

## **Ezekiel 15**

**15:1** *Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying,*

**15:2** *"Son of man, how is the wood of the vine better than any wood of a branch which is among the trees of the forest?"*

**15:3** *"Can wood be taken from it to make anything, or can men take a peg from it on which to hang any vessel?"*

**15:4** *"If it has been put into the fire for fuel, and the fire has consumed both of its ends and its middle part has been charred, is it then useful for anything?"*

**15:5** *"Behold, while it is intact, it is not made into anything. How much less, when the fire has consumed it and it is charred, can it still be made into anything!"*

**15:6** *"Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, 'As the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem;*

**15:7** *and I set My face against them. Though they have come out of the fire, yet the fire will consume them. Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I set My face against them.*

**15:8** *'Thus I will make the land desolate, because they have acted unfaithfully,'" declares the Lord GOD.*

Chapter 15 can be divided into two sections: 1. the illustration (15:1-5) 2. the interpretation of the illustration (15:6-8)

In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was often likened to a vine or vineyard. In Psalm 80:8 the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt was described in terms of a vine being transplanted from the soil of Egypt to that of Canaan. God made adequate preparations to ensure its survival and fruitfulness. According to Isaiah 5, God dug up the ground and removed the stones from the soil (Isa. 5:1-2A; Ps. 80:9). He built a tower in the middle of a vineyard and also hewed out a wine vat in it (Isa. 5:2b). He then waited for the vine to grow and produce a crop of sweet grapes. The vine "took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shadow, and the cedars of God with its boughs. It was sending out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the river" (Psa. 80:9-11). But Israel proved to be less than productive (cf. Ps. 80:8ff; Isa. 5:2b). Instead of producing succulent fruit (righteousness), it became a vine that sent out degenerate shoots (Jer. 2:21). There was only one solution for this vine; it had to be destroyed. God said, "I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. I will lay it waste; it will not be pruned or hoed, but briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it." (Isa. 5:6-7).

Ezekiel 5 contributes to this theme of the judgment of the unproductive vine:

Grapes are planted for fruit, not wood; if the vine does not produce fruit, then what is it good for? It has no value when compared to other trees. "Other trees, fruit bearing or not, are employed for art or construction or other purposes, but not so the vine. Because the vine is crooked, it cannot be used for building. Because it burns so rapidly, it is of little value for fuel. Because it is soft, it cannot be employed

for anything to hang on it" (Feinberg, 83). If it had no usefulness in its best condition, what good would it be if it was charred? It would be worse than useless! The wood of the grapevine is only good to be burned (15:6-8). So Yahweh does just that; He burns it.

No doubt the imagery conjures up the thought of the city in flames from the onslaught of the Babylonian army.

Block says that ". . . the claim to divine election is no substitute for covenant faithfulness. This oracle disputes Israel's false claims to security based on their being the royal vine, the privileged people of God. However, they must respond to the call to this high role with willing obedience to the divine King who has called them to Himself. Grace places high demands on its recipients, and unless one matches one's claims with adherence to his will, one may well wake up one day to the reality that far from being his or her protector and patron, God has actually become the adversary" (459).

In both chapters 15 and 16 we learn a disturbing truth: not all who call themselves God's people are God's people; not all of Israel is the true Israel. There is a remnant according to the election of grace. The same truth taught with the same imagery is found in John 15 where Jesus seemingly picks up Ezekiel's thoughts and applies it to His own situation. In His analogy, the gardener - the vinedresser - is the Father (as in Mk 12:1; Ja. 5:7; II Tim 2:6. cf. 1 Cor. 3:9 - God's field; RWP). The Father is the one who originated the relationship between the vine and the branches, and is the One who looks for and insures the bearing of fruit (Alford, 857). The fruit-bearing branches are pruned to bear more fruit (Jn. 15:2), but among them are branches that are completely unproductive. Their fate is no mystery; the branch is cut off and burned (Jn. 15:6). This is clearly a reference to the future judgment and strongly emphasizes the necessity of remaining in Christ (Morris, 671).

But John 15 also makes it clear that Jesus, not Israel, is the True Vine (Jn. 15:1). The word "true" can be used of that which is real, ideal, or genuine; it almost has the idea of "ultimate" (see notes on 1:9 in Carson). Israel, the degenerate vine, failed to fulfill that which the image was intended to portray (Ps. 80:8-16; Isa. 5:1-7; Jer. 2:21; Ezek. 15; 19:10; Hos. 10:1; Morris, 668); Jesus became the fullest realization of Israel's hope, expectations, and of what God intended her to be.

Jesus, the true vine, is the source of life and strength and fruit. There must be complete dependence upon Him, for He supplies life-giving nourishment to the branches. Apart from Him, the branches have neither life nor fruit (Jn. 15:1-5).

As the branches, we are the visible manifestation of the life of the vine. We are His instruments of fruit-bearing. Since our Lord's ascension into heaven, the church has been the body of Christ. The world is to see Him in us—we are His hands, His feet, and His mouth.

Although NT believers are under a different dispensation than those in Ezekiel's day, the Jews to whom Ezekiel was speaking could have a vital spiritual connectedness to God in the system they were under. Like we, who are under the New Covenant, Israel's fruitfulness was tied to the living union they could have with God.

## ***Ezekiel 16***

In Chapter 16, though Israel is pictured as a prostitute instead of a vine, the displeasure-of-God- toward-Israel theme continues:

***16:1 Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying,***

***16:2 "Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations***

***16:3 and say, 'Thus says the Lord GOD to Jerusalem, "Your origin and your birth are from the land of the Canaanite, your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite.***

***16:4 "As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water for cleansing; you were not rubbed with salt or even wrapped in cloths.***

***16:5 "No eye looked with pity on you to do any of these things for you, to have compassion on you. Rather you were thrown out into the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born.***

In 16:2, Amorite and Hittite are the general names for the people of Canaan who occupied the land before Abraham. Of course these were not the ancestors of Israel but were used as a taunt, as though Israel had not descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The same sense is used by Christ in John 8:44 where He tells the Jews that they are of their father, the devil. The words convey a moral rather than a historical notion.

Jerusalem's beginnings involve the most destitute circumstances (16:4). It is impossible to describe the misery and utter helplessness of the condition she was in. She was like an infant abandoned at birth. The care normally extended to a newborn baby was refused her. The cultural custom for newborns was to cut the umbilical cord, wash the baby, rub it with salt, and wrap it in swaddling cloth. (No one really knows the reason why the baby was rubbed with salt, but one suggestion is that the salt prevented harmful bacteria from accumulating since the baby's soiled cloth could not be changed as readily as diapers can be changed today). But Jerusalem's (in this case a synonym for the nation) parents had no inclination to care for the child at all; they had no natural love, nor did they have pity on her. They simply threw her out into the field to die. In the harsh heat of the Palestinian desert, the infant had no hope of survival.

In ancient times, parents sometimes abandoned newborns, especially unwanted daughters, due to personal poverty or to avoid shame. Here, no reason for the abandonment is given except for the lack of love.

***16:6 "When I passed by you and saw you squirming in your blood, I said to you while you were in your blood, 'Live!' Yes, I said to you while you were in your blood, 'Live!'***

Abandoned, and left in the hot sun in the field, the baby wouldn't last the day. However, Yahweh is passing by and sees the movement of the baby flailing in its blood (the amniotic fluid and blood that

accompany birth). Unlike the natural parents, He has compassion on her and declares life upon her when she is certainly facing death. Theologically speaking, when God gives life, His children enjoy the fullness of blessing and joy of having God as their father.

***16:7 "I made you numerous like plants of the field. Then you grew up, became tall and reached the age for fine ornaments; your breasts were formed and your hair had grown. Yet you were naked and bare.***

In verse 7 the child's growth is compared to that of a plant of the field. Mention of her sexual maturity and nakedness, in this case, has moral overtones. "Whereas the earlier nakedness had made the foundling vulnerable to the elements and the marauding animals, she now stands exposed to dangers of a different sort" (Block, 482).

***16:8 "Then I passed by you and saw you, and behold, you were at the time for love; so I spread My skirt over you and covered your nakedness. I also swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became Mine," declares the Lord GOD.***

In verse 6 God saved the baby for certain death, in verse 8 He also saves her purity and marries her.

"Yahweh spreads his garment over the young woman. On the surface, this seems like a simple act of charity, relieving her shame by solving her problem of nakedness. However, the gesture of covering a woman with one's garment is a symbolic act, whose meaning is illustrated by Ruth's invitation to Boaz to spread his 'wing' over her (Ruth 3:9). According to ancient near Eastern custom, the gesture signified 'the establishment of a new relationship and the symbolic declaration of the husband to provide for the sustenance for his future wife'" (Block, 482, 483).

God formalizes the marriage; He both pledges Himself to His new wife and enters into a covenant with her:

***16:9 "Then I bathed you with water, washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil.***

***16:10 "I also clothed you with embroidered cloth and put sandals of porpoise skin on your feet; and I wrapped you with fine linen and covered you with silk.***

***16:11 "I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets on your hands and a necklace around your neck.***

***16:12 "I also put a ring in your nostril, earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head.***

***16:13 "Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your dress was of fine linen, silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour, honey and oil; so you were exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty.***

***16:14 "Then your fame went forth among the nations on account of your beauty, for it was perfect because of My splendor which I bestowed on you," declares the Lord GOD.***

Verses 9 and following describe God's efforts to ensure the happiness and well-being of His bride as He acts responsibly and compassionately toward her.

First, He cleanses and anoints her (16:9). "The present washing and anointing with oil seemed to have been part of the wedding ritual itself, a tender expression of love and devotion" (Block, 484).

Next, God clothes her with the finest garments. The description of the garments shows that He did much more for her than simply cover her nakedness; she is dressed with the splendor of a queen and is given the finest jewelry, and the choicest food to eat.

These lavish provisions portray a husband whose love for his wife knows no bounds. The account reaches its climax in the notice of the stunning effects of his kindness: Jerusalem has become a beautiful queen. The superlative magnificence of her beauty is highlighted. . . But this remarkable rags-to-riches story ends with an extremely important reminder: Jerusalem's beauty was not innate – it was a gift, graciously bestowed on her by Yahweh, and reflective of his own splendor. She had become his trophy of grace, a glorious witness of the power of his love, a showcase of divine splendor (Block, 485).

The language of Ezekiel's description of Jerusalem, Yahweh's wife, invites interpretation at another level. It is hardly coincidental that the clothes he provides for her involved "embroidered cloth," and "fine linen" (16:10). These expressions occur elsewhere most frequently in the descriptions of the tabernacle, its curtains, and the priestly vestments. References to the luxury leather of which her sandals are made occur only in contexts involving the tabernacle. Furthermore, her special food, "fine flour" and "oil," figured prominently in the sacred offerings. In short, Jerusalem, the bride of Yahweh, is clothed with the garments that "clothe" the sanctuary and is fed with the "food" of its offerings. As the bride of Yahweh, Queen Jerusalem is a surrogate for the temple, elsewhere referred to as "the beauty of his adornment" (7:20), and "the delight of [his] eyes" (24:16). Without naming Zion in this description Ezekiel offers his interpretation of Zion theology in its ideal form. To Yahweh Jerusalem is the absolute perfection of beauty, Yahweh's delight. However, the rest of the chapter will bring realism to this ideal vision. Like this woman, Jerusalem owed her status entirely to the grace of God (Block 485-486).

God is nostalgically looking back upon His relationship with Israel. He remembers Israel's heartbreaking beginnings, how her life hung in the balance and how he saved her from certain death. He recalls how He loved her, cared for her at no expense, and had eyes for no one else. He remembers her beauty and how much he delighted in her.

This is the story of the beauty and extravagance of grace; grace that takes the unlovely and uncared for and shows mercy, compassion and floods with unimaginable love and care.

But the story changes; it turns from the story of the orphan who had become a queen to that of a queen who becomes a whore.

NOTE: Feinberg connects the life stages of the child to stages in Israel's history. The infantile stage (16:4-6) was like that of the patriarchal period. The growth of the child in the field (16:7) pictures the multiplication of the nation in Egypt. 16:8 tells how she became a beautiful young woman but she was still naked and bare - possibly implying that she was without wealth and the benefits of culture and civilization as the world sees them. Thus, God entered into a covenant with her (16:8) at Mount Sinai and blessed her (16:9-14), especially under the reigns of David and Solomon, and the nation grew in wealth and renown. But things changed quickly. In Ezekiel's day she had become a prostitute (16:15). Although this detail may not have been in Ezekiel's mind as he wrote, it does provide an interesting comparison.

**16:15 "But you trusted in your beauty and played the harlot because of your fame, and you poured out your harlotries on every passer-by who might be willing.**

**16:16 "You took some of your clothes, made for yourself high places of various colors and played the harlot on them, which should never come about nor happen.**

**16:17 "You also took your beautiful jewels made of My gold and of My silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself male images that you might play the harlot with them.**

**16: 18 "Then you took your embroidered cloth and covered them, and offered My oil and My incense before them.**

**16:19 "Also My bread which I gave you, fine flour, oil and honey with which I fed you, you would offer before them for a soothing aroma; so it happened," declares the Lord GOD.**

**16:20 "Moreover, you took your sons and daughters whom you had borne to Me and sacrificed them to idols to be devoured. Were your harlotries so small a matter?**

**16:21 "You slaughtered My children and offered them up to idols by causing them to pass through the fire.**

"Verses 6 to 14 had portrayed Yahweh as the gracious benefactor of a helpless maiden; now he speaks as the husband betrayed. The honeymoon is over. Jerusalem's response to his kindness is characterized by a single word, 'to act as a prostitute,' and its derivatives, which occur no fewer than eighteen times in the next twenty verses. The first half of the accusation focuses on Jerusalem's prostitution of Yahweh's gifts (15-22), the second on Jerusalem's prostituting herself (vv. 23-24). The former deals primarily with religious prostitution, the latter with political" (Block, 487).

Verse 15 functions as a thesis statement and identifies the cause of the city's problem:

"Fundamental to Jerusalem's harlotry was the misplacement of confidence. Instead of committing herself to her divine husband, she placed her confidence in her beauty. Incredibly, the charge that Ezekiel would later level at the king of Tyre applied to this poor foundling: 'your heart was lifted up on account of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom on account of your splendor.' For Jerusalem, the newly found beauty and fame were intoxicating. In her inebriation she lost all sense of history,

perspective and propriety; the temporal and ephemeral replaced the eternal; the gift displaced the giver. Instead of devoting herself to Yahweh, the first passerby (vv. 6,8), who had rescued her from certain death, taken her as his wife, and shared with her his splendor, she dispenses her harlotries indiscriminately to all who pass by" (Block 488).

Jerusalem had used the beautiful clothing Yahweh had given her to make shrines for her adultery (16:16). She melted down the gold and silver jewelry, Yahweh's expressions of love, to make male idols (16:17; Exodus 32:2-4, 24). She used the oil and incense that had come from His hand and offered it to other gods as food (16:18-19). She even sacrificed the children of their "marriage" to other deities (16:20-21).

### **16:22-34**

In **verses 22-34** the language is shocking; it is crude—and it is meant to be. Israel proves to be completely unfaithful. But Israel is worse than just unfaithful. As Carson says, ". . . while prostitutes receive a fee for their services, this woman pays others so that she can sleep with them (16:33-34). Israel has not so much been seduced by idolatry or somehow been paid to engage in idolatry, as she has taken the active role and has paid quite a bit so that she can indulge in idolatry, precisely because that is what she wants to do." The analogy to adultery exposes the emotional horror of apostasy. It is seen as the betraying, despicable, hurtful, selfish conduct it really is (Carson, For the Love of God , Sept 28 Meditation).

What is so shocking is that God isn't talking about Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon; He is talking about the behavior of the people of God. These are those who have known mercy, who have tasted of the good things of God, and yet they had become spiritual nymphomaniacs. Their lust for other lovers could not be satisfied (16:28, 29). But sin never satisfies. It is never enough. It never fulfills. As the preacher of Ecclesiastes says, it is all vanity. We are only made whole in fellowship and communion with God (in Christ). As a Christian, I will never be satisfied until my soul finds satisfaction in Christ.

### **16:35-59**

Verses 35-59 describe the destruction of Jerusalem. Israel had gathered her neighbors to "make love" with them, but in a dramatic turn of events, Israel's neighbors will gather to "make war" with her. Israel will be publically humiliated before her lovers and her enemies. God found her in a vulnerable state of nakedness and saved both her life and purity (16:2-6), but she flaunted her nakedness before others. Therefore, God will expose her nakedness, bring shame upon her, and return her to the destitute condition in which He had found her. All has come full circle.

**16:60 "Nevertheless, I will remember My covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you.**

**16:61 "Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you receive your sisters, both your older and your younger; and I will give them to you as daughters, but not because of your covenant.**

**16:62 "Thus I will establish My covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the LORD, 16:63 so that you may remember and be ashamed and never open your mouth anymore because of your humiliation, when I have forgiven you for all that you have done," the Lord GOD declares.**

"God can no more help being gracious than He can cease being God. He is the God of all grace, and He always finds a covenant basis on which He can exercise His grace. Judah may forget her origin, the many benefactions received at the hand of the Lord, even the heinousness of her sins, but the Lord will remember the Abrahamic covenant made with Israel in the days of her youth. Restoration will be because of grace and not merit" (Feinberg, 92)

The majority of people superficially lived under the outward form of the covenant, but their actions brought about God's wrath. However, not all were like that; the covenant that God made was never abandoned by a remnant of Israel whom God will preserve. But God will do more than remember the old covenant He had made; He will establish an everlasting covenant with His people - the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34; Isaiah 59:21; 61:8; and Ezekiel 37:26. In that covenant, the riches of God will extend even to Israel's "sisters" (16:61), the gentiles.

A key to Israel's restoration was in her remembering who she was and where she had come from. Contrast verses 22 and 43 to Verses 61-63.

*16:22 "Besides all your abominations and harlotries you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare and squirming in your blood.*

*16:43 "Because you have not remembered the days of your youth but have enraged Me by all these things, behold, I in turn will bring your conduct down on your own head," declares the Lord GOD, "so that you will not commit this lewdness on top of all your other abominations.*

*16:61 "Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed. . .*

*16:62 "Thus I will establish My covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the LORD,*

*16:63 so that you may remember and be ashamed and never open your mouth anymore because of your humiliation, when I have forgiven you for all that you have done," the Lord GOD declares.*

"The effects of this covenant renewal are spelled out. First, Jerusalem's memory will be quickened. In the past she had stifled the memory of Yahweh's grace, but when he restores her, she will acknowledge her ungrateful and spiteful response. Second, Yahweh's new expressions of grace will evoke an intense sense of shame in her" (Block, 518).

Block draws some applications out of Chapter 16 (Block, NICOT, Ezekiel, vol. 1, 520-522):

First, the destitute condition of Jerusalem in the opening paragraph (1-5) is a figure not only of Israel in its infancy but of all humanity in its natural state. The dominant gene in the human family tree is its sinfulness. Even the person with the most noble and privileged cultural heritage, if left to his or her own resources, is utterly helpless and without hope. The sentence of death hangs over all from the outset (cf. Ro. 3:23).

Second, verses 6 to 14 offer one of the most vivid pictures of the grace of God in the entire Bible. Several dimensions of divine grace stand out:

(1) The source of motivation of divine love lie entirely in God himself – nothing in the human person calls for or warrants such grace. Divine favor is unconditional and unaffected by the impressive quality or potential utility of the object (cf. Deut. 7:7-9; Rom. 5:6-11).

(2) The reach of divine love knows no limits. God not only rescues the destitute from death. He also lavishes on them his gifts with unrestrained generosity (Eph. 1:1-6).

(3) The seriousness of divine love is expressed in the covenant relationship he establishes with those to whom he reaches out. In God's covenant faithfulness the helpless may find perfect security.

(4) The power of divine love is displayed and its ability to transform a wretched filthy person into the most beautiful trophy of grace, a glorious witness for all the world to see. Apart from God's love one is nothing, but as its object one is elevated to the status of royalty to showcase the divine splendor.

Third, along with an extraordinarily dramatic portrayal of divine grace, this chapter provides a shocking picture of human ingratitude (vv. 15-34). The stages of apostasy are easily plotted. Forgetfulness of one's wretched beginnings and God's unrestrained expressions of love quickly leads to pride, self-indulgence, and the adulterous pursuit of other gods. But the appetite for sin is never satisfied. Indeed even the world is often embarrassed by the excesses of the "believer." As it was in Israel, so it is in the church. But the primary antidote to apostasy remains as an unblunted memory of the sinner's wretched origins and boundless love of God that made the person who he or she is.

Fourth, God is never capricious or arbitrary in his judgment of sin. Punishment is always appropriate for the offense; and to whomever much is given, of that person much will be required. Even so, the harshness of his response to human rebellion can be understood only against the backdrop of his grace. Having loved so deeply, he is certainly justified when he responds passionately to the one who tramples underfoot his grace.

Fifth, the test of one's spiritual parentage is not one's confession but one's life. Although the gospel declares that deliverance from the family of darkness is possible by the grace of God, there is no ground of security for those who claim to be the people of God but are arrogant, smug, and are insensitive to the cries of the needy.

Sixth, probably the most remarkable insight gained from this chapter is the constancy of God. The defiance of his people may cause him to suspend the promised blessings and to impose on them the curses described in the covenant; but far from suggesting a temporary lapse of memory, such punitive responses represent the fulfillment of its fine print. The warnings are clear: people who sow the wind will reap the whirlwind. But God is faithful. Having given his covenant under oath, he will not go back on it.

Seventh, this passage offers helpful insight into the biblical perspective on guilt and shame. Against the grain of popular thinking today, this oracle is unrestrained in its shaming of unfaithful Israel. The nature and cause of biblically sanctioned shame may be appreciated by plotting Jerusalem's experience:

1. She begins in a destitute and hopeless natural condition.
2. She is rescued from certain death by God, who lavishes his love on her and elevates her to the status of royalty.
3. She snubs her Deliverer and divine Benefactor by running after other gods and dispensing his gracious gifts to strange lovers.
4. She discovers that God is as passionate in his judgment as he had been in his love, and she loses everything that she had ever possessed.
5. After the judgment she experiences a new outpouring of divine grace, is forgiven of her sins, and accepted as his covenant people again.
6. She recognizes that the past disruption in her relationship with Yahweh was not the fault of God, but her own, and she experiences shame.

Admittedly, each human being is invested with special dignity by virtue of his or her status as a divine image (Ps. 8), which provides the basis for God's special interest in humankind. But with our rebellion we absolve God of all obligations to deal positively with us. Accordingly, to experience divine grace is never a cause for pride and should not dull one's consciousness of sin. On the contrary, the gift of grace quickens the memory to past infidelity and present unworthiness, and heightens one's amazement at God's love (Block 520-522).