EZEKIEL

Chapter 15

*Jerusalem, A Useless Vine*

**The word of the LORD came to me:  2 “Son of man, how is the wood of a vine better than that of a branch on any of the trees in the forest?  3 Is wood ever taken from it to make anything useful? Do they make pegs from it to hang things on?  4 And after it is thrown on the fire as fuel and the fire burns both ends and chars the middle, is it then useful for anything?  5 If it was not useful for anything when it was whole, how much less can it be made into something useful when the fire has burned it and it is charred? 6 “Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: As I have given the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest as fuel for the fire, so will I treat the people living in Jerusalem.  7 I will set my face against them. Although they have come out of the fire, the fire will yet consume them. And when I set my face against them, you will know that I am the LORD.  8 I will make the land desolate because they have been unfaithful, declares the Sovereign LORD.”**

**15:2** *vine.* For Israel as a vine see Ps 80:8–13; cf. Lk 20:9–19; Jn 15:1–17. (CSB)

In spite of the externally different subject matter, chapter 15 structurally has much in common with 14:12–23. There is no reason to doubt that chapter 15 was originally a separate oracle, but was editorially linked with the preceding one, most likely by Ezekiel himself. The connections are especially clear in 15:7–8. The message of 15:7 recalls 14:22–23. The oracle’s conclusion (15:8) uses vocabulary that was prominent in chapter 14, namely, “desolation” (שְׁמָמָה), as in 14:15–16, and “they faithlessly did infidelity” (מָעַל מַעַל), as in 14:13. (CC)

The metaphor of a useless vine is developed in a series of rhetorical questions and a concluding exclamation in 15:2–5, followed by “therefore” (לָכֵן) introducing the application of the metaphor to Jerusalem in 15:6–8. (CC)

The vineyard and grapevine are common biblical images for the church in both Testaments—for Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem in the OT, and for Christ and Christians in the NT. (CC)

Christ uses the metaphor to convey the organic connection between himself and true believers. However, in Jn 15:1–8, instead of Israel/the church being the vine, Jesus himself is the vine, and believers in him are the fruitful branches. The phrase “fruit of the vine” is familiar from our Lord’s use of it in describing the eschatological implications of the Eucharist (Mt 26:29; Mk 14:25; Lk 22:18), which unites communicants with him by furnishing his true body and blood (1 Cor 10:16–17; 11:17–34). Like Ezekiel 15, Christ states that unfruitful branches are to be thrown into the fire and burned (Jn 15:6). The description of the final judgment as a grape harvest (Is 63:1–6; Joel 3:13; Rev 14:17–20; 19:15) has left its impress both on Christian hymnody and on English literature at large. (CC)

**15:3-5** These verses develop the metaphor. To Ezekiel’s audience, the answer to the rhetorical question in the previous verse (“What becomes of the wood of the grapevine?”) would have been obvious. Ezekiel drives home the point with two more rhetorical questions: “Can wood be taken from it to use for work? Can they take from it a peg?” The obvious answer to both is negative. From its unsuitability as lumber (15:3), the next verse underscores its sole use: “to the fire it is given for fuel” (15:4). The climax comes in 15:5 with an a fortiori argument: since the intact wood is useless for work, how much more worthless it is once it has been reduced to ashes, since it has already been put to its sole use (as firewood). (CC)

**15:3** *Do they make pegs from it to hang things on?* See Isa 22:23–25. (CSB)

**15:4** *is it then useful for anything?* Whereas Isaiah (5:1–7) and Jeremiah (2:21) express divine disappointment over Israel’s failure to produce good fruit, Ezekiel typically laments her total uselessness. (CSB)

**15:6** “Therefore” (לָכֵן), often (as here) followed by the citation formula (“thus says the Lord Yahweh”), is Ezekiel’s customary introduction to the part of the oracle that announces the divine judgment (see the textual note on it in 5:7). In prophetic usage it is not the conclusion of a syllogism (as “therefore” often is in Greek and classical Western logic), but simply a way of signaling that the point of the analogy is now being made. After the citation formula, “thus says the Lord Yahweh,” Yahweh briskly makes the application to Jerusalem in the form of a simile (“like …”). (CC)

Much of the point turns on the nuance of the verb נָתַן, “to give,” which was used in 15:4; now is used twice in 15:6; and (in different senses) also begins each of the next two verses (15:7–8). Just as it is a “given,” part of the order of creation, that the wood of the grapevine is good for nothing but fuel, so also in the order of redemption, apostate Jerusalem is fit for nothing but the fire. The analogy is not exact, of course. Jerusalem had not been created simply to be burned. King David had established it as the capital of Israel, God’s “church and state” on earth. But its refractoriness had disqualified it from continuing as the center of God’s redemptive work, his new creation (promised and begun already in the OT). And so the fire of judgment had become, for now, just as much a “given” for her as it is for the wood of a vine. (CC)

This should not be misunderstood to imply determinism or predestination to damnation. There is no problem in understanding that God’s purpose and intent is for a vine’s wood to serve as fuel for fire, a law of nature explained in 15:4. But Jerusalem’s consignment to the flames was no matter of God’s eternal, immutable will (what theologians sometimes call his antecedent will), but of his consequent will (as theologians sometimes call it). His decree is a consequence of Jerusalem’s violation of his covenant and rejection of him. At the time when Ezekiel prophesies chapter 15, God’s decision to judge Jerusalem has been made final, and indeed the judgment had already commenced some years earlier with the first two waves of exiles having been taken from the city in 605 and 597 b.c. (the latter including Ezekiel). With this verb, “give(n)” (15:4, 6–8), as with everything in Holy Writ, Scripture must interpret Scripture.(CC)

The Christian reader knows, of course, that Jerusalem’s destruction in 586 b.c. by no means marked the termination of her role in salvation history. A less glorious city and temple would be rebuilt after the exile, and Jerusalem would be the site of the greatest acts of redemption: Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection in fulfillment of all that was written by the prophets (Lk 24:25, 27, 44). Jerusalem even serves as the earthly type of the eternal city in the new heavens and new earth that shall be the home of all believers: the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21; cf. Gal 4:25–26; Heb 12:22). Yet ethnic Israel as a whole rejected the Messiah at his first advent, and the consequence was yet another destruction of the city, in a.d. 70, which serves as a type of the final destruction at the end of the world upon Christ’s return (Mt 23:37–25:46). (CC)

**15:7** I WILL SET MY FACE AGAINST THEM – Twice a formula expressing hostility, in which Yahweh declares, “I will set my face against them,” underscores what was already clear in 15:6, namely, that Jerusalem’s consignment to the fire of destruction is not simply another instance of the “horror of history.” The destruction of an ancient city by fire was an event that has happened countless times throughout history (see, e.g., Josh 6:24; 8:8, 19; 11:11). But in the case of Jerusalem in 586 b.c., the event would be by God’s deliberate design and of a piece with his overarching purpose in history. He “desires all people to be saved” (1 Tim 2:4), and he accomplishes salvation for all in a cruciform way. The people’s sin led to the city’s well-deserved judgment by fire, though a remnant would be preserved by grace and the people would experience a kind of “resurrection” to new life by the Spirit (Ezek 37:1–14). Even so, outside that same city the sinless Christ vicariously suffered the judgment for the sin of the world, and after his baptism by fire (Lk 12:49–50) he rose in power according to the Spirit of holiness (Rom 1:4). (CC)

 *Although they have come out of the fire.* A reference to the siege of Jerusalem in 597 b.c., which resulted in the exile of which Ezekiel was a part (see 1:2; 2Ki 24:10–16). (CSB)

Yahweh’s statement here that some Israelites already “have come out” (Ezek 15:7) of the “fire” (see below) most naturally refers to the siege of Jerusalem in 597 b.c., when Ezekiel and probably most of his present audience, which he will address shortly, were taken into exile. That “the fire will still devour them” refers to the conflagration coming in 586 b.c. As in 14:22–23, the people dare not consider their escape from the first “fire” a sign of God’s favor. It was only a temporary reprieve, and since they had not repented, the fire of his well-deserved wrath would eventually overtake them. (CC)

The momentary shift to the second person plural in the recognition formula, “then *you* will know that I am Yahweh,” makes plain that Ezekiel’s first audience is his fellow exiles, although the “final judgment” of which he prophesies will more immediately affect their compatriots who were still in Jerusalem—who, however, may well have become his “second audience.” By indirection, the recognition formula may intimate that a remnant of believers (“know” as a synonym for “faith”) will survive, but its major accent in this context is surely Law: the people’s recognition, however begrudging, of Yahweh’s omnipotence and the justice of his judgment. (CC)

 *fire will yet consume them.* Prophecy threatening another and more devastating siege—Ezekiel’s main message before 586 (see 5:2, 4; 10:2, 7). (CSB)

It is not known whether fire had literally played much of a role in the siege preceding the deportation of 597 b.c., but it certainly did in 586 b.c. (2 Ki 25:9). Ezekiel may be using the word more figuratively to make an immediate connection between the two events. Keil argues that the reference is not merely to those two events, but also “to all the judgments which fell upon the covenant nation, from the destruction of the kingdom of the ten tribes to the catastrophe in the reign of Jehoiachin.” Ultimately, no doubt, all those other judgments illustrated the same problem of Israel’s faithlessness, but the immediate accent is clearly on the end of monarchial Israel in 586 b.c. (the brief respite under Zerubbabel after the exile notwithstanding). (CC)

The conflagration of Jerusalem in 586 b.c. with fire, like that of Sodom and Gomorrah (Jude 7), serves as a type of the final judgment of all unbelievers at the end of the world, pictured as the burning of the city “Babylon” in Rev 18:8. Many Scripture passages depict that eternal judgment as by fire. (CC)

**15:8** This verse might appear redundant at first glance, but its connections with 14:12–23 appear to be a deliberate attempt to weld the two chapters together. It supplies the prophetic indictment or reason for the judgment which had not been developed explicitly in this chapter. Ultimately, Jerusalem’s burning is not the result of some ineluctable order of creation, but of its own sacrilegious deportment. (CC)