

Chapter 15

Date: Between **August 13, 592 BC** (The 5th of Elul, 3,169) & **July 8, 591 BC** (The 10th of AB, 3,170)

Historical Setting: The prophet Ezekiel is living among his fellow Jewish captive's in the exile community of Tel-abib just outside the capital city of Babylonia, Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar reigns during the entire time period of this chapter. King Zedekiah rules Jerusalem as a "Puppet" King under King Nebuchadnezzar's control. Jerusalem is forced to pay tribute to the Babylonians, which by 588 BC, Zedekiah stopped paying. The events of this chapter occur just prior to, or during, the time period in which Zedekiah made this bold decision. This caused great anger on the part of the Babylonians, most especially King Nebuchadnezzar. King Zedekiah and most of the inhabitants of Jerusalem were stiff-necked, prideful, and even outright wicked. During this time period, Nebuchadnezzar was involved in the expansion and beautification of Babylonia.

Preview: The prophet Ezekiel is once again instructed by the Lord. This revelation contains the allegory of the useless vine. Israel is compared to a useless vine that brings forth no fruit. God, who is the husbandman of the symbolic vineyard, promised to destroy the vine that has no use. Jerusalem, the heart of the nation's wickedness will be left desolate when the Lord is finished with His wrath.



Verse 1: "And the word of the LORD came unto me, saying."

Previous chapters have discussed that the word "Lord" in much of the Book of Ezekiel comes from the Hebrew word "יהוה" or "YHWH" which is our English equivalent "*Jehovah*". Jehovah is the pre-earth name for Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is then the originator of

the words that will be contained here after. The fact that the chapter starts by saying that the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel leaves us to wonder as to how the message was delivered. We do not know if Jehovah himself delivered the message, if an angel delivered the message for him, or if it came by the way of dream or vision. The only thing we do know is that it is divine in nature.

The circumstances of the revelation contained in this chapter are also unclear. One might ask if this were a new revelation or part of a series of revelations continuing from chapter thirteen and fourteen. The answer is unclear. It is however supposed that the revelation contained in this chapter took place between August 13, 592 BC (The 5th of Elul, 3,169) and July 8, 591 BC (The 10th of AB, 3,170). Given the fact that several other revelations occurred during this same period in Ezekiel's life, it is also thought that chapter fifteen occurred during the later part of that time period.

Verse 2: **“Son of man. What is the vine tree more than any tree, or than a branch which is among the trees of the forest?”**

Again, with a constant reminder as to his mortality, the Lord calls Ezekiel “Son of **man**”. This should not be confused with the Savior's title of “Son of **Man**”. The Lord's title refers to the “**Man** of Holiness” or God the Father. Ezekiel's title refers to “Mortal **man**” with all the weaknesses and frailties thereof. The only written difference is the capitalization of the letter “**m**”.

Continuing with the verse, the Lord poses a question to the prophet. The question is quite figurative in nature, so understanding what the Lord is really getting at requires the dissection of the symbols used in the verse. It also helps to look at the structure of the sentence as it stood in the Hebrew. The Biblical Scholar, Moeshe Greenberg, translated the last portion of this verse from the Hebrew as “*What, of all trees, becomes the vinestock, the vine branch, that belongs the trees of the forest?*” (*Ezekiel 1-20, Moshe Greenberg, page xx*)

The first symbol that should be examined is that of the tree. A tree is a very common symbol among ancient societies. It is used in connection with the tree of life. It is also used to represent the bringing forth of good and evil. This is probably derived from the fact that Adam and Eve obtained the knowledge of good and evil by eating of the tree thereof. Trees also represent man and his posterity. The list of symbolic interpretations for the tree could go on and on; however the most plausible meaning behind the tree spoken of in this



**Babylonian
Picture of the
Tree of Life**



verse in that of man and mankind in general. For the most part, the type or condition of a symbolic tree would indicate things about the person or people in which it symbolizes. For example, the oak tree would symbolize one that is strong, maybe old and wise, and often powerful in character and stature.

The next symbol that we should evaluate is that of the forest. A forest is made up of many trees, meaning it is comprised of many men. The forest represents the world we live in. It is made up of all the nations of the earth. A forest is also used as a symbolic representation for a place of testing. It also represents perils and darkness; a lack of spiritual insight and light. Since we were sent to this world that we might be proven to see if we would do all the things that the Lord God commanded it is fitting that the symbolic forest, which represents this world, also represents trial and testing.

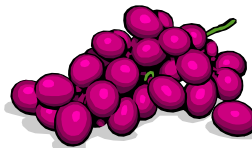


The next symbol that should be evaluated is that of the “*vine tree*” or “*vine stock*”. Before evaluating the term as a symbol, the literal definition of the term should be evaluated. The American Heritage Dictionary defines the term “*vine*” as follows.

Vine *n.* 1. A weak-stemmed plant that derives its support from climbing, twining, or creeping along a surface. 2. A grapevine.



Symbolically, the vine, which produces fruit, represents fertility and fruitfulness. In the Ancient Near East, the term vine is mostly used to refer to the very beginning, Israel a vital part of their the modern country of production to be one of important assets. Deviations on the symbolic nature of the vine have to do with the status of the vine. A fruitless vine represents uselessness, and void of good. The wild vine symbolizes falseness and



unfaithfulness. Ancient prophets often used the grapevine as a representation of the Israelites. In Psalms we read, *“Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: though hast cast out the heathen, and planted”* (Psalms 80:8). The prophet Hosea almost defines the symbol as he wrote, *“Israel is an empty vine, he bringeth forth fruit unto himself...”* (Hosea 10:1). Aside from its association with grapes, the vine itself symbolizes worthlessness. The vinestock by nature is worthless. Other than producing fruit, it has little or no use.

The Grapevine is a common symbol used in parables and allegories. Most often God is considered the Vinedresser or the Lord of



the Vineyard. Israel or God’s children are considered the vine. The fruit or lack thereof represents the works of God’s children. Christ taught, *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit...As a branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches....If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the*

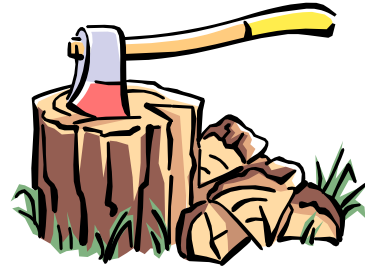
fire, and they are burned” (St. John 15:1-6).

Returning to verse two of chapter fifteen of Ezekiel, the discussed symbolism might help us to better understand what the Lord is trying to tell us. He is asking Ezekiel if the vine, which is probably representing Israel, serves any noteworthy purpose. Does it stand above any of the trees of the forest? In other words, is it any better than any of the other heathen nations of the earth?

Verse 3: **“Shall wood be taken thereof to do any work? or will men take a pin of it to hang any vessel thereon?”**

The Lord continues his questions regarding the symbolic vine spoken of in verse two. Now He asks Ezekiel if the wood of the seeming fruitless vine can be used for any productive purpose. Keep in mind that wood symbolized the *prima materia*, or base material, in the East. Since Christ was a carpenter and carpenters used tools to shape

and sculpt wood, wood often represents mortal men who are shaped and sculpted by the master. If the vine could not produce fruit, which was its main purpose, could it at least be used for something?



Apparently the Lord was pointing out symbolically that Israel didn't have a whole lot going for it in the area of eternal worth. Their wickedness had progressed to the point that they could be compared to a barren grapevine whose wood couldn't even be used as a pin. The term "*pin*" might also be translated as "*peg*". A peg was a simple dowel of wood driven into a wall to hang pots and pans, or other item on. Was there enough righteousness in Israel to at least compare it to a simple peg? Based on the rest of the chapter, the answer is probably no.

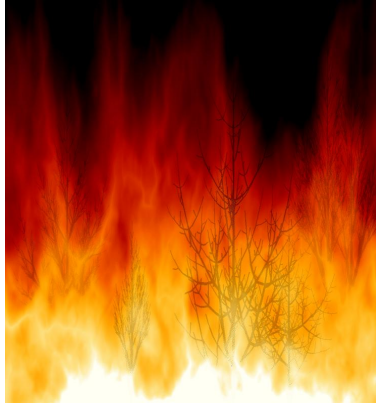
One final perspective should be mention before going on to the next verse. The Lord's final question used the symbolism of the peg and a vessel. Symbolically, a vessel represents protection, nourishment, shelter and preservation. If Israel was not worthy even to be compared to a peg, then the protection and nourishment of the Lord had no home in Israel.

Verse 4: "Behold, it is cast into the fire for fuel; the fire devoureth both the ends of it, and the midst of it is burned. Is it meet for any work?"

Apparently the Lord found no worth in the vine discussed in the previous verses since His judgement was to cast it into the fire for fuel. The term fire has many symbolic interpretations. The most common Biblical applications are cleansing, purification, destruction, repentance, and the Lord's wrath. The term fuel is a seldom used symbol in the Bible. In the literal sense, fuel is a material used to produce heat or energy. Finally, a use for Israel. Unfortunately, the only thing they were good for was destruction and cleansing. The term burned has similar symbolic meaning due to its close association with the term fire.



The Lord explains that the fire devoured both ends of the vine, and finally the "*midst*" of it was burned also. The word "*midst*" might also be translated as "*inside*". The meaning of this passage is somewhat difficult to nail down. Some scholars feel that the meaning behind this verse has to do with the hostile takeovers Israel had been through. The one end of the nation was devoured by the Assyrians who



destroyed the Northern Kingdom some one hundred plus years prior to Ezekiel life. The Southern portion of Israel had been “burned” by the Egyptians who dominated over them for quite some time. Finally, the inside of the vine, which they suppose to be the treasured city of Jerusalem was “burned” at Babylonia’s first invasion. This theory does have merit especially in the absence of other alternative; however,

the student should remember that this is still theory.

The Lord ends this verse by asking if the vine that was worthless to start with, and now is burned from end to end is meet for any work. The American Heritage Dictionary defines the word “meet” as follows.

Meet² *adj.* Fitting; Proper: “*It seems not meet, nor wholesome to my place*” Old English *mete*.

The House of Israel was apparently becoming of less and less worth as time went on. Now that the wicked nations of the world had unleashed great wrath on them, they furthered their destitute state by not humbling themselves and turning to the Lord. They were now not fit for any work.

Verse 5: “Behold, when it was whole, it was meet for no work: how much less shall it be meet yet for any work, when the fire hath devoured it, and it is burned?”

A theory presented in verse four suggests that the vine being burned at each end represented the conquest of Israel by foreign nations. This theory finds further application in verse five. The Lord states that the vine, or Israel, was of no use when it was whole. This refers to a time when Israel was a united nation of twelve tribes. They appeared to have many of the same problems that they struggled with in Ezekiel’s time. They turned to idols, ignored the God of Israel, and blatantly ignored His commandments. As a result, He divided the kingdom. The two new kingdoms (Israel and Judah) didn’t stop their evil ways as a



result of their division. This eventually resulted in the nation being “burned”, so to speak, at both ends. The question can now be asked, if Israel was not fit for any righteous work when it was whole, how then can it be good for anything after having been divided, conquered, and still wicked? The terms “fire” and “burned” symbolized purification either by the repentance of the wicked or their removal. Obviously, Israel was not interested in repentance.

Verse 6: “Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD: As the vine tree among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so will I give the inhabitants of Jerusalem.”

Finally, the Lord presents to Ezekiel the judgement that will be passed onto the worthless vine, which is indeed Jerusalem. Comparing the useless grapevine to Jerusalem, we learn that Jerusalem will be destroyed amongst the nations like the vine was figuratively burned among the trees of the forest. This scripture supports a much less symbolic prophecy uttered by the prophet Lehi. His son Nephi recorded, “*Wo, wo, unto Jerusalem, for I have seen thine abominations! Yea, and many things did my father read concerning Jerusalem – that it should be destroyed, and the inhabitants thereof; many should perish by the sword, and many should be carried away captive in Babylon*” (1st Nephi 1:13).



Verse 7: “And I will set my face against them; they shall go out from one fire, and another fire shall devour them; and ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I set my face against them.”

The Lord again uses the symbolic expression of setting His face against Israel. The face represents one’s whole being. It carries the idea of focus and devotion towards. Setting ones face against something is a negative gesture. It carries the idea of opposition. Having the Lord set His face against you is not an admirable position.

The Lord declares that Jerusalem, or rather the children of Israel, will go from one fire only to be devoured by another. This passage is somewhat reminiscent of the old adage, “*out of the frying pan and into the fire*”. But what is the Lord speaking of here? Remember that Jerusalem and the Kingdom of Judah avoided destruction by bargaining with the Assyrians, which eventually led them to be ruled by the Egyptians with which they, again, bargained with to save their lives. The Babylonians eventually came on the scene and conquered them away from the Egyptians. The Israelites tried to free themselves of the Babylonian grip by appealing to the Egyptians. Unfortunately for Israel, the Egyptians didn’t come to their aid and the Babylonians eventually destroyed them for their efforts. Truly, Israel kept escaping eminent destruction only to find more fatal opposition awaiting them.



In all of this, one great lesson will stand as testimony, “The Lord is God”. Why is this significant? The entire Near East was consumed with idol worship, including Israel. Their faith was placed in stone statues rather than the living God of Heaven. Israel’s destruction stands as a testimony to them as to the power of their idols and the power of the creator of the earth.

Verse 8: “**And I will make the land desolate, because they have committed a trespass, saith the Lord GOD.**”

As a final judgement, God promised to make the land of Israel desolate, because of their transgressions. The term “*desolate*” means to be void of life, inhabitants, and life sustaining resources. It is often used in conjunction with the term’s “*desert*” and “*barren*”. Likewise, it is often recorded that conquered cities were desolate meaning in ruin or great disrepair. The Lord carried out His word to the “T”. The Jewish historian Josephus records,



Example of Desolation

“...the king of Babylon, who brought out the two tribes, placed no other nation in their country, by which means all Judea and Jerusalem, and the temple, continued to be a desert for seventy years” (Antiquities of the Jews, Flavius Josephus, Book X, Chapter IX, verse 7, page 222).



Chapter

Summary:

This chapter, though short in length, carries a harsh symbolic message to the Israelites of Ezekiel’s time as well as a message to those of us today, who are falling astray from the Lord’s path. The Lord reveals to Ezekiel an allegory about a vine tree that grew among the trees of the forest. The trees of the forest represented the nations of the world, while the vine tree represented Israel. The poor vine tree was apparently barren of fruit and burned from fire. This portion of the chapter referred to Israel’s wickedness. They had stopped bearing fruit, or producing righteous works. Their burning probably makes reference to the repeated conquering they underwent as the Lord attempted to humble them and turn them from their wicked ways. Stubborn and unchanged, Israel left God with no other choice but to destroy her and leave her desolate. Like Israel, if we refuse to heed God’s word we too will face His judgements.



