

Bearing Fruit In God's Kingdom

Throughout the Bible, God uses simple, everyday illustrations to communicate spiritual truth. Frequently these illustrations are taken from the agrarian lifestyle common in biblical times. These teachings were meant to bring clarity and insight to the readers in an easy-to-understand manner. Unfortunately, we live 2,000 years after the events of the Bible, and most of us are not involved in growing our own food. Even if we are farmers, the methods have changed dramatically over the centuries. We read Scripture through our own cultural eyeglasses, and often miss truths because we simply don't understand the illustrations.

Understanding Life in Bible Times

So, let's transport ourselves back in time several thousand years. First, we need to understand that life in Bible times was much more fragile than today. People were totally dependent on the crops they grew. If there was a drought, a famine ensued. There were no grocery stores from which to purchase food. If there was no rain, there was no harvest, and if there was no harvest, the people starved. Life revolved around the seasons. It wasn't just a segment of society that was concerned about farming issues, as in our modern society; everyone was affected.

When God said that the Israelites were to obey Him or there would be no rain, it was serious business: *"And it shall be that if you earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today; to love the Lord your God and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will give you the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, your new wine, and your oil. And I will send grass in your fields for your livestock, that you may eat and be filled." Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn and serve other gods and worship them, lest the Lord's anger be aroused against you, and He shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land which the Lord is giving you"* (Deut. 11:13–17).

These verses were so important that the Jewish people were commanded to recite them morning and evening and to write them upon the doorposts of their houses and upon the gates of their cities. To this day they do so in their daily prayers (Hareuveni). *Mezuzot*, small boxes created to hold the Scripture passages, are affixed to the doorposts of the houses as a constant reminder to love and serve the Lord as a condition to receiving His blessings.

Notice the three food items listed: grain, new wine (from grapes), and oil (from olives). These were the staples of life to the Israelis. It was as if God were saying to them: If you love and serve Me, I will provide all the necessities of life. The key was to be in relationship with God. We see the same theme repeated in the Christian Scriptures when Yeshua (Jesus) says, *"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"* (Matt. 6:33). What things was He referring to? Look at verses 25–32 for the answer: food, drink, and clothing. God will provide for our sustenance if we will love and serve Him, putting Him and His kingdom first.

Let's take a closer look at the grapes and the grapevine, as they are one of God's most often used illustrations. Learning how grapes were grown in Bible times will help us glean the truths that were easily understood by the people of that day.

Vine Growing in Biblical Times

Producing grapes is not a quick or an easy process. In fact, it was an occupation best suited to peaceful times because the vines needed constant care and several years of watchful cultivation

before they bore fruit. In ancient Israel, vines were typically planted on terraced hillsides, which were less suitable for grain cultivation, although they were also planted in valleys and plains. The prophet Isaiah describes the procedure usually followed in cultivation of a vineyard in biblical times:

“Now let me sing to my Well-beloved a song of my beloved regarding His vineyard. My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. He made a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it; So He expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes” (Isa. 5:1–2).

The soil was first dug and cleared of stones. A wall or hedge was erected to discourage predators (Ps. 80:12–13). A watchtower and wine vat were built with a booth for lodging in during the harvest season. A member of the family was constantly on duty in the watchtower from the time of planting through harvest to protect the family’s future food supply. Wild animals, fire, and robbers were a constant threat.

Vines required heavy annual pruning, hoeing, thinning, support of fruit clusters, and sometimes irrigation. The grape harvest was so important that a man who had planted a vineyard, but had not enjoyed the fruit from it, was exempt from military service (Deut. 20:6).

In peace time, vineyards flourished. In time of war, vineyards were ravaged, walls broken down, vines choked by thorns, branches trampled by wild beasts (Isa. 5:5–6; Ps. 80:12–13). At harvest time, the grapes were crushed in stone wine presses to extract the juice, which flowed down stone channels into the vats. The grapes were crushed by foot, and the harvesters’ feet—as well as the hems of their garments—became stained with the juice.

Today, in Israel, vineyards flourish. As we drive throughout the country, we see them in orderly rows lined up like soldiers on parade. Their “arms” are lifted high off the ground and stretched out to the sides on wires. But, in ancient Israel, the vines trailed on the ground because they believed the grapes ripened more slowly under the shadow of the leaves. Fresh grapes were eaten in great quantities during the harvest season and then dried into raisin clusters for later use (I Sam. 25:18). The juice boiled down to a thick syrup called “honey,” but the chief product was wine or “new wine.”

Rich Biblical Symbolism

1. The Blood of the Grape

Grape juice was referred to as the “blood of the grape.” In Jacob’s blessing over his son Judah, he says in part, *“Binding his donkey to the vine, and his donkey’s colt to the choice vine, he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes”* (Gen. 49:11). Also, in Deuteronomy 32:14, it says: *“Curds from the cattle, and milk of the flock, with fat of lambs; and rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats, with the choicest wheat; and you drank wine, the blood of the grapes.”* This calls to mind the words of Yeshua at the Last Supper, *“Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins”* (Matt. 26:28). Yeshua frequently taught in such a way as to bring images to the minds of His hearers.

2. Judgment

The Lord’s judgment is expressed with the rich imagery of wine pressing. *“Why is Your apparel red, and Your garments like one who treads in the winepress? ‘I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with Me. For I have trodden in My anger, and trampled them in My fury; their blood is sprinkled upon My garments, and I have stained all My robes. For the day of*

vengeance is in My heart, and the year of My redeemed has come. I looked but there was no one to help, and I wondered that there was no one to uphold; Therefore My own arm brought salvation for Me; and My own fury, it sustained Me. I have trodden down the peoples in My anger, made them drunk in My fury, and brought down their strength to the earth” (Isa. 63:2–6).

3. Prosperity and Blessing

Vines and vineyards were sometimes symbols of prosperity and blessing among the ancient Hebrews. The Messianic age of blessing of peace and security is described as a time when *“they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none of them shall be afraid”* (Micah 4:4; also I Kings 4:25; Zech. 3:10).

4. A Symbol of Israel

Israel was compared to a choice vine, planted and tended by the Lord, which became a wild vine (Ps. 80:8–16; Isa. 5:1–7; Jer. 2:21).

The Fruitless Branch

This section of the teaching on the branches was inspired by a devotional BFP Publications Manager Eddelene Marais gave based on Bruce Wilkerson’s book *Secrets of the Vine*. Wilkerson provides a lot more detail than we have room for here. We recommend you purchase a copy and read it.

After the Last Supper, while on the way to Gethsemane, Yeshua and His disciples left the Upper Room on Mount Zion and traveled to the Garden of Gethsemane. During this walk, we have some of the most important teachings of Yeshua in the Bible. I imagine that on this walk, they passed through a vineyard. What a wonderful place that would be to teach them about life in Him! I can just imagine Him bending down to the ground and lifting up a leaf to see the grapes, gesturing as He spoke in a typical Israeli manner.

(1) “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. (2) Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. (3) You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. (4) Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.(5) I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. (6) If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. (7) If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. (8) By this is My Father glorified; that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples” (John 15:1–8).

Yeshua speaks of two kinds of branches: those that bear no fruit and those that bear fruit. Both are “in” Him. Because the fruitless branch is “in Him,” Yeshua is most likely referring to a branch that is temporarily unproductive. This branch He “takes away.” However, the word translated “takes away” in verse 2 is the Greek word *airo* (ah'-ee-ro). It is defined by *Strong’s Concordance* (#142) as “to lift; by implication to take up or away; figuratively to raise (the voice), keep in suspense (the mind); spec. to sail away (i.e. lift anchor); by Hebrew (compare to #5375) to expiate sin: away with, bear (up), carry, lift up, loose, make to doubt, put away, remove, take (away, up).”

When I read this passage, I always pictured grapevines as they are today with their branches suspended on wires or fences. So, when I read “takes away,” I pictured them being removed, gone, or no longer relevant. Instead, think of a grapevine lying on the ground in the dust. The vintner

lovingly “lifts up” the vine, places it in a position where it can grow better—perhaps placing a rock underneath it, and washes the dirt away from the leaves. This is a picture of God dealing with sin in our lives that keeps us from being fruitful. He doesn’t cut them off! God will do everything He can, even loving discipline, to help the fruitless become fruitful.

The Fruitful Branch

What about the branches that have fruit? These the vinedresser prunes to ensure a plentiful harvest. Vines tend to grow too wild and become so dense that the sun cannot reach into the area where fruit should form. The good vinedresser prunes the vine to ensure a plentiful harvest. He cuts away growth that is dead or dying, making sure that sunlight gets to all fruit-bearing branches in order to increase the size and quality of fruit and encourage new fruit to develop.

The vinedresser knows that to produce more, He has to thin out the branches. If he doesn’t, the vine will produce a lot of beautiful green leaves but little or no fruit. So, be careful. If you are asking the Lord to make you fruitful, you are asking to be pruned!

But what does it mean to be fruitful? What does God need to prune from our lives? As Christians, we live busy lives. We have many plans and priorities. We have many demands on our time. Most of the things we are involved in are good, even righteous, endeavors. In my position as CEO of Bridges for Peace, I find I have many demands on my time. I must constantly choose to abide in the vine and seek the Lord’s direction for my time. The things on my schedule may not be wrong, but they may keep me from God’s best plan. We need to constantly assess our priorities and guard against making commitments that will rob us of the energy needed to fulfill God’s greater calling on our lives.

Abundance is such a beautiful thing, but the older the vine, the more radical the pruning. This kind of pruning is painful, because the longer we abide in Yeshua, the more He asks of us and the more giving up and letting go there is to do. It becomes harder to abide during this process. Our flesh cries out, but God is not trying to slay us; He only wants to lift us up, to make room for growth, and to increase strength, productivity, and spiritual power, bringing us closer to the perfect and complete image of Messiah (Christ).

As we abide in Yeshua (the vine), we choose to submit to His pruning. We are choosing to do as John and Baptist did when he said, *“He must increase but I must decrease”* (John 3:30). When we choose God and not our own ways, then God will bless us. We may be asked to let go of possessions or to leave loved ones to follow His call. Tom and I did this when the Lord called us to go to Israel. We left possessions, family and friends and followed His call. It has not always been easy, but it has always been right and has led to an abundance of His Spirit in our lives. I don’t regret it in the slightest. Some of us may even be asked to lay down our ministries. Whatever God asks, we have to totally submit our branches (lives) to the pruning of the Vinedresser.

But, we can always expect a harvest! I remember a song, taken from Exodus 4, that was popular years ago in Christian circles. God asks Moses “What’s in your hand, Moses?” “A rod,” he replies. God then tells him, “Lay it down.” We know that when Moses laid his staff down, it became a snake, displaying the miracle-working power of God. What fruit is God able to produce in us when we lay down what He asks of us? Expect an abundant harvest.

How Do We Abide?

We must put our relationship with God first. To achieve that, the emphasis should be on “being with” Him rather than in “doing for” Him. In other words, that requires spending time with Him, not

just doing His kingdom's work. As we stay closely connected to Yeshua, we will see Him working in our lives in supernatural ways.

Abiding is the main focus of the John 15 passage. When it says "abide," it is a command, not an option. Do you want to breakthrough to abundance in your life and ministry? It will come as you abide in Him. It is not about how much you know about faith or the Bible; it is about getting to know God personally. Do we have a passion for God like David did? *"O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh longs for You..."* (Ps. 63:1).

The sap, the life force of the vine, is not visible. It is what is happening inside. Sadly, you can read your Bible for years without abiding. You can attend church every Sunday without fail. You can teach a Sunday School Class. But, none of these good things is abiding. It is easier to work "for" God than learn to abide "with" Him because it requires time, a precious commodity we don't easily give up.

Fruit Grows...with Time

All vineyards, orchards, and gardens must be given time to come to fruition. Some fruit trees, depending on their type and climate, take up to 10 years to produce fruit. Others bear fruit within two, three, or four years. No two fruit trees are identical. But all are expected to eventually produce fruit. *"Now when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it"* (Matt. 21:34).

Sometimes as believers, we expect to have the fruit of the Spirit evident in our lives (or the lives of other believers) speedily. We should remember that the maturity process takes time. Even when the tree is of fruit-bearing age, we don't wake up one morning and find fruit. The fruit starts as tiny buds, barely noticeable on the tree. Then the buds open up into a fragile and beautiful fragrance of blossoms. Then blossoms give way to the hard, unripened fruit and, over time, grow and develop to full maturity.

As a young Christian woman, I had a problem with a critical attitude. I often found myself expecting other believers to be more mature than they were. One day, about 20 years ago, I was standing on the back deck of my parent's home enjoying a lovely morning. I felt the Lord speak to me and tell me to go and get an apple off the apple tree in their yard and eat it. I refused, saying, "But, Lord, those apples are not ready to eat, they will be bitter. They won't taste good." You see, the apples were only the size of walnuts. Then I felt the Lord say to my heart, "But those apples are developing perfectly according to My plan. They are perfect for this stage in their development. How can you say they aren't good?" I realized then that the Lord was dealing with me concerning my attitude towards others. None of us knows the maturation time of others. Only God knows whether or not a person is maturing as God desires. In time, those little hard apples on that tree would be ripe, juicy, and delicious. So, also, in God's timing, will the fruit in our lives come to maturity.

At a staff devotion one morning, BFP International Projects Director Barry Mevorach told us: "The maturing process takes time. The fruit of the Spirit aren't simply purchased commodities or cheap gifts. We don't wake up one morning with the gift of gentleness or self-control. They grow slowly over a lifetime. Any fruit of the Spirit is cultivated in our lives as we decrease and He (Yeshua) increases."

Results are inevitable. They may be excellent, fair, poor or bad; but results are inevitable. The Most High expects results in proportion to the input He has made to the vineyard. When evaluating results, He also considers the conditions: the social climate, a person's spiritual background (the soil),

the age of each tree (a believer's spiritual maturity), and the opportunities each of us has received in times past.

The crop the Lord is expecting from His vineyard is not a crop of material possessions, money, houses, lands or possessions. It is not a crop of higher education or fame, important as these things may be. The fruit God looks for in His people is the fruit of the Holy Spirit: faith, love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22). The fruit of the Holy Spirit should be produced, in varying quantities, on every vine in the Almighty's spiritual vineyard. All other achievements, regardless of how much they are valued by the world, count for nothing when compared with the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

My prayer for you today is that you will choose to abide in the vine, submitting to the loving ministrations of the Vinedresser, trusting Him to make the best decisions for your life. Don't wait, it is the most wonderful and important decision you can make.

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