

## Ezekiel 15

- Today we temporarily wrap up our Ezekiel study with chapter 15
  - Our break is made necessary, of course, by my transition out of this pulpit and into the next
    - One day soon I hope to restart the Ezekiel study in chapter 16
    - So stay tuned for the rest of the book
  - But today we have a brief chapter to complete
    - As you glance down the page of your Bible, you'll notice that we only have 8 verses to cover today
    - If you're thinking to yourself, "I wonder how Steve will fill an entire Sunday sermon with just 8 verses?"
    - Then you are a visitor, and we welcome you to OHBC this morning
    - Because the regulars know this is no challenge for me
  - Chapter 15 brings us the fifth of eight excuses that Israel relied upon to tell themselves they have no reason to fear Ezekiel's warnings
    - We've been studying these excuses and God's response to each,
    - And we've been considering whether we too use the same excuses for our own disregard for God and His word
    - The fifth excuse runs two chapters, chapters 15 & 16
    - We see the excuse in chapter 15, and then the Lord uses two chapters to respond
  - Normally, I would have preferred to cover both these chapters in quick succession so we could see God's full response
    - But as short as chapter 15 is, chapter 16 is exceedingly long
    - In fact, chapter 15 is the shortest chapter in the book of Ezekiel, while chapter 16 is the longest
    - So it's simply not possible to cover both in the time I have left

- Not unless you want me to cover chapter 16 for our Christmas service...
- So we'll save chapter 16 for the day I resume this study
- Meanwhile, chapter 15 lies ahead of us, and it offers quite a bit to consider on its own, so we'll take our time this morning examining it
  - Chapter 15 is a parable, and like all parables it teaches a profound spiritual truth using a simple, everyday metaphor
    - So first, we'll understand the metaphor
    - Then we'll apply that metaphor to understand the spiritual truth God is teaching
    - In the process we'll discover Israel's excuse and see God's response
  - Given the chapter's short length, I'll read it all at once

**Ezek. 15:1** Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying,

**Ezek. 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?"

**Ezek. 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?"

**Ezek. 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?"

**Ezek. 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!"

**Ezek. 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;

**Ezek. 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.

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

- The Lord speaks to Ezekiel once again with a word for those in Israel making excuses for ignoring the counsel of the prophet
  - The Lord begins with a question for the prophet

- He asks how is the wood of a vine better than the wood of any tree branch in the forest?
- The vine God mentions is a grapevine, and grapevines grew throughout Israel
- Grapes and the wine made from them was an important part of Jewish diet and culture, so every Jew knew this plant well
- And the branches of trees in the forest refer to the limbs of tall, old growth trees common to the forests of ancient Israel
- So God asks Ezekiel (and Israel) to compare the worth of the wood of a grapevine with that of the wood of the trees of the forest
  - It's an easy question for any Jew to answer
  - In fact any child in Israel could have answered the question
  - Grapevines are good for one thing...producing grapes
  - But their wood is virtually worthless
  - It's too soft, too weak and too gnarled to be useful for any serious purpose
- The Lord goes on to ask could you even make a peg out of the wood?
  - Grapevines, even older, thick ones, are so soft they cannot be used even to make pegs to hold up a kitchen pot
  - They would snap under any weight
  - So no one bothered using grape wood for anything except fueling a fire
  - So the answer is no, grape vine wood is not superior to the wood of the forest trees
- Next, the Lord asks in v.4 that if that vine wood was thrown into a fire, and it was partially consumed by the fire, would the charred remains be more useful or less useful?
  - With both ends burned and only the center untouched, would the wood become stronger or weaker?
    - Would someone be more inclined to use it in construction or less?

- Given how useless it was to begin with, burning the ends would only serve to make it less useful, of course
- In v.5 the Lord affirms the obvious answer
  - If that wood was good for nothing while it was intact, how much less useful is it now
  - Here again, the answer would have been easy even for a small child
  - Obviously, the Lord is using this parable to lead Israel to a certain conclusion
- And the Lord moves to making that application in v.6 by comparing that grapevine to the people of Israel still living in Jerusalem
  - The Lord says He's bringing a "fire" to the "forest", and if that fire can burn tall, stately trees, then it will surely burn the weak, useless grapevine too
    - This comparison is consistent with God's use of the grapevine as a picture of Israel in the whole Bible
    - Grapevines are one of three, common agricultural symbols of Israel used in the Bible, along with fig and olive trees
    - We can find a grapevine picturing Israel in Genesis 42, Deut 32, Ps 80, Isa 5, Jer 2 and in the New Testament in Matt 21 (among others)
    - So that part of the parable was relatively straightforward
  - So the Lord says Israel (i.e., the grapevine) is a weak and useless nation
    - They were not a mighty or numerous people compared to the Gentile nations that surrounded them
    - In fact, Israel has never been very powerful as a people, not compared to the great Gentile powers
    - God made Israel great, but apart from God, the Jewish nation was small, weak and inconsequential
    - It was like grape wood growing in a forest surrounded by tall trees
  - So by logical extension, the other tall, majestic trees of the forest must represent the Gentile nations of the earth

- And many of these nations were far more numerous and far stronger than Israel
- Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Moab, Ammon were all stronger than Israel
- They were like tall, strong, stately cedars compared to the crooked, weak grapevine of Israel
- But then the Lord says He is bringing a “forest fire” that will consume all these trees
  - He is referring to the fall of nations at the hands of great empires that the Lord was in the process of raising up
    - Assyria, Babylon...eventually Persia, Greece and Rome
    - All the mighty Gentile nations that Daniel foretold would dominate Israel over many centuries
    - These series of conquests began with Babylon’s march in Jerusalem
  - And Ezekiel is warning Israel that yet one more Babylonian invasion is coming, one that will topple all opposition including Israel
    - God compares these conquests to a fire raging through a forest of cedars, taking down those majestic sentinels
    - Egypt, Assyria, Moab, Ammon...
    - Even the strongest and tallest “trees” were going to fall under the onslaught of God’s appointed victor
- In the midst of the conquering forest fire, there stands a single grapevine... weak, soft and alone
  - How likely is it that this vine would survive the advancing fire?
    - Obviously, it will burn up easily and quickly
    - If cedars can’t defeat the enemy, a grapevine has no hope
  - That’s what the Lord wants His people to realize
    - The Lord has ordained Babylon to subdue all other nations, and in particular Israel

- These things were foretold by the prophets as God's judgment against Israel for violating the Old Covenant
- Hundreds of years earlier, Isaiah told Israel to expect Babylon to conquer them

**Is. 13:1** The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw.

**Is. 13:2** Lift up a standard on the bare hill,  
Raise your voice to them,  
Wave the hand that they may enter the doors of the nobles.

**Is. 13:3** I have commanded My consecrated ones,  
I have even called My mighty warriors,  
My proudly exulting ones,  
To execute My anger.

**Is. 13:4** A sound of tumult on the mountains,  
Like that of many people!  
A sound of the uproar of kingdoms,  
Of nations gathered together!  
The Lord of hosts is mustering the army for battle.

**Is. 13:5** They are coming from a far country,  
From the farthest horizons,  
The Lord and His instruments of indignation,  
To destroy the whole land.

**Is. 13:6** Wail, for the day of the Lord is near!  
It will come as destruction from the Almighty.

**Is. 13:7** Therefore all hands will fall limp,  
And every man's heart will melt.

- Isaiah told Israel that Babylon would conquer the land
  - They were God's consecrated warriors executing His anger against His people
  - And they would not be defeated
- So the parable reminds Israel that Babylon's conquest was a foregone conclusion
  - They first two attacks were merely prelude to the coming battle
  - The city would be taken and the rest of the people exiled

- The Lord concludes vs.7-8 that He has set His face against them
- They will come out of the fire, that is they will not be destroyed, but the fire will consume them
- With the result being they will know I am the Lord, they will cease their idolatry
- This leads us to understanding Israel's fifth excuse
  - The people were assuming God would preserve them from the prophet's dire predictions of coming destruction because they were God's people
    - Being the chosen Jewish nation, they expected God would always protect them
    - The other nations were falling, but Jerusalem wouldn't fall
    - God would protect His people in the end
  - So the Jews remaining in Jerusalem took comfort in the assumption they were special people and the rules didn't apply to them
    - To which the Lord responds yes, Israel is special, but not in the good sense of that word
    - They were disadvantaged compared to other people
    - He told them that long ago

**Deut. 4:37** "Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power,

**Deut. 4:38** driving out from before you nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in and to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is today.

**Deut. 7:7** "The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples,

**Deut. 7:8** but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

- Notice the Lord emphasized to Israel in their Law that He chose them because of His love for their fathers, not because they earned His love

- The Lord set His love on them not because they were so numerous nor mighty but because He was keeping a promise to Abraham
- And they conquered mighty nations in taking possession of the land because the Lord did the fighting for them
- Elsewhere in Deuteronomy, the Lord told Israel not to become puffed up by these successes nor to think themselves so good or worthy

**Deut. 9:4** “Do not say in your heart when the Lord your God has driven them out before you, ‘Because of my righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,’ but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is dispossessing them before you.

**Deut. 9:5** “It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

- When Israel went conquering throughout the land of Canaan, the Lord knew they would be tempted to boast
- They would claim the Lord was on their side because they were the good guys while the Canaanites were the bad guys
- Well they were half right...the Canaanites were bad guys, but Israel wasn't much better apart from their relationship with God
- The Jewish people were so certain they were special that they assumed God was *prohibited* from acting against them as they sinned
  - They thought God's hands were tied by His promises to them in the covenant He made with Israel
  - And they assumed this despite the the terrible atrocities Israel committed in pursuit of idolatry
  - This was their excuse for ignoring Ezekiel...our special status renders Ezekiel's warning null and void
- But once again, their excuse was based on a conveniently selective memory
  - First, they conveniently overlook the fact that Jews were already sitting in exile in Babylon
    - Remember, in the parable the Lord asked Israel if the vine becomes better after having it's ends burned?



- The Lord was referring to the first two attacks that Babylon brought against the city
- The first attack was likened to burning one end of the vine, while the second attack was likened to burning the other end
- That left only the “middle” of the vine intact
  - And so the Lord asks Israel that if the vine couldn’t withstand the fire when it was whole, how can it expect to endure after two ends are charred?
  - Clearly, the people had no reason to think the Lord would defend the city from a third Babylonian attack
  - Their own captivity was proof that Israel’s covenant relationship with the Lord wasn’t a guarantee of protection
- Secondly, that covenant relationship was itself responsible for God’s wrath coming against the city
  - As we saw last week, the Old Covenant spelled out the very disasters Ezekiel was predicting would come against the city
  - They were appointed by the Lord as the consequence for Israel’s disobedience
  - So that covenant relationship didn’t tie God’s hands...it bound Israel to receive the very disasters they said couldn’t happen
- Finally, Israel made the very mistake God warned about in Deut 9
  - They thought they were *inherently* worthy of God’s protection
    - They assumed they would be protected merely because they entered into a covenant yet they failed to consider its terms
    - That’s like us expecting to be protected by our government under all circumstances merely because we are citizens
    - But if we do not obey our country’s laws, then we will not be protected...we will be punished
  - Similarly, the covenant God made with Israel called for national obedience to the Law as a condition for receiving His protection
    - That covenant relationship did make Israel unique among the nations of the world, but it did not make Israel *inherently* special

- If the people of Israel lived according to the covenant's commandments, then Israel would receive God's protection
- But if they disavowed their God, engaged in idolatry and disobeyed His covenant, then they receive His wrath
- In the end, the nation will always be preserved in some form, because the Lord made a promise to their forefathers
  - But along the way, many in Israel would see the consequences of the nation's disobedience
  - And in Ezekiel's day, that meant emptying the city and destroying the temple and walls to purge idolatry from Israel forever
- God was taking drastic steps to cut away a cancer in order to save the patient
  - If the Lord had taken less serious action, that cancer of idolatry would have remained in the hearts of the people
  - Like any cancer, if you leave even a few cells alive, they eventually come roaring back
  - Eventually, idolatry would have destroyed God's people
- So instead, the Lord cut it all out, which was painful and left scars among the people
  - But in the long run, that radical step saved the patient
  - The nation survived and when they finally return to the land, they come back changed
  - Never again did the nation bend their knee to an idol
- Christians too can presume that our relationship with Christ is like magical force field that protects us from every bad thing
  - Some Christians believe that nothing bad will befall a Christian because of our covenant relationship with Christ
    - These believers repeat favorites phrases like God loves us and has a plan for our lives

- That misquote scripture saying, anything I ask in Jesus name will be done, and that no weapon formed against me may prosper, etc.
- They believe these things mean God has promised to keep us from all harm
- I call this jingo Christianity
  - Jingo Christianity reduces our expectations of God to a cosmic genie, and makes us invincible superheroes
  - It's a blind faith in a hyped and false view of what our covenant relationship with Christ says about our future
  - It's believing what the Jews believed in Ezekiel's day
  - That God will never allows us to suffer defeat, just as God would never let a Babylon defeat Jerusalem
- But just like the Jewish people, such thinking is self-evidently false
  - Bad things do happen to Christians all the time
  - Christians get cancer, Christians go bankrupt, Christians lose their jobs
  - Christians experience wars and earthquakes and fires
  - Christians are attacked and murdered and worse
- If we're promised to be like Christ in the eternal life, than we ought to expect to experience what Christ did in His earthly life
  - In His earthly life, Christ was tempted by the enemy...and so will we
  - Christ felt sorrow and loss...and so will we
  - Christ was mistreated and slandered...and so we will be
  - Christ was beaten, tortured and murdered...and so will go the lives of many Christians
  - A slave is not greater than the Master, as Jesus said
- But these things do nothing to change our relationship with God or our eternal future, much less our salvation

- We are saved by our faith in Jesus Christ, and that salvation is assured forever because God has made promises to us
  - He's come to dwell in us forever to prove His intention to fulfill those promises
  - He has made us a new creature, and our old nature has passed away never to return
  - And He says He will never leave us nor forsake us
- Meanwhile, we serve Christ for a time while living here in a fallen and sinful world
  - Sin is all around us
  - In fact, it's still inside us, dwelling in our physical bodies
  - So until we shed this body and receive our new body, we will know the ravages of sin
  - We will commit sin and we will suffer it's consequences whether at our own hands or at the hands of others
- But the good news is God is using those "bad" things to accomplish wonderful, amazing eternal things
  - For example, God used terrible things in Job's life to author a book that has given hope to countless millions who faced similar devastation
  - God used the terrible things of Israel's exile to put an end to their soul-crushing idolatry
  - And God used nails and whips to disfigure and kill His own Son so that we might know God's perfection and glory and love
  - Good things coming from bad things
- But there's a second way we can repeat Israel's excuse, and it's even more dangerous
  - We might begin to think that our covenant relationship with Christ means we're special and the rules no longer apply to us
    - We might tell ourselves that since Christ died to pay for our sins, God won't give regard to our sin

- That we can do no wrong now
- Certainly, by our faith in Jesus, the Lord has set aside the penalty for our sin
  - Because of our faith in Him, we are credited with Christ's righteousness, and the penalty for sin fell on Him rather than us
  - But that does not mean God overlooks our disobedience or that we have free license to sin
- Such presumption is the pride that goes the fall in a believer's life
  - It's the same self-deception Israel used to excuse away the prophet's warnings
  - Like Israel, it stems from assuming we are *inherently* deserving of God's protection
- Once again, we need to separate our eternal life *in* Christ from our life lived *for* Christ
  - Living in Christ, we are deserving of mercy and forgiveness and protection because the Father loves the Son
  - Living in Christ, we are assured eternal glory because we are heirs to Christ's promises\
  - These promises are spiritually true for us now by our faith in Christ
  - And one day they will become our experience in the age to come
- But in the meantime, we are expect to obey the Bible's commands for how to live for Christ
  - Living for Christ, we discipline our flesh to prevent its sin nature from ruling us
  - Living for Christ, we put away sin to please Him and to become a more effective ambassador in His name
  - Just like Israel, our covenant relationship didn't tie God's hands from responding to our sin
  - It bounds us to serving the God Who has saved us and to living according to His commandments or experience His discipline

- Ironically, one of the strongest warnings in the New Testament against this attitude involves the same analogy

**John 15:1** “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.

**John 15:2** “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.

**John 15:3** “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

**John 15:4** “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me.

**John 15:5** “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

**John 15:6** “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.

**John 15:7** “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

**John 15:8** “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.

**John 15:9** “Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love.

**John 15:10** “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.

- In this parable, Jesus is the vine and we’re His branches
  - The Father is the vinedresser, caring for the branches
    - We gain our spiritual supply in Christ
    - We are nothing apart from Him, just as Israel was nothing apart from the relationship with the Lord
  - We abide in Christ by keeping His commandments, for to love Christ is to keep His commandments, just as Christ loved the Father by obeying the Father
    - And we glorify the Father by bearing much fruit
    - Fruit bearing is doing works that glorify the Father while putting away the sin that displeases Him
    - We can do these things when we depend on the supply of the Vine
  - But that branch that will not abide, that will not obey, is taken away

- He dries up and is gathered for burning
- That's the same picture Ezekiel used for the Israel that disobeyed the Lord, a vine being burned
- Just as Israel didn't cease to be God's chosen nation, neither is that Christian who is taken away ceasing to be God's child
- The disobedient Christian risks being set aside from the work of glorifying the Father
  - That's a useless life, a life wasted
  - But it doesn't have to be that way, of course
- It think it's appropriate that the first part of this Ezekiel study should end with this reminder, since I think it neatly sums up my overall teaching perspective
  - To quote Jesus, to whom much is given, much is expected
    - In Christ, we have been given so much, more than we can even imagine
    - When we see the glory of Christ's appearing to us, and when we see the heavenly realm and the kingdom age to come, we will be stunned by all that the Lord has prepared for us
    - We will be overwhelmed by His love
    - Only then will we begin to appreciate all that we have been given in Christ
  - And in that moment, we will also appreciate why the Lord had right to expect so much from us
    - Let's be ready for that moment
    - Let's all be ready to say we held nothing back from Christ, because He gave us everything
    - Abide in Him, keeping His commandments, and not making excuses for our sin
    - Let's bear fruit