

Joined to Jesus to Have Joy

John 15:1–11

Studies in John #35

WHAT are some feelings that come to mind when you think of a loved ones' absence? Children, how do you feel when your mom or dad are away on a trip? Sad? Lonely? Even mad? Husbands and wives, how do you feel? Would you immediately associate *joy* with absence? As we turn again to Jesus' Upper Room Discourse with his disciples on the eve of his glorification on the cross and to the right hand of God when he will be absent from them, he speaks of how his absence means they'll be JOINED TO JESUS TO HAVE JOY.

But there's an issue. We always have issues! What's the issue? You! Me! We don't associate John 15 with joy. Instead, we associate it with Calvinist or Arminian understandings of salvation. I heard a speaker on the radio once say "John 15 is a chapter Calvinists skip when they talk about the perseverance of the saints because it doesn't fit their theology." So we make it all about that. I read a book once that said John 15 teaches the Spirit-filled Christian is the one who abides in Christ while the carnal Christian doesn't. We make it all about responding. But I want you to focus on this: JOINED TO JESUS TO HAVE JOY.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

A Jewish man speaks to Jewish disciples in first century Judea. The O.T. is just a *little bit* important! Let's summarize the *OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND*.

First, *the Lord planted a vineyard*. Isaiah 5 describes his clearing away stones, building a watchtower, and hewing out of rock a wine vat before planting (vv. 1–2), which Jeremiah 2 says he did with pure seeds (v. 21).

Second, *the vineyard didn't produce fruit as it was intended*. Jeremiah 2 said it grew into a wild vine (Jer. 2:21) and Isaiah 5 produced wild grapes (Isa. 5:2, 4). Hosea 10 explained that Israel was a luxuriant and fruitful vine but the more fruit it produced, the more altars and pillars to false gods it built (Hos. 10:1–2).

Third, *the Lord removed his protection so it was uprooted* (Isa. 5:5–6; Jer. 12:10; Hos. 2:12). In Jeremiah 5, in fact, the Lord commands the prophet to walk up and down every row of the vineyard to tear off unfruitful branches (v. 10). Ezekiel 15 says just as the wood of vines was only good for burning so he gave up the inhabitants of Jerusalem to exile (vv. 1–8). Ezekiel 19 then says it once was planted by water but now was in the wilderness (vv. 10–14).

Fourth, *a day was coming when the Lord would replant a fruitful vineyard* (Jer. 31:5; 32:15). Isaiah 27 envisions the Lord as the keeper of his vineyard who watered it day and night (vv. 2–5); it would take root and fill the whole world with its fruit (v. 6). One of my favorite images of what God had in store for his people in the New Covenant is found in Amos 9. The Lord would raise the fallen booth of David so that his people would possess Gentiles like the

Edomites (vv. 11–12). Acts 15 says this was fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus and gospel spreading to the Gentiles. Then we read this:

“Behold, the days are coming...when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; *the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.* I will restore the fortunes of my people...they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine...I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them...” (vv. 13–15)

This imagery is brought together in Psalm 80. “You brought a vine out of Egypt” (v. 8a). When? The Exodus. “You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land” (vv. 8b–9). When? The conquest of Joshua. “The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River” (vv. 10–11). When? The reigns of David and Solomon. “Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?” (v. 12). When? The Exile. Then comes the prayer for revival: “Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted, and for the son whom you made strong for yourself” (vv. 14–15).

JESUS: THE VINE (VV. 1–2)

So if you were a first century Jewish disciple and heard all that, whom did you think the Bible was referring to as the vine? Israel (cf. Isa. 5:7; 27:6). In

fact, so did Jesus. Turn for a moment to Matthew 21:33–44 (cf. Mark 12:1–9; Luke 20:9–18). A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, built a tower, leased it to tenants, then went away. When harvest was ready he sent servants but the tenants beat one, killed one, and stoned one. He sent more servants; they did the same. The man finally sent his son but they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Jesus asked the Pharisees what the owner would do when he came? They responded rightly that he'd put them to death and lease the vineyard to a new tenant. What was Jesus' application? "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits" (v. 43).

Hold that thought. Imagine growing up your whole life thinking ethnic, national Israel was the Lord's vine; but then in a Darth Vader-esque moment of revelation, like telling Luke, "I am your father," Jesus reveals: "**I am** (Ἐγώ εἰμι) **the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser**" (v. 1). One commentator said it best: "Jesus is identifying himself as the true people of God."¹ Jesus *is* Israel. That's not "replacement theology;" that's Jesus! He's the "**true** (ἀληθινός) **vine**," meaning, he's the genuine article. Jesus is not saying he's true while Israel was false; no, just like John the Baptizer was a *light* but Jesus is the *true light* (1:9) and just like the Lord gave Israel *manna* but Jesus is

the *true bread* (6:23), so unfruitful Israel was the Lord's vine and vineyard that finds its fulfillment in Jesus. As the Lord planted and cared for his vine so **“my Father is the vinedresser”**—the γεωργός. Does that sound like a word you know? γεωργός. Gorgeous. The Father is the one who makes his vine beautiful. It's into this O.T./Gospel context that Jesus says of the Father: **“Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit”** (v. 2).

Like my pomegranate tree, I prune it for two reasons: negatively, to cut off what's dead and fruitless; positively, to cause what's alive to be more fruitful.

US: THE BRANCHES

Have you ever been talking with your friend, wife, or kids and in the middle of the conversation they say something that feels out of context? So in John 13–14 we're listening to Jesus and his disciples talk about his upcoming absence. Doesn't it feel to you that Jesus brings up this imagery of a vine out of nowhere? *Awkward*. It's not, though; he's still explaining that his is beneficial: while we feel separation there's actual union with him.

Look at *the image* in verse 3: **“Already you (pl.) are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you”** (pl.). Jesus isn't speaking to you and me individualistically; he's using plural pronouns—“you *all*”—to speak to his

disciples collectively and then to us as a covenant community. Remember Jesus washing his disciples' feet? He told them they were clean, although not Judas (13:10). This is so important. When Jesus shifts from speaking in general, parable-like terms in verses 1–2 to personal terms here in verse 3 he tells the disciples they *are* clean. Why's that important? He's contrasting the unfruitful branches with them, fruitful branches. Then he issues an imperative: **"Abide in me"** (v. 4).² The only way for a branch to be fruitful is to be united to Jesus. Some of us come out of Calvary Chapel where the first part of this verse is heavily emphasized: **"Abide in me."** The force of this imperative, we were told, was for us to self-examine; and many precious souls leave this command unsure and in doubt: "Am I abiding?" But when you only focus on this *snippet* of the verse apart from its context you miss the power to realize the command: **"and I in you (pl.)."** There's a mutual abiding and indwelling here. Do you see it? Is Jesus saying only when you abide in me then I may abide in you? If Jesus issuing a hypothetical: "If and when you abide, then I will too?" No! He's making a link. Yes he commands us to abide, but he does this *because* he he's made us **clean** (v. 3) and *because* he abides in us! (v. 4) **"As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine"**—that's the general principle; then he applies it: **"neither can you (pl.), unless you abide (pl.) in me"** (v. 4). J.C. Ryle helpfully defined this abiding: "To abide in Christ means

to keep up a habit of constant close communion with Him,—to be always leaning on Him, resting on Him, pouring out our hearts to Him, and using Him as our Fountain of life and strength...”³ Again, Jesus brings his Old Testament imagery to personal application: **“I am the vine; you (pl.) are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do (pl.) nothing”** (v. 5). And this is true of believers, right? We’re **“already...clean”** (v. 4) and Jesus abides in us (v. 4).

“But look at *the exhortation* in verse 6”: **“If anyone does not abide⁴ in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers;⁵ and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned”** (v. 6). Yes, this comes right out of the Old Testament. Unbelieving Israel did not abide; like the prophets Jesus says they’d be thrown away and burned in the end. This applies to Jesus’ community because like ancient Israel the New Covenant Church is a corporate community in which wheat and tares, believers and unbelievers are mixed. Some say this passage goes against our theology and we avoid it. Here we are! Exhortation is *the means* by which God works in his community to cause his people to persevere. Exhortation doesn’t disprove our theology; it’s instrumental to it! The purpose of John 15 isn’t to discourage, but to encourage genuine disciples united to the genuine vine to be fruitful.

Note *the means* of abiding in the subtle shift from **“abide in me”** (vv. 4, 5, 6) in verse 7: **“If you abide (pl.) in me, and my words abide in you (pl.), ask whatever you wish (pl.), and it will be done for you (pl.).”** We abide in Jesus by faith. Tangibly, we abide in Jesus by the word and prayer. It’s said that Mary Queen of Scots feared John Knox’s prayers even more than an army of twenty thousand.⁶ Prayer is a powerful weapon when we understand that the power of prayer is linked to the power of communion with Christ.

Note who gets *the glory* from our abiding: **“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear (pl.) much fruit and so prove to be my disciples”** (v. 8). This is all rooted in love not fear: **“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you (pl.). Abide (pl.) in my love. If you keep (pl.) my commandments, you will abide (pl.) in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love”** (vv. 9–10).

WHAT’S IT ALL ABOUT? JOY

I mentioned at the beginning that various evangelical interpretations cause people to doubt: “Am I abiding? How much? Is it enough?” Instead note *WHAT JESUS SAYS IT’S ALL ABOUT* in verse 11: **“These things I have spoken to you (pl.), that my joy may be in you (pl.), and that your (pl.) joy may be full.”** Jesus is speaking to those already made clean by his word (v. 3) and in

whom he already abides (v. 4). We will abide in him through faith by means of his word and prayer and be more and more fruitful in our lives. Hearing this is a joy to us! Think of it like this: what's the purpose of a vineyard? To grow grapes to produce wine. What's wine a sign of in Scripture? According to Psalm 104, joy. What did Jesus miraculously do at the wedding in Cana? He gave them wine! Why? As a sign that a new age had dawned, which we heard Amos 9 describe like this: "the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it...they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine."

The Holy Spirit has joined us to Jesus so that God would give us eternal joy!

Notes

¹ Searles, ““These Things I Have Said to You,”” 517.

² “Abide” (μένω) is the key verb he uses ten times in verses 4–10.

³ Ryle, *John 13:1–21:25*, 4:104.

⁴ Present subjunctive.

⁵ These two aorist indicatives are not being used in the sense of time but in the sense of completeness, of ultimate reality. Carson, 519.

⁶ Ryle, *John 13:1–21:25*, 4:104.