



‘I Am the Vine’

"I am the Vine" is the seventh, and last, of the great I am sayings of our Lord recorded by John in his Gospel. We do not know what exactly it was that prompted Jesus to speak of the Vine and its branches, but it does provide us with another rich source of teaching, encouragement and challenge. So what can we learn from this claim "I am the Vine"?

The Reality Christ Provides

The actual claim Jesus made was "I am the true Vine" (John 15.1) and that indicates a contrast with another vine (or vines). Now Jesus was speaking to his disciples here – who were all Jews. So this reference of himself to a "vine" would have had particular significance for them because the vine was used as a symbol for Israel over and over again in the Old Testament. Consequently, Jews thought that they were the true vine of God because of their race, birth and nationality.

However, the Old Testament picture of Israel as the vine is also consistently one of degeneration and fruitlessness – *"it brought forth wild grapes"* (Is 5:4); *"how art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto me?"* (Jer 2:21); *"Israel is an empty vine"* (Hos 10:1; cf. Ps 80.8-16). And Jesus was proclaiming here in unmistakable terms that it was not the nation of Israel which was the true vine; in fact, as their prophets made clear, Israel was degenerate. The reality, Jesus was saying, was *"I am the true vine of God"*. It is in Christ that God dwells and God's people consist only of those who are in relationship to him. It is not external qualifications (like physical or national ties and the like) but union with Christ – faith in him – that makes us right with God and shows us to be his special people.

The Security Christ Procures

"I am the Vine; ye are the branches" (v 5a). While we cannot be certain where it was that Jesus spoke these words, it surely is no mistake that they occur between John chapters 14 and 16 which record the comfort that the Saviour sought to give to his disciples in the light of his going away. The disciples were worried men; they were anxious and concerned that he was leaving them and they were going to be abandoned – they couldn't see that anything good was likely to happen them, especially in the face of the hostility of the religious authorities. It was bad enough facing opposition when the Lord was with them – but how could they possibly manage in his absence (cf 16:1)?

And now Jesus says "I am the Vine, ye are the branches". The point is that they were not going to be cut off from him; they were not going to be separated from him! They were still going to be joined to him in the same way that a branch is to the stem. There would still be that living link between them and their Lord and because of that they would be secure and they needed not to be afraid of what the future might hold. I wonder if you have that sense of security in the Saviour? The opposition we face is different in kind to that which the disciples met, but the world still opposes him and his people. However, as believers we still have the resources, power and presence of the Saviour today to enable us to overcome. If you are "in Christ" (as Paul loved to put it) you are never left on your own to meet any and every attack of the world, the flesh and the devil.

The Fertility Christ Produces

"He that abideth in me and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit" (v 5b). The whole point of a vine being cultivated is that it might produce fruit in the form of grapes. And Jesus was reminding his

disciples of their responsibility to bear fruit to his glory. In a short time he would ascend bodily back to heaven and the public ministry he had conducted for two-to-three years in Palestine would cease. But his message had to continue to be spread by his followers, in ever widening circles. His disciples were to be witnesses of him in word and deed; beginning at Jerusalem, and going out to Judea, Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the world. And the example of life he had set was to be copied and lived out, in and before the world. So Christ-likeness of life, growth in grace, faithfulness in witness – these were what the Master was requiring of his followers – then and now.

The great difficulty, however, is how to achieve this; we are, after all, weak and sinful – and easily discouraged in the face of opposition and persecution. And the secret lies in 'Abiding in Christ'. This is something we are commanded to do – it is not an optional extra in the Christian life, but an absolute necessity. We are to have such a close relationship with Christ that the sap of his Spirit flows from him to us continually, enabling us to be spiritually fruitful. As he reminds us in v 5c *"without Me ye can do nothing!"* This is both a challenge and an encouragement. Fruitfulness is impossible apart from Christ – but it is inevitable if we preserve a living, vital contact with him! Are you abiding in Christ?

The Levy Christ Prescribes

"Every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it..." (v 2b). Here we meet the cost of fruitfulness. It is essential that, if a vine is to produce quantities of good fruit, pruning is carried out. And pruning involves cutting away those parts that would hinder productiveness. At times the pruning will be very severe; at others it will just nip little buds or tendrils. But if a good crop is to be harvested, then this process must occur. And Jesus is telling his disciples that they must expect to have the pruning knife applied to them in the same way – for the same purpose. Therefore we are to take heed to the Word of God as it challenges our attitudes and behaviour – *"Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you"* (v 3). When Scripture convicts us of sin in our lives we are to repent of that sin and put it away.

The providences of God in our lives are also a part of this pruning process. Whether it is illness, bereavement, disappointment or hardship and occurring in the domestic, employment or leisure aspects of our lives, our Lord will see to it that we are shaped and fitted for productive service and witness. I wonder how many of us, facing a trial or difficulty, ask why God is "putting us through the mill" and almost feel that he has abandoned us – when we should be thanking him for the providence, drawing closer to him in it and finding his grace not only sufficient for the particular need of the hour, but also proficient in using what we have come through as a witness and testimony that brings glory to his name?

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