

THE LOOKOUT

JANUARY 2024

Unit: Gospel of John (Part 2)

Theme: I AM

Overview: Jesus made several claims about himself in the Gospel of John. These claims connected the dots between his name, his identity, and his mission. They all have Old Testament antecedents with additional connections to Israel. In Part 2 of this three-month study in the Gospel of John, students will learn of Jesus' superiority to Abraham, how Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the exclusive way of salvation, and the true vine (new Israel). This LORD is the great I AM.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a lesson aim, lesson text, and supplemental text.

Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: Study, Application, and Discovery.

Use the Discovery questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF JANUARY 28, 2024

LESSON AIM: **Glorify God by bearing
the fruit of Christ's life
flowing through you.**

UNIT: Gospel of John (Part 2)

THEME: I AM

LESSON TEXT: John 15:1-20, 26-27

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 17:7-8; Matthew 3:7-11;
Galatians 5:22-23

STUDY

I AM THE VINE

BY MARK SCOTT

The next step beyond a metaphor is an allegory. A metaphor is a comparison of two unlike things (that is, bringing “A” and “non-A” together, such as in the statement of Jesus about Herod, “Go tell that fox” [Luke 13:32]; Herod was not a fox, but he acted like one). By contrast, an allegory can be a more complete narrative than a metaphor, and possibly have more than one point of comparison (for example, in Jesus’ parable of the sower, soils, and seed in Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23).

As Jesus continued his Upper Room Discourse in John 15, he moved beyond metaphor by claiming to be the true vine of Israel. Then he connected the dots between the vine and himself, the gardener and his Father, and the branches and the disciples. If, by this time, Jesus and the disciples had left the upper room and were on their way to Gethsemane (John 14:31 ended with Jesus’ words, “Come now; let us leave”), perhaps they walked past a vine that sparked this analogy.

The Vine and Fruit

John 15:1-8

To start this chapter, Jesus made a characteristically audacious claim—as he was inclined to do in John’s Gospel—by saying, “*I am the true vine.*” (He repeats this a few sentences later, but without using the word *true*.) It probably meant Jesus was claiming to be the New Israel. In just a few hours, Old Israel, who thought of themselves as God’s vine in the world (Isaiah 5:1-7), would compromise themselves in this respect by trying and condemning God’s Son. Jesus was the provider of the real fruit from heaven. Jesus said that the Father was the *gardener* (i.e., one who cultivates the earth).

The true vine of Israel wanted the *branches* (disciples) to *bear much fruit*. Three conditions must be met for the branches to produce a bumper crop. First was the pruning of unproductive branches. Dead branches must be cut off and *thrown into the fire and burned*. Second, there was the pruning of the productive branches. *Prune* means “to take away or lift.” It seems so counterproductive, but any backyard gardener knows it is vital to prune good branches. This is not often fun (cf. Hebrews 12:7-11). Third, remaining in the vine is the most important condition. Some form of the word *remain* occurs in this text 11 times. It means to “dwell, live, or abide.” No wonder

Jesus said if we do not remain in him we *can do nothing*. But remaining in him guarantees production of fruit and even answered prayers.

The Lord and Love

John 15:9-17

In these verses, Jesus turned to *love*, one of the major themes of the Upper Room Discourse. After Jesus gave the great mandate (“love one another,” 13:34-35), *love* dominates the Gospel of John, with the word occurring more than 20 times. Here Jesus called his fruit-bearing disciples (cf. Galatians 5:22-24) to love one another in the same way the Father and Son love each other.

Love is connected with four virtues in this paragraph. First is the matter of obeying commands. Love is not antithetical to obedience; love is both the fruit of obedience and the reason for obedience. Second is the matter of sacrifice. Love’s highest gift is sacrifice—something Jesus knows all too well. Love means laying down one’s life for another (1 John 3:16). Third is the matter of joy. Jesus wanted his joy in his disciples, and he wanted that joy to be complete (i.e., full). And joy is still the second fruit of the Holy Spirit. Finally, there is the matter of friendship. C.S. Lewis put this kind of love at the top of his list (*The Four Loves*). Jesus called them *friends*, not *servants*. And out of this friendship comes answered prayer (as in the former paragraph).

The World and the Persecution

John 15:18-20, 26-27

Bearing fruit that lasts and loving others unconditionally does not mean the walk will be easy. Jesus never overpromised (except concerning the world to come). He said the world would hate the *branches*. Like teacher/like students. Like master/like servants. Persecution of one means persecution of the others. But obedience of one also means the obedience of the others.

Who can sustain the persecuted disciples? The answer is the *Advocate* (helper, counselor, companion). The Father and Son would send the Holy Spirit to the disciples. He would not only give testimony about Jesus (which is what he is most comfortable always doing, since he does not want the spotlight), but he would also help the disciples with their testimony for Jesus. ■

APPLICATION

NO PRUNING, NO PROGRESS

BY DAVID FAUST

My wife took the pruning shears to an overgrown houseplant and chopped it down to a stub. I was sure she had killed it, but the remarkably resilient plant now thrives in a corner of our kitchen with stems a yard long, covered with healthy green leaves. Every year, I take my hedge trimmers and whack away the overgrown branches of my lilacs and rose bushes, and each summer they reward my efforts by producing more colorful flowers.

I'm not sure why God designed things this way, but sometimes cutbacks lead to growth spurts.

Jesus illustrated this truth when he said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful" (John 15:1-2).

Pruned

I don't enjoy being pruned. The Master Gardener, our heavenly Father, trims branches with surgical precision, but if you're like me, you don't like how it feels when the cuts occur.

Your career was on track and things were going well at work. Why did your company lay off employees and eliminate your job?

You took care of your body and tried to stay in shape. Why did God allow you to get cancer?

You enjoy your circle of friends, but as time passes, some of them die or move away, and you miss their companionship.

You liked your church the way it was. Why did the leaders make disruptive changes that hurt feelings and caused several longtime members to leave?

You have done your best to earn a living, spend money wisely, tithe, and give generously to those in need. Why is your budget so tight? Why isn't God showering you with financial rewards?

Productive

We don't always understand the pruning process, but it's wise to trust the Gardener. According to Jesus, the Father prunes branches that are already fruitful to make them more fruitful. If the Lord cuts something out of our lives, his goal is to make us more productive, not less.

Gideon must have been bewildered when God reduced his fighting force from 32,000 to 300 men, but God used that miniature militia to defeat the Midianite army (Judges 7).

The Israelites cowered in fear because of Goliath's threats, but a sling-wielding young shepherd solved the giant problem a sizeable army couldn't overcome (1 Samuel 17).

The apostles must have been dismayed when the crowds dwindled because of Jesus' hard teaching (John 6:60-69), but the Lord used a handful of convinced, devoted followers to change the world.

Thousands of disciples were baptized in Jerusalem, but soon the church was decimated by persecution. The believers scattered to far-flung regions of Judea and Samaria, but the Master Gardener used this painful pruning to fulfill a positive purpose. Those scattered followers of Christ were like seeds a farmer plants in the soil. They bore fruit and "preached the word wherever they went" (Acts 8:4).

It's strange how life works. No pain, no progress. No tension, no transformation. No cutbacks, no fresh starts. Thank God for the seeds he is planting and the lifeless branches he is pruning from your life. He is not trying to hurt you. He is preparing you to bear more fruit.

Personal Challenge: Think of a time when God pruned you and cut something away from your life. Have you seen any new growth emerge in the process? Read James 1:2-5. Have the unpleasant "cuts" you have endured resulted in greater perseverance, maturity, and wisdom?

DISCOVERY

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What is your level of experience with gardening? What is your least favorite part of gardening . . . or what part of gardening do you find to be the most difficult?

Ask two people to read aloud **John 15:1-20, 26-27**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

2. In verse 3, Jesus says believers are already clean because of the word he has spoken to them. What does "cleanliness" signify in this context?
 - How does experiencing God's forgiveness and the knowledge that you are "clean" impact your relationship with Jesus and your ability to bear fruit?
3. How can we abide in Jesus and have him abide in us?
 - What specific steps can you take to nurture and deepen your connection with Jesus?
4. Can you think of a time when you experienced God's loving discipline or pruning in your life? How did it help you grow?
5. How does Jesus calling his disciples friends instead of servants change the way you view your relationship with him?
6. What does it mean to love one another as Jesus has loved us?
 - How does keeping Jesus' commandments relate to remaining in his love?
7. Jesus helped his Father God to create the world, and yet the world hates him. The world also hates people who follow Jesus. How did we get to this point?
8. Why is it so difficult (yet important) to be—as the saying goes—"in the world but not of the world"?
9. As best you can, describe how the "Advocate . . . the spirit of Truth," whom God ultimately sends to Jesus' disciples, testifies to them about Jesus.
10. In what area of your life would you like to see more spiritual growth or fruit? Take positive steps toward growth and being more fruitful this coming week.

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **John 1:35, 40-50; 2:1-11** as we begin the unit "John (Part 3)" with the theme, "Believe." You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. **■**