

Grace School of Theology

A STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN 15:1-11

A Paper Submitted to

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In Fulfillment of the Final Exam Requirement for

TH-560: Hermeneutics

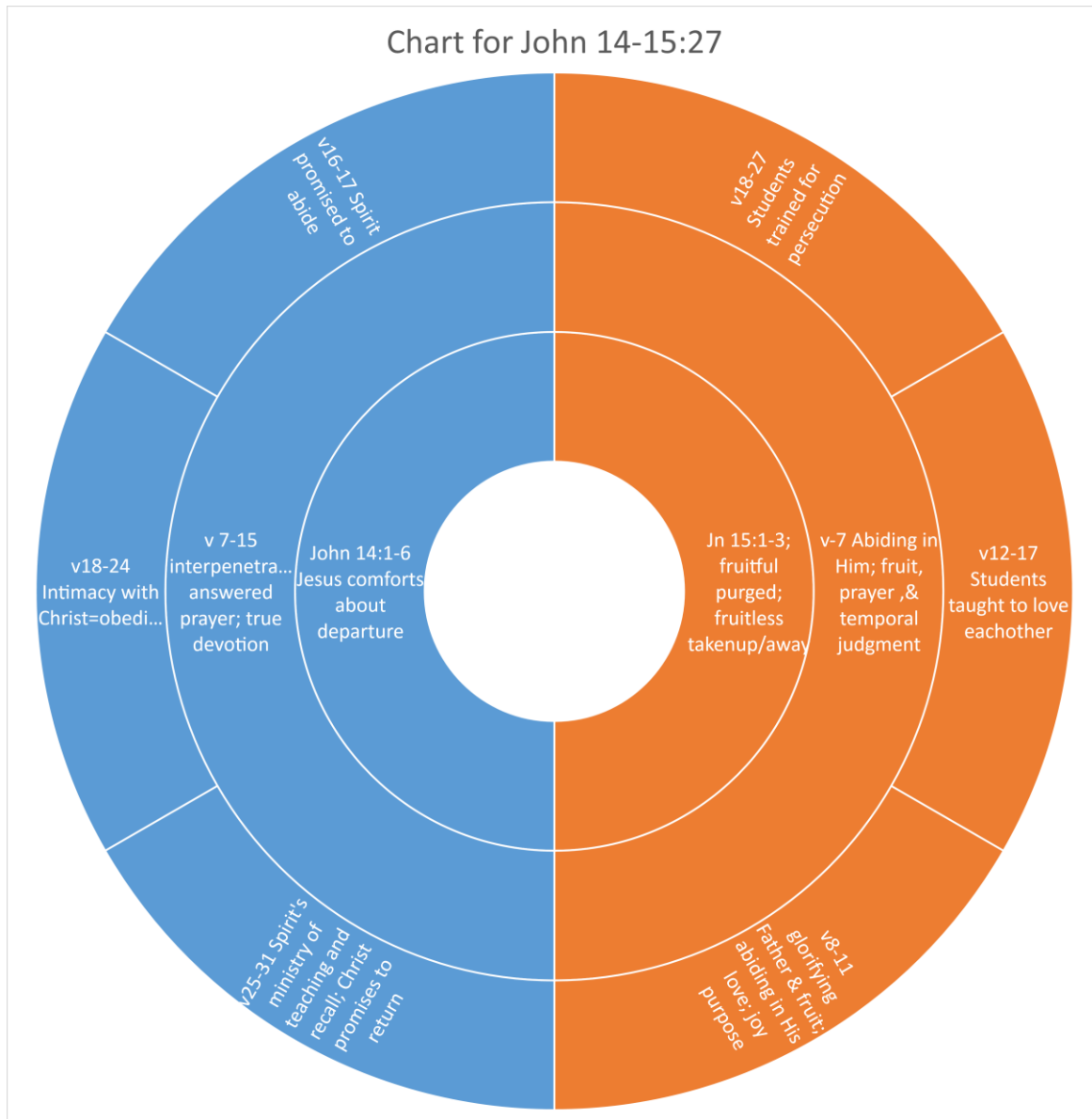
by

Bruce W. Irish Jr.

May 6, 2017

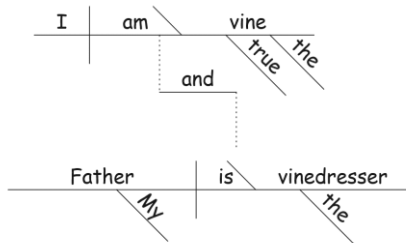
Ten Observations

1. Jesus refers to Himself as the vine that is true.
2. The Father is called the “vinedresser.”
3. Non-fruit bearing branches are referred to as “in Me” in verse two.
4. Non-fruit bearing branches are those “He takes away” in verse two.
5. Fruit bearing branches are those “He prunes” in verse two so as to bear more fruit.
6. In verse three, the addressees are “already clean,” and in verse four, they are commanded to abide in Him.
7. The non-fruit bearing branches are said to be taken away, dried up and burned.
8. The branches which “abide in Me” in verse seven, are said to be able to ask whatever they wish, and it will be done.
9. “Much fruit” production is what is said to glorify the Father, in verse eight.
10. Verse eleven says these things were spoken to the addressees so that Jesus’ joy would be in them, and so the addressees’ joy would be full.

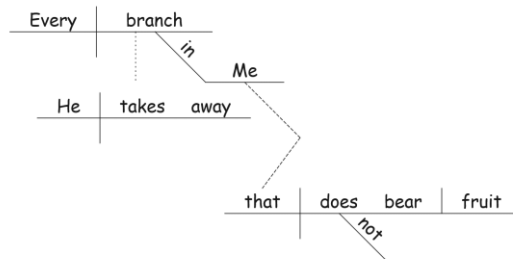


Interpretation: Grammar Context

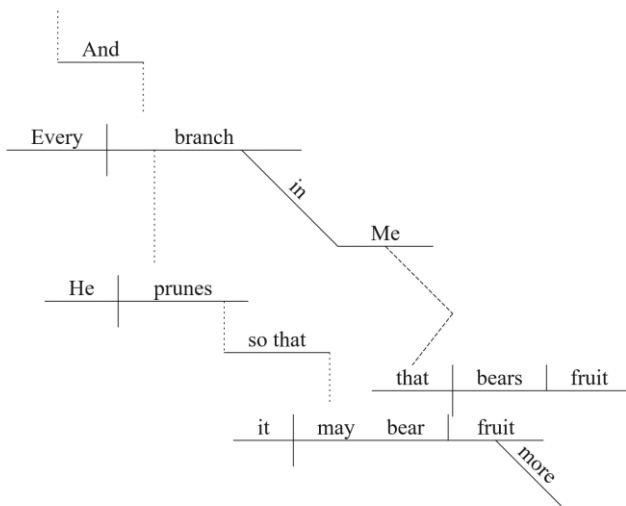
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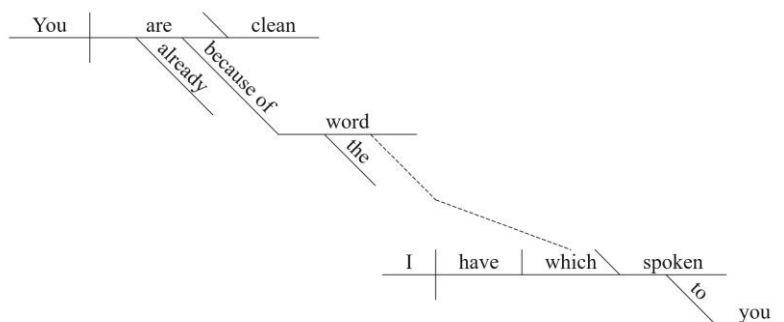
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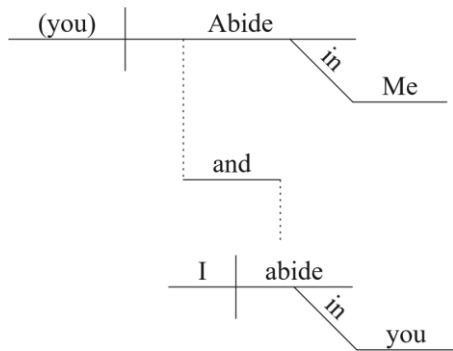
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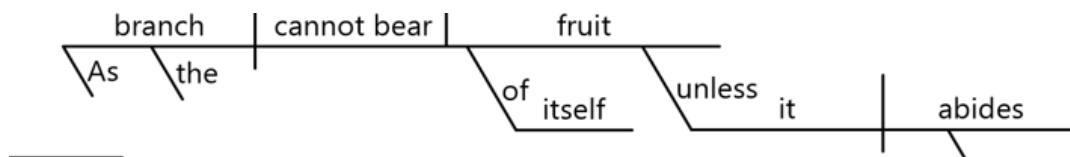
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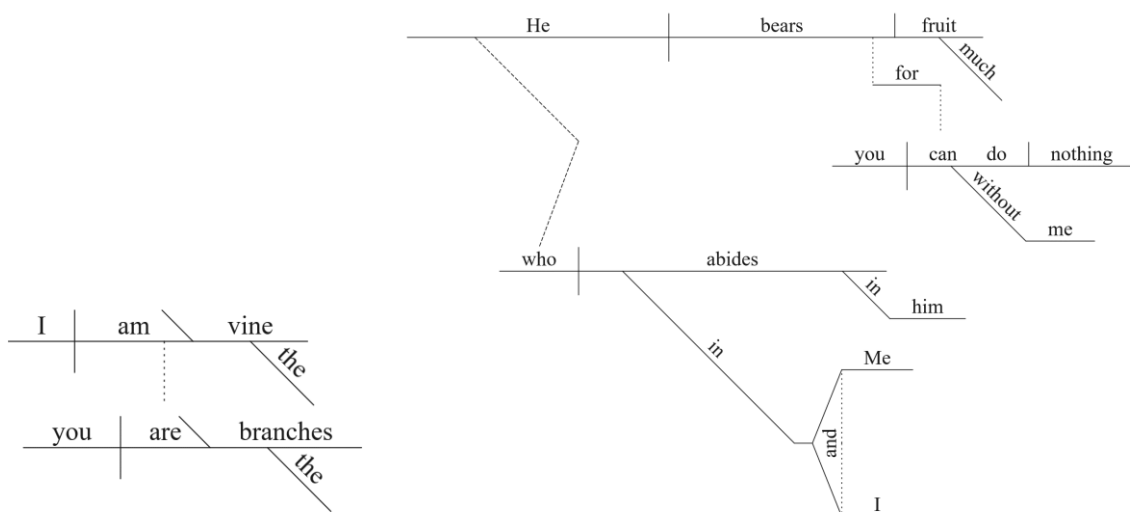


V4b.



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V5.



Interpretation: *Word Study on “Abide”*

There are sixteen instances of the English word “abide” (or a derivative such as “abode” or “abiding”) in the Old Testament (OT). Most of the occurrences (nine) occur in the Psalms, three occur in Job, two occur in Isaiah, one occurs in Jeremiah, and another in Haggai. In the Psalms, the word usually appears as some tense or mood variant which includes the literal “abide” (i.e., “may abide”, “will abide” etc.), although there are a couple instances where the noun “abode” is found. In Job, the noun “abode” is found, and in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Haggai, “will abide”, “abode” (noun), and “is abiding” are respectively found.

In the New Testament (NT), there are one-hundred and eighteen usages of the Greek word “μένω” or one of its derivatives. Approximately sixty-eight usages occur in all of John’s writings, with about twelve usages occurring in the other synoptic gospels, and thirteen instances occurring in the book of Acts. Seventeen instances occur in Paul’s writings, six instances occur in the book of Hebrews, and two instances occur in Peter’s epistle.

The following semantic domains were unearthed by investigating the usages in the OT and NT: (A) temporary lodging, (B) someone or something continues or remains somewhere or in some state of being, (C) to wait in some location, but not to live there, and (D) to continue in some intimate state of being or communion with someone or something.

In the OT usages, to “abide” with someone entailed not only a temporary or permanent lodging, but a close fellowship. Thus, when one abode with or before God in His holy hill or in the shadow of the Almighty, there was an intimacy in fellowship. This idea was common in the Psalms. The “temporary lodging or dwelling” domain was found approximately six times, mostly in the Psalms, Job, and the prophets (e.g., Ps 68:16; 94:17; 113:9, Job 5:3, 24; Isa 34:13; Jer

31:23). The second domain of longevity or perpetuity was also found about four times, primarily in the Psalms (e.g., Ps 25:13; 37:27; 102:12; Isa 32:16). The third domain was not very prevalent in the OT, but the fourth domain of steadfastness in some intimate state of being or communion was found in the Psalms and prophets as well (e.g., Ps 61:7; 91:1; Haggai 2:5).

In the NT, the first domain of “temporary lodge” or “lodging” was found about twenty-one times. It occurred approximately six times in Luke, six times in John, seven times in Acts, and once in 2 Timothy. The third domain of “waiting or staying” in some location occurred at least four times (twice in the synoptics, twice in Acts). The vast majority of the occurrences in the NT fall into the second domain wherein something or someone continues or remains somewhere or in some state of being. Approximately fifty-four instances of “μένω” or its derivatives can be classified as falling into the second domain of continuing or remaining in some area or state of being. Its occurrences are somewhat dispersed through the NT beginning at John’s gospel, and continuing up until 1 John. Finally, instances of the last domain of steadfastness in some spiritual intimacy or fellowship approximate thirty-nine instances which are concentrated in John’s writings.

Although many figures of speech can be found in the passage, three specific instances of figures are the metaphor, simile, and the hypocatastasis. When Jesus declared Himself to be the true vine in, “I am the true vine,” He was using a metaphor. It was understood that He was not literally a vine, but that He was making an application. Another figure of speech would be the simile which implements “like” or “as” in its usage. Verse four says, “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me.” Likewise, verse six speaks of how one is “thrown away as a branch and dries up” which utilizes simile. Finally, the hypocatastasis is like a metaphor, but it differs in that one of the objects of reference

is not stated, but simply implied. For example, in verse two, the disciples' fruit is not explicitly referred to as righteous deeds. Instead, these assignments of meaning are implicit.

Interpretation: *Immediate Context*

The immediate context of this passage in Scripture is very vital to understanding the passage in its entirety. In the first verse, the author tells the reader who the vine is and who the vinedresser is explicitly, and without any need for interpretation. The vine is certainly the Lord Jesus Christ, and the vinedresser is definitely His Father. The branches, however are not so easily interpreted because it is not spelled out for us in the initial part of the passage. One has to wait until verses four and five in order to gain more clarity as to the identity of the branches.

In the immediate context, the Vine is the Lord Jesus Christ who said, "I am the vine" in verse one. The vinedresser, according to the Lord, is His Father. Since any given branch either bears fruit or does not, the branches in verse two describe any branch in the vine. We see in verse five that his audience would fall into any of the branch categories of verse two, for He says "you are the branches" in verse five.

The "you" in verse three most likely refers to the same audience addressed as the recipients of the Holy Spirit in John 14:16-17. This same group was the set of individuals for whom the Lord would return in John 14:18. Furthermore, this same group is the set of individuals to whom He said, "Get up, let us go from here" in John 14:31. It is unfortunate that there is a chapter break at this juncture because the Lord is still addressing that same group of students as they are departing in John 14:31 through 15:1. Thus, the Holy Spirit-endowed students for whom the Lord would return, from John fourteen, are the branches in verse two, which are then referred to as the "you" in "I am the vine, you are the branches" in verse five.

In the analogy, the “they” of verse six remain unnamed, but they take on the role of laborers who work in the vineyard doing tasks for the vinedresser. In actuality, it is possible that the “they” of verse six are angelic messengers who do the Father’s bidding.

John fifteen is couched in the center of a broader context consisting of the Upper Room Discourse from John 13, up through John 17. John 13 commences the whole discourse by transitioning to the Upper Room or terraced area and Jesus demonstrating to the followers the essence of true service; He likewise prophesied the sin of Judas, in addition to His own crucifixion. Moreover, John makes it very clear that Judas has exited the physical and spiritual setting. John fourteen is filled with words of comfort for the pupils in that they too have inclusion in the place where Jesus is going. Moreover, He is sending the Spirit to comfort, empower, and show them; additionally, Jesus equates being in Him and the Father to keeping His word, and expresses that He is the sole means to the Father.

John fifteen concentrates primarily on discipleship, and commences with the Lord revealing to His students that they should continue in His word and live selfless lives toward each other, even as He loved them. The Lord goes on to emphasize that just as the world hated Him, even so the world will hate His followers. John sixteen infuses meaning and provides motive behind the Lord's message. He goes on to provide solace by telling the students that they will not be left alone after the Lord departs.

John seventeen deals with the High Priestly Prayer where the Lord makes special requests for his contemporary and future students. John 15:1-11 is centered in an immediate context that deals heavily with discipleship and what love for God looks like in practice.

The purpose statement for John’s gospel is found in John 20:30-31 which states, “These have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that

believing you may have life in His name.” John’s gospel is divided into two sections: the first deals with receiving eternal life, and the second focuses more on the inner sanctum of discipleship. John 15:1-11 happens to occur just after this turning point in the subthemes of John’s gospel.

Interpretation: *Theological Context*

Many of the events of the Gospel of John would fall into the Dispensation of Law, which began at the giving of the Mosaic Law. It continued up through the birth of the Lord Jesus and on through the ministry of John the Baptist (Romans 4:4; Galatians 4:4; Luke 16:16). It is probable that a Dispensation or offering of the Kingdom of God was in force from this time up through the beginning of the book of Acts. Here we see John’s preaching, Jesus’ preaching, and the early apostolic gospel which included numerous offerings of the Kingdom of God to Israel if they were willing to turn to God and receive their Messiah. The Grace Age then followed this shorter dispensation of Law/Kingdom. In the Grace Age, the focus of God’s economy shifted from primarily an Israel focus to that of a “Nations” focus.

Interpretation: *Cultural Context*

The Passover was the night in Israeli history when the Death Messenger slew all the firstborn in Egypt during Israel’s captivity there; however, the Israelis were spared as a result of having placed the blood of an unblemished sheep on the lintel and doorposts of the house. The flesh of the slaughtered sheep was then to be roasted and eaten along with bitter herbs and unleavened bread.

Some preliminaries to the actual Passover meal included the choosing of a lamb (Nisan ten), the search for any remaining leaven in the house (Nisan thirteen), the slave-executed foot-

washing (Nisan fourteen, evening), preliminary wine-drinking (of no religious significance), ritual handwashing, and the setting of the table with all the necessary accoutrements and initial foods for the meal, which included four wine glasses for the ritual wine of the Passover.

Next, the participants would recline at a very low table (approximate eighteen inches high), with the presiding member usually sitting at one end. The first wine glass was then poured and a first prayer of thanksgiving was uttered, along with verbiage from Exodus 6:6-7. The first cup of wine was then passed around, and the participants drank from the cup. After this first cup was served, the members were permitted to drink non-ritualistic wine.

Then, the presiding member would dip bitter herbs (“karpas”) into saltwater, and then he would pass such herbs around the table. All would then eat of the bitter herbs, after which, all items would be cleared from the table. Typically, the youngest would then ask why such a night differed from all other nights, and why on such a night no leavened bread was to be eaten. The question of why meat was to be roasted was also posited. The head of the household would field such questions during his chronicle of the history of the Jewish people from Abraham until the Mosaic Law. It was at this point that the food (including the roasted lamb) was returned to the table, and the first half of the “Hallel Psalms” (Psalms 113-114) were sung.

After this, the presiding member would give a prayer over the second cup of wine, and he would utter quotations from Exodus 6:6b. Following this came a second handwashing in honor of the fact that the Unleavened Bread was about to be partaken. The roasted lamb, vegetable with sauce, and two Unleavened Bread slices were served. The presiding member then would proceed to pray over the Bread. The Bread would then be broken by the presiding member, and he would also break the guest of honor’s bread, and both would proceed to dip it together in the vegetable sauce mingled with bitter herbs. The guest of honor would follow the presiding member’s pattern

to whomever he was seated next to, and so on. The Passover meal was then consumed along with the second cup of wine. After this, the participants were permitted to partake of any non-ritual wine.

Following the Passover meal, the third ritual cup of wine was poured, and the remaining Unleavened Bread wafers were blessed, divided, and consumed. After the meal, all joined in a post-meal prayer. Then the presiding member uttered a prayer over the third ritual cup, and some quotations were made from Exodus 6:6. The third cup of wine was then drunk. Following this, any non-ritual wine could be drunk until the fourth cup. Once the fourth cup of wine was poured, the presiding member would recite verbiage from Exodus 6:6-7, and Psalm 115-118 was sung as a final hymn.¹

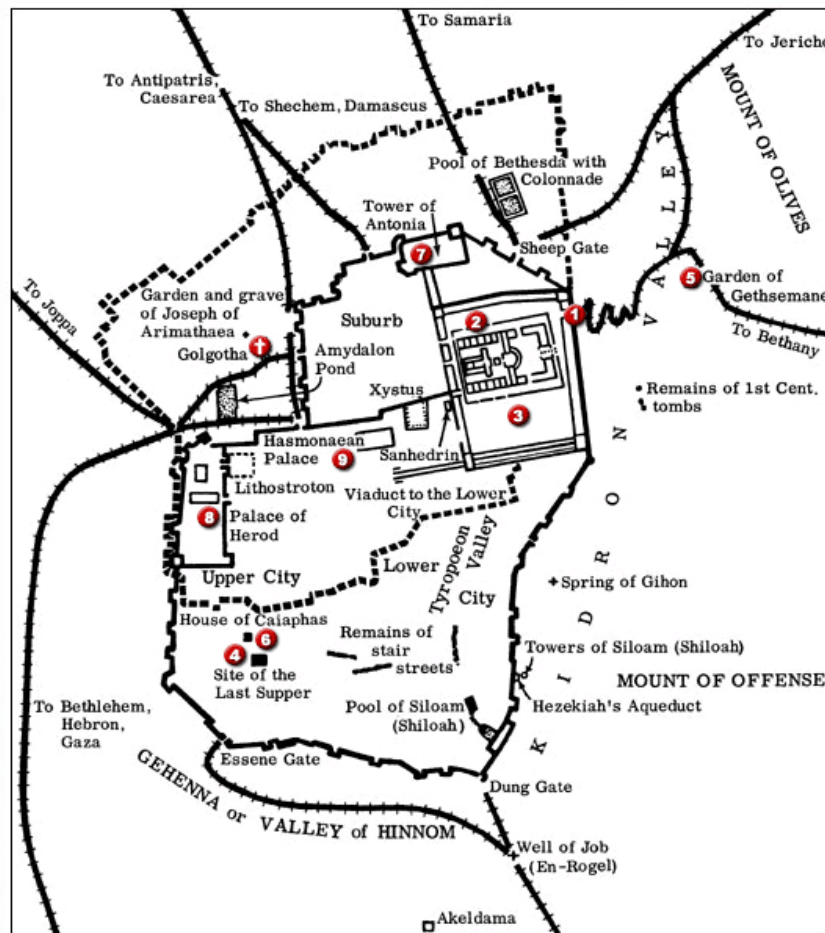
During the Upper Room Passover observance, the Scripture alludes to a few elements in the order of ceremony, in John 13-17. When the Lord began washing the feet of the students, the supper had already commenced according to the NASB reading of John 13:3:2. It is possible this foot washing could have been the initial foot-washing a slave would have done, or even a second one. Subsequent to this, the students inquired about who would betray the Lord. Jesus then broke some bread and gave it to Judas Iscariot, as the presiding member would have done in giving the Unleavened Bread to the guest of honor (John 13:26). The remainder of the Upper Room events, including the consumption of the Passover lamb, likely transpired in John 13:31-14:31 given that He says in 14:31, “Get up, let us go from here.”

The Old Testament contains a wealth of over sixty references regarding vineyards and vineyard farming practices. Israel was largely an agrarian society which had much use for

¹ This section was summarized from Daniel B. Wallace’s essay, *Passover in the Time of Jesus*, published May 28th 2004 and found at: <https://bible.org/article/passover-time-jesus>

cultivating vineyards. Vineyards were often planted on hills, and stones were removed to facilitate growth and even to build hedges. The vine was often pruned using a pruning hook. The Lord refers to some of its uses in John 15:1-7. In order to make room for continued fruit production on fruitful (and possibly unfruitful) branches, the existing fruit needed to be removed. Also, the unfruitful branches would either be lifted up for more sunlight exposure, or they would be taken away after persistent unfruitfulness. The pruned vegetation, if not edible, was dried out and used as fuel for a fire which enabled heat generation for other processes. As the Scripture says, the wood from a vine was rather flimsy, and not useful for much else other than to be used as fuel for burning (Ezekiel 15:1-8).

Interpretation: *The Upper Room*



Map of the Last Passover and Death of Jesus

- 1 The Golden Gate
- 2 The Temple
- 3 The Court of the Gentiles
- 4 The Last Supper
- 5 The Garden of Gethsemane
- 6 House of Caiaphas
- 7 Fortress of Antonia
- 8 Herod's Palace
- 9 Hasmonaean Palace
- 10 Golgotha

Interpretation: *Historical/ Political Context*

The major world power at the time of the Upper Room Discourse was the Roman Empire. It controlled the entirety of Israel. The emperor of the empire at the time was Tiberius Caesar Augustus. The governor who presided over Judea was Pontius Pilate. Luke explains the political setting in Luke 3:1-2, which says:

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness.

The two more notable religious rulers in Israel at the time were the high priest Annas, and his son-in-law, Caiaphas. They presided over the Sanhedrin which consisted of other members such as the chief priests and elders.

Interpretation: *Summary of Interpretation*

As has already been mentioned, John 15:1-11 was partitioned as the beginning of a new chapter in Scripture, but such a chapter division at this particular juncture has contributed to much confusion in the Christian world. The reader generally does not read the immediate preceding context to discover those whom the Lord is addressing. Given that (1) Judas had already departed during the Passover ceremony (John 13:26-31), and (2) the Lord had promised to (a) return for the remaining students in John 14:18 and (b) send His Holy Spirit to dwell with and in them, and (3) the same group of students addressed in chapter fourteen is most likely identical to, or possibly a subset of those addressed in John 15:1-11 due to “Get up, let *us* go from here” (14:31, emphasis added), it is most probable that those to whom He is speaking in John 15:1-11 are elect individuals.

In John 15:1, the Lord begins by saying “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.” It must be noted that this was not the only time the Father planted a vine in a vineyard. The OT consists quite a few references wherein the Lord had planted and cultivated His vine—Israel. One such passage is Psalm 80:8-9 which says:

You removed a vine from Egypt;
 You drove out the ¹nations and planted it.
 You cleared *the ground* before it,
 And it took deep root and filled the land.
 The mountains were covered with its shadow,
 And the cedars of God with its boughs.
 It was sending out its branches to the sea
 And its shoots to the River.

And again, of Israel He says, “Yet I planted you a choice vine, a completely faithful seed.” Nevertheless, each of these passages goes on to explain how Israel became degenerate and unfruitful as a nation, even though God generally always had a few righteous saints who did remain faithful. Thus, Israel was not the genuine vine that always flourished in accordance with His desires—at least not at that time. Rather, the Lord Jesus fulfilled all His will, and could ascribe to Himself the title of “the True Vine” who always was in communion with His will and could channel that same unity and fruitfulness to whomever was in sync with Him.

Moreover, the Father as the vinedresser was the One on whom the Son relied in the days of His earthly ministry. It was only as the Father initiated and prompted, that the Son acted. Thus the Lord Jesus could say in John 5:30, “By myself, I can do nothing [...]”, and in John 5:19, “the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing;[...]”

In verse two, the Lord said, “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.” The identity of

“every branch” (be it fruitful or fruitless) is revealed to be the elect individuals according to verse four wherein the Lord expresses *to His saved students* the very real possibility that they too, could be at the risk of being classified as fruitless branches unless they abide in Him. Also, it is undeniable that the disciples had produced quite a bit of fruit in their preaching, miracle, and service ministry with the Lord Jesus. Therefore, it follows that a fruitless branch need not to have always been fruitless. In fact, some Free Grace advocates would argue that all believers have produced some measure of fruit at some time, be that invisible fruit or small fruit². While there is good reason to think this, the point here is that one must not assume that every fruitless branch of which the Lord spoke was always fruitless. Furthermore, it is interesting that the fruitless branch in verse two is described as “in Me” which would also suggest some degree of union with the vine, for the branch proceeded from the vine. This is perhaps the first piece of evidence in chapter fifteen which suggests these fruitless branches are in fact believers.

Also in the “a” part of verse two, it is said that the vinedresser “[...] takes away” these fruitless branches. The Greek word for “takes away” is a form of “αἶρω” which can be understood as (1) to raise or lift upwards, or (2) to raise up and away (i.e., to remove). Those who would espouse that the fruitless branches represent false believers, or alternatively believers who have forfeited salvation, would likely be more prone to understand this instance of “αἶρω” to refer to “away” in the sense of having been detached and banished from the vine, of which they were either never really a part, or from that which they have forfeited.

Others who hold more of a Free Grace view have held this usage of “αἶρω” to refer to a unfruitful believer who is removed from the earth via being taken to heaven in an act of divine

² It should be noted that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). If a believer has ever done or felt or been any of these, it would qualify them as having produced fruit. Something as simple as feeling joy after believing the gospel, would qualify as producing fruit.

concern for the fruitfulness of the remaining earthly constituents. Some Free Grace adherents have held to a view which describes the vinedresser lifting up the unfruitful branch so as to help it to receive more sun exposure. This would equate to a failing believer being spiritually lifted up by divine grace and encouragement. Still other Free Grace adherents would hold that the action of unfruitful branch being taken up is the preliminary part of the action described in verse six which describes the fruitless branches as being “thrown away” and gathered to be thrown into the fire for burning. The author (who is also a Free Grace proponent) would hold to “αἴρω” here as meaning either “to lift up” such that the branch is raised for better nourishment, or to “take away” the unfruitful branch for the purpose of burning.

The “b” part of verse two says, “and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.” As has been alluded to already, pruning was a vital part of keeping a vineyard. Not only did this involve clipping the mature produce, but it also included the removal of excessive foliage which used up nourishment that could be channeled toward fruit production. It is important to keep in mind the purpose of the vinedresser. That purpose is to create conditions for maximal fruit production. The Greek word for “prune” is “καθαίρω” which speaks of cleansing, purifying, or pruning. Although it is not the exact same word “καθαρός” that was used of the saved students in John 15:3 and John 13:10 in reference to justification³, the sounds of the words are rather similar, and so are the meanings. Note, it is not being asserted that the pruning in John fifteen speaks of justification. Rather, it is being asserted that a spiritual cleansing process (sanctification) is evident in the John fifteen acts of “καθαίρω” and a spiritual cleansing process (justification) is implied by the spiritually pure state “καθαρός.”

³ John 15:3 (“You are already clean [...]”) and John 13:10 (“[...] and you are clean, but not all of you”)

In verse three, this aforementioned pure state of “καθαρός” in the students is said to be caused through the word which the Lord spoke to them. This word was received by them through faith, thereby resulting in eternal life. Perhaps the Lord saw it fitting to reiterate the author’s point that the disciples were already clean, and that His point here was not to cause them to question their salvation or to cause doubts. He explicitly reassures them of this truth in verse three.

Verse four says, “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.” Here, the Lord commands His students to steadfastly continue in intimate fellowship with Him. He follows that by assuring His desire and commitment to do the same in response. The Lord also emphasizes the utter impotency and inability of His students to do anything of eternal value unless they imbibe in His provision and power. Thus, the plight of the unfruitful branches becomes clearer. Even though the vine yielded forth and formed the branch, something occurred in the branch which choked the free flow of vitality and enablement throughout the branch. In reality, the will of the believer and his or her affinities to distractive things disrupt this free flow of grace enablement in his or her life.

Verse five essentially reiterates the point of verse four; however, it becomes doubly evident that all the branch needs to do is to continue to draw nourishment from the vine, and much fruit will result. In other words, all the believer needs to do is remain steadfast in intimacy with Him, and much fruit is inevitable. The vinedresser cultivates the vine and faithfully supplies nourishment. The vine faithfully receives, processes, and distributes this to the branches. All the branches have to do is draw it from the Source, since the source is faithful to supply. It is of interest that the Lord said, “he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit,[...]” It is

certain that once the branch has blocked off the free flow of truth and nourishment, the branch becomes unfruitful, even though the vine has an abundant supply of nourishment pressing against the other side of the blockade. The Lord's statement speaks of a mutual work towards man's fruitfulness. The Lord, in His abiding, must remain faithful to supply the enabling grace, and the believer, in his abiding, must continue being open and positive toward His grace and truth. Man's fruitfulness is hindered if either one of these facets ceases to operate; however, much fruit must result when each is actively abiding in the other.

Moreover, in verse six, it reads, "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." This is perhaps the most controversial verse in the entire passage since Calvinists and Arminians both see the fire here as speaking of hell⁴. The verse speaks of any branch that is not abiding in Him (i.e., not in close fellowship or communion). This includes branches which were once abiding and flourishing. If unfruitful branches are first "lifted up" to receive more sun and flow of nourishment in verse two, then verse six may refer to a point when the vinedresser sees it fit for the unfruitful branch to be removed, especially if it is just absorbing nutrients to fulfill only rudimentary tasks such as foliage production, but not fruit. Such a diversion of nutrition could cause stunted fruit production in the other branches. In other words, if an unfruitful believer is encouraged and equipped for a time, yet he or she only wallows in error or the mundane, verse six may refer to a point where divine forbearance has run out for such a one due to his or her hardheartedness. Such urgency and severity of divine discipline is more binding when sin's consequences are systemic throughout the body of Christ.

⁴ Calvinists would see this fire as hell for those who had some temporary faith (not saving faith) but were not elect, as evidenced by not having persevered to the end. Arminians would see the fire as hell for those who were in fact truly justified but forfeited that salvation.

Regardless of whether verse two refers to being “lifted up” or to being “taken away” (for burning), not all branches produce fruit concurrently. Even soon-to-be fruitful branches may stall in a period of unproductivity for a while. Some branches yield fruit faster than others. Thus, it takes an omniscient vinedresser to know the heart of a believer who is a branch.

Although it has been established that the branches are only believers, supposed it is assumed that the fire is hell. Although hell is certainly a place of literal fire, what warrant does such a proponent have here to say that *this vine analogy* is speaking of literal hell? What is the hermeneutic that gives such a one the right to label the fire as literal hell, but not say that Jesus is a literal vine and His disciples, literal branches? On the contrary, a better, more Biblically coherent explanation can be given for the meaning of the fire.

Just as John fifteen is not the first place where a vine figure is used to describe God’s people Israel, John fifteen is not the first place where fire is used in reference to God’s people. One place which demonstrates the use of fire *in a vine analogy*, is Psalm 80:8-19, which says (emphasis added in italics):

*You removed a vine from Egypt; You drove out the nations and planted it.
 You cleared the ground before it, And it took deep root and filled the land.
 The mountains were covered with its shadow, and the cedars of God with its boughs.
 It was sending out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River.
 Why have You broken down its hedges, so that all who pass that way pick its fruit?
 A boar from the forest eats it away And whatever moves in the field feeds on it.
 O God of hosts, turn again now, we beseech You; Look down from heaven and see, and
 take care of this vine, Even the shoot which Your right hand has planted,
 And on the son whom You have strengthened for Yourself. It is burned with fire, it is cut
 down; They perish at the rebuke of Your countenance. Let Your hand be upon the man of
 Your right hand, upon the son of man whom You made strong for Yourself.
 Then we shall not turn back from You; revive us, and we will call upon Your name.*

O Lord God of hosts, *restore us*; Cause Your face to shine upon us, *and we will be saved*.

It is quite evident that the Lord had planted this vine of Israel. It began to be extremely fruitful, for the “mountains were covered with its shadow, and the cedars of God with its boughs.” God destroyed its hedges and caused the vine to be feed for wild animals, due to Israel’s unfaithfulness. The vine was even described as having been “burned with fire, it is cut down,” but the Psalmist made intercession for those who “perish[ed] at the rebuke of [His] countenance.” The Psalmist recognized that such a dismal spiritual situation could be rectified through God’s mercy, and the nation’s repentance. Thus he prayed for a spiritual revival, and for mercy from the Lord to restore and deliver the nation. The nation which had been “burned with fire” was not eternally rejected or banished to hell. Rather, the nation was undergoing a period of temporal judgment and breach in fellowship from the Lord.

Another passage which demonstrates this point is Ezekiel fifteen. In verse two, the Lord asked Ezekiel how the wood of the vine was better than the wood of a branch from the forest. Wood cannot be taken from a vine to form anything useful due to its lack of strength. The purpose that such flimsy wood is good for is that of fuel for a fire, the prophet intimates. In verse six, Ezekiel prophesies that “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.” He goes on to say in verses seven and eight:

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. ⁸ Thus I will make the land desolate, because they have acted unfaithfully,” declares the Lord GOD.

Here, it is evident that the fire had a temporal aspect to it in that the people had previously come out of some fire. The Lord resolved that they, as a nation, would face more severe consequences

due to their unfaithfulness. In fact, the desolation of the land (a temporal, physical punishment) was a large part of this looming fiery judgment.

Therefore, Psalm eighty and Ezekiel fifteen (each of which deals with a vine and elements being cast into the fire) are two places in Scripture which add some harmony to the notion that the unfruitful vine branches in John fifteen undergo some degree of severe, temporal divine discipline. It is worth noting, however, that the parallel between the two OT passages and John fifteen is not exact given that the entire vine in John fifteen is not overrun and burned. This is obviously impossible given that John fifteen is dealing with the true and impeccable vine. The only burned components of this vine are the individual branches, which oftentimes experientially pale in comparison to the perfect vine.

Verse seven reads, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” The mysticism of abiding is unveiled, and one begins to see that the act of steadfastly communing with the Lord is done through communing with His words. A life of continual contemplation and rumination on the Word of God is what helps yield the abiding life. Now the latter part of verse seven may, at first glance, appear as a spiritual “blank check” where one may ask whatsoever he or she wills from the Lord, and get certain results from the Lord. This could not be further from the truth. When “[His] words abide in you,” (verse 7a) the nature and will found in the words become the character and volition of the one asking. Therefore, the spiritual “blank check” is nullified, and His perfect will is executed and cherished in the life of the abiding believer.

Verse eight reads, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.” The Lord Jesus is essentially saying that when the vinedresser can see much fruit from His spiritual labors, He is glorified. It should be noted that the “much fruit” here that

glorifies the Father comes through the mutual abiding of vine and branch. Verse five says, “[...]he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears *much fruit*,[...]” It should be noted too, that the much fruit is not proof of being a believer or saint, but rather, much fruit production is proof of one’s having resolved to study Christ.

Verses nine and ten should be taken together as a whole, for it is difficult to understand verse nine without verse ten. With verse divisions, they read, “⁹ Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. 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.” The duration of the Father’s devotion (agape) to the Son is no less than the length of time whereby He remains Father to the Son. The Father has always been devoted to the Son, and always will be. This love was such that the Father told the incarnate Son in Psalm 2:8, “Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession.” The Father and Son were so devoted (agape) to the world such that while men were still sinners, Christ died for them. The Lord, in verse nine, says to “[...]abide in My love.” By this, He is not saying “earn My devotion for You,” but rather, through the keeping of His commandments (verse 10a), the believer remains in fellowship or abides in His love. This is similar to saying that if the believer obeys the commands of the Lord Jesus, that believer really has a grasp on the love that Christ has for him or her. So by reflecting back that devotion through obedience, he or she proves he has really understood this great love. The Lord, in verse ten, remains everlastingly in an intimate communion with His Father’s devotion toward Him. The Father emits endless praise, exaltation, and focus on His Son, and the Son, in return, emits back passionate obedience and sincere gratitude to His Father. The Son’s response in His humanity indicates He has truly perceived and embraced the Father’s gift. This same reasoning between Father and Son also applies to Son and

saints. The Son emits mercy, self-sacrifice and cherishment to the world, and those holy ones perceive and embrace the Son's agape by responding in sincere obedience to His words.

Verse eleven reads, "These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full." This is essentially a purpose statement for all that He has said. It also draws heavily on the things spoken in verses nine and ten. The Lord is saying that He spoken these things in order that His students may have the same joy He has in doing His Father's will. He goes on to say that He spoke these things in order that the disciple's joy may be at its maximum. For one to realize that he or she is the end recipient of all the Father's labor of love is quite an exhilarating and motivating realization.

Application

John 15:5 is a powerful motif where the Lord says, "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." One theological principle that this demonstrates is that believers should be conscious so as to always give glory to Christ. In every circumstance and in every victory. The enabling grace to endure, and the spiritual endowment to conquer, all stems from being tapped into His strength. There have been times I felt confident in my ability to execute some spiritual task, and when the time came, I did not execute it successfully. I was too confident in my own strength, and as the verse says, apart from Him I can do nothing. I have found that those time which have been most victorious have been the "Gideon" instances where God used a downcast, broken, and confused vessel to most powerfully execute His will.

There have also been times that I have gotten easily frustrated with my son or wife; yet when I look at things in their proper perspective, I realize that during those times, I had failed to view the situation Christocentrically. The reason I got frustrated was because I was deceived into

thinking that “I’m only one man!” or “What else can I do?” Yet if I had relied on the power in the Vine, I really can do all things through Christ who strengthens me, and I would not need to live in the defeat of feeling like I have to do it on my own.

In John 15:7, the Lord says, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” One theological maxim that can be unearthed from this verse is that the Lord hears and answers the prayers of His people, when they are asked according to His will. For years, my wife and I had been trying to find a home close enough to our beloved local assembly, but still close enough to my job. At the time, we had been living about an hour and a half away, and the drive was rather taxing. We knew that it was the will of God for us to move closer to our assembly in order that we might imbibe more in the fellowship of the body. We found a house that was well beyond our budget (at least six times we crunched the numbers, but to no use), but we were confident that the Lord wanted us to move closer and that perhaps He might touch the heart of the seller to help us in our endeavor. No, this is not a case of the so called “prosperity gospel” or “name-it-claim-it” insanity. Rather, the sellers ended up being fellow believers and were willing to sell the house to us at a lower price. A third party (yet another believer) actually ended being involved in the transaction (as he purchased a piece of land we did not want to buy) from the seller, which made the house more affordable. To make a long story short, the Lord, in His providence made the paths of three saints converge to bring about His will in the life of one of them.

Correlation

Other New Testament passages which deal heavily with “abiding” are found in John’s first epistle. In 1 John three, John discusses how the one continuing in fellowship with the Son cannot sin, because he has been born of God. The Pauline version of this type of understanding is

perhaps found in Romans chapter seven, when he explains how two principles are warring within him, and when he sins, it is not “I” who sin, but the sin that dwells in him. Thus, in John’s epistle, the new man is one who positionally abides in the Son, and possesses the abiding seed or new birth. Therefore, the new creation remains unblemished and in intimate relationship and identification with Christ, even though man sins according to his old nature.

In 1 John 2:4-6 it states, “The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.” When one is “checked in” to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, he can live like the Lord lived, but when one is not in intimate communion, he cannot claim to know Him or to be walking as He walked.

This Johannine idea of “abiding” is one that I hold close and dear. I really enjoy how John eliminates the mysticism surrounding the idea, and simplifies it to keeping His Word, remaining in intimate fellowship, and receiving His devotion. I desire to abide in Christ, not just in my mind or intellect, but in my emotions and desires.