**WHY ON EARTH GOD? WHY GOD ON EARTH?**

**THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: Chapter 15**

***"Clingin' to the Swingin' Vine"***

We're chugging through probably the most quoted book of the Bible, written in the late 1st century by John, sole survivor of Jesus' twelve disciples. We're now in the final week before the cross.

As His hourglass runs out, Jesus huddles with His men, prepping them for what would become "the hinge of history," i.e., His crucifixion and resurrection. He briefs them on how to rightly relate to Himself, to each other and to the world.

He tells them that (a) after His ascension to heaven, He'll return to earth as King of kings, in great power (Matt. 24:30-31); (b) that no one, not even He, can predict *when* He'll return because only God the Father knows (Matt. 24:36); (c) and that 'til then, His followers are to remain faithful to Him (Matt. 24:42, 44).

***Hollywood and Vine***

Edgar Rice Burroughs gave us that lovable savage Tarzan who had more chances swinging on vines with Jane than Capt. Tony Nelson did with "I Dream of Jeannie." In his 1963 film, "Tarzan's Three Challenges," those challenges were (1) finding a mouthwash that could mask week-old bananas, (2) fighting off young, single lady gorillas and (3) trying to get Cheetah to floss. 1938 brought "Tarzan's Revenge." But we won't go there.

Today we meet history's most famous Vine, one whose market share tops even Ernest and Julio's. **Let's read John 15:1-16:4.**

***Branching Out***

***John 15:1-11***

As ch. 14 ends, Jesus takes His disciples from the Upper Room, scene of the "last supper," up to the Garden of Gethsemane, just hours before His arrest where He's fingered by His weasel pal Judas.

Skirting old Jerusalem, they pass vineyards which Jesus uses as an allegory to describe the relationship He wants to have with you and me. 1,000 years before Christ, David, Israel's second king, used the vine allegory in this prayer to God on behalf of his people:

"You brought us from Egypt as though we were a tender **vine**, and drove the heathen from your land and planted us…and we took root. … we were like mighty cedar trees, covering the entire land from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates River. But now you've broken down our walls, leaving us without protection." (Psalms 80:7-13)

About 750 B.C. Isaiah witnessed one of Jerusalem's most turbulent periods, condemning the rulers for crushing the downtrodden.

Converting the vine allegory into a parable/song, he wrote, speaking of God: "My Beloved has a **vineyard** on a fertile hill. He plowed it and took out the rocks and planted His vineyard with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower (*the Temple*) and cut a winepress (*the altar*) in the rocks. He waited for harvest, but the grapes that grew were wild and sour, not at all the sweet ones He expected. Now, men of Jerusalem and Judah, you've heard the case! You be the judges! Why did My vineyard give Me wild grapes instead of sweet? I'll tear down fences and let My vineyard go to pasture and be trampled by cattle and sheep. I won't prune or hoe it, but let it be overgrown with briars and thorns. I'll command the clouds not to rain on it any more. I've given you the story of God's people. *They* are the vineyard I spoke about. Israel and Judah are His pleasant acreage! He expected them to yield a crop of justice, but found bloodshed instead. He expected righteousness, but cries of deep oppression met His ears. You buy up property so others have no place to live. Your homes are built on great estates so you can be alone in the midst of the earth! But the Lord has sworn your awful fate -- with my own ears I heard Him say, 'Many a beautiful home will be deserted, their owners killed or gone.' An acre of vineyard will not produce a gallon of juice!" (Isaiah 5:1-10)

Isaiah saw the **vineyard** as the Jews. The **vines** were their leaders with whom He'd dealt generously by leading them out of

slavery in Egypt into "the promised land." The fruit God expected was justice and honesty. But the harvest came in "wild," not "sweet," due to the Jews' sins, resulting in their being taken captive.

In John 15 Jesus says, "Israel blew it; now *I'm* the *real* Vine; my Father is the Winegrower; you're the branches. When you and I are in an intimate, organic relationship, the harvest will be sweet!"

Anyone *not* in this relationship is deadwood to be burned. Good harvests occur when the Winegrower (God) lops off "sucker shoots" that produce leaves but no fruit. One fruitless, dead branch had already been removed -- Judas Iscariot.

What *is* this fruit? **Let's read what Paul wrote to the early Christ-followers in ancient Turkey in Galatians 5:19-23.**

Did Judas "abide in the Vine" and produce good fruit? Is everyone who associates with Jesus a true believer? After Judas' "sell-out," Jesus says, "Those who truly follow Me will stay close to Me and show evidence of that in their lives, unlike Judas."

Jesus invites us to "Make yourself at home in My love. Be fulfilled, joyful and fruitful, because My joy is saturating your life." He is *not* saying to His followers, "Screw up, and I'll cut you off, and you'll burn forever." No, like a caring gardener, He's committed to putting us where we'll succeed at being His authentic reps.

To succeed, we must "abide" in Him, talk to Him, listen to Him, allow the Bible to "prune" us, show us what sin is, inspire us to right living. Then good fruit's inevitable! What signs show that we're a true, fruit-bearing branch?

(1) We'll have "prayer power" when our prayers are what Jesus wants to hear.

(2) We'll be known as Christ-followers. But some contend, "Hey, I'm quiet about my faith because it's private." Jesus says our faith is *personal*, but it's for sure not to be *private*. (Matthew 5:14-16)

1. Our lives will be marked by love, like God's love for us --- unconditional, undemanding, a love that loves even the unlovable. When we love like that, people see God in us.

(4) And we'll have joy (John 10:10). Christ found joy (Hebrews 12:2) in coming to earth to restore us sinners to a loving relationship with God. Telling people God loves them unconditionally, that He holds nothing against them, that He wants to live with them forever, that's *real* joy! Our role as branches is to let fruit, which God will produce, decorate our lives so that others will see, enjoy and sample it.

***What The World Needs Now***

***John 15:12-17***

"Love others the way I love you," Jesus *says*. No, He *commands*! Why such strong language? Because this is the best way to love, the *only* way to love someone impossible to love. Met any of those?!!

Who are you struggling to get along with now? I've got *my* guyin mind! By reflecting on how much God loves *us*, on Christ's sacrifice for us, we can begin to let *Him* love even the jerks *through* us!

As God's *friends*, He takes us into His confidence, tells us His plans, how we tick, where the world's headed. Just as He hand-picked His disciples, Jesus is saying God's *chosen*, or *strategically placed* us to help bring His love and wholeness to our world. (I John 4:19) Serious stuff, ergo He *commands* His followers to "Get busy loving!"

***Don't You Hate It When Hate Happens***

***John 15:18-27, 16:1-4***

Facing the cross that next day, knowing His guys would be tortured and martyred, Jesus braces them for rough times: "When people hate you, they're really hating Me, for no good reason." (Matt. 10:22)

Before the crusades, slavery, IRA, PLO and the World Trade Center, before all that, Jesus is saying, "When people are mean to you, some will even think they're actually doing God a favor!"

The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church says 200 million followers of Christ face persecution TODAY! Another 350 million face discrimination and restrictions. Missionaries are now held by terrorists in the Philippines. Afghanistan is set to try eight foreign aid workers for promoting Christianity, a charge that carries the death penalty. 200 Catholic leaders and thousands of Catholic and Protestant laity are said to be in Chinese slave-labor camps because they're loyal to Christ. Catholic priests have been arrested and shot in China and Cuba. To convert from Islam is a crime in Iran where Christians are threatened, imprisoned and tortured. Sudan is the world's worst human rights offender, with crucifixions and slavery. Vietnam tightly controls all religious groups. Romania has refused to return buildings and properties confiscated by the Communists in 1948 from the Greek-Catholic Church. Yemen, Maldives, Indonesia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan and India are also in the Hall of Shame.

Jesus says, "I've told you all this to get you ready." What causes this hate? It's *godlessness*. And, get this, Jesus is speaking of that day's *religious* leaders when He says, "They don't know God who sent Me." Oh, they know religion. But they don't know the *true and living* God; they only know the god they *want* to know.

***What Vine Are You Clinging To?***

Do *you* know the true and living God? Oh, you probably won't have to face persecution like the young men who went to Ecuador to take the Gospel to *real* Tarzans -- cannibals of the Auca Indian tribe. These missionaries were slain in 1956 by those they came to love. One of them journaled just before his death, "He's no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

As we sit in this boardroom of one of America's most respected companies, flush with our freedom and comforts, it's hard to see how truly desperate we are……*without Christ.*

John 15's bottom line? (1) If we're a follower of Christ, we should stay plugged in to Him for *real* joy, love and purpose for living.

1. If we're not His follower, we'll be cast into the fire, a literal place the Bible calls hell. As Monte Hall says, "Door #1? or #2?"

Like it or not, our *only* hope is God. Paul writes, "No one can ever be made right in God's sight by doing what the law commands. For the more we know of God's laws, the clearer it becomes that we aren't obeying them; His laws serve only to make us see that we are sinners. But now God's shown us a different way to heaven -- not by 'being good enough' and trying to keep His laws, but by a new way (though not new really, for the Scriptures told about it long ago). Now God says He will accept and acquit us -- declare us 'not guilty' -- if we trust Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we *all* can be saved by coming to Christ, no matter who we are or what we've been like. Yes, all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious ideal; yet now God declares us 'not guilty' of offending Him (literally, "righteous") if we trust in Jesus who in His kindness freely takes away our sins." (Romans 3:20-24).

If you've never accepted God's total forgiveness that Jesus has already bought for you, you can do it right now. Just swing open the door of your heart and pray something like this:

"God, I believe You sent Your Son Jesus from heaven to pay for my sins. I don't deserve this love. I can never be good enough to earn it. Nobody can speak enough words over me, or splash me with enough oil or water to set me right with You. Thank You for loving and forgiving me. Please enter my life and make me Yours from the inside out. Open a 'branch' office in me. And let's get into the fruit business together! I ask all this in the name of Jesus, amen."

His Deal

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\* This was to have been our study on September 11, 2001, America's Day of Terror.

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