



THE VINE & the Branches

Introduction



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On November 19, 1863, Abraham Lincoln memorialized the gruesome battle which had taken place in the little town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania during the first three days of July. It was the bloodiest battle of the Civil War with over 51,000 casualties. In scholar Garry Wills' definitive exegesis of Lincoln's famous speech, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America*, he concluded that "it would have been hard to predict that Gettysburg, out of all of this muddle, these missed chances, all the senseless deaths, would become a symbol of national purpose, pride, and ideals. Abraham Lincoln transformed the ugly reality into something rich and strange – and he did it with 272 words. The power of words has rarely been given a more compelling demonstration."

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One thousand, eight hundred and thirty-three years earlier, the horror that Jesus of Nazareth would experience on a cruel Roman cross lay *before* Him. At the Last Supper, Judas Iscariot left the room after Jesus had given him the dipped morsel and Satan had entered his heart. The time for Jesus' arrest, torture, and crucifixion had come. After completing His farewell discourse with His beloved friends, Jesus said to his remaining eleven disciples: "Rise, let us go from here." Then they sang a song and went out to the Mount of Olives. As they walked together, Jesus used these last moments with them before His death to impart an enduring allegory which would transform their lives and, through them, the lives of millions of people around the world.



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Jesus used 306 words (as John records them in the Greek text) – 34 more than Lincoln used at Gettysburg. Lincoln had used the power of his rhetoric and carefully chosen words to present “the great ideals that are made to grapple naked in an airy battle of the mind.” *The nation shall, under God, have a new birth of freedom, and that the government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.* He interpreted Gettysburg for the North and South. As Wills suggests, “Lincoln’s words had to complete the work of the guns...Without Lincoln knowing it himself, all his prior literary, intellectual, and political labors had prepared him for the intellectual revolution contained in those fateful 272 words.”

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In Jesus' brief, 306-word discourse on *The Vine & the Branches*, He is not concerned with the past, nor over a divided nation struggling for meaning and unity during a time of war. Rather, the verbs He uses in John 15 reveal that His concern is with the present tense ("I am the true vine"), the imperative mood ("abide in Me," "love one another," "ask whatever you wish"), and the future necessity of bearing lasting fruit as a clear indication that they are abiding in Him. He is not giving an oration to 20,000 (estimated crowd at Gettysburg) but a private discourse to 11 men who would turn the world upside down. They are the only ones who hear these words from Jesus' lips and who will give a first-hand account, written and oral, to the entire world.

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Why, we may ask, did Jesus feel the need to share this allegory on the brink of His death? Did they not already know these truths? Were their previous experiences with Jesus over the past 3½ years insufficient or misunderstood? We may not know the details of our Lord's thoughts on that lonely night, but we do know that He employed this allegory to ensure that everyone understood how to have a vital, personal relationship with Him. He was not thinking about what one nation could become nor about temporal realities, but His final thoughts were on eternity and on how to rescue fallen humanity from the grip of sin and death. Lincoln's words established a vision for a nation; Jesus' words offered eternal life to branches who remained in the vine.

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There is much to discover in these sixteen verses. If you want to know God through Christ, “eat” the text of *The Vine & the Branches*. If you are looking for reasons your heart has grown cold toward the Lord, look no further than this allegory. If you aren’t sure what it means to “abide in Christ,” come closer and listen to Jesus. If you have been told that you can lose your salvation, carefully examine John 15:2 again. If you want to know more about how to live a joyful, abundant life and bear much fruit for God’s glory, immerse yourself in this allegory. And if you are unclear about the pruning process God uses to make room for even more “grapes” in your life, give Him complete access to your heart and ask Him to reveal His purposes in your current trials and difficulties.

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I will never be timid about encouraging people to study apologetics, logic, reason, philosophy, history, science, psychology, engineering, literature, or any other discipline. God may use any or all means at His disposal to bring us to Himself through the death of His only begotten Son. To be candid, however, I would place John 15 in front of anyone who longs to have eternal life before I would recommend works by an apologist or philosopher of the Christian faith. Not everyone can understand the lofty reasoning of the well-educated. Jesus is populating His kingdom with people who are disabled, uneducated, poor, imprisoned, naked, and simple as well as with the wise. John 15 is for those who are repentant, humble, broken - and need a Vine.

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During the next eight weeks, we will examine this allegory that the Apostle John recorded for us and that God preserved for us in His infallible Word. During the past two months, I read and re-read this text over and over, seeking to understand it in its original form as Jesus intended it to be understood. For those who have only skimmed the surface of Jesus' words, you are about to become richer. You will be irresistibly drawn to the greatest Orator who has ever lived. One greater than Lincoln is here. In Christ, you will find unparalleled beauty, emotional intensity, familiar metaphors, and a clarity about the most important question that you will ever face in this life: May I truly know the triune God and be welcomed, received, and acknowledged by Him?