

“Conversations with Harry Reeder and Bruce Stallings”

Part Twenty Two

August 23, 2020 • Sunday Evening

The devotional for this time comes from John 15:8. Jesus loved to use parables but He also used allegories. A parable is an extended simile. An allegory is an extended collection of metaphors. Both of them would be done in a short story form. A parable can be spotted with the words ‘like’ or ‘as’ because it is an extended simile in a short story form. An allegory can be spotted as something is juxtaposed by something else. For example, Jesus is the Door, Jesus is the Vine and a story is built around it. John 15 is an example of this where Jesus is the Vine and the Father is the Vinedresser. I’m not going to go through the whole chapter but I want to specifically look at a summation statement that He makes.

John 15:8 says [8] *By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples.* This is a great verse. In this allegory Jesus is depicted as the Vine and we are the branches. The Father is the Vinedresser and the Father prunes. Jesus gives two cases of the pruning of the Father in the allegory but He also gives the reason for pruning. One is to remove those that look like branches that are not branches and they are cast into the fire which means eternal condemnation. In other words, there would be some who would imitate and profess to be in the vineyard of Christ but they are not because they have not root in Him who is the Vine. He does this to purify the vineyard. That is why He calls to abide in Him and He abides in us.

What’s the result of abiding in Him? It is that you bear fruit. Then a second reason is given for pruning and that is to purify the branches. In other words, He is growing us, perfecting us and He shows us this by making the point that when we’re in Him we bear fruit. When we abide in Him we bear more fruit and when we are pruned we bear much fruit.

Every so often I try to give statements of encouragement and recently I posted one about a passage in James where I have really come to understand what this passage really means. James 1:2–4 says [2] *Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials,* [3] *knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.* [4] *And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing* (NASB). I have come to understand that I am where I am today in Christ, not in spite of the trials of life, but because of the trials of life as a sovereign grace of God has administered them and as the sovereign grace of God is at work within me in the midst of them. And that God is using those in my life.

This is what He is talking about in John 15 where as He prunes you grow. If there is no fruit there is no root, but when you abide in Christ you bear more fruit and when He prunes you, you bear much fruit. What is fruit? John 15:8 tells us the answer to this, for it is a way of life by the grace of God that fixes us on Christ where two things mark us. One is that we live our life to the glory of the Father – by this is My Father glorified that you bear much fruit. Then by the power of the Spirit of God within us we bear witness to Christ as our Lord and Savior – and so prove (manifest) to be My disciples.

When you come to Christ for salvation you also come to Christ to follow Him. You are His disciple. As a church gives itself to equipping you and discipling you and you give yourself to discipleship and discipling others you are going to grow, bear fruit, more fruit and much fruit. As you abide in Christ you will bear fruit. Abiding in Christ with intentionality and the means of grace you are going to bear more fruit and as the Lord prunes you in this world you will bear much fruit. That will give glory to the Father and show that Christ is your Savior.

There is one key word in John 15:8 which says *By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples.* Are you in Christ? Are you one of His disciples? If so, then you will bear fruit. Are you abiding in Christ? If so, you will bear more fruit. Are you in Christ in the trials of life and the pruning of the Lord? If so, you will bear much fruit and the result is God is glorified in our life and then people will know that we are Christ followers – we prove to be His disciples. So my devotional thought to you today is that God is at work in your life.

Bruce: As I have been thinking about the times of pruning in my life, I remember when my kids were young praying to God that I wanted my kids to love God more than I do, walk with Him more faithfully than I do and have a deeper relationship with Him more than me, but without any pain, trial, failure etc., only to conclude that's not how God works. Then you do learn how to praise the Lord. Now it's still a mitigated prayer of maximum production with minimum pruning but I think my children preferred the first prayer. That's the way the Lord works in our lives.

Harry: Two things come to mind as you say that. One I remember there was some pruning done in front of the church which I didn't know about and a couple of the members said to me 'What happened out front??' I said 'I don't know anything about it but they tell me it's going to be better.' Sure enough, six months later everybody who looked at the area that was pruned were amazed at how pretty it looked. Pruning really works.

Secondly, my youngest daughter and her husband recently got a sale on mulch. When they got home they received an email from their homeowner's association that said no one was allowed to use mulch since pine straw was being used. She then called me and said 'Dad, would you like to buy some mulch?' I did need mulch so they came over and we told them 'we'll feed you if you help us spread it and help us with pruning.' So we all went to work on my yard. I remember when it was all over, like many other times, when you have done the pruning and the weeding, all the things you need to do so that things will grow, it's unbelievable the amount of stuff we had to pick up and get rid of in that pruning.

A great thing to do concerning this is just to stop and reflect on your life of how much God is cutting out and thrown away. Praise God that He has taken what He has pruned out of my life and it is gone forever.

Bruce: Amen. Previously you answered a question about the origin of sin contextually and someone asked a follow up question to that. Where did evil come from that God could order it, ordering sin, and what does it mean to order sin?

Harry: So the previous question was, why did God allow evil? I will give the short answer to that before I proceed with the follow up. God allowed evil for His glory, because there are attributes of God that you would not know without evil. You wouldn't know that God is patient or gracious without sin. Grace is in opposition to sin. Romans 5:20–21 says [20] *Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,* [21] *so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.* You also wouldn't know about His mercy or justice without the presence of evil yet God does not author sin for He is not the origin of sin. So I made the point that God acknowledges in His sovereignty that He has ordered the presence of sin but He did not

author so the question has come back that if God didn't author or order sin, then where did it come from?

Sin came from Satan and from us. We are the originators of sin, not God. But God in His sovereign will has ordered its presence and its use. Like everything God can work all things together for His glory and our good and that is what He has done for all who have put their trust in Him as Lord and Savior. God has no desire to sin and no act to sin. Sin has two parts – a desire and an act. That is what you see in eternity as Satan sins, we don't know the timing of when he sinned, but we do know he sinned sometime before Adam and Eve sinned because he had been cast down before he came to Adam. Then he goes to Adam and Eve in order to tempt them.

Genesis 3:6–7a says [6] *So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. [7a] Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.* We can see by this verse there was an attraction on the outside which Satan brought by basically saying 'God is a liar, I'm telling the truth and you can be like God.' Instead of Adam and Eve answering 'We already are because we're made in His image' it was really 'we want to be God' which was the attraction. Ultimately it is that all of life is about 'me' and so that was the attraction. It had come with Satan the fallen angel and it comes from within us. It also came within those fallen angels that came with Satan which we now call demons. So that is where the authorship of evil and sin come from.

Bruce: There is another follow up question to a statement you made about cremation in the last Q&A session. The question is one you would hear often and that is, is it wrong/sin to do cremation?

Harry: I tried to make that clear in the last session but no, it is not a sin to cremate. The Bible tells us to glorify God and declare the preeminence of Christ in life and death and burial is a part of death. So how you bury is going to make a statement, but there is no command in the Bible as to how we are to bury. It doesn't give us the liturgy of a burial, but there are multiple examples of saints being buried and the phrase 'gathered unto their fathers' which would mean their body is set aside – dust to dust, ashes to ashes – and then their soul goes to the place of the dead. It has been noted in previous sessions that there are two dimensions to the place of the dead. There is the place/status of spiritual torment and the place/status of spiritual blessings, also known as paradise or Abraham's bosom.

Going back to the body, you want the ceremonies to make two statements. One, we acknowledge the body is undergoing the curse of sin for it was made from dust and is returning to dust but we also acknowledge that the body was good. When God made the body like everything else, He said 'It's good.' Then the second thing is our hope is in Christ who will resurrect this body from the consequences of the curse and give us a new body and this dust shall be brought back to a new body for the new heavens and the new earth. Thus the burial is making a statement and it's not positioning the body so that God can pull this off.

God will bring back bodies from everywhere – burned up bodies, drowned bodies, broken bodies, etc. The Bible says the earth, sea and hades will give up the dead when He gives that glorious shout; some will be raised with a body for everlasting condemnation and some to a body to everlasting life, but there is no direct command. Westminster shorter catechism time –

what is sin? Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God, the commands of God, in thought, word or deed – whether sins of omission or commission. There is no command in the Bible about cremation and if there was I would say yes it was wrong but there isn't. There are precepts, examples and a theological rationale as to why believers have always, with dignity, respect and ceremony, with the anticipation of the resurrection of the body have engaged in burial so that whether by life or by death we honor Christ.

I have participated in many worship funeral services where the body had been cremated by believers. If I thought that was sin I would not have participated. So cremation is not a sin but I would say to believers, think your way through it, pray your way through it and as the Lord gives you peace follow Him. As Paul says in Philippians 1:2, *[20] as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.*

Bruce: The next question comes from your study of the Apostles' Creed when you went over the phrase from the creed that says 'Christ ascended into heaven.' The question is, if Christ ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father and the Holy Spirit is here on earth as our Helper, then who is with the souls who are waiting in paradise? Is there Scripture that directs us in this?

Harry: First of all, we know that they are being comforted by the presence of the Lord. Jesus has a glorified body and soul and is at the right hand of the Father, having left paradise, the intermediate state in the resurrection and now ascends to the Father. Now remember what He said to Mary at the tomb; 'Don't cling to Me for I am not yet ascended to the Father.' He had already said on the cross, 'Father, into Thy hands I commend My Spirit.' So He is saying that His Spirit had been in the presence of the Father in paradise, that intermediate state called hades or Sheol that we identify as the place of blessing but the place of torment is called the abyss. Hades is a general term that refers to the abyss and to the place of paradise – the place of the dead. The abyss of judgment is the intermediate place of judgment and then there is paradise which is the intermediate place of blessing.

Psalm 139:8 says 'If I make my bed in Sheol, Thou art there.' So who is there when you are in that intermediate state? It is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Just like the Father is with you now and the Son is with you now by the Holy Spirit. Jesus said 'When you have seen Me you have seen the Father.' In other words, wherever the Spirit of God is working so is the second and first Person of the Trinity. II Corinthians 5:8 says *[8] I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.*

Remember God is a Spirit – the first, second and third Person of the Trinity. The second Person of the Trinity now has by grace for us, has a glorified body and soul but He now comes to you by the Spirit of Christ. So people ask, how can He be with me in paradise if He is at the right hand of the Father? It is the same way He is with you right now. Matthew 28:18–20 says *[18] And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, **I am with you always, to the end of the age.**"* Then He leaves. The glorified body leaves but He has been and is with us by His Spirit.

This is why Paul loves to call His present ministry the power and Spirit of Christ. The same Spirit who is with Him, identified with Him, who is One with Him, is at one with you and

is at work in your life. Here is another example. The Bible says that through preaching Jesus speaks to the heart of His people. If He is at the right hand of His Father then how does He speak to the heart of His people? He does so by His Spirit and He says His sheep know His voice and they follow Me.

Here is one more dimension to this. The Bible is clear in this intermediate state, even though it's a spiritual state it's not yet a glorified body. That's what He was telling Mary at the tomb. He had been with the Father in paradise but He had not been with the Father in His ascended, transformed body and soul at the throne at His coronation. The Father and the Son are with you by the Spirit in paradise and even as they are with now, yet then when they are with you, you will not have the issues with the old man that you are constantly battling. You don't always feel or sense the presence of the Lord and the problem is you are in a sin-cursed world with a body that bears the effects of sin and with an old man that keeps trying to rear its ugly head. When you go to paradise your soul will be unfettered by sin and you will have that presence with the Lord as the Spirit of God is with you.

I also believe that it indicates that even though it's a spiritual presence, it's not a non-visible presence. They are able to see. So I believe you will be able to 'see' the Lord as well as be comforted by the Lord in that intermediate state, but you won't have your glorified body yet and that transformed existence of a perfected body and soul which is the final state in the new heavens and the new earth.

Bruce: You just answer this question, how do the justified souls experience Christ – are they comforted by Him, do they have communion by Him, do they have fellowship with Him in any way, larger or somewhat more complete than their pilgrimage before that?

Harry: They don't have their sin that hinders their present fellowship with Him or the old man which is also gone. Secondly, they see Him. Thirdly, they experience His presence by the Spirit of Christ. When the Spirit of Christ is with you, Christ is with you. Ephesians 3:17–19 says *[17] so that **Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith**—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, [18] may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, [19] and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.* As the Spirit of God is within you, Christ is within you upon the throne of your new heart that He has given to you.

You also have the anticipation of His coming which comforts you. You will have a resurrected body and perfected soul for the new heavens and the new earth. I also believe you will hear Him. You hear Him now so why would you go to paradise and not hear Him. He will minister to your soul visually, verbally and with His presence by His Holy Spirit.

Bruce: Several people I have talked to have struggled with the term intermediate state.

Harry: When people ask me about this, I will ask them if they believe there is going to be a new heavens and a new earth and they will say 'yes.' Then I ask, do you believe you will have a glorified body and a glorified soul? They will say 'yes.' Then I ask, when you die where is your body? So there has to be an intermediate state. It is called the place of the dead, the souls. It has two dimensions to it – the place of blessing and the place of torment. Absent from the body but present with the Lord but it is not final and it is not yet complete.

Bruce: A question comes from a text you used from Ephesians 4 and the phrase 'He, Jesus led captives,' can you give more depth to who these captives are?

Harry: The question is, when He comes again is going to bring those captives and the answer is yes, but that is not the point of that text. The point of that text is the King has descended into the battle and He is now ascending back for His coronation and celebration having won the victory over His enemies. As He ascends He has the rewards of that victory and He has the enemies He has captured which was us. We were enemies of God and He has captivated us. That's why the Bible says when He ascended, we ascended. Now we're still here physically and spiritually in that sense but legally and positionally because we were in Christ when He died for us and Christ is in us as He redeemed the elect of God from all of their sins on the cross, then when He ascended we ascended with Him. So in a sense, legally I am now at the right hand of the Father in Christ. I am secured in Him with my name in the Book of Life and I have everlasting life in Christ and for Christ for which I will be able to glorify the Lord now and forevermore.

Bruce: I struggled to conclude that we were those captives and it was almost like it was a mental block for me where I did not see us as those captives. Finally I realized that the reason I didn't see us as the captives was because I didn't see myself as an enemy of God. So I kept thinking of myself as being favored and I love God but not seeing myself as an enemy of God before His Spirit called me. It's a beautiful passage now that I understand what He has done to us as enemies and now we're the captives that He brings forth.

Harry: Recently I was listening to a sermon that talked about how Jesus loved and died for His friends and actually Jesus loves and lives for His friends, but He died for His enemies to make us His friends. That's why that ascension sermon is so important. At the cross He redeemed His enemies and now has captivated us by His grace so that we are in Him and when He ascends we ascend. We are joint heirs with Christ forever and ever and He lives to finish His work on us. At the cross He finished His work to save us from the power and penalty of our sins, now He is finishing His work on us to eradicate the practice of sin. Then He will come again for us and eradicate the presence of sin.

Bruce: We'll close with this that is not so much a question but is something from what we closed with from our last Q&A session when we talked about sack cloth and ashes. There is an act that is simply more than contextualization that reveals our grief and lament and that comes with that prayer we would do to God and that is fasting. I thought it would be good for you to wrap up our session with thoughts about that.

Harry: There are a number of things being done, given what is going on in our nation that are calling for national concerted action. We are certainly praying through how to participate in that, what to participate in and how to communicate those and I'm all for the big symbolic meeting but I really think what needs to happen is the lifestyle activity. Related to that sack cloth and ashes, while sack cloth and ashes was a first century mannerism to depict the depth of your grief and lament because of either your sin or the sins of a people or the consequences of those sins, there is something that is attached to our prayer life that transcends culture. It's called fasting. Fasting is a way to communicate to yourself and to the Lord the depth of your grief and your lament. Remember we always lament with hope because our Lord is gracious and His grace is

greater than our sin, but fasting is a part of that. Fasting is a declaration of intensity, of awareness of your sin, the intensity that you want to kill your sin, the desire that you clearly, without mitigation or modification confess your sins to the Lord. If we confess our sins to the Lord, He who is at the right hand of the Father is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (I John 1:9).

Our leadership is working through, not just an event but we'll certainly acknowledge events, but what is it we can do for concerted action in a season of prayer and fasting? Many times the Bible talks about prayer without fasting but the Bible doesn't talk about fasting without prayer. They are tied to each other. The fasting shows up in prayer in the context of the lament of sin and its consequences. I think we have many reasons to fast right now before the Lord, not to be seen by people for Jesus condemns that. So I'm promising this initiative season in some form or fashion as it is framed, will be communicated and not only the season of concerted prayer for all of us and one that can't be affected in terms of a meeting size because of COVID restrictions and things like that, but one that can ascend 24/7 for an extended period and season of life. And also has the opportunity to unite our grief and lament over what we see in our culture, our nation and in our own lives and what we see even in the professing church.

This is all because we have hope. We don't fast in hopelessness. We fast, pray and lament with hope – O God, bring revival power to us, our marriage, our families, our churches, and our lives. Bring it to Your church, through Your church and may it be manifested in a sweeping Gospel movement that souls are brought into the Kingdom. O God, raise up again those trumpet voices of the Gospel in pulpits like Whitfield, Edwards, Tennet and Wesley – raise them up again. That is what we need to be praying for. We want to move in that direction. The event of prayer and fasting in our lives and in our church we looking forward to talk more about that in these coming days, particularly as we anticipate all the dynamics of what is happening in our nation – divided, pestilence, an election and all those things that are before us.

Bruce: It is our prayer, our hope and our expectation that doing something with focus would unify but wouldn't necessarily be what started us praying. We are already praying so don't wait on whatever that plan is for the prayer and fasting, but this will give a unified focus over a period of time on that prayer.

Harry: Yes, don't wait for the framing and the directives to come through on what I've just talked about. Go ahead and start praying. Call upon the name of the Lord with praise and petition. So so persistently, pervasively and let's be like the woman who came persistently before the judge and the judge answers because she has given him a black eye so to speak. I know we can't give God a black eye and I know He is not reluctant to answer but if a reluctant judge responds to the intensity and passion of such a woman, what would the God who wants to bless us with His power and His presence do if we keep coming to Him with persistence and as my dear friend Al says, with an intolerable burden and praise the Lord for that.

Bruce: That is all we have time for in this Q & A session but I want to encourage you to continue to send your questions to askthepastor@briarwood.org and we'll look forward to answering them, Lord willing, in our future Q & A time with Harry and Bruce. May the Lord bless you.