

Dwell with Me

Growing in Your Spiritual Walk with Jesus

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Several months ago, our pastor led us through Ephesians chapter 3. I will never forget the Holy Spirit speaking to me as I listened to these beautiful verses. One verse, in particular, caught my eye. When I heard Ephesians 3:17, “that Christ may *dwell* in your hearts through faith...” the Holy Spirit convicted me and immediately grabbed hold of my heart.

This verse tested my faith and caused me to ask the following questions: Do I dwell with Christ? Is He involved in everything I do or just a friend I visit on Sundays? Wow! Ephesians 3:17 hit me like a ton of bricks!

Dwell with Me was written for those who are seeking a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ or may be getting to know Him for the very first time. If you wonder if there is more to your walk with Christ or ponder how to take your relationship with Him further, this book is for you.

As you read this devotional, I want you to know I am transparent regarding my imperfect walk. *Dwell with Me* is not about achieving perfection here on earth. Instead, this book will point you to the one we strive to emulate - Jesus Christ. Paul says, “To me, who am less than the least of all saints, this grace was given” (Eph. 3:8). May we journey together and learn how to dwell with Jesus and grow in your spiritual walk with Him.

Lord, thank You for creating us in the image of your Son, Jesus. Through this process, may we attain “boldness” and “access [Your throne] with confidence through our faith in Him” and Him alone (Eph. 3:12). Guide us as we draw near to You while on this journey. Send us Your peace and prepare us for trials ahead. You never promised this journey would be easy. You only promised that You would never leave or forsake us (Heb. 13:5). Remain with us on this voyage. Abide in us so we may learn to dwell with You. In Your precious and holy name, Amen. - Whit

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Introduction

A few months ago, I wandered into our backyard and noticed a vine growing around the trees along our fence line. This vine contained beautiful purple grapes. Since my curiosity had the best of me, I ran next door and grabbed my neighbor so she could tell me more about these wild grapes. She told me these were not the same grapes found in a grocery store produce section and that I should avoid eating them due to their high acidity. They were muscadines. Even though they could not be eaten from the vine, I could boil them in water, add sugar, and produce a mouth-watering jelly.

Excited at the thought of homemade jelly, I yanked on the vine. I tried separating this climbing plant from its friend, the branch. I instantly felt like I was in a game of tug-of-war. Unfortunately, I lost. (You may be laughing right now if you are an experienced vine puller, but I know absolutely *nothing* about wild grapes or vines.) I bolted inside and grabbed a pair of scissors and a step ladder.

When I stepped on the ladder to analyze the situation further, I realized why I could not yank the vine apart from the branch. The vine had wrapped itself around the branch multiple times (see image below).

John 15:5 immediately entered my mind: “I am the vine; you are the branches.” This verse took on a new meaning after getting up close and personal with an actual vine and its branch.

Looking at how tightly the vine wrapped around the branch caused me to think about Jesus and how He wants this same type of relationship with us. People may say they believe in Jesus, but

what if He wants us to take our belief to the next step? What if He yearns for us to believe in Him *and* put our trust in Him? What if He longs for us to be completely engulfed in His Word and solely wrapped up in Him? What if He desires for us to speak Jesus's name in everything we say and do? What if He wants us to act like Christians the other six days out of the week and not just portray one on Sunday?

When I began to analyze my relationship with Christ compared to the vine and branch, I concluded that my spiritual walk could improve. Fortunately, we serve a God who knows we fall short but loves us regardless. If we were perfect, we would not need a Savior.

If you are committed to reading this book in its entirety, you are choosing to deepen your relationship with Jesus Christ, regardless of your starting point. You desire to stop staring at Him from afar and instead abide or dwell with Him.

Before we dive in, I want to share the meanings of abide and dwell since they are used many times throughout the book.

Abide means to remain, continue, stay, have one's abode, dwell, reside, remain steadfast or faithful, to keep.¹

Dwell means to live or stay as a permanent resident; reside.²

Once you take this leap of faith to dwell with Him, you are pullin' up a chair and stayin' a while (as we say in East Texas). Pour some sweet tea into a Mason jar because Christ is not leaving! He stands ready to reside permanently inside your heart.

I challenge you to read the following words from a classic hymn: *Take Time to be Holy*. Let the words soak in. I recommend making a copy of the lyrics and printing them out. Hang it on the wall in your office, tape it to the mirror in your bathroom, or stick it to your refrigerator door.

When you internalize these beautiful lyrics, you will see how they relate to dwelling with Christ. Let us all take time to be holy while we watch Him begin to open doors in our lives like never before.



TAKE TIME TO BE HOLY

Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord;
Abide in Him always, and feed on His Word.
Make friends of God's children, help those who are weak,
Forgetting in nothing His blessing to seek.

Take time to be holy, the world rushes on;
Spend much time in secret, with Jesus alone.
By looking to Jesus, like Him thou shalt be;
Thy friends in thy conduct His likeness shall see.

Take time to be holy, let Him be thy Guide;
And run not before Him, whatever betide.
In joy or in sorrow, still follow the Lord,
And, looking to Jesus, still trust in His Word.

Take time to be holy, be calm in thy soul,
Each thought and each motive beneath His control.
Thus led by His Spirit to fountains of love,
Thou soon shalt be fitted for service above.

The True Vine

“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.” - John 15:1

If you read too quickly, you might miss an important word in John 15:1. I passed over it multiple times, but now it jumped right off the page: true. Not all Bible translations contain the word true, but the New King James uses this adjective to describe the vine.

What is the meaning of true when used as an adjective? True means fulfilled, consistent, steadfast, loyal, honest, just, and rightful.¹ Can you imagine abiding with someone who contains all those attributes? Believe it or not, there is someone who encompasses those characteristics. Jesus.

Jesus made it known multiple times that He was the vine, and we are the branches in John 15. The question is, why did He feel it was necessary to include the word true? You can find the answer to that question in Matthew chapter 7.

Jesus, needing rest from the multitude, retreated to the mountain with His disciples. He began to equip these fishers of men with situations they would experience once He left them. One set of instructions Jesus gave His disciples was to “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves” (Matt. 7:15).

When meeting an untrue vine, one might view them as kind and gentle, like sheep. This vine may sound charismatic, very much unlike a sheep. These false prophets have set their sights on ruining you. They desire to tear you apart emotionally, mentally, physically, and financially. To bring home His point, Jesus did not shy away when He described the false prophets as *ravenous* in Matthew 7:15.

Examine the various meanings of ravenous: extremely hungry or characterized by extreme hunger, greedy, predatory or ferocious in predation, eager for gratification, or highly desirous.²

Take a few minutes and allow that last definition to soak in. How can we identify if a person is a false prophet or a true vine? According to Matthew 7:16, “You will know them by their fruits.” You might think it would be simple to identify someone falsely teaching the Word of God, but it is easy to become entangled with these deceptive vines and consumed by their false teachings.

Jeremiah, a prophet from God, was sent to Jerusalem to prophesy to the Israelites. He warned the sinful people they would be held in Babylonian captivity for 70 years because they turned their back on God (Jer. 25). Many wolves in sheep's clothing assured the people they were safe and no harm would come to them. “They [false prophets] have lied about the Lord, and said, 'It is not He, neither will evil come upon us nor shall we see sword or famine'” (Jer. 5:12). Not only did the Israelites die by the sword and starve from famine, but they also perished from pestilence.

Several of the false prophets mentioned in Jeremiah were prophets and priests. Why would men in their position lie to their people? Jeremiah 5:31 says, “The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their power.” How quickly the taste of power can change a person!

When considering the works of false prophets, I quickly turn my attention toward cult leaders. My oldest son and I enjoy watching documentaries. A few years ago, we watched a show based on the life of Jim Jones, a cult leader who killed himself along with all his followers in South America.³

I was shocked at the evil acts this one man enforced upon these innocent people. He encouraged his flock to beat children and adult parishioners physically. He boasted of having affairs with married women *and* men. His followers were enslaved people who worked on the land he

purchased in South America. He thrived on power and saw himself as a god. Does his story resemble Lucifer when he was cast out of Heaven by God?

The most shocking revelation was the people who followed Jim Jones. They were everyday people like me and you. They came from all over the world to hear his teachings. Eventually, they followed him to live in a secluded South American village, forsaking all and leaving behind everything. Talk about a wolf in sheep's clothing! They followed him to their death.

Jesus warned about the dangers of following false prophets when He asked, "Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles?" in Matthew 7:16. Have you ever picked wild blackberries and felt the sting of their thorns? It hurts! Well, guess what? Red flags and warning signs surround a false prophet, which should prick our hearts to notice a problem. Yet, we keep pulling those grapes from their bushes and figs from the thistles.

Unfortunately, the people of Jonestown failed to see the thorns because they were captivated by the charismatic ways of Jim Jones. This misleading vine showed signs of being a false prophet throughout his ministry. One identifying factor was when he asked his people to discontinue bringing their Bibles to worship services. Has your pastor ever stopped you at the door and asked you to keep your Bible in the car? Convincing his people to leave their Bibles at home allowed Jim Jones the opportunity to force his ideology of socialism upon his followers. His socialist beliefs quickly overrode the Biblical principles that first began his ministry. Isn't that exactly how Satan and false teachers lure us in? Slow and steady in hopes of winning the race.

The good news is that we serve Jesus, a Son who emulates Himself after His Heavenly Father. In John 15:1, Jesus called His Father a "vinedresser".

After becoming an expert grape farmer, I began researching the role of a vinedresser. God made no mistake when comparing Himself to that of a vinedresser. Let me share with you the expectations of a vinedresser.

Vinedressers are “agricultural specialists who oversee the propagation, planting, pruning, and tending of grape vines in a vineyard”.⁴

Our Heavenly Father is the epitome of a specialist. Nehemiah recognized the attributes of God when he proclaimed, “You alone are the Lord; You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and everything on it, the seas and all that is in them, and You preserve them all” (Neh. 9:6). God alone can do all things. He created the heavens and earth in complete isolation without our help. God does not rely on us to complete His good work. However, He made Jesus to fulfill His role as the true vine.

If the vinedresser failed to propagate his crop, it would become unfruitful. “Their [the vinedresser's] goal is to optimize the quality and abundance of grapes used in wine and food products”. Jesus worked similarly to further God's kingdom when He sent out the disciples. Luke 10:1 says, “The Lord appointed seventy others also, and sent them two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go.” Notice Jesus, the vine, was sending His disciples to places where He would also travel to share the gospel. Jesus knew the extent of the task when He said, “The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few” (Luke 10:2).

As the propagator, God desires for us to grow in our spiritual walk with Him. In the same way a vinedresser cultivates grapes, God wants to produce the finest qualities in His children. Do you remember feeding your children at various stages? Life changes when a baby moves from being

breastfed or bottle-fed to a toddler who consumes solid food. Your vinedresser craves to observe you advance from a babe in Christ to a mature Christian (1 Cor. 3:1-2).

If shifting from a new Christian to a more experienced one seems daunting, you are not alone in this process. Paul addressed a division that corrupted the church at Corinth. The people were at odds on whether they should follow the teachings of Paul versus Apollos. Paul pointed out their carnal minds and how they allowed works of the flesh to corrupt the church (1 Cor. 3:3). The Corinthians failed to remember how the vinedresser operated. So, Paul reminded them. He said, “I [Paul] planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase” (1 Cor. 3:6). We play our part as the branch while Jesus portrays that of the vine, but God is the one who makes all things flourish.

In the remainder of this book, you will discover how the vinedresser prunes His branches to ensure the grapevine will grow. After this pruning process, you will notice how your Heavenly Father tends to your spiritual giftings while watching over you.

Remember to stop and thank God for giving you access to Him through His Son, the true vine.

Questions

1. In Matthew 7:16, Christ tells us. “[W]e will know them by their fruits.” He says in Matthew 7:20, “Therefore, by their fruits, you will know them.” What does it mean when Jesus says something twice?

2. Read Luke 6:43-45. Can a good tree bear bad fruit? Explain.

3. In 2 Timothy 4:3-5, Paul warns Timothy that people will turn away from hearing the truth. What will cause people to turn away from God’s Word? What does Paul encourage Timothy to continue doing?

4. The bearing of good fruit versus the bearing of bad fruit all begins in the _____.

5. How would you describe a false prophet in today’s day and age?

The Branch

“I am the vine; you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.” – John 15:5

God allowed me to swim in a sea of humility these past few weeks.

Greg and I bought a used Toyota Highlander last year. To open the gas tank door, I have to pull the fuel release lever located on the driver’s side floorboard. I gradually noticed that the gas tank door would only slightly open.

One day, while at the gas station. I pulled on the lever only to realize the gas tank door would not open. I realized I would either need to stretch my leg across the driver’s side of my car and open the door with my big toe or find someone to open the door while I pulled the lever.

Off I went in search of another set of hands that could (or would) help me prop open the gas tank door so I could fill up my tank. Everybody took shelter in their warm vehicles. I stepped out of the Highlander, tapped on a guy’s passenger side window, and asked, “Can you come here for a minute?” (Can you tell I’m a teacher?) I explained my situation to the poor man; he was kind enough to open the gas tank door while I pulled the fuel release lever. How embarrassing!

Unfortunately, this scenario occurred several more times because who can remember their gas tank door is broken until they are at the gas pump? Not me. One gentleman was reluctant to help, saying he wanted nothing from me. I reassured him I was not selling anything. I JUST NEEDED GAS! Also, I prayed for a lady to help me, and I only found one. ONE! I want to thank God for this time when I learned to be humble enough to ask for help with the quick realization I could not complete this job on my own.

Here is the catch. The lever needed a new cable attached to the gas tank door. A mechanic brought it back to life when he connected the lever to the door. There was much rejoicing in our town since this crazy lady quit stalking people at the gas pumps.

Is the relationship between a vine and branch similar to my fuel release lever and gas tank door? We know Jesus serves as the true vine when we indwell with Him. If Jesus wants to be the vine, what is our role in this relationship? According to John 15:5, He wants us to take on the branch's role.

To identify the importance of the branch, I am going to start with the end of John 15:5, where it states, “[F]or without Me, you can do nothing.” For a branch to survive, it must be attached to a food source. Walking in my backyard and pulling a branch off the tree would eventually make for good kindling in my fireplace. I just took the branch away from the only food, water, and nutrient source it has ever known. The same is true in our relationship with Jesus Christ. We cannot live apart from the vine if we want to thrive in this world.

I can think of at least one young man in the Bible who *tried* living apart from Christ. His story is in Matthew chapter 19. He asked Jesus, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have

eternal life?" (Matt. 19:16). Jesus was quick to point out that God the Father was and is the only one considered good (Matt. 19:17). Oh, the humility of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Let me stop here and say to you, little branch, that your life should emulate that of Jesus Christ and nobody else. Goodness only comes from the Father above. We might look at others thinking they have it all together, and we would like to walk in their shoes for just one day. You must remember they are sinners saved by grace, just like you and me. The branch can only look to Jesus Christ for perfection.

When I was a teacher, we often set classroom norms. My students always wanted me to write the word *good* on our classroom chart. I would then turn around and ask them what it meant to be good. What does good look like? How could we display goodness inside and outside the classroom?

Jesus had an answer to such a question.

He went on to tell the rich young ruler, "[I]f you want to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matt. 19:17). In the same verse, this youth asked Jesus, "Which ones?"

I love this question! Does the rich young ruler sound similar to you and me today? Okay, Jesus. I know I need to be good, but how good must I be to receive eternal life? Jesus, I want to dwell with You eternally, but how much work do I need to bring to the table? Is this "I am the vine, and you are the branch" relationship going to crimp my style?

Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and *your* mother, and You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:18). The young man assured Jesus, "All these things I have kept from my youth" while wondering what he was still lacking (Matt. 19:20).

You might be working extremely hard to keep your branch looking pristine on the outside, but Jesus looks at the heart. Samuel discovered God's view of the heart when he spoke to Him concerning the upcoming king of Israel, King David. In I Samuel 16:7, "the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.'"

If you know the story of King David, he broke most of the Ten Commandments. Yet, God saw something in David. David had a repentant heart and often sought forgiveness from the Lord. He quickly praised God for all He had done and would continue doing.

Jesus saw the heart of this rich, young ruler, just like with David. "Jesus said to him, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me'" (Matt. 19:21).

So, how did the young lad respond to Jesus's requests? Matthew 19:22 says, "But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions."

Jesus's disciples responded differently in Matthew 4:19-20 when He requested the same from them, "Then He said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.' They immediately left their nets and followed Him." They left behind everything to dwell with Christ - family, the fishing industry, money, etc.

When you take on the branch's role and are ready for the vine to wrap Himself entirely around you, get ready. Jesus may ask a lot from you, just like He did with the rich, young ruler. Did you hear the various commands? Go. Sell what you have. Give to the poor. Come. Follow Me. Will you be

sorrowful when this time comes, or will you gladly cast your net off to the side and risk it all to abide with Him?

Before leaving Matthew chapter 4, I want to remind you that works do not lead to eternal life with Jesus Christ. Once you are saved, good works will help you earn crowns in Heaven, which you will then cast at the feet of Jesus. Salvation comes only by faith in Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

We inherited our sinful nature from the actions of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This act of disobedience displayed in the garden condemned us all to death. Romans 5:19 says, “For as by one man’s disobedience, many were made sinners...”

But there is hope! A living hope. God sent His Son, Jesus, to die for our sins. “So also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19).

You can take advantage of this gift by believing that Jesus Christ died for your sins. Next, you must recognize you are a sinner and repent of past sins. Confess your faith in Jesus Christ. After salvation, the Holy Spirit will dwell inside you to stir up good works and a desire to follow Jesus.

Salvation does not lead to a sinless life, but it does lead to an eternal life with Jesus.

Questions

1. The rich, young ruler was unwilling to give up his great possessions. What are you reluctant to give up that is standing between you and attaining a deeper relationship with Christ?

2. Jeremiah 23:1-8 speaks of Jesus Christ coming again as the Branch of righteousness. What will He do for His people?

3. When we take on the role of a branch, we will begin to blossom as the vine wraps itself tighter and tighter around us. Read Colossians 3:12-17. Write out the characteristics that define a branch.

4. Fear can prevent us from going to and growing with Jesus Christ. Read Isaiah 41:10. List truths from this verse that help to remind us of God's assurances when we choose to dwell with Him.

