

One thing I remember about growing up in Alabama is kudzu – it was everywhere! Kudzu is a vine-like plant used to prevent erosion, but it is an invasive plant. It grows up trees, power lines, even houses. It will cover anything in its path and keep growing. It smothers other plants and trees under a blanket of vines, preventing sunlight from his heavy shade. I thought of this when I read about the vine in this psalm, how a vine spread about a thousand miles and its shade covered the mountains and the mighty cedars. That’s a huge vine.

The vine in this psalm is a metaphor, of course. The vine is Israel, and the psalmist reflects back on how God brought them out of Egypt and transplanted them as a grapevine into the promised land. God cleared the land for them, and they took root and spread throughout the land. They were a mighty force, a force to be reckoned with – kinda like kudzu – if you’ve ever tried to maintain it.

But, now, they feel that God has allowed them to suffer, that God has allowed their destruction. The psalmist asked God point blank: “Why have you broken down our walls so that all who pass by may steal our fruit? The wild boar from the forest devours it, and the wild animals feed on it” (v.12-13). The wild boar may be referring to the Assyrian conquest when the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell in the early 700s. What is clear is their belief that God allowed them to be destroyed. Let’s look at that a little closer today.

Israel as a vineyard is a common metaphor in the Hebrew Bible. Isaiah 5:1-7 shows us a similar use of this image and helps us to understand why the psalmist poses the question of destruction. [Read

Isaiah 5:1-7]. In this image, we see that the Lord made a watchtower in the middle of the vineyard in order for the Lord to protect it. Perhaps that is why the psalmist suggests that God left his post at the watchtower, breaking down the walls of protection and allowing the wild boar to trample the vineyard.

This passage gives us more insight into the condition of the vineyard in the psalm and who really caused the destruction. We see that God was a good gardener. He planted the vineyard in a good place, a fertile hill, that would give his vineyard a good start. He dug the soil, removed the stony obstacles, gave it sunlight and nourishing water. God gave everything it needed to grow, and so God expected it to yield good fruit. However, it yielded wild grapes instead. God “expected justice, but saw bloodshed” (v.7).

But, as all gardeners know, despite your best efforts, you can’t make fruit grow. You can provide every opportunity for it to grow, but you can’t force it to grow. God couldn’t force good grapes to grow even though God provided every opportunity. As gardeners know, there’s a waiting period. You do all the work and then you stand back and allow the vines and the fruit to grow on their own.

And, God did, yet wild grapes grew, grapes that went their own way, grapes that were sour and caused violence instead of peace, grapes that were not what God had designed. Mutant grapes. And so, the vine called out to God, begging to be rescued. They realized that it was their selfish behavior that caused the wild grapes, and it was their sinful living that ultimately caused their destruction, not God. They realized

that they needed their gardener to help them go back to being a vineyard that produced good grapes. But, when something is already grown, how can it go back? It can't.

God says, "And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it" (Isaiah 5:5-6). God will let the vineyard die. Because any good gardener will tell you that sometimes the best thing to do, is to let it die, and start again.

This psalm makes it sound like God is a vengeful God for not protecting it from harm, that God allowed the destruction, but the kindest thing God does is to let it die. Protecting the vine and keeping it walled up in a toxic and unhealthy environment is the worst thing the gardener could do. If God allowed the destruction, it was only so new life could grow.

In order to continue the growth cycle, something has to die. Death is part of the growth cycle. There will be things in our lives that must die. We die to self, selfish desires that take precedence over God's desires. We die to our sin. Behavior that causes others harm must be broken off. Our selfish, sinful behavior are things that prevent new life. The dead or wild parts suck all the life out of the source, preventing new life to form. That's why gardeners have to break off the dead leaves or buds, to ensure the new growth will receive the best energy and nourishment. We have to let go of the dead things in order to produce good grapes.

But we don't like to let things die. We're invested in those leaves, branches, and even wild grapes. We devoted our time, money and energy into growing. Even if our choices produced wild grapes, we still want to hold on because we think wild grapes are better than no grapes at all. But, letting it die begins the next phase in the growing cycle.

We have a good gardener who breaks down the walls of fear and selfishness, clears the soil of toxins, prunes the wild grapes, the wild parts of us that need to be pruned in order to give the proper space and nourishment for good grapes to grow. God may be breaking off the dead parts of us, so we can grow into the beautiful vineyard that God planned for us to be. Sometimes we like to blame God for allowing us to be destroyed, but we cause our own destruction by going our own way and living by our selfish desires. But as soon as we call out to God, God begins something new. God sets us up for every opportunity to grow good grapes. Out of our destruction comes new life. God is growing something new in us. Amen.