

The Devastated Vineyard

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn to our Bibles for our reading this morning, which you will find in the prophet Isaiah. And Bob is continuing the series that he's just recently started, and we're in Isaiah chapter 5.

Bob, what page is that in the church Bible? 5, 6, 9, if you have one of our blue visitor's Bibles. Otherwise, it's pretty much in the middle of whatever Bible you have.

Big along prophet Isaiah, and we're right at the beginning, or near the beginning, in chapter 5. And again, we need to brace ourselves, really, for this very bracing word from the Lord to his people.

Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it, cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines.

He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it. He looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

[1 : 14] And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?

When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I'll tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured.

I'll break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I'll make it a waste. It shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. And he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed.

For righteousness, but behold, an outcry. Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field until there's no more room, and you're made to dwell alone in the midst of the land.

[2 : 26] The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing, Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses without inhabitant. For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah.

Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them. They have lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine at their feasts, but they do not regard the deeds of the Lord or see the work of his hands.

Therefore, my people go into exile for lack of knowledge. Their honored men go hungry, and their multitude is parched with thirst.

Therefore, Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure. And the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude will go down, her revelers and he who exalts in her.

Man is humbled, and each one is brought low, and the eyes of the haughty are brought low. But the Lord of hosts is exalted in justice, and the holy God shows himself holy in righteousness.

[3 : 47] Then shall the lambs graze as in their pasture, and nomads shall eat among the ruins of the rich. Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood, who draw sin as with cart ropes, who say, let him be quick and let him speed his work, that we may see it.

Let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw near, and let it come that we may know it. Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and a light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.

Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and shrewd in their own sight. Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, valiant men in drinking strong drink, who acquit the guilty for a bribe and deprive the innocent of his right.

Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will be as rottenness, and their blossom go up like dust.

For they have rejected the law of the Lord of hosts and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. Therefore, the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people.

[5 : 10] And he stretched out his hand against them and struck them, and the mountains quaked, and their corpses were as refuse in the midst of the street. For all this, his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still.

He will raise a signal for nations afar off and whistle for them from the ends of the earth. And behold, quickly, speedily they come. None is weary, none stumbles, none slumbers or sleeps.

Not a waistband is loose, nor a sandal strap broken. Their arrows are sharp and their bows bent. Their horses' hooves seem like flint, and their wheels like the whirlwind.

Their roaring is like a lion. Like young lions, they roar, they growl, and seize their prey and carry it off, and none can rescue.

They will growl over it on that day, like the growling of the sea. And if one looks to the land, behold, darkness and distress, and the light is darkened by its cloud.

[6 : 22] Amen. May God bless us. This is his solemn word. Now, could I ask you, please, to have your Bibles open at page 569 as we have a moment of prayer.

Lord God, your word speaks to us in many voices, many, many tones that often we would rather not hear.

And so I pray, Lord, that you would take my words, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word. And so lead us to the living word, the Lord Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen. During my years at Corn Hill, there was a phrase I used to use continually, there is no part of the Bible that is unpreachable.

I found myself this week panicking as I read Isaiah chapter 5. I thought, shall I have a few words on this and then rush on to chapter 6, the holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of hosts.

[7 : 43] And then I remembered what Paul says in Romans, all scripture is given by inspiration of God. It is profitable for rebuke, for correction, for building up.

He didn't say all scripture, apart from Isaiah 5, is given for reproof, correction, encouragement, and building up. Well, let's venture into this unpromising territory.

We've reached the end of Isaiah's introductory section, chapters 1 to 5, telling us the circumstances in which he preached, the circumstances in which he delivered his message, which was a message of judgment and of salvation.

If you like variations on a theme. Now, these were the situation in which he received the great revelation of chapter 6.

But they continued, because if you read the last chapter, chapters 56 to 66, you find that God's people are committing the same sins, making the same errors, going down the wrong paths, as God's people still are today.

[8 : 56] And it's very clear that here we have the background, not just to the early days of his ministry, but to his whole ministry. Almost certainly what would happen is that these messages, these sermons, these writings, would be collected by his disciples.

When we read about in chapter 8, verse 16, he says, seal this up and give it to my disciples. Just as Jeremiah had a scribe called Baruch, who collected his writings at the end.

Rather like the way in which the Gospels came together. The Gospels with which, as you know, are all consistent, but they don't present material in the same order.

Something doesn't have to be chronological in order to be true. And so we have here the circumstances in which he ministered. And here in particular, we have two different types of writing.

We have, first of all, a love song, a parable, in verses 1 to 7. And then the longer part of the chapter, a judgment oracle, in verses 8 to 30.

[10 : 04] It seems to me these are deliberately put together. The love song to show us how deep the Father's love is for us, and the judgment oracle to show how holy he is.

Verse 19, Isaiah's difficult title for the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. Incidentally, this title, the Holy One of Israel, occurs in Isaiah more often than the rest of the Old Testament put together.

It clearly comes from the experience of chapter 6. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory. And we have two main parts then, and these are my two main points.

Verses 1 to 7, and verses 8 to 30. And then I'm going to add a third point as a kind of footnote on the chapter as a whole.

So verses 1 to 7 is the story of betrayed love, or better still, the betrayed lover. Now the picture of the vineyard occurs particularly in Psalm 80.

[11 : 09] It's a pity we couldn't find a singable tune for the version of Psalm 80 in these books, or other fine version by, I think, Timothy Dudley Smith, but we couldn't find a singable version.

Anyway, it's of planting and fruitfulness. The Lord takes the vine from Egypt and plants it in the promised land, plants it there in soil where it will grow, but instead it turns out to be a false vine.

When Jesus says in John's Gospel, I am the true vine, what he's meaning is he is the vine whom Israel failed to be. That's why we sang that hymn, O true and living vine.

Jesus does what Israel failed to do. It's interesting to study the I am's in John. You find two strands running through them. One where he claims to be equal with Yahweh himself, I am the good shepherd, echoing Psalms such as 23, and others where, like the vine, where he says, I am the true Israel.

So here is the picture of the vine. Our point is not to work out every detail. I mean, some commentaries give you an enormous amount of information about the cultivating of vines and what's needed and all the rest of it.

[12 : 35] I think I'd be to miss the point. The point is, nothing was done that could not, sorry, let me rephrase this sentence, which is not going to work out.

By the way, if you start a sentence that's not going to work out, admit it and then recast it. Anyway, the Lord omitted to do nothing that he could have done.

Everything was done. Good soil, removal of the stones, and then these stones made into a wall and a watchtower. Contrast to chapter 1, verse 8, where the daughter of Zion is like a fragile booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field.

This was great power, great care taken to make sure that the vines grew and that they grew properly. But you'll notice it's not just power.

Let me sing for my beloved. The Lord here is referred to as the beloved, rather like in the Song of Songs, where the beloved is, of course, a human lover, but also a picture of the great lover himself.

[13 : 44] So there's not just power, there's not just effort, there is generous care, and he would expect it to produce fruit. Good soil, good care, good cultivation, and yet what does it produce?

It produces wild grapes, the grapes of wrath, sour grapes, if you like. And that means there is no excuse. He invites the readers to be judge and jury.

Verse 3, And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. And the answer is very obvious.

And the closest parallel to this, I think, is the story of Nathan and David in 2 Samuel 12. Nathan comes to David after his adultery and murder by proxy and tells the story of a rich man who robbed a poor man of his one lamb, a rich man with flocks and herds.

And immediately, David's chivalrous nature aroused and says, This man must die. And Nathan replies, David, you are the man. So you see what's happening here.

[14 : 58] Isaiah is saying, You are the people. I have to say, the more I read the Bible, the more I read passages like this, the phrase that's echoing in my mind is, You are the man.

You see, I say it's very easy to read a chapter like this and launch into the denunciation of the ills of the world and the ills of the nation, which, my goodness me, are real enough and pretty awful.

But that would miss the point. The prophet is making to us. The inevitable result, verses 5 and 6, I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

Notice not what I will do to the world, what I will do to my vineyard. And he's not just going to abandon it, he is going to destroy it. Notice the repeated active verb, I will remove its head, I will break down its wall, I will make it a waste, I will command the clouds.

This is the Lord of wind and weather who is going to destroy the work of his hands. And in case anybody is still doubting who it's addressed to, Isaiah says, Isaiah says, verse 7, The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planning.

[16 : 16] He looked for justice, and behold, bloodshed. There's a wordplay in Hebrew, we can't really reproduce in English. He looked for Zedekah, righteous, and he found Sa'aka, bloodshed.

He looked for Mishpeth, which is righteousness, and he found Mispeth, which is an outcry. So you see, Isaiah is using all the resources of language to hammer it home.

This is totally just judgment. And then he launches into the six woes. And that brings us to our second section. The first section, the parable, the love story, beautiful, moving, and pointed.

And now on to deserve judgment. Six woes, verses 8, 11, 18, 20, 21, and 22.

What does that mean? Now, woe isn't just saying, oh dear. Woe means we are under God's judgment. It's very interesting, the next chapter, the prophet himself, to say, woe is me.

- [17 : 23] The prophet himself is standing under this judgment. All sins can be forgiven, but only if they're repented of.

That's the point. You see, and at the root is a false view of reality. Verse 13, therefore my people go into exile for lack of knowledge.

Knowledge here is not just intellectual knowledge. Knowledge here implies broken relationships as well. Back in chapter 1, verse 3, Israel does not know me.

My people do not understand. At the heart of human condition is this failure to recognize reality. T.S. Eliot, the poet, says humankind cannot bear very much reality.

Well, Isaiah says you're going to have to bear reality. You're going to rub your noses on it six times. Woe, woe, woe. Now, the opposite of woe is blessing.

- [18 : 23] And just as woe is not a feeling, blessing is not a feeling either. Blessed does not mean happy. It can mean happy, and of course it will ultimately lead to happiness, and there are glorious moments when we feel happy about it.

But if you are blessed by the Lord, you can still be blessed, even if you're feeling dreadful, even if everything is against you. And similarly, woe is not feeling bad about something.

Woe is being under the judgment of God. And we may be going along perfectly happily. So, let's look at these woes then. First, the first two woes are about greed, verses eight to ten.

Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field until there is no more room. This is the emergence of a wealthy landed class whom Amos slightly earlier attacks as well.

There is nothing wrong with owning property. There is nothing wrong with owning land. But it's the attitude. The land belonged to the Lord. Read the great chapter of the year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25.

- [19 : 35] God's people were tenants. He was the landlord. It didn't belong to them. What have we that we have not received? And when property becomes an idol, or money, or anything else becomes an idol, rather than it is received as a gift, then this will not lead to further riches, but will lead to poverty.

We've seen this, haven't we, last Sunday in Haggai. You have so much, you bring in little. You do all these things, but you are not, to use the New Testament phrase, laying up treasure in heaven.

So that's the point Isaiah is saying. Isaiah is not saying you ought not to own a home. You ought not to own land. What he's saying is your security must not depend on these.

This mustn't be what identifies you. This mustn't become so much part of you, that you forget you are the recipients of God's grace.

You haven't created, but you know, young people, I've worked hard and I deserve this. Now, there may be some secondary truth in that, but the whole point is we have nothing which we have not received.

- [20 : 51] And once we begin to imagine that these blessings that God has given us are actually things we've achieved by our own effort, then we are in real danger.

Then verses 11 to 19, there is self-indulgence. People become slave to appetites. Woe to those who rise early in the morning.

Now, once again, lyre, harp, timbre, and flute, once again, these can be good instruments. After all, in Psalm 150, the psalmist calls on all these to be used to praise the Lord and to praise his name.

Similarly, the Bible does not condemn wine, but does condemn drunkenness. Actually, it would be very odd to condemn wine and then use vineyard as a positive image.

That's the point. Read Romans 14 and 15. These belong to what Paul calls secondary matters, don't they? The kingdom of God, he says, is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

[21 : 56] Once again, though, it's becoming a slave to these kind of things. exile. And in verse 13, the end of all this will be exile.

Over the whole of the book of Isaiah hangs the shadow of exile. In his lifetime, the northern kingdom are to go off to Assyria, and after his time, the whole people, Judah, are to be taken to Babylon.

So, exile hangs over this, and therefore Sheol, verse 14, has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure.

Going to the grave without having made peace with God, that is the point. We all die, whether we are, you know, whatever way we have lived our lives, but this is going to the grave with sin unforgiven, sin unrepented off, continue imagining that we can still control our destiny.

Complete humbling of human pride, verse 15, man is humbled, and each one is brought low. The eyes of the haughty are brought low, and the holiness of God exposes all of this.

[23 : 12] Verse 16, the Lord is exalted in justice, the holy God shows himself in righteousness. And the trouble about all this is that people think they are in charge.

Verse 18, woe to those who draw iniquity with cords, who draw sin as with cart ropes, imagining they are in control. It's my life, and I can do with it whatever I like.

Now, that sounds like freedom, doesn't it? The Word of God continually tells us that slavery, because as sinful people, if we do exactly what we like, this is the way we'll behave, and we all know that in our own hearts.

This is the way sinful people, when they set out to do exactly what they want, become slaves, slaves to appetite, slaves to opinion, slaves to everything that degrades.

And verse 19, you say, let him be quick, let him speed his work, that we may see it. In other words, we believe the Lord if he shows us evidence. But you see how it's developing, greed, self, indulgence, then worse still is to come in verse 20, woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who hoot darkness for light and light for darkness, who hoot bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.

[24 : 35] Everything is turned upside down. How do we discover the truth? We discover the truth because we like it. We discover the truth because it pleases us, indulges us, it's sad to hear a politician saying, for example, that the thing they're most proud of is having legislated for same sex marriage.

Once again, of course, most of us here would have no difficulty in condemning that. What about our own hearts when we call good evil and evil good?

When we persist in following the inclinations of our own heart? And what does that lead to? That leads to rampant injustice.

It leads to a total view of life where everything becomes, everything's up for grabs. Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, or as Shakespeare put it, fair is foul and foul is fair.

That's what Isaiah is saying here. And what does this lead to, then, the vineyard is going to be destroyed, and the imagery here is of the power of the Creator. Verse 24, Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, the dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will be as rottenness, and their blossom go up like dust, for they have rejected the law of the Lord of hosts and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

[26 : 12] Image here, the raging fire, our God is a consuming fire, says the letter of Hebrews, fire right from the beginning of the Bible, an image of the overwhelming, devouring, and also cleansing power of God.

He is the Creator, He is the Lord of the nations. Verse 26, He will raise a signal from nations far away, and hustle for them from the ends of the earth, and behold, quickly, they come.

He is talking here about the Assyrians and Babylonians, and later on in the book, he is going to talk about how these proud nations imagine they are doing it out of their own power.

They are actually the Lord who is arranging this to happen. The ferocity of nature, verse 29, their roaring is like a line, they growl and seize their prey.

Ferocity of lions, and of the raging water, they growl over it on that day, like the growling of the sea. The people in Jerusalem and in Judah are having a wonderful time.

[27 : 21] They are partying, they are building houses, they are spreading themselves across the land, and everything is wonderful. What's the Lord saying? Darkness falling on a devastated vineyard, and a depopulated land.

verse 30, one looks to the land before darkness and distress, and the light is darkened by its clouds. Now, a chapter like this is very uncomfortable, and it's meant to be uncomfortable.

We'll never appreciate grace unless we realize how bad we are. One of our problems is, even as Christians, we often try to make excuses for ourselves, rather than saying, I have sinned.

Rather, remember how David responded to Nathan when Nathan said, you are the man, and like his predecessor, Saul, he didn't try to make excuses.

David said, David repented and humbled himself in dust and ashes, and you can read about that in Psalm 51. That leads into my final point, which is a comment on the chapter as a whole.

[28 : 35] Can even grace save us? That's the question. The chapter is one of the bleakest in the Bible. I say we must not try and water it down. Two weeks ago, we looked at two dead-end ways of dealing with sin.

One was the way of legalism, which condemned and condemned and condemned, but left you with the guilt. The other was the way of liberalism, which sounded kind, or we're all like that, and swept it under the carpet, so that nothing ever was solved, nothing was ever faced up to.

I think there are two hints in this chapter. And the first thing is the fact that it begins with a love song, deliberately placed beside the judgment oracle.

Also noticed a couple of weeks ago about the judgment of God, the outraged majesty of God. When theologians say the judgment of God really isn't personal, it's impersonal, like a live wire.

Now, C.S. Lewis pointed out long ago, that is a dreadful image, the image of a live wire, because a live wire cannot forgive the outrage majesty can.

[29 : 52] This is the outrage of the lover who wants to restore the broken relationship. relationship. You see, what Israel have done, they haven't broken a contract, they have destroyed a relationship, but the lover wants to win them back.

The lover is determined to win them back. Much later in chapter 28, the Lord is going to say to Isaiah, my pleasant vineyard, when he has destroyed and removed the sin.

So it's a love song. But there is paradoxically another important point at the very end of the chapter in verse 30, darkness and distress.

The light is darkened by its clouds. Now that is part of the imagery of the prophets of the day of the Lord. The day of the Lord is a day of darkness and thick clouds.

That is how the end comes, the darkness, which is the sign of God's anger. earth. Where do we see that? Matthew 24, in the little apocalypse, Jesus talks about the day darkened when the Lord judges.

[31 : 05] When the Lord comes to judge, the day will become like night and darkness will cover the earth. I want you to read a few chapters later in Matthew.

Matthew 27, darkness covered the whole land from the sixth hour to the ninth hour as God carried out his judgment.

As the Father turned his face away, as wounds that mar the chosen one bring many sons to glory. That judgment was visited on the true Israel.

The true vine, which did not fail to produce the harvest and which continues to reduce the harvest, becomes judgment for us. So as we look at this chapter and the whole picture of the gospel as it develops.

This is what we can learn from here. When darkness falls, we're going to see this in the next chapter, when darkness falls, when darkness is at its deepest, that is the place where Jesus enters the darkness so that we can be freed from that darkness.

[32 : 14] Jesus bears the judgment for us. Now Isaiah Isaiah didn't see this as clearly as we do, not because we are more spiritual than Isaiah, but because we've had a different point in salvation history.

In his great 53rd chapter, he's going to have the clearest view in the whole of the Old Testament of the one who bore our sins, who bore our iniquities, in his body on the tree.

And that, I want to suggest, is the final message of this chapter, sin is dreadful, sin will lead to judgment. But someone else has taken our place and stood in for us and taken the judgment of God so that we might go free.

And that is the gospel. Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, as we read a chapter like this, in our honest moments, we recognize that it's not about other people, it's about us.

It's not the sins that other people think of and commit, it's the sins that lurk in our hearts. And so, Father, we pray that we may leave here today repenting of our sins once again, and yet rejoicing in the one who bore our sins in his body on the tree.

[33 : 43] Amen.