

2. A Vintage Worth the Costly Wait

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn to our Bibles now for our first reading today, and you'll find it in the Old Testament in the prophet Isaiah. We're going to be looking this morning at chapter 27, but reading first of all in Isaiah chapter 5.

If you have one of the church Bibles, that's page 569. This is the passage that Rupert was preaching on last week about the Lord's vineyard.

So we're going to read Isaiah 5, 1 to 7, and then we'll come back later and read chapter 27. The Lord says, 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 : 11] And now, O habitants 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 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 will break down its wall, and it will be trampled down.

I will make it a waste. It shall not be pruned or hoed, and brows 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. Amen. Amen. May God bless this, his word.

[2 : 18] Amen. Amen. Well, let's turn to our Bibles again, to Isaiah chapter 27. That's page 587, if you have our church Bibles.

and we pick up the story of God's vineyard once again.

This time Isaiah looking to the future and to the promise of what God will at last do in the great day, the day of the Lord. And Isaiah says in chapter 27 verse 1, in that day the Lord with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeting serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.

In that day a pleasant vineyard, sing of it, I the Lord am its keeper, every moment I water it, lest anyone punish it, I keep it night and day, I have no wrath.

Would that I had thorns and briars to battle, I would march against them, I would burn them up together. Let them hold, they hold of my protection, let them make peace with me, let them make peace with me.

[3 : 48] In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit. He has struck them, sorry, has he struck them, has he struck those who struck them?

Or have they been slain as their slayers were slain? Measure by measure by exile you contend with them. He removed them with his fierce breath in the day of the east wind.

Therefore by this the guilt of Jacob will be atoned for. This will be the full fruit of the removal of his sin. When he makes all the stones of the altars like chalk stones crushed to pieces.

No asherim or incense altars will remain standing. For the fortified city is solitary. A habitation deserted and forsaken like the wilderness.

There the calf grazes, there it lies down and strips its branches. When its boughs are dry, they're broken. When women come and make a fire of them. For this is a people without discernment.

[5 : 00] Therefore he who made them will not have compassion on them. He who formed them will show them no favor. In that day, from the river Euphrates to the brook of Egypt, the Lord will thresh out the grain.

And you will be gleaned one by one, O people of Israel. And in that day, a great trumpet will be blown. And those who are lost in the land of Assyria, and those who are driven out to the land of Egypt, will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.

Amen. Amen. May God bless to us this is... Well, this morning we're finishing our tale of two vineyards with chapter 27 of Isaiah.

So perhaps you turn with me back to page 587. Amen. And we'll ask for our Father's help. Heavenly Father, as we open your word together now, we pray that you would open our hearts and sharpen our consciences to your spirit.

Help us, Lord, to humbly accept what you have to say to us this morning and to bow the knee to your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, how badly might you be prepared to be hurt for the sake of love?

[6 : 32] How much pain would you be willing to inflict on somebody because you care for them? Last week, Isaiah rather brutally lulled us in by singing what he purported to be a love song.

And yet, no sooner had he won over the rather cold hearts of his listeners than he transformed his song into a horrifying tragedy.

So perhaps now, when 22 chapters deeper into his book, we find ourselves once again listening to a beautiful song about God's vineyard, we'd be wise to be on our guards.

This time, though, there's no mention of the word love at all. It's as if at the start of verse 2, the Lord himself just bursts into song.

And yet, without using the word even once, it soon becomes clear that love is precisely what this song is all about.

[7 : 40] Which, given that it's being sung to exactly the same loveless people as the last song, is surprising enough in itself. But what's even more surprising is the kind of love God reveals.

There's nothing naive or sugary about it. There's a wild fierceness to God's love in this song. It's fierce both in its intensity and in its jealous determination to possess and protect his people exclusively.

Chapter 5 looked like a love song, but it didn't much feel like it once Isaiah had flicked his knife. Lots of chapter 27, in contrast, doesn't look much like a love song at all.

Because God's love doesn't always look quite how we'd imagine. But a love song is precisely what we're going to find. One which will ask how far God is willing to go to bend our hearts back to him. Now there's one thing we need to notice about this song before we dive in. Although it's being sung in the grim darkness of Isaiah's day, its subject is a beautiful future hope.

[9 : 04] So bracketing this chapter, opening the first two verses and the last two, is the little phrase, in that day, four times.

Chapter 27 closes a short section, sometimes called Isaiah's Apocalypse, which looks forward, not just to the end of Israel's exile, but to the day God returns to make an end of all things.

So that day is the day described back in chapter 24, when the moon will be confounded and the sun ashamed. It's the day of chapter 25, when God will swallow up death forever and wipe away every tear.

And it's the day of chapter 26, when God's truly repentant people will at last seek him again, when the dead will wake up and sing for joy.

Now that day was still a long way off for Isaiah's listeners, but they needed to hear about it, because right now, God's vineyard was in the terrible state we left it in last week.

[10 : 18] It was a broken society, a nation which had squandered their extraordinary privileges of grace and was beginning to reap the consequences.

Which brings us to verse one. Because right now, as Isaiah spoke, there was no doubt whatsoever whose influence was writ large over God's vineyard.

But it had the marks of the twisting serpent all over it. Leviathan there is the hideous, coiling predator who stalks the Psalms.

It's a poetic picture of everything in this world, which is sinister and demonic and standing in opposition to God's loving purposes. So in that day, before God's vineyard can be restored, his great enemy had to be destroyed.

If his vineyard is to have any hope, then one day the creator will have to yield his sword. And in that day, verse two, there really will be something to sing about.

[11 : 32] Well, the song itself splits into two halves, both of which tell us something about God's fierce love for his people. Firstly, and at long last, we find out about the future God has for his vineyard.

And it's a future God is ferociously pursuing for them. Verses two to six tell us about the fierce determination of God's love.

In that day, verse two, a pleasant vineyard. Sing of it. This is the song God can't wait to sing. Of the day when all of that painstaking care he's lavished on his people will finally reward him. The song he'll sing when he looks at us, his people, and says, at long last, here is a vintage worth waiting for.

Well, as in chapter five, he sings about the loving attention he'll pour into his vineyard. But this time, his song is a complete reversal of the judgment he meted out back then.

[12 : 51] Chapter five was a song about the people who had spat in the face of God's grace. And so God had withdrawn precisely the privileges which they had scorned.

But listen now to how that's all reversed. Back then, he withdrew his gracious provision, stopping the clouds from raining. But now, verse three, I, the Lord, am its keeper.

Every moment, I water it myself. Back then, he removed his gracious protection, breaking down the walls, which kept us safe from harm.

Now, though, lest anyone punish it, verse three, I keep watch over it night and day. Back then, he was burning with angry indignation at his callous, ungrateful people.

But now, verse four, God sings what must surely be four of the most reassuring words in the Bible. I have no wrath.

[14 : 02] It's a verse just full, says Calvin, of wonderful comfort. For it expresses the incredible warmth of love which God has for his people.

And incredible, seems to me the right word, because remember who Isaiah is addressing this to. If there was one thing he wanted us to feel sure of, as we read his first song, it's that wrath was precisely what they deserved.

Judge for yourself, he said. Remember that? And yet, says Isaiah, to those same callous people, there will come a day when God will look at his vineyard and know that his anger is spent.

Those four words are going to come at quite a cost to Israel. More on that later in the song. But they would come at a far greater cost to God himself.

Next, there's what comes from being right with God. Back in chapter five, his special people returned to the lost state of the rest of mankind.

[15 : 20] The vineyard would be overrun. The vineyard would be overrun with thorns and briars, a throwback to God's original judgment in Genesis three. Life under his care with its little respite from man's curse would be taken away.

But now, verse four, there's not a thistle in sight. If you want a taste of the fierceness of God's love, then you get it here.

He talks like a lover just bursting to show off his protective passion. He's simply looking for a chance to defend his beloved. Would that I had thorns and briars to battle, I would march against them.

But even if there were any enemies left, well, before they could get to his people, they'd have to face the same warrior who took down Leviathan.

Or, verse five, they can do the sensible thing. They can sue him for his peace. And like his church, like his vineyard, they can lay hold of his protection in Christ.

[16 : 34] I, for one, would rather know his fierce love than his sword. And there's one final part to this great reversal, possibly the most important at all.

Not only will his wrath be spent, not only will they know him once more as protector, and provider, and constant gardener, but they themselves will be changed.

At long last, verse six, the vineyard will be what it was made to be. Something which brings delight and joy to the Lord Jesus.

In days to come, Jacob shall take root. Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit.

Chapter five was a song about what God had made his people and what they refused to be. This is a song about what God will make of his people.

[17 : 40] At long last, Israel will be what they were called to be. A blessing to all the families of the earth. That last vineyard was itself overrun with weeds.

But this one will overrun the world with the fruit that brings glory to Christ. The last vineyard produced stinking, sour fruit, a society which the pagan world would only look at in absolute revulsion.

But this one will produce lives which taste so sweet that the world will want what they have. And there's our strongest clue that, in some sense at least, the day God is singing about has already begun.

The gospel has come to you, Paul told the Colossians, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing. This great reversal began the day that Christ appeared to crush the head of the serpent.

And just as he warned, the vineyard was taken away from those who rejected him and handed over to others. So that until he returns, us Gentiles too are invited to lay hold of his protection, and begin producing fruit.

[19 : 12] Fruit which one day will fill the world as every tribe and tongue and nation comes to this vineyard, to Jerusalem, and bows to its king.

That, in God's love, is what he is fiercely determined to make of his people. And it's a wonderfully encouraging picture, isn't it? But why does Isaiah want to show it to this lot?

I suppose we have to ask whether they, or we for that matter, long to sing this song in quite the same way God does. Isaiah is writing to a people far more like that rotten, rebellious vineyard of chapter 5.

But he wants them to know what they were made to be. What God is determined to make of them. My older daughter took absolutely forever to learn how to walk.

Partly because she was an expert bottom shuffler. She got so good at dragging herself around on her bum that it was as if she just couldn't see why she'd ever need her legs.

[20 : 30] And like most paranoid parents, there were moments when I had visions of giving her away in marriage, all decked out as a beautiful woman, and having to wait while she shuffles down the aisle on her backside.

But eventually, of course, like everybody else, she discovered that God had made her to walk. The perversity of chapter 5 was that despite all that God had given her, Israel persisted in being something so much less than they were made to be.

Well, isn't it encouraging after being bruised by that tragic song last week to see that God intends better for his people shouldn't Judah have longed for the day when God could say there is no wrath left?

Shouldn't we long for the day that we're fully and wonderfully possessed by the fierce love of our maker and to delight him with that cherished, beautiful vintage which he's waited for so long and so patiently?

That's the goal God is ferociously bent on for his people. Verses 1-6 show us the fierce unrelenting determination of real love.

[22 : 01] But when love is real, it means doing what's best for somebody even if it causes them real hurt. Which is why the second half of the chapter also has to tell us about the fierce discipline of God's love.

You see, God's fierce discipline serves his fierce love. And if verses 1-6 showed us the goal God has for his vineyard, then verses 7-11 show us the means by which he'll get them there.

Leviathan isn't the only problem, is it? It's us that spoils the vineyard too. Heaven won't be heaven if you and I are the same as we are right now.

So verse 7 jolts our gaze abruptly off the not yet and back into the present to the trouble and pain ahead of Judah.

Because before they could be restored, the vineyard had to be torn down just as chapter 5 warned. But this second song adds something seriously important to how we understand God's judgment.

[23 : 24] when he's dealing with his people, even when they deserve it as little as that rotten vineyard, God's purposes in judgment are always good.

Now it's a little tricky at first to hear how he's saying that in verse 7 because of the way the poetry itself grabs our ears. There's a pounding rhythm to the verse, almost as if we're listening in to the blows of war taking place.

But just listen carefully as I read it again to the question he's actually asking. Has he struck them as he struck those who struck them?

Or have they been slain as their slayers were slain? The question is, did God give his people what they deserved?

has he struck them as hard as he struck the Babylonians and the Assyrians and the other nations? And the answer we're clearly meant to give is no.

[24 : 33] There's a reason, isn't there, that you've never met a Moabite. It's that they were wiped out of history. They got what they deserved. And chapter 5 told us that's precisely what should have happened to Jerusalem.

yet, even in his anger, God treats his people better than they deserve. It's the principle Christians call grace.

And that is surely something we ought to be immeasurably grateful for as we read these two songs. It tells us that the difference between us and the people on the street outside is not how well we've responded to God's privileges, but how extraordinarily patient he's been with us.

And the only possible excuse for such manifest injustice on God's part would be that one day, in his grace, he would provide a substitute to be struck and slain in his people's place.

Now that is not to say that God's discipline wasn't severe. The picture in verse 10 is about as harsh as it gets without blotting a people out forever.

[25 : 59] The city, presumably that's Jerusalem, but it's been a recurring picture through these last few chapters of man's proud, God-defying self-reliance. That city will be left for cattle and firewood.

His people, with such little spiritual discernment, verse 11, that they betrayed the God who made them. He'll show them no favor. And yet, while God judges his enemies, verse 8 says that he contends with his vineyard.

that's a legal word. It implies that he's wrestling with them in court, holding them to their covenant obligations. And he'll do that for Judah, verse 8, through warfare and exile.

Yes, it is certainly a severe mercy, but nevertheless, that God disciplines his people, rather than destroying them, is a mercy we should never forget.

Notice Isaiah tells us two things about it. It's restrained, verse 7, and it's restorative, verses 8 and 9. It's not as bad as they deserved, and it's meant to lead them to repentance.

[27 : 26] William still said this, the difference is as stark as between heaven and hell. In fact, that is the whole difference, because while God's chastisements point to heaven, his judgments point to hell.

The fierce discipline of God's love is how he'll bring about the great goal of his love. And that's explained in verse 9, isn't it?

By this, through this severe mercy, Jacob's guilt will be atoned for. people. It's not saying there that by suffering enough punishment, they made up for their sin.

He's already said they didn't pay what they deserved. But atonement was made because through God's discipline, his people were made to see their guilt and turn back to him.

And the evidence, the full fruit of that repentance is what the second half of verse 9 shows us. The idols Israel cherished so much.

[28 : 36] All those things she put in place of God for her security and self-esteem, well, she would crush them like chalk.

God's fierce discipline would teach her to trust him. God's punishments, says Calvin, atone for our offenses indirectly because they lead us to repentance and repentance in turn brings us to forgiveness.

Now I wonder if you ask the average superficial modern evangelical what God's love means to them, how many of us would answer that it scares us a little?

I doubt very many. But I have to say after living with this passage for a week, God's love scares me. Not because I doubt it, but because I can believe it a little bit more.

God's love God is doing in this age with the people he loves is not simply keeping them warm and tucking them up at night and whispering sweet nothings.

[29 : 58] He's forging their souls. He's doing whatever it takes to ensure they produce fruit for his vineyards. love and if our salvation is a sure and certain thing in Christ, which it is, then the fierce discipline of God's love must be just as sure and certain because it's the one which ensures the other.

we can get there kicking and screaming or we can get there joyfully but he won't let us in with divided hearts.

His love is too jealous for that. Now let me be clear that often when the Bible talks about God disciplining his children, it means the training we face just by living in a world which hates Christ. The Hebrews faced those sorts of trials didn't they? So they were reassured that God disciplines his sons. It isn't always because of something we've done. We don't always need to go searching for sin when bad things happen.

But Isaiah is writing this to a people who've insisted on doing things the hard way. Insisted to the point where, to quote Mr.

[31 : 23] Still again, God in his love has to thrash the sin out of them. Often we can be just like my daughter, can't we?

We can insist on shuffling around on our backsides and refuse to simply get up and walk and be the people God redeemed us to be.

And if we believe that God's love is a fierce love, then we should expect him to respond sometimes by making life a little bit harder.

There came a time when I had to stop handing things to my daughter when they were well within her reach if she'd only get up and use her feet. Surely all of us have known times when a particular struggle just seems to consume you.

Internet pornography is the classic example, isn't it? But it could well be less colourful. And the more you give in, the worse it gets until it seems that your whole spiritual life is falling apart.

[32 : 32] You lose discipline in other areas of your life. You stop reading your Bible. Your work might even begin to suffer. And just perhaps the Lord in his severe mercy is teaching you the hard way, the crush and also which, if you're honest, you've begun to enjoy far more than you're enjoying him.

Friends, when we slip in that way, we had better believe that our father is able to make life harder and more painful than it needs to be. Don't be like a mule, says Psalm 32, that needs to be curbed with a bit stuck in its mouth.

And don't doubt, says Isaiah, that God's love is far too fierce just to smile on us all the way to hell. Well, as he closes, Isaiah brings us back to that glorious goal which God's love in all its ferocity is bent on pursuing for his people. In that day from the river Euphrates to the brook of Egypt, from pole to pole, God will thresh out the grain and one by one he will glean his people from the chaff.

Not a single person who belonged to Christ would be lost in the exile. Not a single one of us here who loves the Lord Jesus will fall under his condemnation even if that takes God threshing and beating us into his heaven.

[34 : 27] In that day, says Jesus, he'll send out his angels with a loud trumpet call to gather his elect. And that's the closing picture in verse 13. It's borrowed from the year of Jubilee in Leviticus where every 50 years God's people would rest and remember the great goal of his determined love and on the day of atonement a trumpet would sound proclaiming liberty to the slaves and telling those in debt that they were allowed home.

And one day, says Isaiah, the trumpet will summon us home from our exile, home to worship the God of our salvation.

Well, that's the tale of Isaiah's second vineyard. I suppose we could sum the whole story up like this. It began with the serpent God's sword must slay if his people are to be free, and it ends with the slaves God will summon home to worship.

And in between, we heard the song God can't wait to sing and the severe mercy God in his love cannot spare us.

Loving determination and loving discipline. Christ will have fruit from his church. Every fiber of his fierce love is bent towards that goal.

[36 : 01] love. What a terrifying love that is to stand in the way of. And what a wonderfully reassuring thing it is to know that a God who loves like this takes such determined joy in us.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Thank you Father that you have sworn to possess and perfect the church you redeemed by
your son.

Thank you for the fierce unrelenting determination of your love for us in Christ. Help us Lord more
and more to produce beautiful gospel fruit which delights and honors the Lord Jesus.

In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen.

[37 : 19] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Me
Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.