

1. Grapes of Wrath

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- [0 : 00] We're going to have two readings tonight, and the first reading is in Mark chapter 12, so I'd be grateful if you can look that up. And that is in page number 848 of the Pew Bibles.
- So Mark chapter 12, verse 1. And he, that's Jesus, began to speak to them in parables.
- A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower and leased it to tenants and went into another country.
- When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed.
- Again, he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed.
- [1 : 04] And so with many others, some they beat and some they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally, he sent him to them, saying, they will respect my son.
- But those tenants said to one another, this is the heir, come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours. And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard.
- What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture?
- The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. And they were seeking to arrest him, but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them.
- So they left him and went away. Well, friends, turn with me to our text for tonight, which is Isaiah chapter 5, on page 569 in the Visitor's Bibles.
- [2 : 26] Tonight and next Sunday morning, we're going to be looking at a tale of two vineyards. The two beautiful vineyard songs of Isaiah. The first one here, at the beginning of this big book, and the second one right at the end of the first half of the book, chapter 27.
- So Isaiah 5, we're going to read the first seven verses. Let me sing for my beloved my song concerning his vineyard.
- My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and 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.
- And he looked for it to yield grapes. But it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.
- What? What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I look for it to grape, to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?
- [3 : 40] 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 and 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. Amen. May God bless to us his words. Amen. Amen. Well, we're going to take up our offering now for the work of our ministry here in the city center and beyond.

And you might like to use that time to read the rest of this chapter. Chapter five really belongs together, but we're going to be focusing on the first seven verses tonight. Perhaps that you can make up for that in the few minutes we've got now while we take up our offering.

[4 : 46] 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. ructiada. Amen. Let's pray together.

Father God, as we bring you these tokens of our gratitude, we think again of all that you have lovingly done to us, given to us, given for us.

[6 : 48] We thank you, Father, for the beauty of this world that you've made for our stewardship, for the peace and the prosperity that we enjoy, as well as the freedom to meet together around your words.

And most of all, Father, we thank you for the son you gave, that we might know you and be reconciled to you. So, Father, please would you use these gifts, given not from a debtor's ethic, but in sheer thankfulness to your lavished grace.

We ask it, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, turn with me back to Isaiah chapter 5, if you've let that close, on page 569.

And we'll ask for the Lord's help. Father God, we thank you for the richness and the colour of the way you speak to us.

We thank you for the creativity you gave your servant Isaiah as he spoke these words in front of us to a hard-hearted and resistant people.

[8 : 00] And we pray, Lord, that as you speak these same words to us today, that we wouldn't harden our hearts. In your grace, Lord, bring us to thankful obedience in your son.

In his name we pray. Amen. By 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, one in every four Americans was unemployed.

That in an age without housing benefits, without a health service, without even food banks. Drought had devastated rural America, leaving families to default on loans, and hundreds of thousands homeless.

Over 5,000 banks failed. And the nation, which had swung the outcome of World War I, found that many of its own citizens were starving to death at home.

For my wife's grandmother, it meant a childhood lived on one hard square of cornbread a day, softened in one glass of milk. And yet, at that same time, in order to maintain and fix the food prices, companies actually began the scandalous practice of deliberately destroying their crops.

[9 : 28] If you think modern Britain is angry with its bankers and its politicians, then try to imagine the cry for justice. That was building in the American Dust Bowl in the 30s.

Well, how do you communicate a sense of outrage and sheer injustice when human beings have become so perverse that it seems they simply can't hear you anymore?

The novelist John Steinbeck faced exactly that problem. He wanted those responsible to feel their guilt. And his answer was to write a book so moving that its readers would be forced to condemn themselves.

I've done my damndest, he said, to rip a reader's nerves to rags. Well, that novel was *The Grapes of Wrath*, a title borrowed from the celebration of divine justice in Revelation 14, and not a bad title to give the first of Isaiah's two vineyard songs.

You see, Isaiah faced a very similar problem to Steinbeck. How do you get through to a people who have grown so complacent, so comfortable with privilege and grace, that they simply can't hear you?

[10 : 57] We're most likely in the exact period that we read about this morning, towards the end of the reign of King Uzziah. And he was a very successful king in worldly terms.

And Judah has at last grown prosperous and comfortable. She's not as bad as Israel, her northern sister. And although there are some fairly threatening moves on the global stage, she has enough foreign allies to feel secure.

But as we'll see, she's not really interested at all in living under the rule and protection of the Lord. So back in chapter one, God had graciously offered to reason together with his people.

But now at the end of his prelude, Isaiah is forced to take a more creative track. So like Steinbeck, he tries to get under his reader's skins in a more subtle way.

He writes a love song, verse one, to grab their emotions and take them by surprise. Now, I don't know when he would have first sung this, presumably at a celebration of some sort.

[12 : 13] I promise not to burst into song from the pulpit. I'll leave that sort of thing to Willie. But perhaps that wouldn't have been quite so strange in ancient Judah.

This one begins rather like a wedding song. Think of the wedding songs of the Bible, like Psalm 45. I suppose that's what his listeners would have been expecting.

But having lured them in with a beautiful start, this song takes a rather surprising turn. Instead of the joyful song they might expect, which celebrates the grace of God's covenant, Isaiah uses his poetry to turn the knife on his listeners.

Well, I want us to listen in to two sides of this song this evening and then think about a rather important footnote to it. Firstly then, beginning in verses one to four, Isaiah sings about a lover whose grace is squandered.

A lover whose grace is squandered. Isn't it surprising in such a somber song that twice Isaiah is bold enough to call this furious God his beloved?

[13 : 33] Well, verse two tells us why. He paints the Lord as the owner of a vineyard, a picture he's used twice already for God's people. It's a vineyard the Lord has painstakingly built.

Verse two is a picture of sheer gracious care. And it's that which makes this Lord so worthy of Isaiah's love.

If there was anything a vineyard could need, this God provided it. He searched for a rich, lush hillside.

And then he worked hard to make it thrive, digging it out and clearing its stones. That is not my kind of gardening. That's hard work. Supposedly, there's an Arab joke that when an angel broke a bag of stones during creation, half of the rocks intended for the entire world ended up in Palestine.

It's certainly a stony landscape. And yet, this vineyard was painstakingly cleared. There's people's good. And then he planted it with choice vines.

[14 : 47] They weren't just any old variety. That word suggests a vibrant color. These are rich, lush Marks and Spencers vines. He built a watchtower to defend it from any threat outside.

Nothing would get in to spoil her fruit. And then finally, because he could expect her to produce so much beautiful wine, he hewed out a massive vat from the rock to store it all in.

And then he sat back and waited for the harvest to come. This shows in two ways, says Calvin, how highly the Lord values his church.

For no possession is dearer to a man than a vineyard. And nothing demands so much constant work. Well, sadly, I've never owned a winery.

But I bet you if I did, and I bet you if I'd lovingly worked away on it for all those years, I would darn well look forward to that first bottle of wine.

[15 : 54] If you're sitting here tonight, you can know without a doubt that you're one of the most privileged human beings in the world.

God has lavished his care and attention on you. Most of us have had better starts in life than we could possibly deserve. And on top of that, God has given us a roof over our head to gather on Sundays.

He's given us pastors and teachers who try our best to feed us well. He's given us leaders who care and protect us from harm. And above all, every one of us has had chance after chance to hear the gospel and receive the Lord Jesus and live for him.

Even if this is your first time in a church, he has lovingly guided you here and given you a chance that millions go without.

That is extraordinary privilege, isn't it? Well, what did Israel do with that enormous privilege? God looked for it to yield grapes, verse 2.

[17 : 10] Too right he did, but found wild grapes. That's a little too polite, really, for Isaiah. It yielded stink fruit. That's what he says.

Stinking, rotten, sour grapes that even Ryanair wouldn't bottle for their house red. Well, what exactly did that look like on the ground?

How did they so squander his grace? We get a little glimpse in verse 7. Having got his readers' attention and their sympathy, Isaiah flicks the knife there.

You are the vineyard, Israel. Those precious Marks and Spencer's vines are you men of Judah. And God looked for a crop of justice, but behold, bloodshed.

He looked for fruit like righteousness, but behold, an outcry. All he could hear was the moans of their victims. The bad fruit which Judah produced was a society utterly indifferent to God's ways of love and justice and goodness.

[18 : 21] We don't quite hear how savage verse 7 is in English. It's full of puns, that verse. Perhaps we could rephrase a little like this. Instead of lawfulness, he found them lynching each other.

Instead of righteousness, behold, rottenness. They sound rather alike, don't they? But the truth is, they are nothing of the sort.

It's a bit like the grapes themselves. From a distance, Judah probably looked the part. They were talking about the covenant. They probably took great pride in being the real Israelites, the ones with the real temple and the proper king.

But look a little bit closer. And there was no sign they really loved the Lord at all. One thing I love to talk about at the Tron Church is our church family.

But what if you looked a little closer and found us lynching each other with our tongues, gossiping and backbiting when no one sees us?

[19 : 33] What a way to cheat Christ out of his fruit. Well, the rest of this chapter is a long commentary on what that stinking fruit looks like in Judah.

From verse 8, Isaiah pronounces six woes. He catalogues a society rotten from top to bottom. And I'm not going to drag you through the whole thing, but it earths this in reality, so we can't afford to ignore it.

His first jibe in verse 8, woe number 1, is at greed and land grabbing. Each tribe, remember, was given its own share of the promised land, but they're constantly grasping for more.

It's not a million miles away from jostling for position within the church family, grasping to build up our own little kingdoms. The second woe from verse 11 is drunken debauchery.

Early morning tipples to late night bender without a moment's thought, verse 12, to the works of the Lord. Of course, you meet plenty of that on West Nile Street at 10 in the morning, but I think verse 12 is a little bit more middle class than that.

[20 : 51] I guess if these guys had a choice between a nice dinner party or the Wednesday night prayer meeting, they wouldn't agonize all that long. Woe number 3, verse 18, is a complacent moral defiance of God.

I will do what I want, and he will never stop me, because it's his job to love me, not to judge. That's the sort of thing these people would say. Numbers 4 and 5 are the determination to rule for yourself, to judge right and wrong without God interfering.

Verse 20, woe to those who call evil good and good evil. Verse 21 is the age-old human delusion. They're wise in their own eyes, but suppress the truth.

I will be Lord, and God can stop off. Finally, verse 22, woe number 6, it's debauchery again and corruption right at the top.

MPs and high court judges who are heroes at drinking and accepting bribes, but not quite so heroic when it comes to enforcing justice.

[22 : 08] That's what the stinking fruit looked like on the ground. But Isaiah in this song wants us to feel the disappointment for ourselves.

So at verse 3, it's as if God invites us up onto the bench. Judge. Come on, he says. Judge for yourselves, and you tell me just how hollow and ungrateful your hearts are.

What more of us four could I possibly have done for my vineyards? What more friends could God have possibly given to you and me?

Is he not absolutely just to expect fruit from us? Yet we just don't really believe that he will judge us, do we?

We've got so used to thinking of ourselves as the ones he'll always find a reason to dote on and excuse. So this time he says, go on, just look at the facts honestly.

[23 : 22] And tell me what you think you deserve. A friend of mine's mother had a lifelong kidney defect and slowly the day drew near for dialysis to begin.

So she was put on the transplant list and her family braced itself for a long, agonizing wait. But that very week, somewhere out there, a little toddler lost his life.

And that child's mother agreed to donate his organs. Now can you imagine how conflicted my friend's family felt? Their middle-aged mother was given life through the organs of a little child.

She hadn't even waited her turn like everybody else. They just matched perfectly. And it's only human to feel a little guilty in the face of grace like that, isn't it?

But just imagine if she'd responded differently. Imagine if that mother who'd given the most precious thing a mother could possibly give found out that on discharge, my friend had chucked her medicines and celebrated with a bottle of vodka.

[24 : 45] If she'd squandered that precious young kidney and treated the gift with utter contempt, would not that mother, the mother of that child, be absolutely right to be furious?

Well, what about a father who was given absolutely every gift of grace to the Tron church?

The difference is that his son wasn't robbed from him. He was given by the father for the sake of you and me. Could this father possibly have done more for his vineyard and is he not reasonable to look for fruit?

Three times in this song we see him expectantly looking, eagerly looking, and surely he is looking at us to see what we do with his grace.

He has every reason in the world to think that you and me will give ourselves to the service of Jesus Christ and his gospel.

[26 : 03] That as a church family we'll bear fruit for the gospel to be gathered up on the last day as a beautiful harvest, pleasing to him. That not just the ones among us who lead Bible studies or university missions, but that you personally and your family will put Jesus Christ first.

He is joyfully anticipating a lovely, pleasant vintage from my life and from your life. And isn't that a marvelous and exciting thing?

But if he should find nothing but stinking waste, what would you do in his place? That's the first movement of this song.

The story of a lover whose grace is squandered. And then verses five and six show us his verdict. The song moves on to the loved ones whose privileges are stripped.

And now verse five, I will tell you what I'll do to my vineyard. I'll remove its hedge, break down its wall and make it a waste. You see, a vine is either good for fruit or it is good for nothing.

[27 : 28] And finally, it seems, Israel has exhausted God's grace. So now he does what is utterly fitting and utterly proportionate.

He strips her of the very privileges which she so shamefully wasted. God removes his gracious protection in verse five and his gracious provision in verse six.

By stripping her wall, verse five, he leaves her prey to the wild for that rotten fruit to be trampled and devoured. that's unpacked at the very end of the chapter where the Assyrian army are lined up, their boots spit polished and ready to attack.

And his provision, all that careful, loving work to tend the garden will be abandoned and in the place of the vines will grow briars and thorns.

Surely those weeds are meant to remind us of God's original curse back in Genesis three. You see, God's promised land had been a little picture of Eden, a place where in his sheer grace the ground was sweet and he alleviated some of the toil of life in a broken world.

[28 : 57] That was the privilege of being right with this God. Just a little recapturing of what it is to be a human being under his gracious care.

And that's what they've taken for granted. So at God's word the clouds dry up and the vineyard withers. They're stripped of the privileges of his grace and returned to the cursed world of humanity without God.

it's a pretty unrelenting song, isn't it? And it's not until chapter 27, which we'll look at next week, that we see a little glimmer of hope for this vineyard.

Chapter 5 begins as a love song and it ends verse 30 in sheer unrelenting darkness.

Well, let's not move on without taking the warning seriously. The church which squanders God's grace might see the privileges of that grace stripped away.

[30 : 11] And if we don't believe it could happen to us, well, we only have to look at the empty church buildings on every street corner. If we become complacent and lazy, would God not be right to break down our walls.

As a church, as God's new covenant people, it's right, isn't it, that we apply this warning to ourselves first of all. Each one of us, as individuals making up the church, we make up those choice vines in the Father's vineyard.

We're the objects of his special, tender love. And surely that means special responsibility to each one of us. But there must also be a wider warning to this song.

So much of that bad fruit was the social injustice of a society and breakdown. And we're not living in a religious state. Britain is not Israel.

But hasn't our nation also enjoyed an extraordinarily privileged heritage. And isn't it true that as we squander our Christian heritage, we've increasingly lost the privileges it brought us as a country.

[31 : 40] So surely as Christian citizens, each one of us also has a duty to show that there's a better way, a better way than that path leading endlessly to decline and ruin.

Well then, Isaiah 5 is a tragic song about a lover whose grace was squandered and the loved ones whose privileges were stripped away.

But there's an important footnote to this story. And sadly, it's not yet the tale of this vineyard restoration. That will have to wait till next week.

But the Bible picks up this imagery of a vineyard and develops it into a seriously significant thread running through God's story.

And there's one commentary in particular on this song, which we shouldn't ignore. It's the parable of the tenants, which we read earlier in Mark chapter 12.

[32 : 44] And I think this is the important message of that footnote, that moral rebellion has a personal face. In Isaiah 5, as we've seen, lack of fruit is expressed in highly moral terms, the greed and corruption of Israel.

But when Jesus retells this story, the rejection of God's grace looks supremely personal. It's a story about rejecting God's servants, men like Isaiah, who told this story in the past.

And above all, it's a story about rejecting God's son. Moral rebellion has a personal face.

The grace we squander comes to us in the person and the rule of the Lord Jesus. Notice the other personal twist which Jesus adds in his retelling of the parable.

In his version, there are tenants looking after the vineyards, the priests who were to care for Israel on God's behalf. But when they recognize the son, those priests want him dead so that they can possess the vineyard for themselves.

[34 : 09] Just the same greed for God's inheritance, which we saw back in Isaiah 5 verse 8, but now it's expressed directly as hatred of Jesus Christ.

Now, Jesus isn't changing Isaiah's metaphor. He's simply making obvious what was implicit. Isaiah described the rotten fruit in verse 24 as rejecting the law of the Lord.

They would not have him or his law. Jesus describes that same fruitlessness as rejecting God's beloved son. They will not have him as Lord.

Moral rebellion has a personal face. It isn't simply to make bad choices. It's to reject the lover himself, to squander the most precious gift of all.

And that means that producing good fruit is personal too. If you want to live a life that bears fruit for Christ, then Jesus tells his disciples exactly how, especially in John's gospel.

[35 : 25] people, we abide in him, he says. In other words, we stick doggedly with him. We recognize him as Lord.

Whoever abides, whoever stays put in me, and I in him, says Jesus, he it is that bears fruit. For apart from me, you can do nothing.

Want to know if you're truly abiding in Christ? Well, look at the fruit. Want to produce fruit? Well, stick with Christ.

Well, this gracious, patient father is looking at us for lives which bring him glory and joy. What more was there to do for the Tron church than he's already done over the past few years?

by this is my father glorified, Jesus tells us, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.

[36 : 37] Let's pray. Let's pray. Father God, we confess that you have done absolutely everything for us that we could ask in the grace of your son.

And we long, Lord, to bring you the fruit that you long for in us, of hearts won over by your kindness, and lives lived in joyful obedience to the Lord Jesus.

We thank you, Father, that through the obedience of your beloved son, we too are able to live lives which please you. and we pray, Lord, that by your spirit, you'd help us to increasingly produce fruit worthy of his gospel, to the glory of your name.

Amen.