

ISAIAH 5

First Part: The Parable of the Vineyard (1-7)

This chapter will greatly open up the idea first given in 3:14: The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of His people; It is you who have devoured the vineyard.

**1 Let me sing now for my well-beloved
A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.
My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.**
**2 He dug it all around, removed its stones,
And planted it with the choicest vine.
And He built a tower in the middle of it
And also hewed out a wine vat in it;
Then He expected *it* to produce *good* grapes,
But it produced *only* worthless ones.**

- Let me (i.e. Isaiah) sing now for my well-beloved (Jehovah) a song of my beloved concerning His vineyard (Israel). “For” and “of” my “beloved” assumes a very intimate acquaintance with God. It is true for every prophet that “Surely the Lord God does nothing unless He reveals His secret counsel to His servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). Isaiah in particular learned things from God that no other prophet knew, such as the virgin birth, and the manner in which he would die.
- Notice the care God took over his vineyard. One thing about grapevines, they take a lot of work. Hence Zechariah calls the grapevine “the seeding of peace”, meaning only in times of peace do people have the time to care adequately for them. Fertile soil. Stones removed – a great task in Israel. Tower for protection. Expectation of good fruit. But the result, literally, is “stinking” grapes.
- The result is judgement:

**3 “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,
Judgement between Me and My vineyard.
4 “What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?
Why, when I expected *it* to produce *good* grapes did it produce worthless ones?
5 “So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard:
I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed;
I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground.
6 “I will lay it waste;
It will not be pruned or hoed,
But briars and thorns will come up.
I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it.”**

- God calls Israel themselves to pass judgement (3), so strong is the case (4). Israel stands condemned, so the judgement comes, sticking with the metaphor (5-6).
- The true nature of the metaphor is lastly given:

**7 For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel
And the men of Judah His delightful plant.
Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;
For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.**

- There is a play on words: ויקרו למשפט והנה משפח לצדקה והנה צעקה:

- Other examples of using a parable, and the bringing an accusation: 2 Sam 12:1-7; 1 Kings 20:35-43

Second Part: The Woes of Judgement (8-30)

- What follows now is a terrible and frightening picture of judgement. There follows six “woes” and four “therefores.” A “woe” [in Hebrew “ho”] is an interjection that usually expresses dissatisfaction or pain. The “woes” contain accusations which form the rationale for the judgements of the “therefores.” None of the judgements of God are arbitrary, and Israel cannot say they have not been warned.
- The first woe is on the wealthy:

**8 Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field,
Until there is no more room, so that you have to live alone in the midst of the land!**

The increase of wealth here is without limit or self-restraint – that is the real problem. There was nothing to stop the richer becoming so rich that they crowded the poor right off the land. (Under the Mosaic Law, this couldn’t happen - Lev 25). There was obviously no need for such wealth.

- The judgement follows.

9 In my ears the Lord of hosts has sworn, “Surely, many houses shall become desolate, Even great and fine ones, without occupants.

**10 “For ten acres of vineyard will yield only one bath of wine,
And a homer of seed will yield but an ephah of grain.”**

- the result is great houses being left desolate and unoccupied, and famine on the land.
- The second woe is on drunkards:

**11 Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may pursue strong drink,
Who stay up late in the evening that wine may inflame them!**

12 Their banquets are accompanied by lyre and harp, by tambourine and flute, and by wine;

The problem again is not itself the drinking of alcohol, which is not condemned in scripture, but with the lack of restraint, and the resulting failure to think about what God has given them or requires of them.

**But they do not pay attention to the deeds of the Lord,
Nor do they consider the work of His hands.**

This sounds a lot like New Zealand. Last year we were called the 2nd most peaceful country in the world, and the 4th safest country, out of 195 countries. New Zealanders were, like Israel, tempting fate when they celebrated these things, selling themselves as being far away from strife and trouble. By NZ was misguided on at least two counts. First, there was no peace for those children, in their thousands, who were killed in their mothers’ wombs, with the full consent of the law and most of the population. Second, the great majority of NZers who enjoyed peace wouldn’t dream of thanking God for such an incredible blessing. By and large, by adopting a culture of Godlessness and immorality on all fronts, NZers confirmed their rejection of God. In my view, this was tempting God in exactly the same way as Israel. The events of the last few weeks demonstrate that peace is not to take for granted no matter what the provocation to God.

- What follows is the first “therefore” – because of what has transpired,

13 Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge;

**And their honorable men are famished,
And their multitude is parched with thirst.**

- This will be fulfilled about 100 years later, in the Babylonian exile. Lack of knowledge is the cause, but remember, this has come about as a deliberate failure to make a point of seeking the knowledge of God.
- There follows the second “therefore”: Because of Israel’s wickedness, three things will come about:

**14 Therefore Sheol has enlarged its throat and opened its mouth without measure;
And Jerusalem’s splendor, her multitude, her din of revelry and the jubilant within her, descend into it.**

This is first a prediction of actual physical death, Sheol being the Hebrew name for Hell, the place in the centre of the earth which is the receptacle of the dead. Secondly, there follows the total abasement of the proud:

**15 So the common man will be humbled and the man of importance abased,
The eyes of the proud also will be abased.**

**16 But the Lord of hosts will be exalted in judgment,
And the holy God will show Himself holy in righteousness.**

Thus the Babylonian siege and exile are like a precursor to the day of tribulation, achieving exactly the same thing as it is described in 2:11: “The proud look of man will be abased, and the loftiness of man will be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.”

Thirdly, there is the destruction of the land:

**17 Then the lambs will graze as in their pasture,
And strangers will eat in the waste places of the wealthy.**

The point here is, land that was for planting crops became good only for wandering grazers. Also, the land owned by the rich (lit. the fat) will become waste places for foreigners, this first being the Samaritans, who later gave way to the Edomites.

- The third woe now comes:

**18 Woe to those who drag iniquity with the cords of falsehood,
And sin as if with cart ropes;**

19 Who say, “Let Him make speed, let Him hasten His work, that we may see it;

And let the purpose of the Holy One of Israel draw near and come to pass, that we may know it!”

Their proud unbelief yoked them to the wagon of sin, and it followed them everywhere. Then there is wilful defiance, wilfully inviting Jehovah to act. It is incredibly foolhardy to imagine, but this was Israel at the time. What made it possible was, the witness of their senses in the seeming prosperity of the time. The seeming success of sin and the seeming indifference of God had blinded them – they thought that was reality.

- The fourth woe comes:

**20 Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil;
Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness;
Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!**

Within their darkened thinking came a reversal of thinking in Israel’s whole concept of morality itself. What rejecting God eventually represented became more than simple

disobedience, it became the loss of an anchor, a downward spiral into self-referential thinking and altered reality.

- The fifth woe comes:

21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and clever in their own sight!

Proverbs 1:7 says **the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom**. We are reminded of the phrase repeated often in the Book of Judges: “Every man did what was right in his own eyes.” Israel had left the fear of the Lord, and in so doing, left wisdom behind also. Proverbs 3:7 says furthermore, **do not be wise in your own eyes**. Israel, without fear, altered their picture of right and wrong to suit their own tastes, and then thought they were wise to do so. This put them even further beyond the reach of help, being now neither willing nor able to recognise correction. As Jeremiah (30:12) puts it, “Your wound is incurable.”

- The sixth and final woe follows, against those who sit implementing the rule of law:

22 Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine

And valiant men in mixing strong drink,

23 Who justify the wicked for a bribe,

And take away the rights of the ones who are in the right!

Here Isaiah is being mocking and sarcastic: Israel are Gibborim, warriors – this word is used of Goliath – but only in drinking wine. They are valiant men, but only in mixing drinks. When it comes to doing their job, implementing the rule of law, they take bribes and pervert justice.

- This leads to the third “therefore”, a picture of total destruction:

24 Therefore, as a tongue of fire consumes stubble

And dry grass collapses into the flame,

So their root will become like rot and their blossom blow away as dust;

This is the total fiery destruction of the vineyard. The reason is given:

For they have rejected the law of the Lord of hosts

And despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

“**The law of the Lord of hosts**” is the Mosaic Law, and “**the word of the Holy One of Israel**” is the testimony of the prophets. Both have been rejected.

- The fourth “therefore” is the slaughter of battle:

25 On this account the anger of the Lord has burned against His people,

And He has stretched out His hand against them and struck them down.

And the mountains quaked, and their corpses lay like refuse in the middle of the streets.

This is an appalling picture of slaughter in battle, but if Israel expected respite afterwards, they are mistaken.

For all this His anger is not spent,

But His hand is still stretched out.

Meaning, there is more to come, as the next verse makes clear:

26 He will also lift up a standard to the distant nation,

And will whistle for it from the ends of the earth;

Lifting up a standard meant putting up a mark for a distant army to see, so they would know where to gather. “Whistle” is literally “hiss,” as apparently in times past bee keepers would hiss to cause their bees to either come out or go in to their hives, which is a sinister picture of coming vengeance.

- The approach of the coming army is given in frightening terms.

And behold, it will come with speed swiftly.

**27 No one in it is weary or stumbles,
None slumbers or sleeps;
Nor is the belt at its waist undone,
Nor its sandal strap broken.**

**28 Its arrows are sharp and all its bows are bent;
The hoofs of its horses seem like flint and its *chariot* wheels like a whirlwind.**

29 Its roaring is like a lioness, and it roars like young lions.

To a man they are swift, unflagging, well-disciplined, well-armed and determined to bring about Israel's destruction. This is described:

**It growls as it seizes the prey
And carries *it* off with no one to deliver *it*.**

**30 And it will growl over it in that day like the roaring of the sea.
If one looks to the land, behold, there is darkness *and* distress;
Even the light is darkened by its clouds.**

The picture is that of a lion standing over its helpless victim. Israel at the end of the passage is devastated, its utter destruction symbolised by a darkness that fails even to allow the entry of natural light.