

## Isaiah 5

### *The Vineyard of the LORD*

#### ***Introduction***

Chapter 5 brings to a close the introductory oracles of the book of Isaiah. It returns to the indictment theme of chapter 1 as a bracket to the larger set of themes introduced in chapters 2-4. There are three sections to chapter 5. It begins with a song/parable about a vineyard which serves as a metaphorical image for the rest of the chapter that describes the “sour grapes” being produced by Israel and the destruction they are inviting as a result. But at its heart is a theologically significant characteristic of the Holy God of Israel.

#### ***Song about a Vineyard – Vs. 1-7***

As mentioned, chapter 5 opens with Isaiah seeming to take the part of a minstrel singing a *love song* for his *beloved* regarding the love object of his beloved friend, namely his vineyard. As soon is made clear, however, is that this is not a happy love song, but turns quickly into a lament of crushed expectations and consequences. In vs. 1 and 2, the song sets forth the situation, describing the effort of *the beloved* to establish the vineyard, activities that would have been very familiar to Isaiah’s audience. They could well relate to the work to dig and manually remove the many lime stones that are used to build the protective wall and watch tower. He digs out the vats for the winepress, and then plants *choice vines* – not ordinary vines, but special ones. After all that work, he must then wait expectantly for another two years for the vines to yield the grapes. What types of grapes would you expect after that amount of work and care? Would you not expect rich, sweet, wonderful grapes? Instead, the vines produce “wild grapes” or better “worthless” ones – small and sour.

Even as Nathan in 2 Sam. 12 uses a parable to open David’s eyes to his own sin, so Isaiah now presents the situation to his audience to try and draw them into a similar reaction. In verses 3-6, the voice of the song changes to that of the lover who first presents the case and calls on the men of Jerusalem and Judah for a verdict. The expectation from the questions in verse 4 is that the audience would clearly empathize with the shock and disappointment of the owner in finding worthless grapes. In verses 5 and 6, the sentence is pronounced and carried out by the owner. If the grapes are wild, then there is no sense in protecting and cultivating the vines, but will the vineyard to the wild. The owner will tear down the hedge and wall and allow the wild beasts to trample it. He will no longer tend to the vines and will call on the rain to no longer fall.

In verse 7, the voice changes back to Isaiah to give the punchline to the song, that (if not yet realized by his audience) this is really a parable of the situation between God and His people. Even as the owner had invested in his vineyard for a good result, even so God had established Israel for a *pleasant planting*. Isaiah uses a play on words in these final phrases to contrast God’s expectation with what he found: He looked for *justice (mishpat)* but found *bloodshed (mishpakh)*; He looked for *righteousness (tsedaqah)*, but heard *outcry (tse’aqah)*. What will happen to Judah and Jerusalem as a result is not mentioned but implied by the parable and made clear in the following section. Israel had enjoyed God’s favor and protection, but now as they have rejected His ways they would now lose that protection.

## Sour Grapes/Woes – Vs. 8-25

In verses 8-25, Isaiah describes examples of the “worthless grapes” as 6 woes and the consequences that will come as a result. The word “woe” (or “alas”) expresses both a warning and a lament, a grieving over the sin of Israel. Verses 8-25 are divided into 2 subsections of woes and “therefore” consequences: vs. 8-17 and 18-25 with a central reminder of the exalted, holy God contrast to His people.

Vs. 8-10 present the first woe to those that *join house to house, who add field to field*. The phrase expresses the constant striving to have “more,” far beyond what you need while pushing others out so that you are alone in the midst of your gain. But the catch is that the more you strive for more, the less you will end up having. For we can achieve nothing without God giving the increase. It is interesting to note the number of castles and mansions that are now simply museums. Or the fields that have been over harvested resulting in barrenness. The dust bowl of the 1930s is a classic example of a disaster that was both natural and manmade due to greed. And here, the LORD promises desolate houses and fields and vineyards that yield next to nothing.

The second “woe” in verses 11 and 12 addresses the other self-serving extreme of lavish squandering. The complaint or “woe” is not simply that the people are enjoying themselves. God Himself had ordained days of feasting and celebration. However, in this case, the issue was the constant seeking of indulgent pleasure without regard or interest for anything else, especially for God and His ways. And so they were losing more and more of their knowledge of Him as indicated in verse 13.

Verses 13-14 begin the first “therefore” segment which flows out of the second woe. Because they have squeezed God out and lost their knowledge of Him, they will be sent into exile. In contrast to the lavish parties, they will now go hungry and parched with thirst. The “feast” will now be had by Sheol (Death) personified to have an enlarged appetite to swallow the multitude of revelers.

Verses 15-16 are an interesting interruption in the flow of the text at this point. Many commentators think that they have been inserted incorrectly here. However, far more likely is that the break is meant to highlight these verses as a central theological point to be emphasized by the entire passage. Man will be humbled. For all his attempts at self-aggrandizement (see later woes) or self-indulgence, he is **not** God. It is God who will be exalted in the end. God’s holiness is one of the key themes of Isaiah. Here what makes God holy and distinct from man is not His power or supernatural essence, but it is His *justice* and *righteousness*! And that incredible essence of justice and righteousness is what will humble us in the end.

Verse 17 now returns to the “therefore” segment and gives the consequence for the first woe in verses 8-10. Those many fields and mansions will be grazing lands and a camping ground for nomads among the ruins of those houses.

Verses 18-23 contain the second segment of woes. Isaiah picks up the intensity of the text by listing four woes back to back which are then followed by **two** “therefore’s” in verses 24-25. These woes address the outward manifestations of a primary problem as described by Oswalt that “Israel thinks they are better able to determine what is really right and wrong.”<sup>1</sup> This is an attitude held by many in our society today! The first of these woes is the image of people pulling a cart of sin towards them almost intentionally using “cords of falsehood”. A better translation for “falsehood” is “emptiness” or “vanity”. They are using “empty” words that taunt God. They are not only insensitive to what God is doing (woe #2 above), but now they challenge Him to act in a way they can see. It could be that they

<sup>1</sup> Oswalt, John N. – The Book of Isaiah. Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986, p 164

are actually mocking Isaiah's judgment prophecies as they are using Isaiah's favorite term for God – the Holy One of Israel.”

The further the people drift from God and the more self-serving they become, the more they must define life on their own terms as shown in the next set of woes. The three contrasting expressions – evil/good, darkness/light, and bitter/sweet – of verse 20 seems to express that while they might be trying to rationalize their behavior, those terms more likely mean that they are lying to themselves about their situation to make it seem that things were going well when in truth they were on their way to destruction. And thus they had become wise in their own eyes (vs. 21). And what did they have to be proud of? Not courage or nobility or righteousness, but rather they had become great at drinking (vs. 22). The terms “heroes” and “champions” were used to refer to great military men, but Isaiah (rather mockingly) applies it to “leaders” who were great bartenders. Sadly, these “leaders” were also those responsible for judging and had become corrupt, letting the guilty go free or convict the innocent for a price (vs. 23).

Despite what they told themselves in verse 20, things were not going well. Rather it would all turn to dust as the wonderful combination of imagery of vs. 24 depicts. Rather than thriving in life, they would become like ashes from burnt straw or have their roots succumb to dry rot and their flourishing turn to dust because they have rejected the true source of life. Vs. 25 has yet a second “therefore.” God's anger is now kindled against them, for God is not only holy, but a person who loves passionately, and also becomes angry, but with a holy, righteous anger. And even as He has struck them with judgment, His anger continues and His hand is still outstretched against them.

### ***Destruction of Vineyard – Vs. 26-30***

The implied judgment against the vineyard – loss of protection and trampling by wild animals – is now at hand as described in vs. 26-30. The people had called on God to act quickly, and *behold, quickly, speedily they come!* The image is likely of the impending threat from Assyria as that theme and God's outstretched hand are revisited in Isaiah 9:8-10:4. But what Israel should take note of, is that this army comes at the call of God as *He will raise a signal for nations far away, and whistle for them from the ends of the earth.* In this case, the armies are serving as God's instrument of judgment.

The poetic imagery is powerful as its terse phrases express speed and strength and certainty. There are no weaknesses: none weary, none stumbles, nothing is loose, arrows are sharp, etc. The roar of the oncoming horde is like a lion coming to seize and carry off its prey. The roar is also compared to the roar of the sea – the constant pounding of the breakers. The final scene is one of darkness and distress, quite the contrast to the merry reveling just pictured. While hope may be expressed elsewhere in Isaiah, here, the emphasis is on the dire consequences of turning away, or even just slipping away, from a holy, God of righteousness and justice by rejecting His love and ways.