

Isaiah 5:1-30
The Song of the Barren Vineyard
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In our passage for today, the prophet Isaiah does something a little out of the ordinary. He proclaims his inspired prophetic message as he usually does, but this time he packages it a bit differently. The element is the same - prophetic proclamation - but the prophet put that element into a different form. The prophet said, "Now let me sing ... a song ...," and then he vocalized a few lines of lyrics. Perhaps he recited the lyrics in time - we today call that "rap" - or perhaps he actually sang the lyrics to a familiar tune. I think Burl Ives could have taken these lyrics and transformed them into a folk song, and Johnny Cash could have sung them as a tragic ballad. But why the use of song here? There is a reason. The prophet's message was important, and his mission was to communicate that message. To do that, he had to get and keep people's attention. That can involve saying the same message in different ways, transmitting the same message in different forms, airing the same message in different venues. The message which God has entrusted both to Isaiah and to us is so important that such creativity is worth the effort so long as the words and forms used are consistent with the message and not unworthy of it. For example, C.S. Lewis wrote a spellbinding children's story called "The Lion, the Witch and a Wardrobe" to communicate in a different way the message of salvation through the Savior's substitutionary atoning death. The movie version of this story opened in

theaters this past Friday, and I have heard that it is excellent. I would encourage all parents to take their children to see this. We need to try to reach them with this message in different forms and venues because the message is so vital, so important, so significant.

As we will learn in Isaiah chapter six, Isaiah was preaching to a people who heard but didn't hear, a people who saw but didn't see. Ultimately that is a problem of the heart which only God can solve, but the prophet is responsible nevertheless to try to get their attention and to convey God's message.

Isaiah's inspired message was not popular. He was accusing the people of sin and warning them of impending judgment. The people closed their ears. They said to themselves: "Yes, we may have sinned - and who hasn't? - but God is not going to judge us. Maybe a slap on the wrist, but nothing more. After all, we are God's people, and we worship at God's temple in Jerusalem. We are too close to God and God has too much invested in us for God to judge us with any severity." That is how the people were reasoning. That was their rationale for ignoring Isaiah's message.

Isaiah composed this short song to try to get the people's attention and to impress upon them that their thinking was all wrong. They had things backward. Being close to God doesn't make God's judgment less likely; it makes it more likely. Judgment begins with the house of God, and whom the Lord loves, He chastens. Being close to God does affect the way God judges. When God judges His people, He mixes mercy with His

anger, which lasts but for a season. When God judges His people, He uses the affliction to purify a righteous remnant whom He preserves. Being close to God does affect the way God judges, but it doesn't make God's judgment less likely. After all, whom is a good father more likely to discipline, the son in his household who has misbehaved a little or the boy next door who has misbehaved a lot? Well, of course, the good father is much more likely to discipline his own son because his own son is near and dear to him, and he has invested much in him.

That is the message which Isaiah was trying to get across. Being God's special people, His treasure and inheritance on earth, doesn't make them immune from God's judgment. On the contrary, with their greater privileges come greater responsibilities and greater susceptibility to chastisement and correction.

We will look at our passage today under three headings: the song, the sentence and the specifics.

First, let's look at the **song**. Isaiah sings the song to His Beloved, who is God, but Isaiah sings it in the presence of the people because the message is really for them. The lyrics of the song are a parable about a vineyard whose Owner and Vinedresser is God. The story is about a Vinedresser who made every effort to plant a good and productive vineyard. He chose the very best spot for the vineyard. He didn't plant it in the sunless shade or in a waterlogged swamp. He planted it on a hill that had good access to the sun. It was a fruitful hill, which means that the soil was fertile and moist yet well drained. He

dug up the soil to loosen and aerate it. He laboriously removed the stones so common in the soil of Palestine so that these stones could not hinder the plants' growth by preventing their roots from reaching down deep into the soil to get needed moisture. He then planted the choicest vines, vines which should have been capable of bearing large quantities of the best grapes. He had hopes of multiple clusters of grapes like that one cluster which the twelve spies had brought to Moses from the land of Canaan. It was so large that two men had to carry it between them on a pole. After planting, He took the stones He had removed from the soil and used them to build a watchtower from which to guard the anticipated valuable crop. He also laboriously hewed out of a huge stone a winepress with an upper area for pressing the grapes and a lower vat to collect the juice. The Vinedresser then waited. It normally takes a grapevine three years before it bears its first fruit. After all that effort, all that labor, all that waiting, the first grapes appeared, and they were wild grapes. The Hebrew literally says stinking things. The long anticipated grapes were useless, unfit for consumption.

The prophet identified the major elements in the parable. The Vinedresser was God. The vines were the covenant people, the people of Judah. The expected choice grapes were righteousness and justice. The wild grapes were oppression, bloodshed and cries of distress. Without too much speculation, we can fill in more details of the parable. The people of Israel were the choicest vines in that they were descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the patriarchs whose lives bore in abundance the fruit of faith and obedience. God took the people of Israel out of Egypt and brought them to Mount Sinai where He constituted

them into a holy nation, a kingdom of priests, a people who were God's own inheritance and special treasure. God then planted them in the fruitful hill, which was Canaan, the land of promise which flowed with milk and honey. God cleared out the stones from the land. He cast out the Canaanites and ordered that their corrupt culture be destroyed, totally eradicated, so that their pagan idolatry would not hinder the spiritual growth of Israel. God also gave Israel the law as a cultural hedge around Israel and as a watchtower over Israel to protect them from pagan influences. After giving Israel all these advantages, God expected Israel to bear the fruit of righteousness and justice and to produce the kingdom wine of salvation to offer to the nations and to bring joy to the world. Instead Israel broke covenant with God and bore the wild fruit of violent bloodshed and oppressive injustice. In spite of all these spiritual advantages which God had given them, they broke covenant with God and failed to meet the obligations of the covenant, which are faith and faith's necessary fruit: repentance and new obedience. They instead rebelled against God and His law and bore the wild fruit of disobedience.

Our first point was the song. Let's now go to our second point, the **sentence**. I am referring to a judicial sentence which a judge pronounces after a trial. At the end of the parable and before revealing whom the vines represent, God asked the people of Judah to render a judgment regarding the Vinedresser and the vineyard. Look at the first questions in verse 4:

- 4 What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it? ...

A proper understanding of this question is key to a correct understanding of this passage. The correct answer is nothing. There was nothing more that the Vinedresser could have done to insure that the vines would bear good fruit. The Vinedresser had done all that could be reasonable expected of Him. He had generously fulfilled all of His obligations to the vineyard, and the bad fruit was exclusively the fault of the vines.

But some at this point might ask if God could not have done more. Couldn't God have worked the miracle of efficacious grace in the people's hearts? Couldn't God have poured out the Holy Spirit upon them and put them into union with Christ and His saving power? Couldn't God have given spiritual life to them? Couldn't God have regenerated them? Couldn't God have taken out their heart of stone and replaced it with a heart of flesh? If God had done this, then the people would have been a people of faith. They would have had not only the blood of Abraham in their veins but the faith of Abraham in their hearts. As a people of faith, they would have born the fruit of justice and righteousness. Couldn't God have transformed the men of Judah into good vines which bear good fruit? Couldn't God have worked faith in their hearts and put them into a vital covenant union with Christ. Jesus said,

John 15:5

5 I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

The answer to these questions is yes, but these questions miss the point of the passage. God is not here talking about that special inner work of efficacious grace. God is not here talking about the gift of regeneration which brings the spiritually dead to life. God is talking here about the gracious privileges of the covenant which God gives to all who are a part of the covenant people within history, even to those who are a part of the covenant people only in an outward, superficial sense. These covenant privileges are things such as the outward ministry of the Word which reveals God's truth and the common operations of the Spirit which convict and persuade. In terms of things such as these, God has done all that He can reasonably be expected to do. God gives these privileges of grace with a sincere and genuine expectation that the recipients will respond in faith. When some of the covenant people instead respond to these privileges of grace with rejection and unbelief and disobedience, the fault is all theirs, and God takes no pleasure in their wicked disobedience.

Before I go on, let me try to clarify something. When I use the word "expectation" with reference to God, I don't mean to imply that God has any uncertainty about the future. God is not surprised by anything that happens in history. God sovereignly planned it all in eternity past for His own glory, and God is sovereignly working it all out within history for His own glory. By God's expectation, I am referring to God's holding people responsible for their response to His revealed will. By God's expectation, I am referring to God's desiring with a genuine sincerity for people to respond to the gospel in faith. I am referring to that divine expectation rooted in what we call the free offer of the gospel.

Here is a crucial point. Everyone descending from fallen Adam, with the one exception of Jesus Christ, has inherited from Adam a rebellious heart which loves to sin. No one in that fallen state wants Jesus to deliver him from his sinful ways. For that reason, no one in that fallen state will respond to the gospel message in faith. He loves the darkness and will not come to the light. Yet a person's fallen, rebellious heart doesn't free him from his responsibility to do what is right. Being wicked is no excuse for doing wicked things. When a person rejects the gospel, the fault is all his, and God is not to be blamed in the least.

Let me try to illustrate this point for you. The gardener goes to his garden with his hoe of judgment. He approaches a weed, and the weed cries out, "You can't hold me responsible for bearing no fruit, for producing nothing that could be of any possible use. You see, I am only behaving in accordance with my nature. I can do no other. So you cannot hold me responsible." And what is the gardener's response to these pleas? Chop, chop, chop. Another plant is a bare vine that has many leaves but no fruit. Again the vine cries out, "You cannot hold me responsible! I am only being true to my nature, and I can do no other." Again the same response: chop, chop, chop. And a last plant is bearing fruit that is wild and poisonous and bitter. Again, the same argument, and again the same response: chop, chop, chop.

Let me put it this way: When God gives people the privileges of the covenant, privileges such as exposure to the preached Word and fellowship with the church, God has every right to expect them to respond in faith, to respond by meeting the obligations

of the covenant. Responding in faith is their responsibility. They alone are to blame if they don't, and God has every right to judge them.

God gets the people of Judah to acknowledge that there was nothing more that God could have done for them in terms of the privileges of the covenant, that the fault is theirs for not bearing the good fruit of justice and righteousness. God then speaks of the judgment in terms of the vineyard parable. God is going to break down the protective hedge around the vineyard and allow animals to come in and trample it. The vineyard will not be cared for and will become a wilderness with briars and thorns, which are symbols of the curse upon creation. God, being God and no ordinary vinedresser, will even cause the rain to stop upon the vineyard. This is a reference to the coming judgment when first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians invade Judah and trample down the land. Then the Babylonians will take the people into captivity and empty the land so that it becomes a neglected wilderness. That was God's righteous judgment upon them for their sins. That was the judicial sentence.

Our first point was the song, the second was the sentence, and now the third is the **specifics**. In the remainder of the chapter, the prophet gives the specifics of Judah's sin and the coming judgment upon Judah. If you want to follow along in your Bible, I will summarize these for you.

First, there was greed (vv. 8-10). The wealthy were buying up all the land and reducing all others to being landless wage laborers or slaves. One characteristic of an unjust society is the

lack of a healthy middle class. There is something sinfully wrong when a society consists only of the very wealthy and the very poor with few people in between.

Second, there was drunkenness and debauchery (vv. 11-17). The people had become addicted to wine and wild parties.

Third, there was sarcastic unbelief (vv. 18-19). The people were responding to the warning of coming judgment for their sins with sarcasm. They said that they refused to believe in a coming judgment until they could see it with their own eyes. They sarcastically said, Let us sin all the more and hasten this day of judgment so we can see it for ourselves.

Fourth, there was moral corruption (v. 20). The people were so morally corrupt that what they called evil was really good, and what they called good was really evil. They lived in a topsy-turvy world which rejected God's law and which judged everything in terms of apparent expediency and utility.

Fifth, there was pride (v. 21). They were a people who were wise in their own eyes and ignored the wisdom found in God's revelation.

Sixth, there was injustice (vv. 22-23). The judges took brides from the guilty and denied justice to the innocent.

Then the passage closes with a final description of the coming judgment which would begin with an Assyrian invasion. Isaiah gives a description of the invading Assyrian army in graphic,

realistic horror. The picture Isaiah here paints is very much like the depictions of the Assyrian army which archaeologists have uncovered in ancient Assyrian stone carvings.

There are several lessons to learn from our passage for today. First, don't assume you are right with God simply because you are a part of God's covenant people within history. In other words, don't assume you are right with God simply because your name is on the church roll. Make your calling and election sure. Remember that everyone who is a member of God's covenant people within history receive the privileges of the covenant, but only those who meet the obligations of the covenant receive the blessings of the covenant. The obligations of the covenant are faith and faith's necessary fruits. A faith relationship with Jesus will necessarily bear the fruit of repentance and new obedience in your life.

Second, the privileges of the covenant are sincere, genuine and gracious gifts from God, and God will hold you accountable for responding to them in faith. If you don't respond to them in faith, you have no one to blame except yourself.

Third, anyone who considers himself a Christian and yet is bearing the wild fruit of a life dominated by sin should take pause. Wild fruit is evidence that a person doesn't have a real faith relationship with Jesus. Jesus said,

John 15:5-6

5 I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.

Fourth and last, if you are keeping covenant, if you are bearing good fruit, if you are meeting the obligations of the covenant, if you are seeing evidence in your life of a faith relationship with Jesus, then give all the glory to God. The reason you believe when others don't is not because you are any better. It is because God gave you spiritual life when you were dead in trespasses and in sin. It is because God opened your eyes when you were blind and opened your ears when you were deaf. Salvation is all of grace. Give all the glory to God for it. God is the one who has replaced your tragic ballad with the joyous song of salvation.