

There Are Six Woes, Even Seven

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

Isaiah 5

The Vineyard of the LORD Destroyed

*¹ Let me sing for my beloved
my love song concerning his vineyard:*

*My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.*

*² 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.*

*³ And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem
and men of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.*

*⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard,
that I have not done in it?
When I looked for it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?*

*⁵ 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.*

*⁶ I will make it a waste;
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.*

*7 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!*

Woe to the Wicked

*8 Woe to those who join house to house,
 who add field to field,
 until there is no more room,
 and you are made to dwell alone
 in the midst of the land.*

*9 The LORD of hosts has sworn in my hearing:
 “Surely many houses shall be desolate,
 large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant.*

*10 For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath,
 and a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah.”*

*11 Woe to those who rise early in the morning,
 that they may run after strong drink,
 who tarry late into the evening
 as wine inflames them!*

*12 They have lyre and harp,
 tambourine and flute and wine at their feasts,
 but they do not regard the deeds of the LORD,
 or see the work of his hands.*

*13 Therefore my people go into exile
 for lack of knowledge;
 their honored men go hungry,
 and their multitude is parched with thirst.*

*14 Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite
 and opened its mouth beyond measure,*

*and the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude will go down,
her revelers and he who exults in her.*

*15 Man is humbled, and each one is brought low,
and the eyes of the haughty are brought low.*

*16 But the LORD of hosts is exalted in justice,
and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness.*

*17 Then shall the lambs graze as in their pasture,
and nomads shall eat among the ruins of the rich.*

*18 Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood,
who draw sin as with cart ropes,*

*19 who say: "Let him be quick,
let him speed his work
that we may see it;
let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw near,
and let it come, that we may know it!"*

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

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

*22 Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine,
and valiant men in mixing strong drink,*

*23 who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
and deprive the innocent of his right!*

*24 Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble,
and as dry grass sinks down in the flame,
so their root will be as rottenness,
and their blossom go up like dust;
for they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts,
and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.*

*25 Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people,
and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them,*

*and the mountains quaked;
and their corpses were as refuse
in the midst of the streets.
For all this his anger has not turned away,
and his hand is stretched out still.*

*26 He will raise a signal for nations far away,
and whistle for them from the ends of the earth;
and behold, quickly, speedily they come!*

*27 None is weary, none stumbles,
none slumbers or sleeps,
not a waistband is loose,
not a sandal strap broken;*

*28 their arrows are sharp,
all their bows bent,
their horses' hoofs seem like flint,
and their wheels like the whirlwind.*

*29 Their roaring is like a lion,
like young lions they roar;
they growl and seize their prey;
they carry it off, and none can rescue.*

*30 They will growl over it on that day,
like the growling of the sea.
And if one looks to the land,
behold, darkness and distress;
and the light is darkened by its clouds.*

- Isaiah 5, ESV

After the Sermon, a Song

What would you think if, when I finished preaching a sermon, I picked up and guitar and broke into a song? Scary thought?

At the end of Isaiah 4, the Prophet Isaiah finishes his sermon with a powerful theme of Gospel hope focused on the glorious and fruitful Branch of the LORD. Now, as we

transition into chapter 5, Isaiah is following the powerful prophetic proclamation of chapters 2-4 with a song, a love song that's also a tragic lament.

I. The LORD and His Foul Vineyard, vv. 1-7

Isaiah begins, "*Let me sing for my beloved
my love song concerning his vineyard:*" – v. 1

This is not a song of hope of the coming of the glorious future vineyard that will come from the Branch of the LORD. No, it's a very realistic and soberingly sad love song about the current state of the LORD's beloved vineyard. It's a super sad love-song ballad – something like R.E.M.'s "Everybody Hurts" or Adele's "Rolling in the Deep." That might seem like an odd comparison, but this is explicitly a very sad love song of betrayal and unfaithfulness that causes deep pain and regret.

The opening of the love song tells what the LORD has done for His vineyard:

*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* – v. 2

God provided in every possible way for His vineyard. He dug up the ground and cleared it of stones. The land of Israel is a land full of many stones. It is hard labor to clear a field of stones and prepare it for planting. After clearing the land, God planted it with choice vines, the very best vines available, ones that had a history of producing the most desirable grapes. He built a watchtower in the midst of it to set a reliable guard over the vineyard to protect it from thieves. And, finally, He hewed out a wine vat in the midst of it, so the grapes would not be damaged or spoiled by being transported elsewhere. They could be made into good wine right in the middle of the vineyard.

Once everything was properly prepared, the LORD looked for good grapes from His well-prepared, well-provided, well-guarded, well-planted vineyard. And yet, the sad final line of verse 2 tells us, "*but it yielded wild grapes.*" Literally, these are stinky, good-for-nothing grapes. It's the equivalent of planting a sweet apple orchard and getting nothing but crab

apples. It's not that the vineyard failed to produce fruit, but it actually produced an abundance of bad fruit.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel reached a political and economic high-point under the reign of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and so even as they flourished, what fruit did they produce? They worshiped the Baals and persecuted God's true and faithful prophets and servants.

Everything we have in life has been given to us by God. The church of Jesus Christ is very well equipped. We have been given the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. We have a wealth of resources for studying the Bible and a wealth of opportunities for sharing the Gospel. We have a godly heritage from faithful men who have treasured the truth and taught the Gospel well. And we in the American church are very wealthy by the standards of the world and by the standards of history. We are blessed beyond our comprehension. And yet, what are we doing with these blessings? What kind of fruit are we bearing for the LORD? He is looking for good fruit, fruit that remains, fruit that glorifies Him. What does He find in His vineyard?

Verse 7 tells us more about the wild, stinky grapes the LORD finds in place of the good grapes He looked for –

*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!*

Exactly what this looked like and how it came about is the subject of the main body of the song, starting in verse 8. Here, the LORD pronounces six woes on six different groups of people or kinds of wickedness that have polluted and rotted His pleasant vineyard.

II. Woe to the Unjustly Wealthy, vv. 8-10

The first group singled out for woe are the unjust wealthy:

⁸ *Woe to those who join house to house,
who add field to field,
until there is no more room,
and you are made to dwell alone
in the midst of the land.*

⁹ *The LORD of hosts has sworn in my hearing:*

*“Surely many houses shall be desolate,
large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant.*

¹⁰ *For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath,
and a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah.”*

The land of Israel was the land the LORD promised to give His people, to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God repeated the promise of the land to each generation of these patriarchs, beginning more than 500 years before Israel would cross the Jordan River under Joshua and begin to inherit the Promised Land. How could God promise to give this land to children of Israel? Obviously, because it's HIS land. He owns it all, and He gives it according to His will.

The LORD told the Israelites that they were not to sell their land permanently. Their land was their inheritance from the LORD, and it was to remain in their family line. Every 50 years at the Year of Jubilee, God commanded that all land transfers should be undone and the allotment of the land go back to the original tribal boundaries. As far as we know, the people of Israel never actually kept the Year of Jubilee.

We know one of the most wicked acts of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel recorded in I Kings 21 is the illegal seizing of Naboth's vineyard. When Ahab at first offered to buy the vineyard from Naboth, Naboth said, *“The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.”* (I Kings 21:3) Naboth knew it was not proper in the eyes of the LORD for him to sell his father's inheritance which had been allotted to the from the LORD.

Well, Psalm 24 tells us *“The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.”* (ESV) Everything we have has been given to us by God as a stewardship trust, given by Him and to be used for His glory and His purposes. The idea that we should just try to make as much money as we can so we can have as much fun as we can is an idolatrous pursuit of a false god. We need to remember the words of Jesus:

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be

devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” (Matthew 6:24 & Luke 16:13).

The consequence God assigns for this sin of unjust and idolatrous greed is the curse of having such unproductive land that the greed does not pay off. Of course, we know this doesn't always happen, but many of God's people have experienced making more money and getting less satisfaction from it.

III. Woe to the Wickedly Self-Indulgent, vv. 11-12

The second group called out for woe in Isaiah 5 are the recklessly self-indulgent:

*11 Woe to those who rise early in the morning,
that they may run after strong drink,
who tarry late into the evening
as wine inflames them!*

*12 They have lyre and harp,
tambourine and flute and wine at their feasts,
but they do not regard the deeds of the LORD,
or see the work of his hands.*

These people aren't chasing after more wealth; they're just out to have a good time. God is not opposed to celebrations and to pleasure. He created pleasure and He repeatedly calls His people to celebrate and to feast to praise His goodness and His generous, gracious provision. But these people are not receiving God's good gifts in gratitude to the Giver, but they are recklessly pursuing self-indulgence to the point of self-harm.

The key to the evil nature of their self-indulgence is found at the end of verse 12: *“they do not regard the deeds of the LORD, or see the work of his hands.”* If we are blind to the nature of reality – that every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of Lights with whom there is no shadow of turning – then we will think the world and all that's in it exists for whatever purpose we wish to pursue – making ourselves rich or making ourselves numb to pain with overindulgence in pleasure – drinking, feasting, listening to music – all with no restraint or any clear purpose.

IV. Woe to the Morally Deceptive, vv. 18-23

The next two woes, in verses 18-20, are for those who are immoral:

*18 Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood,
who draw sin as with cart ropes,*

*19 who say: "Let him be quick,
let him speed his work
that we may see it;*

*let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw near,
and let it come, that we may know it!"*

*20 Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,*

*who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter!*

The first woe is directed at those who work hard to serve their immorality. They “*draw iniquity with cords of falsehood [and] draw sin as with cart ropes*” (ESV). “Cords of falsehood” is literally “cords of vanity” or lightness/emptiness. There’s a progression in these parallel lines. People begin by lightly sinning and end up strapped to their sins by strong ropes and yet still pulling hard to sin. Sin entices and then entraps. It begins by promising much and seeming to cost little, but then it progressively demands more and gives less.

People so committed to their sin are blind to the work of God, so blind that they demand that God act in such a way that they can see it. Alec Motyer says in his commentary: “The progressive nature of sin (from cords to cart ropes) leads to the arrogance which demands that God prove himself, the skepticism which doubts that He is active in the world and the blindness which cannot see Him at work.”

John Oswalt puts it this way: “This is the tragedy of sin: what was once done somewhat innocently, or at least naively, becomes something we must do, at whatever cost, even though in order to continue it we must explain away God and His moral law. Typical of such an attitude is the demand for God to act prior to the exercise of faith. But no act is sufficient to coerce faith (otherwise Satan would believe).”

From progressive immorality, we move in the next woe to deliberate more confusion in the cynical rejection of moral categories established by God:

*Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter!*

We've been through four woes, and let's review what we've seen so far:

1. The first woe condemns crass, unbridled, self-centered materialism.
2. The second woe condemn self-indulgent hedonism.
3. The third woe condemns progressive and enslaving immorality which leads to skepticism toward God and His works.
4. Now, the fourth woe condemns category-denying and re-defining moral relativism.

Was this song sung in 750 BC in Jerusalem or in 2022 in America? Well, hold on, because we have two more brief woes in verses 21-23:

*²¹ Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes,
and shrewd in their own sight!
²² Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine,
and valiant men in mixing strong drink,
²³ who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
and deprive the innocent of his right!*

The fifth woe is against the self-wise, those who are convinced they are so clever and so insightful. Proverbs 16:12 says, “Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” A fool knows nothing and doesn't care, but one who is wise in his own eyes thinks he knows so much more than he actually does, and so he is unteachable and stubborn. He is worse off than the fool.

The sixth woe targets hedonistic corruption. What marks this groups as distinct from the earlier self-indulgent group is that these people think it's a great accomplishment to be able to drink really heavily, while at the same time they will let the guilty go free and cheat the innocent for a bribe, so they are corrupt leaders and judges. Those in authority who should

be upholding justice are instead lining their own pockets with bribes that pervert justice so they can over-indulge themselves.

So, to the list of materialism, hedonism, skeptical immorality, and moral relativism, we can now add prideful self-reliant so-called wisdom and political corruption. These are six characteristics that are surely abundant in our culture, aren't they? And yet, these things are not unique to our culture. This is how God's people were living over 2,700 years ago. If you read Romans 1:18 to the end of the chapter, you'll see these things also describe those living in the Roman Empire 800 years after Isaiah's day. People never stop being people. These six things really represent the basic patterns of human rebellion if we deny God and live as if He doesn't exist or as if we wish He didn't exist.

In other words, if we're not going to live for God and His glory, what are we going to live for? What is going to dominate and determine the direction of our lives? We have a limited menu of options, don't we?

Material Gain

Self-Indulgent Pleasure

Immorality

Self-Centered and Self-Exalting "Wisdom"

Political Power & Corruption

Pursuing these things will lead us into injustice against the poor, skepticism toward God, and a radical redefining of what is true and good from the woven-into-creation standards that God has set to an entirely different set that we make up on our own.

V. The Disastrous Consequences, vv. 13-17, 26-30

Here's the rub: When unbelievers fall into these patterns of sin, it shouldn't surprise us. After all, they don't really know God. If we didn't know God, we wouldn't be any different. What is shocking and disheartening is when God's people, called by His name, live for these same things. This is the situation in Isaiah 6. It's Jerusalem and Judea, the chosen people of God, whose culture is characterized and dominated by these sinful patterns of behavior. So, because God loves His people and insists that we not live as if we don't know God.

In Ephesians 4:17-24, this is God's call to His people through the Apostle Paul:

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (ESV)

In Isaiah 5, God brings disastrous consequences on His people as a discipline for their destructive way of living. In this case, God summons first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians to bring destruction and then exile to His people in order to humble them and break them from their self-seeking materialism, their self-indulgent hedonism, their self-enslaving immorality, and their self-reliant human wisdom. He is going to show them that everything they had trusted in will fail, everything they feared and hoped to avoid will come upon them, and everything they held onto instead of Him will be stripped away.

The language of judgment is harsh:

*Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble,
and as dry grass sinks down in the flame,
so their root will be as rotteness,
and their blossom go up like dust;
for they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts,
and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.
Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people,
and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them,
and the mountains quaked;
and their corpses were as refuse
in the midst of the streets.
For all this his anger has not turned away,
and his hand is stretched out still. – vv. 24-25, ESV*

But we must see that the severity of the Lord's discipline is in proportion to the severity of His people's sin and also what was needed to break them and bring them back to Himself. If we choose material things, carnal pleasures, self-directed thinking, immorality, skepticism,

or anything else besides the Lord, we will be enslaving ourselves to things that do not love us and cannot save us. God will break us of these things because He does love us and He alone can save us.

So, What Can We Do?

What can we do? We see these patterns very clearly in the world around us. We likely even see some of them at times taking root in our own hearts and minds. What can we do about it?

Well, the answer to the sad song of Isaiah 5 is going to come next week in the stunning vision of God in Isaiah 6. For now, though, I think we need to see one feature from that vision. Here in Isaiah 5, we have six woes, and they're all directed by Isaiah outward at the patterns of sin he sees in his culture. Yes, this is a prophetic word from the Lord for His people, but it is also coming as a song from Isaiah directed toward His culture. Six woes is an incomplete number, and the seventh woe comes in Isaiah 6. It's very different from the first six:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”*

⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” – Isaiah 6:1-5, ESV

Isaiah's final woe is “Woe is me!” and causes him to see his need for redemption, for cleansing. When does he say it? Only when he sees the LORD.

It's not enough to see the patterns of sin in our culture and be in despair over them. It's not even enough to see the patterns of sin in our own life and be in despair over them. We must see by faith the transcendent awesome holiness of God, be overwhelmed by His

majesty and splendor, until we know in our souls how hopeless we are in and of ourselves and how desperately we need the LORD to cleanse and renew us.

Our souls must know God – not just know about God, not just know that God has spoken or what God has said. It's not enough to know about God or even enough to believe that God is real. We must know the LORD. We must see Him by faith. I'm not talking about a mystical experience of a supernatural vision like Isaiah was given. By faith, through the Word and the sacraments, we must see the LORD and know Him, trust Him, believe in Him, turn to Him, rest on Him, be cleansed and renewed by Him – day-by-day and week-by-week. Nothing is more pressing in your schedule, and nothing should be a higher priority in your life than knowing God and meeting with Him.

If we neglect knowing God by faith, meeting with Him regularly in His word and in gathered worship, we will drift into the patterns of the world. We will chase after the same empty things and find our souls growing callous in the same ways. We need nothing less than God Himself. And in the Gospel, in His Word, by His Spirit, in gathered worship on the Lord's Day, the LORD gives us nothing less than Himself!