

Sing To My Wellbeloved

It may seem strange to say but even as the Lord pronounces judgment there is grace in His words. The very act of telling guilty people of impending destruction is an act of mercy by God when rightly perceived and acted upon. When the Lord takes time to condemn sin He is not only demonstrating holiness but patience and longsuffering as well. He is supplying a space for grace and an opportunity to repent.

A sad song

Tomorrow's passage begins in the form of a song. In it we have an Old Testament parable about a vineyard. Later there is a series of six woes spoken against the iniquity of Jerusalem and Judah which the prophet expands on. Perhaps we wonder what continuing relevance exists in these portions of scripture. It is true, the warning and its execution is long past and those concerned long dead and gone. Yet, there are lessons here for us today, and God the Holy Spirit will have us learn them.

No condemnation for the elect

Remember, God is always loving and gracious to His people. Even God's discipline is a kindness which conveys divine care and provision for our spiritual growth and wellbeing. The writer to the Hebrews says, 'whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth'. Read these words with the emphasis on 'loveth'. It is important to distinguish between the Lord's gracious dealings with His people in love, which is always constructive, and His wrath upon the wicked which holiness demands as punishment for sin.

Mocking God

God does not need to explain His actions or justify His dealings with sinful men, though He often does. Yet such is mankind's antagonism against God that even the very notice of culpability is an occasion for blasphemy. When Isaiah warned his generation of coming judgment the people laughed. 'Bring it on', they said. 'Let (God) make speed, and hasten his work, that we may see it: and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it!' Reprobates still openly mock God's 'goodness and forbearance and longsuffering'.

The Lord's vineyard

The Jewish state was favoured for many years with God's blessing. God chose to bless the Jews for Abraham's sake, doing all that was needful, and more, to make them a celebrated and prosperous nation. As the parable shows, great effort by the vineyard builder was expended to produce good grapes and nothing fell short in planning, labour, defences, or in the quality of vines planted; nevertheless, only wild, bitter and rotten fruit was produced. The fault for Judah's evil was not in God who had been faithful in every detail, but the people themselves were corrupt.

God keeps accounts

Here we also learn God keeps accounts. The sins specified consisted of oppression of the poor, exploitation of the weak and unrestrained sensual indulgence. God sees and records all sin and wrongdoing. Man cannot deceive God and God is not mocked by man. There will come a day of accountability when every unforgiven sin shall be revealed and every motive weighed. We lament the evil that fills the earth but justice shall be done. Men will reap what they sow.

Longsuffering warrants hope

The spiritual meaning of God's message to Isaiah was intended for the elect remnant. There is no grace for the reprobate beyond mere postponement of judgment and that, too, is for the sake of the elect. In gathering His people God uses the threat of judgment to humble those He will convert in the day of His power. God is still warning of judgment to come. He extends the day of grace, sends the gospel to us, and shows us the way of salvation in Jesus Christ. This is a message of hope for sinners and is bound up with the promise of acceptance for all who come to Christ in faith.

A lamb feeding-station

And note this, even as God reveals what His judgment will entail He never forgets to qualify and soften His harshest denouncements with a word of comfort for His own little flock. When Judah was overthrown, when the vineyard's walls were broken down and briars and thorns abounded, there was provided still a place for the lambs to feed 'after their manner' (v.17). This is mercy reserved for the remnant people. It justifies our confidence that whatever judgment falls

on this world, Christ's own sheep will be preserved, protected and provided for by the hand of their loving God.

Amen

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