

“There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and he put a fence around it
and dug a winepress in it and he built a tower and leased it to tenants,
and went into another country.

When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit.
And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.
Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them.
Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’
But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves,
‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’
And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.”

When Jesus tells this parable in Matthew 21,
it doesn’t take long for the Pharisees to recognize that he was speaking of them.
They knew the scripture,
and they recognized the description in Isaiah 5 of the house of Israel as a vineyard.

Of course, all of this raises the question why is this called a “love song”?
But if you think about it – isn’t the genre of “love song”
frequently characterized by heartbreak and heartache?
“Since my baby left me, I’ve found a new place to dwell,
down at the end of lonely street at Heartbreak Hotel...”

I don’t suppose you normally think of God as a ‘jilted lover’ –
and we should be rather careful how we say this!
Because if you too far down that path,
you’ll wind up with a deity who is a jilted lover turned serial killer...

But if you want to understand how *bad* our sin is –
then you should compare it to the absolute worst sin – the worst betrayal – on earth.

And in human terms there is nothing worse than the betrayal of a spouse –
the betrayal of your beloved.

We go a little crazy when we feel betrayed!
God does not go crazy.
Rather, he shows us clearly what betrayal deserves.

The wages of sin is death.
But God is not just some stern judge sitting on high waiting to smite the sinner!
God is a lover.
He loves us –
he loves *you*.

We have sinned against the one who *loves*.

We see this in the chiasm of verses 1-7.

First, the vineyard is depicted (1)

The vineyard cared for with five verbs, but it yielded wild grapes (2)

The central question: what shall I do with it? (3-4)

Yahweh's response: the vineyard neglected with five verbs (5-6)

The vineyard explained (7)

1. The Love Song for the Vineyard (v1-7)

a. The Vineyard Presented (v1)

Let me sing for my beloved

my love song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard

on a very fertile hill.

The opening and closing set the stage.

Judah and Jerusalem was a choice vineyard.

God has done everything for his people.

He has prepared his vineyard with care and diligence.

Verse 2 includes five verbs of God's care for his vineyard:

b. The Beloved's Care for His Vineyard – Five Verbs (v2)

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;

He dug and cleared and planted and built and hewed...

and he looked for it to yield grapes,

but it yielded wild grapes.

"Wild grapes" might be too gentle a term here.

"Stink fruit" would be more descriptive.

We're not talking about a minor quibble about varietals!

We're talking about a foul stench –

as though you were expecting the bouquet of a fine cabernet sauvignon...

only to get limburger cheese instead!

c. The Central Question: What Shall I Do with My Vineyard? (v3-4)

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?*

You might wonder – if the Beloved provided all this care for the vineyard –
if he did everything that a vinedresser can do –
then how did this happen?

The difference between a wild vine and a domestic vine is simply the care.
God has lavished grace upon his people–
but they remain as if grace had never touched them.
If a well-tended vineyard produces stink-fruit,
what is the master to do?

Are you beginning to see the problem?
The problem is that no matter how well you tend the vine,
the vine is *not* going to produce good fruit.

This is why Jesus will say, “I am the vine – you are the branches –
and my Father is the vinedresser.”

As long as the vine is “in Adam” – as long as the vine is “mere Israel” –
the vine will keep producing stinkfruit!

b'. Judgment against the Vineyard – Five Verbs(v5-6)

*5 And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;^[a]
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 briers and thorns shall grow up;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.*

And so whereas he had dug it and cleared it of stones,
now I will remove its hedge and it shall be devoured.
Whereas he had built a watchtower,
now I will break down its wall...

It shall not be pruned or hoed – and briers and thorns shall grow up –
just as God had told Adam that briers and thorns would grow up...

a'. The Vineyard Explained (v7)

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;^[b]
for righteousness,
but behold, an outcry!^[c]*

Verse 7 provides the transition between the parable and the rest of the chapter.

It is useful to hear the play on words:

he looked for justice (mishpat), but behold, bloodshed (mispach);
for righteousness (tsedaqa), but behold, an outcry (tse'aca).

The problem is one of justice.

In the six woes that follow,

the focus is on both the practice of injustice and the neglect of justice.

2. Six Woes Against Israel (v8-30)

The structure of verses 8-30 is also a pretty tight literary form:

two woes followed by two “therefores”

and then four woes followed by two more “therefores.”

The first pair ends with lambs grazing.

The last four end with lions roaring.

a. Woe to Those Who Accumulate Wealth (v8-10)

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^[d] of vineyard shall yield but one bath,
and a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah.”^[e]*

Woe to those who join house to house.

God’s law did not permit the large scale acquisition of land (Lev 25).

Every fifty years, in the Year of Jubilee,
any land that you acquired in the last 50 years
was to be returned to its owner.
No one was supposed to accumulate a lot of land.

But the princes of Judah have forgotten this.
They are using their power to enrich themselves and build up their possessions.
They are attempting to drive out the other landowners.
To “dwell alone in the midst of the land”
means that you are the only landowner in sight.
But God promises an irony:
you want to dwell alone in the midst of the land?
Fine! Your houses will become desolate and uninhabited.
All their great acreage will produce but a pittance.
Verse nine starts with no verb: “Yahweh of hosts, in my ears!”
It is intended as an emphatic cry.

It is from these sorts of warnings that our Lord tells us,
where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.
What good is it to store up wealth, if you lose your soul?

b. Woe to Those Who Run after Wine and Entertainment (v11-12)

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.*

The second woe is a warning to those who run after entertainments.

Woe to those who rise early in the morning to run after strong drink,
and who stay up late to drink wine.

They are partying—but they do not see the work of Yahweh’s hands.
Alcohol, music, food.
These are all good things—things that were commanded in the worship of God.
But they have taken these good gifts,
and perverted them for their own selfish pleasure.
In other words, the 8th century B.C. had its own version of sex and drugs and rock’n’roll.

These first two woes describe two of our basic temptations:

the one who is obsessed with increasing wealth –
and the one who is obsessed with increasing pleasure.

1) Therefore Exile and Sheol Awaits Them (v13-14)

¹³ *Therefore my people go into exile
for lack of knowledge;^[f]
their honored men go hungry,^[g]
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^[h] and her multitude will go down,
her revelers and he who exults in her.*

And Isaiah gives two consequences for these two obsessions:

- 1) Exile (v13)
- 2) Death (v14)

Verse 13 adds to the irony of the chapter.

They sought food and drink,
but they will go hungry, and the multitude will be parched with thirst.
They should have known better,
but they did not want to know the deeds of the Lord.
Their “lack of knowledge” is inexcusable.
They have pursued economic gain and personal pleasure—
and it will come back to bite them.

Literally.

Verse 14 connects us back to verse 8.

Just as they devoured the land, now Sheol—the grave—will devour them.
The partyers of verses 11-12 are included in this.
Those who pursue wealth and pleasure will be devoured by it.

Do you remember the haughty daughters of Zion in chapter 3?

Whatever you pursue will consume you.

2) Man Is Humbled – the LORD Is Exalted – and Lambs Will Graze (v15-17)

¹⁵ *Man is humbled, and each one is brought low,
and the eyes of the haughty^[i] are brought low.*
¹⁶ *But the LORD of hosts is exalted^[j] 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.*

And so verses 15-17 add on to the “therefores” with three “and” clauses:
verse 15 echoes precisely the words of 2:9

“So man is humbled and each one is brought low”
After all, we are still in the “word that Isaiah saw”,
from chapters 2-5.
We are called to remember that the LORD has a day
against all those who exalt themselves.
The eyes of the haughty are brought low.

Verse 16 then echoes 2:11, 17,
“And Yahweh of hosts is exalted in justice.”
His vineyard did not produce justice—but Yahweh will!
“And the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness.”
His vineyard did not produce righteousness—but the Holy God will.
God himself will bring justice and righteousness,
a point that Jesus will make in his parable of the vineyard
with the image of the Son.

Verse 17 then gives a vision of the future of Jerusalem.
The lambs will graze over the area that was once inhabited.
Nomads, or tramps, will reside in the emptiness that was once Judah.
In the beginning God created all things.
The earth was formless and void—tohu vbohu—in other words, empty and barren.
God is bringing the Promised Land back to a state of tohu vbohu,
emptiness and barrenness.

Then Isaiah launches into another set of four woes.
And if the first set of sinners were bad—
they at least had the excuse of being mindless about it!
They were like those today who go about their ordinary business,
probably go to church on Sunday,
but for them church is a one day commitment.
The other six days are for material profit and personal enjoyment.
This next set is much more intentional about their sin.

c. Woe to Those Who Defy the LORD (v18-19)

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!”*

Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood, who draw sin as with cart ropes.
These mockers even dare the Holy One of Israel to do his worst! (Verse 19)

They know that what they are doing is wrong,
and that God has said he will judge them,
but they don't care—"bring it on!" "Let it come!"
They defy God.

Then in v20:

d. Woe to Those Who Turn Good and Evil Upside Down (v20)

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!*

Their whole moral compass is upside down.

This is what happens when we substitute *our judgment* for God's.
We think that we know better than God – after all,
we have *so much more* experience than God!
He made us – and he *knows* how we ought to live.

You can hear echoes of Proverbs in the next woe:

e. Woe to Those Who Are Wise in Their Own Eyes (v21)

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

In Proverbs there is more hope for a fool,
than for a man who is wise in his own eyes.

If you think that you are something – think again.
Humble yourself before the LORD, and he will exalt you!

Our final woe returns to our partyers...but they are worse:

f. Woe to Those Who Prefer Partying to Doing Justice (v22-23)

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!*

These are unlike the partyers in verses 11-12,
because they are not just seeking pleasure;
they use alcohol to manipulate others to benefit themselves.

“to acquit the guilty for a bribe – and deprive the innocent of his right.”

They don’t care about truth or justice – they will use your desire for pleasure
in order to manipulate and corrupt the system,
in order to get what *they* want.

And once again Isaiah provides two therefore:

1) Therefore the Anger of the LORD Was Kindled (v24-25)

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;*

The picture is of the fire raging through the dry grass –
devastating everything before it.

Why?

*for they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts,
and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.*

The “law” is not simply a list of rules.

The law of the LORD of hosts

is the pattern of life that corresponds to the world that he made.

It is summed up in these words:

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, and strength,”
and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Israel has rejected the law of love.

Obviously!

They have despised the word of the *Holy One of Israel*.

In the next chapter Isaiah will behold the *Holy One* –

If you insist on living contrary to the word of the Holy One,

then you will find yourself in a heap of trouble –

not because God is messing with you! –

but because you are refusing to live in keeping with the way God made the world!

Which brings us to the final “therefore” in verse 25,

which takes us back to chapter 2, connecting to the language of God’s arising in anger,
and the peoples fleeing in terror.

(read)

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.*

The end of v25 will be the refrain of Isaiah 9.
And the beginning of v26 will launch Isaiah 11.

In other words, these opening chapters of Isaiah are setting up the whole rest of the book!

Verses 22-30 uses the same refrain as Isaiah's sermon in chapter 9.
It is possible that Isaiah took that material and moved it to chapter 5 for his introduction.
The other option is that Isaiah wrote this section with a view
to calling our attention to the connections between chapter 5 and the next section.
But either way, verses 22-30 call us to look beyond the coming judgment.
If God has so consistently called Israel and Judah to repentance,
he must have some purpose other than their complete destruction.

Verses 26-28 then speak of God's judgment in history.

2) The Nations Will Come in Judgment – as a Lion (v26-30)

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.*

As these chapters began with the vision of the nations streaming to Zion
to hear the law of the LORD,
so it ends with the nations streaming to Zion....to destroy it!

But it is God who brings the nations against his people.
(This will be a theme in Isaiah 6-12)

And they will accomplish his purposes.

When you watch what is happening in the world,
you need to see it in terms of what God has promised.

The nations are obeying the call of God to execute judgment against the wicked.
And nothing can stop them.
The language of verses 27-30 is that of a relentless force that nothing can hinder.

Indeed, verse 29 compares them to the lion that carry off their prey—and none can rescue.
and verse 30 compares them to the sea.

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.*

The roaring of the lion and the roaring of the sea –
both are unforgiving heralds of death.

This is the love song of the vineyard!
A love song that ends in darkness and distress.

Isaiah 2-5 ends on a very pessimistic note.
It ends without hope—leaving an unanswered question as to Israel’s future.

It is in this context that we hear of Isaiah’s call.
Because in the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the LORD...

When all is darkened by clouds –
when the roaring of the lions and growling of the sea becomes more than you can bear,
remember, that it was in such a time that “I saw the LORD...”