

How the Lord Deals with an Unfruitful Vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7)

Isaiah 5:1-7 is a song by Isaiah about his own people. He called the Lord “the One whom He loved.” He expressed how good God had been to His people with the picture of Him making a vineyard on a fertile hilltop. Those who plant vineyards look for a sunny aspect. He dug it over, removed the stones, and planted the choicest vines in it. He built a watchtower in the middle of it to guard the vineyard from thieves and enemies. He cut out a wine vat in it because He anticipated producing good wine. However, when He waited for it to produce grapes, it produced bad grapes. Although God had chosen Israel as His own people, the response was disappointing. The introit for this Sunday, Psalm 80, is a prayer to God to restore His vineyard, which He has destroyed. He had broken down its wall, so that those who went past it had been plucking its fruit.

The meaning is that there was nothing more than God could have done for His people of Judah. He had taken pleasure in them. He had made them His covenant people, and given them the fruitful land of Canaan. He had separated them from other nations, and blessed them richly, for His own glory and shown them His special care.

What began with much promise ended in disappointment. When God expected justice from the people of Judah, He heard calls for help from oppressed people. The passage in Isaiah 5 is followed by another section, which describes what was happening in Judah. This is what the bad grapes meant. Bad grapes meant rotten and offensive fruit. The Arabs call the fruit of the nightshade “wolf grapes.” In Judah there were selfish landowners who thought only about their own wealth and made others poor. There were people who forgot God and devoted themselves to pleasures, which included much intoxicating drink. There were people who called evil good. There were people who were proud and acted unjustly. There were people who accepted bribes to oppress poor people (5:8-23).

Jesus had this passage in mind when He told the parable about the wicked tenants. A landowner planted a vineyard, put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard out to some farmers, and went away on a journey. When the vintage approached, the tenant farmers mistreated the servants who had been sent to collect what was due to the owner. He added that they even murdered the landowner’s Son and heir and threw Him out of the vineyard. He added a specific messianic dimension. He made the direct claim of His own part in the Godhead, and, as the heir, claimed the people of God as His own. Although the wicked tenants would put Him to death, He implied His own resurrection and coming to judgment on wicked people. Jesus made them pass sentence on themselves. They could only reply, “He will make those scoundrels die a miserable death and rent out the vineyard to other tenant farmers, who will give him the fruit due to him at its right time.” God would take the kingdom away from them and give it to a nation that continued to produce its fruit (Mt 21:33-44). The chief priests and the Pharisees wanted to arrest Jesus, because they knew that He had aimed this parable at them.

Jesus was not unfaithful when He made the allusion to Himself as the Son and heir in the parable of the wicked tenant farmers. In the previous chapter the Messiah had been referred to as the Branch. “On that day, the Branch of the LORD will be splendid and glorious. The Fruit of the land will be the pride and honour of the survivors in Israel” (Isa 4:2). This song made a transition from the Branch to the vineyard of the Lord.

The response of the Lord is expressed in His own words (v. 3-6). He was amazed at their unnatural response to His care. He challenged the people to say whether the bad grapes were the fault of the owner of the vineyard. There was only one thing for Him to do. He was going to bring judgment on the fruitless vineyard and make it a waste. He would cut down the hedge around it and break down its wall. That would allow animals to ruin it. Foxes like ripe grapes. The vineyard would not be cultivated any more, but briars and thorn bushes would choke the vines and grow up instead of them. He would prevent the clouds from raining on it. The greatest calamity for the people of God is the removal of His saving Word of grace, which God has given through His inspired spokesmen. Without God’s protection and ongoing care, Judah would be ruined. In the context, the destruction of the vineyard meant the captivity of the people of Judah to Babylon. The passage points beyond the captivity to Babylon to the overthrow of the Jewish nation and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. Personally, for unfaithful people of both the Old Testament and New Testament periods it means judgment in the world to come, banishment to eternal punishment, where there will be no hope of recovery.

In Hebrew there are plays on words. There the word for “legal infringements ” sounds like the word for “justice”, and the word for a cry that results from tyranny, covetousness, or dissipation sounds like the word for “righteousness.” “He had waited for legal decisions, but saw legal infringements. He had waited for righteousness, but heard calls for help.”

This song of about God's vineyard in Isaiah chapter 5 is a message of judgment. The vineyard is identified with Judah and Israel. It still applies to people who have the name of God's people but respond wickedly to His grace. God has been gracious in fulfilling His promises in His Son. The Christian church, the body of Christ, is the result of His merciful care. The gates of Hades, He has promised, will not defeat his church. However, the fruit that God expects from individual members in His church is justice and righteousness. When people in His church become selfish, give themselves to their own pursuits and pleasures, forget God, and spurn God's decisions about good and evil, and treat their fellowmen unjustly, He will not ignore their wicked response to His kindness, but punish them.

The song about the vineyard tells us that unfaithfulness to God is completely irrational and indefensible. There is no reason at all for the failure of the vineyard to be productive. Only sinful human beings could be as unresponsive as this.

All who profess to be members of the church must heed such warnings. The Lord scrutinises each person's heart, and expects the fruit of righteousness from those who bear His name. May the gracious Lord, through the Gospel of His Son and Heir's pure altruism, in which He subjected Himself to be rejected and cast out of the vineyard, to be the Stone set aside by the builders, only to be made the capstone, continue to keep us in His grace, so that His vineyard among us responds richly to His goodness!