

# The Vineyard of the Lord

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, this is our first spring as a family, or certainly myself, with a garden that is my own responsibility. And there are two things I've learned in the few weeks that have passed so far.

Firstly, gardening is hard work. And secondly, I'm not very good at it. I've spent quite a lot of time in it over the last few weeks, and if I showed you a before and after picture, I'm not 100% sure you'd be able to tell the difference.

But even with my very limited ability in the garden, after sowing some seeds maybe a couple of weeks ago, there are signs of life. Let me tell you, there is great joy when you work the ground in seeing the fruits of your labor. Isaiah's song in the opening verses of this chapter brings us to the rolling hillsides of a fertile land, and to our first point this evening where we see a vineyard that is perfectly planted. I would consider myself a well below average gardener, but here Isaiah introduces us to the perfect gardener. If you look at the opening verses there, you see that the one of whom Isaiah sings chooses the perfect place for his vineyards.

And he makes sure, doesn't he, that the ground is perfectly prepared. Every stone is dug up and removed. He then chooses the choicest vines, the very best that money can buy. He builds a watchtower in his midst. This was a place, a vineyard that he wanted to dwell in, and he wanted to protect.

He builds a winepress so that the fruit of the vineyard can be preserved and made into something that is lasting and beautiful and precious. And here's the question we're to be asking here if you look at verse 4. What more could possibly have been done for this vineyard?

[ 2 : 26 ] What more could possibly have been done? With my error-strewn efforts behind our house, things somehow grow. This vineyard owner is the world's premier gardener. He did everything possible to ensure that this vineyard's every need was tended to. The owner did everything he could.

But what happens at the end of verse 2? Somehow, nevertheless, this vineyard manages to produce bad fruits.

How has it gone so wrong? How could it possibly have gone so wrong?

The hammer lands in verse 7, doesn't it? The vineyard owner is God, the Lord Almighty. The vineyard is Israel. God's people are the vines that he longed to delight in.

But he is left with nothing but rotten grapes. Something has gone wrong, but it is most certainly not with God. He looks forward to enjoying the fruit of his labor, yet a failed crop is all that lies before him.

[ 4 : 18 ] They're just two very simple but very important points to quickly take away from these verses. First, God is good. Our God, the one true living God, is a God who delights to provide everything for his people.

Everything they need. He delights to provide all that his people need, and he provides all that his people need so that they can delight in him too. First, God is good.

But secondly, God is guiltless, isn't he? We've seen over the last number of weeks through Isaiah that Israel has produced a lot of bad fruits, haven't they?

Most obviously, in their oppressive greeds and their rampant idolatry, they are guilty of sin. We're left in no doubt about that fact by this point in Isaiah.

It would be utterly futile, wouldn't it, for them to try and deny what they have done. But what do we so quickly do when we've been caught red-handed?

[ 5 : 31 ] What were Adam's first words in the Garden of Eden when God asked him if he had eaten of the fruit of the tree he was commanded not to?

He doesn't take responsibility, does he? He says, The woman you put here with me. We are experts in blame-shifting, but here's where Isaiah's vineyard song needs to land on us.

We cannot, we must not and cannot go pointing to God's provisions as excuses for our sins.

God has given all his people everything they need to flourish and bear good fruits. But if and when we fail to do that, we must know that God is good and God is guiltless.

If we misuse, as the people of Israel did, what God has placed in our lives to honor him, that is solely on our shoulders.

[ 6 : 55 ] In the closing arguments of Isaiah's lawsuit against God's people, having established their guilt in the chapters before, Isaiah now declares that when it comes to the sentencing, it should be known that there are no mitigating circumstances.

When it comes to Israel's sin and to our sin, we are guilty and we alone are guilty.

We cannot go passing the blame off onto someone else. Least of all God. That is the tragedy of this love song that Isaiah opens with, isn't it?

That in spite of everything possible being done by the God who so dearly loves his people, they still managed to produce fruit that is detestable in his sight.

And it is detestable that the word translated bad fruits at the end of verse 2 is literally stink fruits. So when we read bad fruits, we shouldn't be thinking, you know, this is a banana slightly past its best.

[ 8 : 20 ] This fruit is disgusting, right? It would make you pinch your nose, hold your breath, and avert your gaze if you just got within arm length of it.

This is not just past its best fruit. This is putrid produce. And what happens in much of the remainder of Isaiah chapter 5 is that the prophet unpacks what makes this vineyard's produce so putrid.

So let's turn now to the vineyard's putrid produce and consider what it is that makes Israel's actions so vile. We're going to do that by first of all looking at two groups of woes that Isaiah puts together between verses 8 and the end of the chapter.

Woe is just a word that's announcing impending judgment on an already guilty people. So let's begin in verses 8 to 13 where we have two woes that you'll see.

You'll see them there in verse 8 and verse 11 if you just look down at your Bible. And what holds these two woes together is people's desire to live for their own gain at the expense of others.

[ 9 : 47 ] Let's just see how Isaiah communicates those truths. The first woe in verse 8 is a woe pronounced on those, if you look there, who seek to build their earthly estates, isn't it?

Those who add house to house and join field to fields. And in ancient Israel, you could not build your own estate without unjustly appropriating your neighbor's property.

You could rent land for a time, but every family was allotted their portion of land, and that was that. Everything would get handed back every 50 years, or that was supposed to be that.

But in Isaiah's time, there were people adding house to house and field to field till there is no space left, till they have pushed everyone out.

The unavoidable implication is that there are poor and vulnerable members of the covenant community, the covenant family, who are being squeezed out and deprived of what is rightfully theirs.

[ 11 : 05 ] Now, we might not be unlawfully appropriating land from other members of the church. I hope you're not, and if not, that's a good thing. But it doesn't mean, does it, we are incapable of living for our own gain at the expense of others.

It's a very slippery slope, isn't it? It's a very simple thing that it's so easy to start taking a step or two down. All it takes is something as simple as speaking poorly of someone else in such a way that makes you look good or you look better.

All of a sudden, we're exalting our own status, aren't we, at the expense of those around us. So we would do well to be on our guards, lest we take a step down this slippery slope.

But I think it's fair to say that what is happening in Isaiah's time is demonstrative of a covenant people who have slid a long way down that slope already.

That is the first wall, people gaining in such a way that deprives their neighbor of what is rightfully theirs.

[ 12 : 24 ] And in the second wall, in verse 11 and 12, we see here people gaining in such a way, are trying to gain in such a way that deprives God, I think, of what is rightfully His.

Those immediately described in verse 11 are those who just seem to enjoy maybe a bit too much wine. And I think on one level, this probably does incorporate people who are having one too many on a Friday night.

But ultimately, I think Isaiah has something much bigger in mind here. Because think of a context we've just come from at the start of this chapter. Those who indulge themselves with wine are doing what?

They are overindulging, aren't they, in the produce of the vineyard. Overindulging in the produce of the vineyard and, the end of verse 12, doing so while paying no heed, respecting no work of the Lord Himself.

Wine is supposed to be the good fruits of a vineyard, isn't it? But what is happening here is people are squeezing dry the fruit of God's vineyard, trying to gain for themselves all that they can from the work of His hands, while paying no attention to the one who has given them what should have been a good gift.

[ 14 : 08 ] Imagine parents buying a child a new games console for their Christmas. I would hope one day to do something similar for our sons, so that we can sit down and enjoy something good together.

It could and should be a really good loving gift. But it's a gift that can be ruined by the way it's used, can't it?

I think what we have in verse 11 and 12 is the picture of a child who runs off to their room with their new console on Christmas morning and never spends time with their family again until the day they leave home.

And depriving the gift giver of the joy that should have been theirs too.

squeezing more life out of gifts than they were ever meant to give, while thanklessly ignoring the one who gave them what should have been a good gift, made bad by the way it was abused.

[ 15 : 29 ] God has given us so many good things that can and should be enjoyed. The work of His hands, His glorious creation, sons and daughters, grandchildren and grandparents, family and friends, nieces and nephews, time with friends, work and holidays, games, games, gadgets, gardens, films, food, drink, there are so many good things that God gives His people.

But if we live for those things and try to squeeze more from them than they were ever meant to give, while ignoring the one who has given them to us, we are taking what should have made good fruits and instead turning it into stink fruits.

It's not a good start. But things, I think, manage to get worse as Isaiah goes on. The first group of woes shows us a people who take too much for themselves.

The second group of woes shows us a people who make too much of themselves. It is bad enough that they live for their own gain.

But these are people who have begun to live as their own God. Just look with me at what is going on in this second group of woes between verse 18 and 23.

[ 17 : 05 ] Isaiah begins, Woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit. That they are starting to take sin with them wherever they go. This is no longer an accidental slip-up here or there.

It is a deliberate decision to live contrary to God's law. And as they do so, they look around in verse 19. And knowing they are living in sin, they don't see God's immediate judgment.

And so they say to themselves, I'll believe in this God of justice when I see that justice.

But I don't see it, so I'm not going to believe it. They see God's patience with his people's foolishness. And instead of being thankful that he has restrained his wrath for a time, they instead interpret it as evidence of an eternal absence of judgment.

And so assuming that God isn't watching, or maybe even isn't really there, they start being God to themselves. Verse 20, They start deciding for themselves what is good and what is evil.

[ 18 : 27 ] What is darkness and what is light. What is bitter and what is sweet. Verse 21, They deem themselves wise and clever. Able to make decisions that are far beyond them.

And so then, verse 22, Perceiving an apparent absence of God's judgment, they start making judgments for themselves. Deciding what is just and unjust.

Depending, ultimately, on what will provide them with short-term gain. Living for a bribe, acquitting the guilty, and denying justice so that they can build their own kingdom.

As their own God. People with little faith in God. Deciding for themselves what is good and bad. Believing themselves to be exceedingly wise.

And making decisions on what is right and wrong based on what serves their personal interests. That might well seem to accurately describe much of what we see in the world around us.

[ 19 : 36 ] But we must remember, Isaiah's audience here is not the world out there, is it? It is God's covenant people Isaiah is speaking to.

It's not them over there who are declared guilty of this lifestyle. It is Israel. It is God's people. And we uncover the root of the problem when we get to the end of verse 24.

They have rejected the law of the Lord Almighty and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel.

You will find many people, even today, won't we, who declare themselves to be Christians, God's people.

But believe God's word has got a few things quite wrong. Even of those of us in here this evening, there will likely be some who hear what God's word says, perhaps particularly on current issues, gender or sexuality, and think, I know the Bible says that, but wouldn't it be better if it was a bit softer on this issue or a bit less clear-cut on that?

[ 21 : 18 ] But when we do that, we are considering ourselves wise and clever, aren't we? Able to declare over God's word what is really right and wrong.

God might have got it right back then, but we know a bit better now. But as soon as we start putting ourselves in judgment over God's word, thinking we even know slightly better on just a few things, or we could make a few improvements for our day and age, we are simply following in the footsteps of Israel in Isaiah's day.

A wrong relationship with neighbor, a broken relationship with God at the heart of both these problems is a broken relationship to his word. Here in Israel, in Isaiah's day, we have a people who live with the word of God, the Bible, as optional, not necessary, as a rough guide, rather than a rule, as good in part, but not in whole.

And the consequence is a nation of God's covenant people who are living for their own gain at others' expense and who ultimately live as their own God.

Because if his word is not ruling your life, then he is not ruling your life. And if he is not ruling your life, you are taking, aren't you, the decision of what is good and evil, right and wrong, out of his hands and into your own fallible hands.

[ 23 : 09 ] And it might make for a more comfortable few years of this life. But just because God in his mercy has not reached out in judgment yet, do not think, as the people of Israel did, that it is therefore never coming.

Because Isaiah makes very clear in the rest of this chapter that judgment is exactly what is coming. And it is terrifying.

So we see, lastly, in these final verses of this opening act of Isaiah, the vineyard's pending punishment. Justice is coming.

And for those who have lived as their own God for their own gain, justice is a fearful prospect. Come back with me to verse 13. Those people will be sent from the vineyard, exiled from God's presence.

This is not a pleasant road trip into unfamiliar lands, because waiting outside of God's presence, verse 14, is death with its jaws wide open, ready to receive them.

[ 24 : 28 ] Those who live to satisfy their own insatiable appetite for greed and gain end up only satisfying death's hunger. Those who sought to exalt themselves at the expense of others are brought as low as can be.

Those who built their great worldly estates will find sheep and strangers grazing over the ruins of their houses. Verse 24, as fire devours dry grass, so will these worthless vines be consumed by the just wrath of God.

His anger will continually burn against his people. The very mountains will shake and leave the dead buried, unburied. enemies will arrive from foreign lands streaming into the vineyard whose walls have been broken down by the very one who built them, in order that the whole fertile hillside that was so beautiful at the beginning of the chapter will become a desolate land.

The lion will roar unopposed and leave nothing. The final image in verse 30 is as bleak as can be. If one looks at the land, there is only darkness and distress.

Even the sun will be darkened by clouds. That is the just punishment hovering over a guilty people.

[ 26 : 03 ] It is grim reading. But if there is one thing Isaiah has been clear on over these opening five chapters, it is that this fearful end is fully deserved.

A people exiled into the jaws of death, a land laid waste, a vineyard burned to the ground, and nothing left but darkness.

If at this point, and perhaps especially if you've been with us for the last four weeks of Isaiah so far, you're feeling it's been pretty heavy going, then good.

Because I think that's exactly how Isaiah wants us to feel at this point. of his book. Weighed down by the depths of Israel's sin.

Weighed down by the depths of our sin, and in fearful awe of the punishment that that sin deserves.

[ 27 : 22 ] God's sin. But that is exactly where Isaiah wants us to be at this point, because that is the beginning of the gospel.

Not that we are good, but that we are wicked, sinful, and in desperate need of saving from a terrifying but entirely justified judgment.

that God in his mercy is delaying. That is who we are.

That is who God's people of old were. That is who God's people have always been. This is where we need to begin, because it's the only accurate diagnosis of our condition.

But this is not where the gospel ends. And it is not where Isaiah ends. There is, as we saw briefly at the end of chapter four, a light shining at the end of the tunnel.

[ 28 : 41 ] we end chapter five in complete darkness. But very soon the sun is going to appear over the horizon.

We heard earlier from Matthew 21. And in the second of those parables that Beth read for us, Jesus pretty much quotes from Isaiah chapter five.

And Jesus knew his Old Testament pretty well, and so did the Pharisees he was speaking to. So there's little doubting that every one of them has Isaiah five in their heads as Jesus speaks the words we read earlier.

And he does, as Isaiah does, terrifyingly say to some who are listening, therefore I tell you that the kingdom of heaven will be taken away from you.

and given to a people who will produce its fruit. There are people who look religious but will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

[ 29 : 55 ] But Jesus does not say, does he, in those words, that God will forever give up on having a people who will bear good fruit, does he? The end of Isaiah five is the end we all deserve.

But praise God, it is not the end we will all face. Jesus says to the religious looking Pharisees, truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.

There are people who enter the kingdom of God. And why are these people entering the kingdom of God, the tax collectors and the prostitutes? Not because they were secretly more righteous.

Not at all. Jesus outlines the difference as clear as can be when he says to the Pharisees, they will enter the kingdom of God.

And you will not because you did not. repent. They will enter the kingdom of God and you will not because you did not repent.

[ 31 : 16 ] we have sins, each and every one of us. We are guilty and there are no mitigating circumstances.

sin. And we are every one of us living now between the time of our sin and awaiting the coming of deserved judgment, but God graciously delays that judgment.

that we might take the opportunity to confess that we need saved, to repent of our sin and turn to Jesus for the help we so desperately need.

repent. The right response to Isaiah 5 is simply repent. And when we do that, listen to these words from later on in Isaiah.

He says, the Redeemer will come to Zion. the Redeemer will come to Zion to those in Jacob who repent of their sins, declares the Lord.

[ 32 : 34 ] When we repent, the Redeemer comes to us. So we must respond in repentance, but we do so, don't we?

We do so knowing that those of us who in times past have ignored God's voice, can come back to Him, knowing that we will be forgiven of all that we have ever done.

Knowing the Redeemer comes to those who repent. Those are wonderful truths, brothers and sisters. Hold on to them dearly. But we must recognize also that those who do not live in repentance, even if they look as outwardly religious as the Pharisees, for any and all who do not repent and put their trust in God's Son, Isaiah 5 is the end of the story.

Exile, death, fire, and eternal darkness. That is what awaits everyone who does not throw themselves on Jesus for mercy and grace.

Please, friends, do not let that be you. Today is the day of salvation. If only we will repent and believe in our Redeemer.

[ 34 : 20 ] Let us pray. Let us pray. Father, you are a good and loving God, who out of your great goodness provides all that your people need to live lives that bring you glory and honor that you delight in and which we too would delight in.

We confess that in spite of your goodness we have failed to love you and our neighbor as we could and should but have instead lived often for our own gain, often as our own God.

God God and so we pray Father that you would have mercy on us. We repent of our sins but we do so knowing that you have sent your one and only son to bear the punishment that we could never have borne but deserved and so we come before you boldly in eternal thanks for the grace you have shown us in Jesus Christ.

Lord help us now to bear fruit in keeping with repentance and because of your great grace that you have shown to us we delight to praise you now and we look forward to praising you forevermore and bowing before our King Jesus Christ in whose name we pray.

Amen.