

# Isaiah 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Isaiah chapter 5. Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. 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. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 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? 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. 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.

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 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. The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing, surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses without inhabitant.

For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah. 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. 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. Therefore my people go into exile for lack of knowledge.

Their honoured men go hungry, and their multitude is parched with thirst. Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite, and opened its mouth beyond measure, and the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude will go down, her revellers and he who exults in her.

[ 2 : 1 3 ]     Man is humbled, and each one is brought low, and the eyes of the haughty are brought low. But the Lord of hosts is exalted in justice, and the holy God shows himself holy in righteousness.

Then shall the lambs graze as in their pasture, and nomads shall eat among the ruins of the rich. Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood, who draw sin as with cart ropes, 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 call evil good, and good evil, who put darkness for light, and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter.

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

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.

[ 3 : 27 ] 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. 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.

None is weary, none stumbles, none slumbers or sleeps, not a waistband is loose, not a sandal strap broken, their arrows are sharp, all their bows bent, their horses' hoofs seem like flint, and their wheels like the whirlwind.

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. 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 chapter 5 seems to mark the start of a new section of the book, opening with the song of the vineyard. Several commentators, Christopher Seitz being one example, argue that the material of chapter 5 originally formed a single block, with material from chapter 9 verse 8 to 10 verse 34.

[ 4 : 54 ] Chapter 6 verse 1 to 9 verse 6 has, they argue, been inserted within it. This claim is based, among other things, upon the presence of the key phrase, for all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still, which is in verse 25 of this chapter, but also a refrain repeated in the supposed other half of the divided unit that now brackets the inserted section, in chapter 9 verse 12, 17 and 21, and then in chapter 10 verse 4.

This theory recognises the presence of woe oracles in both of the supposedly divided sections. As Brevard Childs rightly notes, however, this theory suffers from such heavy theoretical ballast as to obscure rather than illuminate the biblical text.

The vineyard imagery that we find in the opening verses of chapter 5 is also found elsewhere in scripture. Psalm 80 verses 8 to 16 is perhaps one of the most prominent examples.

You brought a vine out of Egypt. You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it. It took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches.

It sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the river. Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.

[ 6 : 17 ] Turn again, O God of hosts, Look down from heaven and see. Have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted, and for the sun whom you made strong for yourself. They have burned it with fire.

They have cut it down. May they perish at the rebuke of your face. There is a return to the imagery of the vineyard later in Isaiah in chapter 27 verses 2 to 6.

In that day a pleasant vineyard, sing of it. I, the Lord, am its keeper. Every moment I water it. Lest anyone punish it, I keep it night and day. I have no wrath.

Would that I had thorns and briars to battle. I would march against them. I would burn them up together. Or let them lay hold of my protection. Let them make peace with me. Let them make peace with me.

In days to come, Jacob shall take root. Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots, and fill the whole world with fruit. Jesus, of course, famously uses and reworks imagery of the vineyard in his parable of the wicked vinedressers.

[ 7 : 17 ] Imagery used from vineyards is also elsewhere associated with love poetry. The song or parable of the first seven verses draws back from the immediacy of Jerusalem's sin and the judgment that awaits it in Isaiah's day, offering a parable that helps the hearer to grasp the larger reality of Israel's dire condition.

As elsewhere in scripture, a parable can provide an arresting new way of framing and perceiving a situation. Verses 1-2 paint the picture. Verses 3-4 invite the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah to cast judgment.

Verses 5-6 declare the sentence. And verse 7 renders the meaning of the imagery more explicit. Isaiah introduces this passage as a love song sung for the sake of his friend or beloved concerning his friend's vineyard.

Yet any romantic expectations on the hearer's part are soon dashed as the love story the prophet sings swiftly turns sour. In the text, three sets of imagery are artfully fused.

There's the romantic imagery, the arboreal imagery, and legal imagery all interplaying with each other. The vine is also in some sense a bride, and the defendant in a lawsuit, and the planter is also a bridegroom and the wronged party.

[ 8 : 30 ] The prophet is both the singing friend of the bridegroom and a prosecutor of his friend's case against an unfaithful spouse, with the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah serving as the jury in verse 3.

As in Nathan's story of the ewe lamb delivered to David in 2 Samuel chapter 12, the party being judged is presented with a parable calling them to pronounce judgment upon themselves.

You are the vine. The imagery of the song is artfully chosen. The imagery of vineyards and gardens on hills are associated with love poetry in places like the Song of Songs, chapter 1 verse 14, chapter 2 verse 15, or 8 verses 10 to 12.

It also, however, recalls Eden, Noah's vineyard, and also are related to the temple. He built a watchtower in the midst of it. The blessed and good wife is elsewhere compared to a fruitful vine in the centre of the garden of her marriage, bearing good fruit in places like Psalm 128 verse 3.

The chosen vine was to provide the owner with the necessary grapes by which to make high-quality wine. Yet when the fruit was gathered, the fruit was that of wild uncultivated grapes, perhaps subtly hinting at marital infidelity.

[ 9 : 41 ] The Lord challenges the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? The sentence upon the vineyard swiftly follows. Its hedge and wall of protection will be destroyed, allowing wild beasts to ravage it, and it shall be rendered a wasteland bearing thorns and thistles, parched for lack of rain.

In the destruction of the vineyard, the painful themes of the fall in Eden are recalled. Thorns and thistles will grow where once a well-watered and beautiful garden lay. If the heroes of Isaiah's parable were in any doubt, his point is made very explicit in the conclusion.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. The indictment is summed up with a deft poetic twist. He looked for justice, but behold bloodshed.

For righteousness, but behold an outcry. The Lord desired a society of right and just relations. Such justice would be displayed not merely in the deliverance of righteous judgments by the rulers and judges of the people, but also in the economic and social relations among the people more generally.

The indictment involves a play upon words. The word bloodshed looks like the word for justice in the Hebrew, and the word outcry like the word righteousness. It is as if the owner of the vineyard were inspecting its fruit, and although from a distance it looked like the cultivated grapes of righteousness and justice were being born in the vineyard, as he came closer, it became apparent that they were quite the opposite.

[ 11 : 10 ] Only the wild grapes of outcry and bloodshed were to be found. The parable of the vineyard is followed by a litany of woes, addressed to the wild grapes that the nation is producing, identifying various forms of their sin in succession.

Verses 8 to 10 speaks to greed and economic oppression. All of the people were supposed to enjoy the gift of the land. However, wealthy landowners had been accumulating land and driving the poor away from it.

They had been reducing the poor to destitution or to landless and economically vulnerable labour. The Lord would judge such oppressors with the covenant sentence of futility. Their great properties and vast estates would be rendered desolate, and their land would be unfruitful.

The failure of the vineyards of the oppressors to yield to their masters is, of course, a fitting judgment for a people that had only just been likened to a vineyard producing only wild grapes for the one who had planted it.

Verses 11 to 12 address the drunkenness, debauchery, and decadence of a people who ran after wine and devoted themselves to feasting, yet neglected the Lord. They give the entirety of their days to revelry, from when they rise up in the morning to when they lie down in the evening.

[ 12 : 19 ] They are also usurping the place that meditation upon the law ought to have in their lives. Their preoccupation is solely feasting and decadence. The sentence to be cast upon them is once again fitting to their sin.

They would be expelled from the land that they had sought to accumulate to themselves, and from which they had excluded others. Those given to obsessive feasting will go hungry and thirsty.

Indeed, they would be the victims of the enlarged appetite of the grave, which would devour them at its coming great banquet. Just as chapters 2 and 3 had explored the contrast between the Lord and his mountain being exalted, and man in his pride being humbled and brought low, so the Lord's holiness would be demonstrated, while the greed and the proud wicked would be abased.

The land of the rich would become wilderness and waste, grazing land for flocks, and their ruins places where wandering nomads might set up temporary camp. In verses 18 to 19, it is the brazen practical atheism of the people that comes into view and is condemned.

They have committed themselves to the practice of wickedness, as if they were devoting the entirety of their efforts and energies to it, as if they were straining their backs, dragging it along as if with cart ropes.

[ 13 : 32 ] They cynically mock at the justice of the Lord, believing that there is no evidence that the Lord will act in their situation. Along with the practical atheism of the wicked is the perversion described in verses 20 to 23.

They care little about truth and readily pervert justice for bribes, denying people righteous judgment in their cases. They celebrate what is evil, while condemning what is good.

Many of those being judged are presumably among those who are supposed to teach the people, and yet they are compounding their darkness. The sentence upon this wicked people, upon the perverse vineyard, is pronounced in verses 24 and 25.

They would be reduced to stubble, dry grass, and rotten wood that would be good for nothing but fuel for the fire. All of this is on account of their rejection of the word and law of the Lord.

From these metaphors, we move to more literal images, as the Lord came upon his people in judgment, his advent being described in theophanic language. Their corpses would be scattered like refuse in the midst of the streets.

[ 14 : 35 ] One of the great lessons that the people needed to learn was that the Lord was over all of the nations, the nations that terrified them, with whom they were compromising in their foreign policy out of fear.

All operate at the command and behest of the Lord. Verses 26 to 30 present the Lord summoning nations against his people. The nations are powerful, arrayed for battle, and yet it is the Lord alone who commands their actions.

These enemies, empowered by the Lord, are described as if they were relentless natural forces. Their horses' hooves are compared to flint, the wheels like whirlwind, the sound that they make to the roaring of lions, their actions to those of a predatory beast, and their coming like the inrush of a growling sea or dark storm clouds.

Just as the Lord controls the elements and the meteorological forces of the world, so he controls the powers of the nations, and he will wield them against his unfaithful people.

A question to consider. What aspects of a vineyard, its fruit, its working, its produce, and its processes are used as parables and prophetic imagery here and elsewhere in Scripture?