

this reference harks back to that time when God's people were ungovernable; it is not something we might easily pick up on today, but it may well have been something which people recognised in Isaiah's day.

Application

As God's people the Church, we know that Jesus has saved us and that we have access to the Throne of Grace through Jesus. This is basic to our Christian beliefs, and it is hard to go back into the Old Testament and read that God punishes His people for their sins. Surely, we say, God does not do that; He is a loving God and He has sent Jesus to save us. I do not disagree that Jesus has come to save us and that we are now God's people in a new era of salvation, rather than the era of anticipation of the Messiah in which the people of Israel lived. However, we should not try and suggest that sin or its consequences have changed; sin is still sin, whoever commits it and the consequences of most sins are the same whoever commits it. Jesus has cracked the problem of how sin separates us from God and we depend upon that, but the world in which we live is still the same.

We can learn from the 'Song of the Vineyard' that God is still in the business of growing vines; we know this because Jesus calls us 'branches of the vine' in John's Gospel (John 15:2f.). Our options therefore are to accept the Lord's rule, His hand upon our lives and sometimes His 'pruning' (John 15:2), or to reject it and find that we do not bear the fruit He requires and we become as it says in our passage today; 'wild grapes' (5:2)! If it is the second path we choose, then we will place ourselves in the same position as the people of Judah to whom Isaiah spoke this prophecy. God will act justly against all who choose not to do His will. Unfortunately, it is still easy for people, even church people who would call themselves Christians, to live a life which is not in obedience to the Lord, and repeating the sins of past generations. If we are truly born again of the Spirit of God then we are pruned in order to bear fruit, but if we have gone our own way then there is no escaping God's justice.

Questions (for use in group)

1. Why do people sin today, and why do Christian people battle with sin when they know that Jesus has died to save them?
2. How does the Lord act in judgement now, when His own people do not do what He has asked of them?
3. Is it right to think of the church as like a 'vineyard' in the light of this passage?

Discipleship

This passage presents us with a picture of God constantly at work helping His own people, but of His work in us not always being appreciated and fruitful. If we read in John 15 we can see how Jesus talked about branches of the vine which 'bear fruit', and those which do not. Do you feel like a fruitful branch or not? And is what you feel really true of your life and what you do? The only way to sort out the difference between these two questions, if there is any, is to talk about it to someone else!

Final Prayer

Your love, O Lord, draws me onwards, through all the fears and doubts, the trials and temptations I experience. Your love has drawn me to the Cross where, inexplicably, all the things of this world fall away and I am empty before You! Fill me up O Lord, and make me worthy of my call! AMEN

Prayer

Call us, O Lord, from Your glorious throne on high;
Speak to us, O Lord, through the world of natural beauty;
Address us, O Lord, in the joys and hardships of our earthly lives;
Talk with us, O Lord, in the midst of our deepest, heartfelt feelings;
Tell us, O Lord, how to understand the many things we hear.
Your voice, O Lord, is always true: Praise You!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Clothes

Vast amounts of money are made by the clothing industry, and large numbers of women and men are dominated by the fashion desires which are fed by that industry. Pray that God's people might gain a sense of perspective when dealing with their clothing, including issues of fashion, make-up, shoes and toiletries. Pray for godly modesty to be taught, practiced and appreciated by God's people.

Meditation

Be comforted, you who have felt the power of sin,
There is One who has the victory over Satan's evil sway.
Be strengthened, you who know cruel oppression,
There is One who has the courage to bring you freedom.
Be heartened, you who struggle with your burdens,
There is One who takes the weight you suffer on Himself.
Be encouraged, you who need to hear good news,
There is One who broke through death to bring you love.
Be enlightened, you who have the heart to understand,
There is One who taught the way of life, and lived it perfectly.
Be enthused, you who are willing to speak your faith,
There is One who works through you in authority and power!
Be blessed, you who have walked in hope and joy,
There is One you know who has a place for you in heaven!

Bible Study - Isaiah 5:1-7

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| <p>¹ Let me sing for the One I love
my love-song about His
vineyard:
The One I love had a vineyard
on the side of a fertile hill.</p> | <p>⁴ What more could I do for my
vineyard
that I have not done for it?
When I looked for good grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?</p> |
| <p>² He dug it, cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
He built a watchtower within it,
and carved out a wine vat in it;
He expected a good crop of grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes!</p> | <p>⁵ So I will now tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it will be eaten up;
I will break down its wall,
and it will be trampled down.</p> |
| <p>³ So now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah:
Judge, if you please,</p> | <p>⁶ I will set it aside for destruction;
it will not be pruned or hoed,</p> |

*and it will be overgrown
with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds
so that they do not rain on it.*

⁷ *The vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,*

*and the people of Judah
are plants in which he delights;
he expected justice, but saw
bloodshed;
righteousness, but heard a cry!*

Review

This passage is called the 'Song of the Vineyard'. It is a tragic poem which is well known amongst the prophecies of Isaiah because the idea of God's people being His vineyard is one which is well used in scripture. The story is simple. Isaiah recites the poem on behalf of the Lord, who likens His work with His people to that of a farmer who prepares and plants a vineyard using all the best methods, but discovers that it does not produce the sweet cultivated grapes required for wine-making, but bitter wild grapes which are unusable. The Lord is therefore forced to do away with his vines and abandon the vineyard (5:6).

If you have followed these studies of Isaiah, your head will now be spinning! Yesterday, we read from chapter 4 the most sublime promises of God to those who would survive the coming troubles, and for whom the Lord would provide the perfect protection of His presence by 'cloud, smoke and fire' (4:5)! Yet despite this, Isaiah had previously spoken the most shattering of prophecies against the arrogant women and the failed leadership of Jerusalem (ch.3). The whole book swings ever more violently between extremes; at one moment we hear of the Lord's passion and love for His people and then in the very next part we read of His wrath in judgement against the sins of His people!

We have already concluded that Isaiah believed that the sins of the people would indeed have their due consequences, and occasionally, Isaiah prophesies war as a consequence of Judea's sin (as in 1:7,8; 3:2,3; 3:25,26), but he also says that God has a purpose for some of the 'survivors' of His people (4:2) through whom He intends to achieve His plans for the world. However, some might say that His approach to His people was 'two-faced'; for as we read through Isaiah it is as if we do not know what we are going to get from the Lord next; love and compassion or justice and retribution! This criticism is a little unfair, because there is one other good and logical explanation of God's attitude to His people: He is heartbroken. Most of us are aware of the complex feelings we all have when we have been rejected by someone we love. These feelings combine the passions of love with abhorrence, and it would be fair to say that Isaiah's prophecies paint a picture of God as One who is certainly heartbroken that His people have rejected Him. Sin has its consequences and will be met with punishment, but God's love is not simply destructive; He has higher plans and purposes (see chapter 4).

If we do not have this understanding firmly fixed in our minds than we are liable to read Isaiah 5 without the necessary balanced approach. Undoubtedly, this poem reads like a religious horror story, but from all we know of Isaiah's prophecies so far, the 'Song of the Vineyard' (together with the rest of chapter 5) begs the very important question; what therefore will the Lord do about this sorry state of affairs? The Lord does indeed have a great plan which He is about to reveal through the life and work of Isaiah, but the introductory passages in Isaiah (before the famous 'call of Isaiah' in Isaiah 6) serve to highlight the critical tension which arose between God and His people. Something had to happen, because the relationship between God and His people had broken down.

Going Deeper

We will look further at some of the details of the poem, though its general theme is readily understandable. What is interesting, however, is how the 'picture' of the vineyard

appears in the Old Testament prior to Isaiah's use of it in this prophecy. Secondly, if we look in the New Testament, we will find that Jesus used the picture of the vine and the vineyard at critical points in His own ministry. The 'Song of the Vineyard' both built on scripture and provided a base for what was to come.

The setting in the 'Song of the Vineyard'

The 'Song of the Vineyard' consists of four 'stanzas' of Hebrew poetry, and in the first of these (5:1,2) it is the prophet Isaiah who speaks (or sings!), declaring what the Lord has done. He describes the normal actions taken by someone who wanted to grow a vineyard, choosing the ground, clearing the stones, selecting the right plants and planting them, building the right structures to look after the vine and keep out unwanted animals, and creating a winepress out of some nearby rocky outcrop. In just the same way that Jesus would one day tell a parable (see later), Isaiah created a word picture and then came to a conclusion, which in this case was startling. What should have resulted in good fruit had produced 'wild grapes'!

This was not just a matter of 'bad' being the end result instead of 'good', for anyone listening to Isaiah would have known even without the explanation given in the fourth stanza (verse 7), that 'the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel and the people of Judah are the plants in which he delights' (5:7). The point was this; the vines were 'chosen', but they produced 'wild' fruit. In other words, the life work and witness of God's people had proved to be no better than that of Gentiles or pagans! This was a scandalous state of affairs in Judea and Jerusalem, and no doubt some who heard Isaiah say this could hardly believe their ears. This was Isaiah's sharp way of putting across what he had been saying since the beginning of his prophecies; which was that when the people of God sinned, they behaved in a way which was no better than the nations around them; they were unjust, they impoverished the poor and they worshipped idols (1:1-31).

The questions about the vineyard posed by God

What should be done about this state of affairs? This is the question addressed in stanzas 2 (5:3,4) and 3 (5:5,6), and in both of these, Isaiah changed to reporting the speech of God instead of speaking himself. Isaiah had set the scene, but it was up to God Himself to declare the consequences of what had happened, and in the second stanza, He began by asking what more could He have done? Surely He had done enough for the vineyard to be successful? This was reasonable to ask, but the song holds an amazing paradoxical twist, for we realise that God was speaking to the people of Judah themselves! What did they make of what had happened? What more could God have done for them (5:4)? Why did they continue to sin (5:4)? God used the song as a method of asking His own people why they had sinned against Him! In Hebrew, the grammar of a question conveys whether the expected answer is a 'Yes' or a 'No'. In verses 3 and 4, the grammar of the question implies the answer 'No'. In reality, the breakdown between God and His people was the responsibility of the people, the 'vineyard', and not of God.

In the third stanza, God speaks for a second time, but this time to pronounce judgement. It was his intention to allow a comprehensive course of action which would render the vineyard unusable, firstly by leaving the plot open to the animals and the beasts of the field to eat the plants and then let it become overgrown (5:5) with weeds and 'thorns and briars' (5:6) followed by the greatest curse of all in that part of the world; drought (5:6). It is not certain, but it is just possible that Isaiah was aware of a previous reference to 'thorns and briars' in Scripture. This comes in Judges 9:14,15, where the 'thorns and briars' otherwise translated 'bramble' figure in a poem at the heart of the book of Judges, which sarcastically describes the most lawless period of time in the life of Israel and Judah. Without going into the full meaning of the passage from Judges, Isaiah's use of