

“The Song of the Vineyard”

Isaiah 5:1-7

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Vineyards are plentiful in the land of Israel. Much of the climate is perfectly suited for it. There is a hot, humid season stretching from April to October with very little rain, and a cold, rainy season stretching from October to March. For thousands of years farmers in Israel have been carefully irrigating their fields to bring water directly to the roots of the vines, and the dryness of the growing season helps prevent a variety of grape diseases. The net effect is that there are a large multitude of vineyards, some small, some large, producing a total of about 36 million bottles of wine annually. The wine has long been considered of good quality; in the book of Deuteronomy the wine was identified as one of the seven best delicacies in the land, and in Roman times wine was exported from the Holy Land all the way to Rome. Today you can go on wine tours in Israel, touring the wineries and tasting the wine. When I was there in January, our group did not visit any wineries, but we certainly saw plenty of vineyards in plains and along the slopes of hills from the windows of our bus.

Every vineyard has a wine press, an area or a chamber where the juice is pressed out of the grapes and collected. In ancient Israel these were typically built into the ground, often carved directly out of stone, like in this photo here. The grapes were pressed in that large rectangular area, and then the juice flowed down into the round chamber in the front of this picture, where it was then collected.

So it is no surprise that there are many references to wine and vineyards in the Bible. “I am the vine, you are the branches,” said Jesus (John 15:5). “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard,” said Jesus (Matthew 20:1). There are a variety of laws in the Old Testament about the proper care of vineyards. One of the wicked kings of Israel stole a vineyard after killing its owner. The “capable wife” in Proverbs 31 bought a field and planted a vineyard in it. The young lovers in the Song of Solomon went for a walk and shared their love in a vineyard. And in the book of Isaiah, we find a “love song” concerning a vineyard.

Now Isaiah was a prophet, one of the most significant prophets in ancient Israel. This is how Michelangelo depicted him on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The book of Isaiah tells us that he prophesied during the reigns of four different kings, stretching over a period of some forty or fifty or maybe even sixty years, which suggests that Isaiah started his ministry fairly early in his life. We know practically nothing about his childhood and youth. At some point he got married and had two or three sons. He lived during a tumultuous period in Israel’s history; he lived in the southern kingdom of Judah

(probably in or near Jerusalem) during the time when the northern kingdom of Israel was attacked, invaded, and conquered by the Assyrian Empire. Judah was threatened too, and the Israelite kings entered into various alliances to try to keep the Assyrian army at bay. There were times when Isaiah himself gave advice to the king about the best course of action in the midst of all this political turmoil.

Primarily, Isaiah saw his purpose in life as someone who *proclaimed the word of the Lord*. He would hear, or sense, messages from God, and he would convey those to the leaders and to the people. He seems to have written these messages, or had someone write them for him, in the form of poetry. A lot of what he had to say basically had to do with telling people that they needed to mend their ways and do God's will. It was not always a popular message; people often don't like having their sin pointed out to them! But, he was passionate about his faith, passionate about his God, and he fervently wished that his beloved country would have the will to actually *do* what God was telling them to do.

So, fairly on in the book, and perhaps fairly early on in his ministry, maybe when he was still a young man, he composes this poem. He calls it a "love song." "Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard." Now before you get all romantic, let's be clear: his "beloved" is *God*. He's not composing a sonnet for his lovely bride. He's writing this poem for his beloved *Lord*. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength" – remember that line? what Jesus identified as the greatest commandment of all? – Isaiah *loved* his God. So much so that he writes God this love song.

It begins: "My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill." You can envision the scene, one of those lovely vineyards in Israel. "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 expected it to yield grapes." The vineyard owner goes to a lot of trouble clearing the field, planting it with the best of his vines, building a watchtower, carving out a wine press. He's expecting some *reward* for all his trouble, some good *fruit of the vine* to be savored and enjoyed. But there's a problem: "it yielded wild grapes." Grapes not suitable for pressing, not suitable for fermenting. No good wine is going to come out of *this* vineyard.

Now this is all a metaphor, of course. God did not *really* plant a vineyard. He did not *really* clear a field, build a watchtower, carve out a wine press. But what *did* God plant?

God planted the people of Israel and Judah. He had rescued them from slavery, brought them to a good land "flowing with milk and honey," under the leadership of Moses and Joshua, his successor, a land where they could flourish and prosper – *if* they did God's will. Instead of a watchtower, the people of Israel had the Law of Moses; instead of a wine press, the people of Israel had the ark of the covenant, the place from which God's mercy and grace flowed. God had gone to a considerable amount of trouble *planting* these people in that land, giving them the words and the tools that they needed to survive and thrive. And what did Israel do with all of those gifts?

For the most part ... they just squandered them. "The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!" In a variety of different passages, Isaiah names the sins of the people: there's corruption, there's greed, there's injustice, there's bribery; there are thieves and murderers; orphans are not defended and widows are not protected; there is hypocrisy and idolatry; the people are

haughty; the poor are crushed; the people do what they want, without any consideration of God's will.

Sound familiar? I'm not sure we've changed a whole lot in 28 centuries.

But this "love song" does more than just lament the sorry state of the vineyard. It looks for where the blame lies. Is it *God's* fault that the people are so rebellious? "Judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?" Why, indeed? Had God *failed* in some way? Was there something God should have *done*, that he didn't? He had given them freedom, he had guided them through the wilderness, he had fed them with milk and honey, he had saved them from enemies, he had made it clear – *abundantly* clear – what his hopes and expectations were, he had sent a number of different prophets to remind the people of his will – *where did the problem lie?* Was it with *him*?

No. God was not at fault. He had given them the freedom to choose. They just ... chose poorly.

So, there would be consequences. When you choose to be disobedient and rebellious towards God ... God's not going to just let that slide. "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." There are wild animals out there that want to come in and ravage the fruit. Wild animals ... in the form of foreign oppressors and invaders. "I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns." There's going to be violence in the land, violence and destruction. Enemies of Israel will come in and ravage the vineyard, ravage the people. These beautiful vineyards will turn into wastelands. The people will suffer ... because they kept making the wrong choices.

It's a love song. It's not an ordinary love song, to be sure. But it *is* a love song. A song about *unrequited* love, *one-sided* love. God did all those things, gave all those blessings, because he *loved* those people. And they spurned him, abandoned him, forsake him. God's heart was broken.

So the question is ... how is God's heart, *now*? How is God feeling about *us*, now? He has showered *us* with blessing upon blessing, grace upon grace. He has shown us the way; *given* us the way; *laid down his life for us*, the ultimate act of love, self-sacrifice, on the cross. He did that not just for those of us sitting here in this sanctuary, not just for those of us attending worship at churches around the world this very day. He did it for the *whole world*. For every single last human being on this entire planet. So how are we doing? Is there any corruption in our society today? Any greed, injustice, or bribery? Are there any thieves or murders? Any undefended orphans or unprotected widows? Any hypocrisy or idolatry to be seen? Anybody haughty? Anybody crushing the poor? Anybody doing whatever they want, without any consideration of God's will? We're doing *fine*, right? Aren't we?

Somebody tell me ... somebody *please* tell me ... that our society is not guilty of the same sins. That we've *fixed* it all, that we're better people than they were. Somebody? Anybody?

Okay. Maybe we're not much better. Maybe we're not *any* better. If that's the case – if God's beloved vineyard is producing wild grapes, unsuitable for making wine – *what are we going to do?*

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