

LESSON 3

The Vineyard That Failed

What more could I have done for my vineyard than I did? Why, when I expected a yield of good grapes, did it yield worthless grapes?

— Isaiah 5:4

God did everything a vineyard could need, yet it produced worthless grapes, and for the first time in the book, He doesn't say what comes after the judgment.

WHERE WE ARE

Still about 740 BC, near the end of Uzziah's reign. Judah is rich, well defended, and at peace. Assyria has a new king, Tiglath-pileser III, who is already swallowing the small states to the north, but nobody in Jerusalem is worried yet. Within living memory, an earthquake has shaken the land. Isaiah stands up before a crowd and sings. The question this chapter answers: what does God do when He has done everything for a people and gotten nothing back?

Introduction

IN CHAPTER 5, ISAIAH DOES SOMETHING NO PROPHET HAD DONE QUITE THIS WAY. He sings a song. It's a love song, or at least it sounds like one, about a man and a piece of ground he poured himself into. Everybody in the crowd knew a vineyard. Most of them had worked in one. They knew what it cost to clear a hillside of stones and how many years you waited before the first real crop. So, they listened, took the owner's side, and somewhere around the fourth verse, they realized they were the vineyard.

Then come six woes. *Woe* is a funeral word. It's what you say when the body goes by, and Isaiah says it six times over people who are still alive and still at the party. Land, liquor, cynicism, moral relabeling, self-confidence, bribery. None of it is idolatry, and none of it is murder. These are the ordinary sins of a comfortable nation, and God calls it worthless grapes.

Chapters 1 and 4 ended with a survivor and a promise. Chapter 5 doesn't. Read it to the last verse and notice what's missing.

A Love Song with a Trap in It (5:1–7)

I will sing about the one I love, a song about my loved one's vineyard: The one I love had a vineyard on a very fertile hill, 5:1.

Isaiah leaves out the owner's name. He calls him *the one I love* and lets us make a few assumptions. Then he lists the work. *He broke up the soil, cleared it of stones, and planted it with the finest vines. He built a tower in the middle of it and even dug out a winepress there, 5:2.* That's the full job. Good ground, good stock, a permanent tower rather than a lean-to, and a vat cut into the rock because he expected to need it for

years.¹⁹ Nothing was skipped. *He expected it to yield good grapes, but it yielded worthless grapes.* The Hebrew word is blunter than the English. *Stink-fruit.*

Then the singer stops singing, and the owner starts talking. *So now, residents of Jerusalem and men of Judah, please judge between me and my vineyard,* 5:3. He is asking the crowd to be the jury. *What more could I have done for my vineyard than I did?* 5:4. There is only one honest answer, and everybody listening gave it. Nothing. It is the same move Nathan made on David with a story about a lamb, and it works the same way. The audience convicts the defendant before they find out who the defendant is.²⁰

The sentence comes first, 5:5–6. Hedge gone, wall down, no pruning, no hoeing, thorns and briars, and then the line no farmer could hear without flinching: *I will also give orders to the clouds that rain should not fall on it.* A farmer doesn't command clouds. That's when the crowd knew who was singing.

Then verse 7: *For the vineyard of the Lord of Armies is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah, the plant he delighted in. He expected justice but saw injustice; he expected righteousness but heard cries of despair.* The CSB cannot show you what Isaiah did with the last two lines. The Hebrew for *justice* is *mishpat*, and the word for the bloodshed he found instead is *mispach*. *Righteousness* is *tsedaqah*; *cries of despair* is *tse'aqah*. The words look alike and sound alike.²¹ From a distance the crop looked right. Up close it was the wrong thing wearing the right thing's clothes.

What did it mean to them? That the whole covenant history, from the exodus to the land to the temple on the hill, was the owner's work in the vineyard, and that the harvest God came for was a society where the weak were not crushed. He didn't get it. What does it mean now? That the question in 5:4 is still the question God asks us, and it still has only one honest answer.

Six Woes, Part One (5:8–17)

Now Isaiah shows the grapes.

Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field until there is no more room and you alone are left in the land, 5:8. In Israel the land belonged to God, and each family held its piece on loan, Leviticus 25:23. Buying up your neighbor's field until you could stand on your porch and see nothing you did not own was not shrewd. It was a way of undoing what God did at the conquest. So the houses empty out, 5:9, and the ground itself quits cooperating: a ten-acre vineyard gives six gallons, ten bushels of seed give back one, 5:10. A tenth of what went in.²²

The second woe is the party. *Woe to those who rise early in the morning in pursuit of beer, who linger into the evening, inflamed by wine,* 5:11. The problem isn't the wine. It's what the wine crowded out. *They do not perceive the Lord's actions, and they do not see the work of his hands,* 5:12. God was moving in the world, Assyria was on the march, and Judah's leading men had music on and couldn't hear it.

Two *therefores* answer two woes, and each punishment is cut to fit. The land-grabbers lose the land. *Therefore my people will go into exile because they lack knowledge,* 5:13.²³ The drinkers go thirsty. Then the picture turns grim. *Therefore Sheol enlarges its throat and opens wide its enormous jaws, and down go Zion's dignitaries, her masses, her crowds, and those who celebrate in her!* 5:14. Sheol is the Old Testament's name

for the place of the dead, pictured here as a mouth that never closes. Notice who goes in. The revelers. They go down in the character they built up here, still celebrating, still not looking.²⁴

In the middle of the wreckage, Isaiah puts down the refrain from chapter 2. *Humanity is brought low, each person is humbled, and haughty eyes are humbled. But the Lord of Armies is exalted by his justice, and the holy God demonstrates his holiness through his righteousness*, 5:15–16. Everything that goes up comes down; the only One who stays up never went up, because He was always there. Then the last line, which sounds almost peaceful. *Lambs will graze as if in their own pastures, and resident aliens will eat among the ruins of the rich*, 5:17. The estates of verse 8 have new tenants, and they are sheep and drifters.

Six Woes, Part Two (5:18–24)

The first two woes were about what Judah did with money. The next four are about what Judah did with God.

Woe to those who drag iniquity with cords of deceit and pull sin along with cart ropes, 5:18. Picture an ox in harness. These men are not stumbling into sin; they are hitched to it and pulling, and the rope is getting thicker. What they say next is the chapter's most chilling line. *Let him hurry up and do his work quickly so that we can see it! Let the plan of the Holy One of Israel take place so that we can know it!* 5:19. Isaiah had been preaching that God was at work. Their answer was: prove it. Show us, and then we'll believe. Until then, don't expect us to change anything.

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter, 5:20. Nobody in Jerusalem had abolished the law. They'd relabeled it. What used to be shameful got a better name, and once a thing has a better name nobody feels guilty doing it.

Woe to those who consider themselves wise and judge themselves clever, 5:21. That is the woe underneath the other five, because Be your own standard and you have no way to find out you're wrong.

The sixth woe closes the circle. *Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, who are champions at pouring beer, who acquit the guilty for a bribe and deprive the innocent of justice*, 5:22–23. *Heroes* is the word for mighty men, the warriors of David's day. Judah's mighty men could hold their liquor, and those were the men sitting on the bench when a bribe came across it.

Therefore. Verse 24 answers verse 19. They told God to hurry. *As a tongue of fire consumes straw and as dry grass shrivels in the flame*, that's how fast it will be. And the reason is stated without a figure of speech: *they have rejected the instruction of the Lord of Armies, and they have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel*.

The Hand Still Raised (5:25–30)

Therefore the Lord's anger burned against his people. He raised his hand against them and struck them; the mountains quaked, and their corpses were like garbage in the streets, 5:25. That is the earthquake in Uzziah's day, the one Amos used to date his book, Amos 1:1. Judah had already felt the ground move once. Isaiah

says it was a warning, and then he says the sentence that will follow this book for five more chapters: In all this, his anger has not turned away, and *his hand is still raised to strike*.²⁵

What's the hand going to do? *He raises a signal flag for the distant nations and whistles for them from the ends of the earth*, 5:26. The nation here is Assyria, and the One who whistles for them is God, but the point is in the whistle. God doesn't negotiate with empires. He whistles, and they come, *quickly and swiftly*. The men who told God to hurry are about to see how fast He can move.²⁶

Then the army, 5:27–29. Nobody tired, nobody asleep, no belt loose, no sandal strap broken, arrows sharpened, hooves like flint, wheels like a whirlwind, a roar like a lion's, and *no one can rescue it*. And then the last verse. *On that day they will roar over it, like the roaring of the sea. When one looks at the land, there will be darkness and distress; light will be obscured by clouds*, 5:30.

That's the end. If God has done all that could be done, and the answer was stink-fruit, then what is left for God to do? Isaiah lets the question hang. Nothing in the chapter answers it.²⁷

Looking to Christ

Seven hundred years later, Jesus stood in the temple courts and started a story. *A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug out a pit for a winepress, and built a watchtower*, Mark 12:1. Every priest listening heard Isaiah 5 in the first sentence, and Jesus meant them to.

He changed one thing. In Isaiah's song, the vineyard fails. In Jesus' story, the vineyard is fine; it's the tenants who fail, beating the servants sent for the fruit and finally killing the owner's son. The chief priests understood exactly what He had done with the old song, *because they knew he had spoken this parable against them*, Mark 12:12. Isaiah's crowd convicted itself and went home. This crowd convicted itself and went looking for a way to arrest Him.

But there is more. Isaiah left the vineyard with no grapes and no hope. The night before He died, Jesus said, *I am the true vine*, John 15:1. Where Israel failed to bear fruit for God, He did. And if we stay in Him, we bear what the hillside in Isaiah 5 never did.

Applying the Text

Answer the owner's question honestly. *What more could I have done?* Before you list what God has not given you, list what He has. You are standing in a vineyard God cleared, planted, and built a tower in. The question isn't whether He's done enough. It's what's growing.

Take the quiet woes seriously. Nobody in chapter 5 bowed to an idol or shed blood on an altar. They bought property, threw parties, made jokes about God's timing, updated their vocabulary, trusted their own judgment, and took care of their friends in court. Not one of the six is against the law anywhere. God called all six a funeral.

Don't dare God to hurry. The men in 5:19 wanted to see before they would believe, and they got to see. The whole of Isaiah is going to press one thing on you: trust before the evidence is in, because after the evidence is in it isn't trust anymore.

Watch what you've renamed. Verse 20 is the mechanism by which a whole society stops feeling guilty. Nobody argues that darkness is fine. They just call it light. Ask what you used to call sin, and what kinder word you've found for it.

Remember who was crying. Six times Isaiah says the word people said at a graveside, and every time he says it over neighbors who were still alive. He wasn't scolding them. He was grieving them, out loud, while there was still time.²⁸

For Discussion

1. Trace the trap in 5:1–7. At what verse do you think the crowd realized who the owner was? What had they already agreed to by then?

2. The six woes cover land, drink, cynicism, relabeling, self-confidence, and bribery. Which one would have been hardest to see as a sin from inside Jerusalem? Which is hardest to see from inside your own life?

3. God's punishment in verses 13–14 fits the sin in verses 8–12 point for point. What does that tell you about how God judges?

4. The people in 5:19 say they'll believe God's plan when they see it. What is wrong with that as a way to relate to God? Have you ever made the same bargain, even quietly?

5. Chapter 5 ends with no promise, no remnant, and no light. Why do you think Isaiah put it there, right before the throne-room vision of chapter 6?

6. Jesus rewrote the song so that the tenants fail rather than the vineyard. If He were telling that parable to your congregation, which side of it would you be on?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 4: The Year King Uzziah Died (Isaiah 6:1–7)

The darkness at the end of chapter 5 lingers as chapter 6 opens. Uzziah, the king who reigned for fifty-two years, is dead. He died the way he had lived for the last decade, alone and unclean. Then Isaiah looks up.

Before you come: read Isaiah 6:1–7 slowly, twice. Write down every word in it that has to do with fire or burning, and beside each one, whether that fire is a threat or a mercy.

¹⁹ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 69. On 5:1–2 he takes the vineyard as a familiar figure Isaiah's hearers would have known from elsewhere (cf. Ps 80:8; Jer 2:21) and reads the owner's actions as ordinary viticulture rather than an allegory of specific mercies, the single point being that nothing was left undone; the tower is a permanent structure rather than the seasonal hut of 1:8, and the vat is cut into rock for permanence.

²⁰ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah* 1–39, [[PAGE]]. On 5:1–7 he treats the song as an extended parable rather than an allegory and compares its function to Nathan's story of the lamb in 2 Sam 12:1–10, both designed to trap hearers who don't see the application coming; the beloved language of verse 1 is a deliberate disguise so the audience will condemn the vineyard before learning they are it.

²¹ Motyer, *Isaiah*, [[PAGE]]. On 5:7 he sets out the paired wordplays, *mišpāṭ* against *mišpāḥ* and *šēdāqā* against *šē'āqā*, words that look and sound nearly identical, and cites Kidner's rendering, "he looked for right but, behold, riot"; the point is that the outward form was in place while the substance was its opposite.

²² Motyer, *Isaiah*, [[PAGE]]. On 5:10 he explains the measures: a bath is about six gallons, ten acres is literally ten yokes, the ground ten teams could plow in a day, and a homer equals ten ephahs, so the forecast yield is a tenth of the seed sown.

²³ Motyer, *Isaiah*, [[PAGE]]. On 5:13 he cautions that exile is too precise, since Isaiah forecasts only captivity under a superior power rather than the Babylonian exile as such, and notes that the verb could be read as already accomplished, the people being slaves to appetite before any army arrived.

²⁴ Motyer, *Isaiah*, [[PAGE]]. On 5:14 he insists that the description of brawlers and revelers is not decoration: those who go down to Sheol enter it in the character they forged on earth, spiritually insensitive and unready to meet God.

²⁵ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah* 1–39, [[PAGE]]. On 5:25 he reads the first half of the verse as a past event, the earthquake of Uzziah's day dated by Amos 1:1 to about 765–760 BC, mentioned to warn the hearers that the hand which struck once is still raised.

²⁶ Motyer, *Isaiah*, [[PAGE]]. On 5:26–28 he observes that the Lord's merest gesture, a flag and a whistle, brings the strongest army on earth without delay, and that the cynical request that God hurry in verse 19 finds its answer in the swift onset of the invader.

²⁷ Motyer, *Isaiah*, [[PAGE]]. On 5:30 he notes that the chapter ends in the same hopelessness with which it began, the third movement of Isaiah's preface working out its own logic: if there is nothing left for grace to do, the light has gone out, and the flashes of hope in 1:25–27 and 4:2–6 look like what might have been.

²⁸ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, [[PAGE]]. On the woe oracle he traces the form to the funeral lament (1 Kgs 13:30; Jer 22:18) and concludes that Isaiah is weeping over people he loves rather than lecturing them, which is why the chapter is full of death: empty mansions, the descent into Sheol, rotting roots, corpses in the streets.