

Lesson 5 Isaiah 5 Sin and Grace

Introduction

We are in the prologue, the first section of the first book of Isaiah. This is Diagnosis and Prognosis. Isaiah gives us a diagnosis of Judah's spiritual state. It's not good. He also provides the prognosis, that is, he tells us the consequences we can expect to follow Judah's spiritual disease if left untreated.

We have three sections in this prologue. Chapter 1 was *Sin and Experience*. Isaiah gave us insight into the national, religious, and social condition of Judah. Chapter 2-4 was *Sin and Election*. Isaiah continued to diagnose the religious and social situation in Judah while also raising for us the difficult question of a chosen people. He followed a vision of ideal Jerusalem, with a sad description of actual Jerusalem. We have to ask, "Will these sinful, apostate people really fill the streets of a new Jerusalem, simply because some time in the past God decided to make their ancestors His chosen people?" The answer was, "No. No, they will not fill the streets of heavenly Jerusalem." The election of the nation of Israel was an election for a special purpose in salvation history. They were chosen to receive God's Covenant Law. They were chosen to be His representatives. They were not chosen for guaranteed, mass salvation. Individual Jews still had a choice to make regarding their personal relationship with God. According to Isaiah's vision, only a remnant will participate in the glory of future Jerusalem. They will participate along with a remnant from many peoples, but not with the majority of Israelites.

We now move into the third and last section of our preface. In chapter 5 Isaiah raises the issue of *Sin and Grace*. When we think of grace from a New Covenant perspective, we tend to think of the specific grace of Christ's atonement. That is the free gift of grace given for our forgiveness. Grace as a free gift can apply more broadly to all the gifts God gives. Paul details gifts of grace lavished on Israel as the chosen people when he laments for them at the beginning of Romans 9.

¹ I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit,
² that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were
accursed, *separated* from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh,
⁴ who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and
the giving of the Law and the *temple* service and the promises, ⁵ whose are the fathers, and
from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

God has done so much for His chosen people. Is there a point where God's grace stops coming? How should God feel when His good gifts are ignored or thrown back into His face? Does the holiness of God demand, at some point, a righteous response of wrath? Can the people of God continue living off the sincerity of their ancestors without a response of their own to the grace of God?

This section divides into two parts. Isaiah begins with the metaphor of a vineyard as a description of God's grace to Israel. He follows with six woes that contrast Israel's sin against the backdrop of God's kindness.

What should be done with such a people? Is there hope for such a people? This final section of the prologue offers none. We begin with the metaphor of the vineyard in Isaiah 5:1-7.

Israel as God's Vineyard (5:1-7)

¹ Let me sing now for my well-beloved My well-beloved had a vineyard	A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard. on a fertile hill.
² He dug it all around, removed its stones, And He built a tower in the middle of it Then He expected <i>it</i> to produce <i>good</i> grapes,	And planted it with the choicest vine. And also hewed out a wine vat in it; But it produced <i>only</i> worthless ones.
³ "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem Judge between Me	and men of Judah, and My vineyard.
⁴ "What more was there to do for My vineyard Why, when I expected <i>it</i> to produce <i>good</i> grapes	that I have not done in it? did it produce worthless ones?

- ⁵ “So now let Me tell you
I will remove its hedge
I will break down its wall
⁶ “I will lay it waste;
But briars and thorns will come up.
I will also charge the clouds
to rain no rain on it.”
⁷ For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel
And the men of Judah His delightful plant.
Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.

Isaiah begins the poem from the intimate perspective of a lover singing a song about her beloved. There is some similarity to the Biblical book Song of Solomon. But there is also a lot of difference. There, the vineyard is the body of the lover. That whole poem is a love song. Isaiah’s beginning here sounds like a love song, but we quickly see that it is not. The vineyard is not the body of the beloved. The vineyard is something precious to the beloved. Isaiah has drawn us to view God very positively. We who love God are asked to consider the case of Judah from our Beloved’s perspective. Like the Church is described as the bride of Christ, Isaiah invites those who love God to rejoice in the goodness of His labor.

- ¹ Let me sing now for my well-beloved
My well-beloved had a vineyard
A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.
on a fertile hill.

This is our initial perspective. This is how we are viewing God. Then the singer details the labor of love. We can pause with each phrase to imagine a man at work with glad purpose. First, “He dug it all around, removed its stones.” He is plowing up the hillside. You can see him carrying off the stones, maybe setting them apart for later use on the wall of the watchtower. “And [he] planted it with the choicest vine.” We envision the man moving down the rows, digging small holes and inserting young vines. And they are not just any kind of vine. He has selected “the choicest vine” for this special vineyard. “And He built a tower in the middle of it.” He is fully invested. He intends to live here and watch over this vineyard. “And [he] also hewed out a wine vat in it.” He has expectation. He has planted the vineyard with a purpose. He has done a complete work. He is ready for the grapes to come in, to make the wine. There is nothing more to do but wait for the harvest to come in.

Then He expected *it* to produce *good* grapes, But it produced *only* worthless ones.

That last phrase creates a turning point in the poem. All has gone well until the harvest comes in and the fruit turns out to be worthless. The translation of the Hebrew word for those grapes varies. Your Bible might read “worthless grapes,” or “bad grapes, or “wild grapes.” Motyer comments on the Hebrew, writing,

The word translated *bad fruit*, only found here and in verse 4, means literally ‘stink-fruit’. Delitzsch notes that the difference between a wild and a domestic vine is only in the matter of care. This is exactly the point: what can now be done for the people of God when a total work of grace has been lavished on them and yet they remain as if grace had never touched them?¹

Metaphors do have their limitations. This gracious work of God did not happen over the span of one year. And the bad fruit did not come in only during one harvest. The toil of the Beloved for His vineyard stretches back from the present moment of the poem 800 years to the time of Moses, when God rescued Israel out of Egypt. He made Covenant with them at Sinai. He gave them a good and just Law to live by. He brought them in to their own land and gave them walled cities for protection and the Temple worship with the Psalms. Even before Moses, stretching back another 500 years, God had called Abraham and made with him a Covenant of promise. God gave birth to the twelve tribes and enabled them to grow into a great nation. God’s toil over this vineyard has been a long work. And the harvests have been many.

¹ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 68.

Consider God's patience. Over and over again when the nation turned away from Him, he allowed the consequence of sin to inflict them, but He did not turn them out of the land. He waited patiently for repentance. He has proved Himself slow to anger and quick to forgive, receiving the wayward back instantly. As the people continually struggled with idolatry and sin, God sent workers into the vineyard. Lawsuit prophets, following the model of Elijah and Elisha, keep calling the people back to the way of God.

Should not God expect good fruit when He has lavished so much grace on the people of Israel? But what crop does this present Judah produce? Stink-fruit.

That's an image I can relate to. God has lavished so much grace on me. And still, much too often, stink-fruit comes out. But this image is not directed towards the people who have received God's grace and yet still struggle in their pursuit of God. This image is directed at a people who have persistently turned away from sincere worship, a people who do not even attempt obedience.

Isaiah switches to God as the speaker in verses 3 and 4. God asks this question.

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| <p>³ "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem
Judge between Me</p> <p>⁴ "What more was there to do for My vineyard
Why, when I expected <i>it</i> to produce <i>good</i> grapes</p> | <p>and men of Judah,
and My vineyard.</p> <p>that I have not done in it?
did it produce worthless ones?</p> |
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That was a rhetorical question. God gives His own answer in verses 5 and 6.

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| <p>⁵ "So now let Me tell you
I will remove its hedge
I will break down its wall</p> <p>⁶ "I will lay it waste;</p> <p>I will also charge the clouds</p> | <p>what I am going to do to My vineyard:
and it will be consumed;
and it will become trampled ground.
It will not be pruned or hoed,
But briars and thorns will come up.
to rain no rain on it."</p> |
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God will take away the grace of His protection. He will remove the hedge. "And it will be consumed." God does not only remove His presence. He actively punishes. "I will lay it waste...I will charge the clouds to rain no rain on it." Isaiah sums up the metaphor in verse 7, making sure we have understood.

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| <p>⁷ For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel</p> <p>Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;</p> | <p>And the men of Judah His delightful plant.</p> <p>For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.</p> |
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What crop had God expected from a nation He had so blessed with His Word and His presence through the generations? He expected justice and righteousness. What crop came forth? Bloodshed and a cry of distress.

Isaiah does not suggest that God easily turns away from the work of His hands. He is gonna give us more evidence. He is going to detail Judah's spiritual state as an indictment against them and a justification for God's wrath to be poured out on this people.

Before moving to that indictment, I'd like to make an observation about the poetry of that last line. There is a play on word sounds in the Hebrew. In the first verset the Hebrew for "justice" is "misphat" and the Hebrew for "bloodshed" is "mispah." Then in the second verset the Hebrew for "righteousness" is "tsedaqah" and the Hebrew for "cry of distress" is "tse'aqah": it's, misphat, mispah, tsedaqah, tse'aqah.² I'm not going to be pointing out Hebrew word play or rhyming as we go. Along with most who would listen to this podcast, I am not able to appreciate the Hebrew like I would like. I learn things like this through commentaries. And I believe one of the amazing traits of Hebrew poetry is how much we can pick up on and appreciate in our translations. We have plenty to

² Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019) 1721.

- ¹² Their banquets are *accompanied* by lyre and harp, But they do not pay attention to the deeds
by tambourine and flute, and by wine; of the Lord
Nor do they consider the work of His hands.

Verse 11 could apply to a severe alcoholic who drinks all day from when they rise early in the morning until late in the evening. But the reference to banquets accompanied with all kinds of musical instruments points again towards the wealthy, the potential leaders of society. Rather than taking the opportunity afforded by their wealth to steward society, they take their wealth as means for pursuing unending pleasure. It is no wonder they do not pay attention to the deeds of the Lord, distracted as they are by food and entertainment and strong drink all day long. It is surprising they can stand. They have rendered themselves unable to discern the things that God is doing.

And there is a double charge in the accusation that they do not consider the work of His hands. First, they do not consider the many gracious ways that God has blessed them. They live off a societal foundation of knowledge, and order, and blessing that has made their own wealth and achievements possible. They take for granted all that God has done before them to make possible the kind of society they live in. Second, they do not pay attention to the punishment that currently afflicts them. That is also the work of God's hand. That's the idea of the stricken man in chapter 1 who is wounded from the sole of his foot even to his head, and yet has no awareness that his own worldview and behavior are the cause of the pain, and God is disciplining them to get them to turn around. They have no discernment.

There are consequences to this abuse of material blessing. Isaiah will talk about those consequences. He is providing us a prognosis in a shorter "therefore" and a longer "therefore." The shorter "therefore" is just verse 13.

A shorter therefore, verse 13.

- ¹³ Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge;
And their honorable men are famished, And their multitude is parched with thirst.

Here is the bottom-line. The final Covenant curse listed in Deuteronomy 28 is exile. The lack of knowledge is self-inflicted. They refuse God as a source of wisdom. The one thing they will not do is turn to Him in repentance. That refusal affects all levels of society. "Honorable men" here does not mean "men of moral integrity." It refers to the wealthy in society, to the leaders who hold honorable positions. They will experience hunger and thirst together with the multitude. No one is excluded.

The longer "therefore" is in verses 14-17.

A longer therefore, verses 14-17.

- ¹⁴ Therefore Sheol has enlarged its throat and opened its mouth without measure;
And Jerusalem's splendor, her multitude, her din *of revelry* and the jubilant within her,
descend *into it*.
- ¹⁵ So the *common* man will be humbled The eyes of the proud also will be abased,
and the man of *importance* abased,
- ¹⁶ But the LORD of hosts will be exalted in judgment, And the holy God will show Himself holy
in righteousness.
- ¹⁷ Then the lambs will graze as in their pasture, And strangers will eat in the waste places
of the wealthy.

Sheol, or death, is depicted as a greedy monster whose mouth opens wide to swallow all the splendor of Jerusalem. The banquets, and all the musical instruments, and all the flowing wine goes down the gullet. The phrase, Jerusalem's splendor, connects us back to the description of Jerusalem in chapter 3. All that is considered beautiful and extravagant, the sweet perfume, is turned to putrefaction as it slips and slides down the throat of death.

Verses 15 and 16 connect us back to chapter 2 with a high-low theme that played out there. All men, common and important, will be brought down low, abased. Proud eyes that once looked down on

God will not look down in shame. This bringing down is juxtaposed beside God's exaltation. God will show Himself holy in His righteous judgment. As they are brought down, God is raised up. The land of Judah will be wiped clean of this people. That's the picture in verse 17, where lambs graze freely in empty pastures and strangers eat in waste places created by the indifference of the wealthy.

We move next to a second set of woes. The first two woes described the abuse of material wealth. The next four describe spiritual and moral failure. The third woe is in verses 18-20

The third woe, verses 18-19

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| ¹⁸ Woe to those who drag iniquity with the cords
of falsehood, | And sin as if with cart ropes; |
| ¹⁹ Who say, "Let Him make speed, let Him hasten
His work,
And let the purpose of the Holy One of Israel | that we may see <i>it</i> ;

draw near and come to pass, that we may know <i>it!</i> " |

Isaiah describes sin as a cart being drawn along behind a person. They are not innocently bound to the burden. They drag it willfully with cords of falsehood. That falsehood could be deceit used to gain whatever purposes the sinner desires. But because of the next verse, I think falsehood here points to self-deceit. They have convinced themselves of the truthfulness of their own corrupt path. They do not even seem to be aware that the burden they drag is a consequence of their own behavior.

They mock the warning of the prophet, saying, "Let God make speed, let him hasten His work that we may see it." That is either a taunt to a God who they do not really believe in, "Let Him act. I'm ready. Strike me dead if you're so powerful. No, God? Nothing? I'm still walking along. No smell of lightning here, God!" It is either a taunt like that or they believe that God must act on their behalf. "Okay, God. Do your thing. Make my life better. Don't you see I have this heavy load to bear, God? Why don't you help me pull it for a while? Hurry up your work!" There is a complete lack of understanding. They do not discern that they are responsible. And they do not discern that God's slowness to act is mercy, because righteousness is calling God to bring down wrath. He is not going to come down and help you drag the cart of sin. The fourth woe is in verse 20.

The fourth woe, verse 20.

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| ²⁰ Woe to those who call evil good,
Who substitute darkness for light
Who substitute bitter for sweet | and good evil;
and light for darkness;
and sweet for bitter! |
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Who is the one that calls evil "good?" It manifests itself in all different kind of ways in different societies and different times. It is the one who celebrates the abuse of the poor as good business sense. It is the one who manipulates the courts of justice for personal gain. It is the one who preaches the goodness of gay marriage. It is the one who or argues that dogs and dolphins have the same level of intrinsic value as human beings who are made in the image of God. As societies devolve away from God's word, people develop all kinds of moral ideas. They define their own virtue. Eventually, they get to the point where they are actually substituting darkness for light and light for darkness. As Paul wrote in Romans 1:32,

Although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

The fifth woe in verse 21 follows up this idea.

The fifth woe, verse 21.

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| ²¹ Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes | And clever in their own sight! |
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This is the mocker of the Proverbs or of Psalm 1. This is not the naïve person who does not know something is evil. This is not the foolish person, who knows, but does it anyway. This mocker has turned morality upside down. He believes in his own cleverness. The fool and the naïve are drawn in by the mocker. They think he is wise. But moral discernment has been lost. It sounds smart. It's

²⁸ Its arrows are sharp
The hoofs of its horses seem like flint
²⁹ Its roaring is like a lioness,
It growls as it seizes the prey
³⁰ And it will growl over it in that day
If one looks to the land,
and all its bows are bent;
and its *chariot* wheels like a whirlwind.
and it roars like young lions;
And carries *it* off with no one to deliver *it*.
like the roaring of the sea.
behold, there is darkness *and* distress;
Even the light is darkened by its clouds.

What fire licked up Israel as dry grass in a field? It is the anger of the Lord that has burned against them. That idea of God's anger burning against His sinful people goes back to the very beginning of the nation at Mt. Sinai. From the start, their wandering hearts drifted away from God's Word. He had just said, "Make no idols." They made an idol. They would fashion God in an image that fit their own vision of what He should be like. At that time, God drew Moses up into his own anger and into his own compassion. Moses also burned with anger and then Moses pled for mercy. Both of these realities are true in God's heart: there is this righteous anger against sin, and yet there is love and mercy for His people. God responded He could not go up in the midst of such a sinful people because His holiness would surely consume them on the way. Moses persisted, arguing, "What's the point then? How can we be your people if you are not among us?" God relented. But then perhaps Moses became worried, recognizing he had just invited holy fire to dwell among a very flammable people. How could God go up with a sinful people? Moses then asked of God, "Show me your glory." God told him he could not handle the sight of His glory. But He did speak His glory, declaring to Moses His name in Exodus 34:6-7.

The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished... (Exodus 34:6-7)

The great theological question of Exodus is pictured in the burning bush. How does holy fire remain on a flammable bush without burning it up? How does holy God live with a sinful people without consuming them? It has to do with God's nature. He is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and truth."

And so, He has continued on with His people through the generations. But does the gracious character of God mean that He will allow sin to go unpunished indefinitely? No. The verse continued, "who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished..." God's grace has been abused for generations. God's patience is at an end. He is slow to anger. That is not the same as saying He does not become angry. God's anger has begun to burn against Judah. There is no hope depicted in this last passage, only wrath.

Isaiah introduces two phrases here that he will employ through the whole of his prophecy. First, God stretches out His hand. We will see that phrase repeatedly. God is in the field as a King directing His army. Imagine Him on horseback, at the head of a mighty horde, stretching out His arm, pointing at you. The Lord of Hosts is not stretching His arm out against the enemies of Israel. He is pointing straight at Isaiah's readers: straight at Jerusalem.

Corpses lay like refuse in the middle of the street. That reference finds connection to the very last paragraph of the prophecy (chapter 66), where Isaiah depicts corpses laying in a field, having lost their battle against God. Here, in 5:25, after that terrible image is drawn on our minds, Isaiah utters these ominous words, "For all this His anger is not spent, but His hand is still stretched out." The wrath of God will keep coming.

The second phrase to be carried through the book is the phrase, "He will also lift up a standard..." The idea of the lifted standard will be connected to the idea of a sign. That idea is also found in the last paragraph of the prophecy in chapter 66. God is the King of kings who lifts up His own standard, His banner. And in this case in chapter 5, a distant nation responds to His call. God whistles and they hasten to His banner with great speed. No doubt Isaiah's listeners envisioned the army of Assyria as

they read these words. No one in the world had ever before seen anything like the army of Assyria, the destroyer of nations. They were able to field multiply armies, not one army but multiple armies of 50,000 men, all equipped with iron weapons. They fought with well-integrated infantry, cavalry, chariots, and archers. No city had withstood their siege engines.

Listen again to the description.

²⁷ No one in it is weary or stumbles, Nor is the belt at its waist undone,	None slumbers or sleeps; Nor its sandal strap broken.
²⁸ Its arrows are sharp The hoofs of its horses seem like flint	and all its bows are bent; and its <i>chariot</i> wheels like a whirlwind.

The sound of the army is terrifying. Isaiah likens it to the sound of young lions in their prime as they attack and devour their prey. Then he skillfully heightens the effect by likening the roaring to the overwhelming power of the sea.

²⁹ Its roaring is like a lioness, It growls as it seizes the prey	and it roars like young lions; And carries <i>it</i> off with no one to deliver <i>it</i> .
³⁰ And it will growl over it in that day If one looks to the land,	like the roaring of the sea. behold, there is darkness <i>and</i> distress;
Even the light is darkened by its clouds.	

The grace of God has been spurned again and again over hundreds of years. This people holds Yahweh in contempt. They reject His Word. They despise Him, the Holy One of Israel. God's wrath will be unleashed against Judah. Is there hope for those who reject the grace of God? No. There is not. Not here.

This chapter ends in darkness. Isaiah will be called into this darkness. He will be sent into the vineyard. He has given us the context of that call. We are now ready to consider how that call will form Isaiah's entire ministry experience. That's our next lesson. We will address Isaiah's call next time in Isaiah chapter 6.

Reflection questions

1. Read Isaiah 5:1-7. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Following the flow of thought in 5:1-7, what has God done for Israel? What question does God ask in light of what he has done? And what conclusion does God regarding what he ought to do?
3. Consider each woe separately. What kind of behavior is being described of people in the Judah of Isaiah's day. And what are one or two examples of that behavior in your current society?
 - a. Woe 1 – 5:8-10?
 - b. Woe 2 – 5:11-12?
 - c. Woe 3 – 5:18-19?
 - d. Woe 4 – 5:20?
 - e. Woe 5 – 5:21?
 - f. Woe 6 – 5:22-23?
4. What stands out to you in the two therefores of 5:24-30? What image is especially striking?
5. Isaiah gave a glimmer of hope in the first two sections of this prologue. In chapter 1 that glimmer came in 1:18. In 2-4 that glimmer came in the depictions of ideal and future Jerusalem. There is no glimmer of hope in chapter 5. Why not?
6. How are we supposed to understand the issue of grace and sin in this chapter? Consider the grace described in the vineyard metaphor. God has done all this. Then consider the woes and how those show Judah's response to God. How ought God respond to such a people?