

EXPOSITORY NOTES ON THE PROPHET ISAIAH

by

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ISAIAH CHAPTER FIVE

THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD

“Now will I sing to my well beloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My well beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: And I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briars and thorns: 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 his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry” (verses 1-7)

CHAPTER FIVE completes the prophet’s address. In the parable of the vineyard, God rehearses His ways with Israel and emphasizes their lack of response to His love and patience. This “Song of the Vineyard” links intimately with our Lord’s parable concerning the same subject, which He put before the scribes and Pharisees shortly before His arrest and crucifixion.

We might well speak of verses 1-7 of this chapter as the vineyard-poem as we hear in what graphic and touching terms the prophet sings a song of the vineyard. God Himself, of course, is the real Speaker, and when He says, **“My well beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill,”** we cannot but realize that He has His own blessed Son before Him, for He is the Messiah of Israel as well as the Saviour of the world.

This vineyard represents Israel as God viewed them at the beginning of their Palestinian history. Having brought them out of Egypt, He planted them in the land of promise, and there cared for and protected them from the ravages of their enemies. He fenced His vineyard about, gathered out the stones and planted it with the choicest vine.

He built a tower in the midst of it, we are told, and also made a winepress therein, only to find that there was no fruit suitable to His holy desires. **“He looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes.”** That is, instead of bearing fruit for God, Israel brought forth that which only grieved His heart and dishonored His holy Name.

And so, addressing Himself directly to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the men of Judah, He asks, **“Judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? Wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?”** After all the care He had lavished upon Israel, His loving provision for their needs, His gracious forgiveness extended to them over and over again when they failed, how could it be possible that there would be no suitable fruit for Him? Why should they produce only that which was worthless and useless? Alas, it was but the manifestation of a heart that had departed from the living God.

And so, after giving them one opportunity after another to repent and judge themselves in His sight, He finally decided to give them up, saying, **“I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up ; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: and I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; hut there shall come up briars and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.”**

That we are not mistaken in the application made of the parable is clear from verse 7, where we are told definitely, **“The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah His pleasant plant: and He looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry.”** This is confirmed in Psalms 80, 81; and also in Hosea 10:1.

“Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth! In mine ears said the Lord of hosts, Of a truth many. houses shall be desolate, even great and fair, without inhabitant. Yea, ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath, and the seed of an homer shall yield an ephah. Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them! And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of his hands. Therefore my people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge: and their honourable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst.

Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it. And the mean man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled, and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled: but the Lord of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness. Then shall the lambs feed after their manner, and the waste places of the fat ones shall strangers eat. Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope: that say, Let him make speed, and hasten his work, that we may see it: and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it!

“Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink: Which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous for him! Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. Therefore is the anger of the Lord kindled against his people, and he hath stretched forth his hand against them, and hath smitten them: and the hills did tremble, and their carcasses were torn in the midst of the streets. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still” (verses 8-25).

Here we have the six woes to which reference has been made already. In verse 8 He pronounces a woe upon them **“that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth.”** In other words, the judgment is pronounced on those who selfishly seek to accumulate houses and lands for themselves, showing no consideration for the poor and the needy. Such shall eventually be desolate and their holdings destroyed; their fields will fail to bear, and their hope of gain will be disappointed.

Then in verse 11 He pronounces a woe upon those who give themselves over to voluptuousness and sensual pleasure, who **“rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them!”** They seek to delight themselves with beautiful music and other worldly pleasures, but regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of His hands.

Because of this they shall go into captivity. They have acted as those who are without knowledge; and the leaders among them, who should have been honorable men, have proven themselves but fools. So **“hell hath enlarged herself.”** That is, the unseen world has opened her mouth without measure, and they and all they have delighted in, go down into the pit. The mean man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled also. But the Lord of hosts whom they have despised, shall be exalted in judgment, and God, the infinitely Holy One, shall be sanctified in righteousness when He visits with judgment those who have grievously offended.

The third woe, in verse 18, is upon those who **“draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope.”** They openly defy the God of Israel and brazenly insist on taking their own way in opposition to His Holy Word, ridiculing the message of His prophet and spurning His commands.

The fourth woe, verse 20, is upon those who fail to distinguish between good and evil, righteousness and unrighteousness. They put darkness for light and light for darkness; they put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. In other words, they make no distinction between that which honors God and that which dishonors Him. Like Laodicea in a later day, they are neither cold nor hot but utterly indifferent to divine truth.

The fifth woe, verse 21, is upon those who are wise in their own eyes and prudent in their own sight; and **“pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.”** Pride, so natural to the human heart, is hateful to God, and if persisted in it will eventually bring destruction.

The sixth woe is for those who, inflamed by wine, lose all sense of righteousness in judgment, that **“justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him!”** Therefore the Lord declares that, **“As the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the Word of the Holy One of Israel.”**

Because of these things the anger of the Lord was kindled against His people, and His hand stretched out against them. He had smitten them so that the very hills would tremble. But they, themselves, persisted in their iniquity, their hearts unmoved by all His dealings with them; therefore, greater judgments are yet to come, as we shall see as we go on in the study of this book.

“And he will lift up an ensign to the nations from far, and will hiss unto them from the end of the earth: and, behold, they shall come with speed swiftly: none shall be weary nor stumble among them; none shall slumber nor sleep; neither shall the girdle of their loins be loosed, nor the latchet of their shoes be broken: Whose arrows are sharp, and all their bows bent, their horses' hoofs shall be counted like flint, and their wheels like a whirlwind: Their roaring shall be like a lion, they shall roar like young lions: yea, they shall roar, and lay hold of the prey, and shall carry it away safe, and none shall deliver it. And in that day they shall roar against them like the roaring of the sea: and if one look unto the land, behold darkness and sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof” (verses 26.30).

The Lord Himself had summoned the nations of the East to overrun the land of Israel. Already the kingdom of the North had felt the power of Assyria and had been carried away. Soon the kingdom of the South will be destroyed by the might of Babylon.

No effort on Judah's part would enable them to turn back the power of the enemy when the appointed hour had come for the destruction so long predicted. Like a roaring lioness with a litter of young lions, would the eastern nations rush upon their prey and carry it away triumphantly; and in that hour of distress, they should cry to the Lord in vain, for darkness and sorrow were destined to be their portion and the light should be darkened in the heavens above them.

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