

Isaiah 5:1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. 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, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, 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? And now 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. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with 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 people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Mark 11:27-28, 12:1-9, 12 (New Revised Standard Version)

Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and said, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?"

Then he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.

When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

Those amazing x-ray glasses that were advertised in old comic books.

When I was a small boy a close friend ordered a pair one time,
and we both lived in eager anticipation for when
we'd be able to see through solid objects with them.

But when those wonderful x-ray glasses finally arrived in the mail,
how terribly disappointing, **so much less than we were expecting.**

The Isaiah passage we read is Hebrew poetry and allegory,
that compares how God had so abundantly blessed the Jewish people
with a vineyard that was well planned & equipped to be fruitful,
but that only produced wild grapes or useless and bitter fruit...
... so much less than the owner was expecting.

According to biblical scholars
after the defeat and destruction of Israel by the Assyrians,
this passage was intended to help interpret why it had happened.

The story begins with God's call and promise to Abraham,
the blessing of receiving a home, the Promised Land.
Later on, the descendants of Abraham became slaves in Egypt.

The Lord God heard their cries of hopeless desperation,

and through Moses and the mighty acts of God against Pharaoh,
the Jewish people were freed from their Egyptian bondage.

But because of that generation's obstinance against the Lord,
they wandered through the wilderness for the next 40 years.

Before the next generation crossed the Jordan River into the land,
they were warned by Moses in his last sermon, Deuteronomy 30:15~20.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the Lord walking in his ways, then you shall live in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away, I declare to you today that **you shall not live long in the land** that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Though abundantly blessed by God, the nation had not been faithful.

Prophet after prophet had warned against their idolatry,
worship of other gods, judges corrupting justice for a bribe,
gross immorality, widows and orphans robbed by the powerful,
leaders who exploited & abused the poor and powerless, etc.

For centuries they were warned that God would respond, as in Ezekiel 34.

... prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: Thus says the Lord God: you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You have not strengthened the weak, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. I will seek the lost, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong **I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.**

Like the vineyard described in Isaiah, the Israelites though
abundantly blessed by God **had failed to produce righteousness.**

When the vineyard failed to produce the harvest as expected

despite all the blessings that God, the owner, had provided,

the owner withdrew his protection and allowed

the vineyard to be trampled and overgrown...

... just as God would eventually allow

the nation Israel to be conquered and trampled by Assyria.

At this point, the passage shifts to complaint and response, vs. 3~5.

And now, 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? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. **I will make it a waste...**

Israel had become a false vine that produced wild and bitter grapes.

The nation of Israel had rejected the blessings God intended,
and refused to abide in the love and gracious ways of the Lord.

About 700 years before Christ,
the Assyrian Empire conquered the 10 northern tribes of Israel,

then scattered the people of that nation among the empire,
and what became of those 10 tribes is lost to history.

The only ones who remained as the identifiable Jewish people,
were the other 2 tribes of Judah, the southern region of Palestine.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus told the parable we read
3 days after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday,

Jesus had driven the money-changers and animal-sellers
out from the Temple in Jerusalem earlier during Holy Week,
and the chief priests and Pharisees were offended and angry
that Jesus had dared to upset and cleanse **their** temple.
Jesus was on their turf, a threat to **their** authority and income.

The chief priests and Pharisees demanded that Jesus explain
by what right or authority he had cleansed the Temple,
and Jesus answered them by telling this parable,
a story about trouble in the Lord's vineyard.

As in Isaiah, in the parable that Jesus tells,
God is the vineyard owner and the vineyard represents Israel.

By specifically mentioning the wine press, and building a watchtower,
Jesus is making a clear reference back to the Isaiah passage,
a hard message of judgment against the leadership of Israel.

The religious authorities who were opposed to Jesus
perceived the Temple as their own property to control,
just like the corrupt and conniving tenants of the parable,
who rejected the messengers sent by the true owner
and who then decided to murder his beloved son...
... foreshadowing that they'd have Jesus crucified on Friday.

The religious authorities understood the plot of the parable.

This parable served as a mirror and challenge to their power
in which the religious authorities could see themselves, vs. 12

When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they
feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

Even though they recognized themselves in the parable,
they still opposed, arrested and killed Jesus anyway,
for similar reasons as the tenants in the parable...

**... for as it turns out, greed, selfishness and bitterness,
can indeed become a very destructive and deadly thing.**

As in the Isaiah text, Jesus asks and answers his own question, vs. 9

What then will the owner of the vineyard do? **He will come and destroy the tenants and give the
vineyard to others.**

He will come and destroy the tenants...

... may be referring to the destruction
of Jerusalem and Temple by the Roman general Titus in 70 AD.

and give the vineyard to others...

... may be a reference to the evangelism work of the Apostle Paul,
whose missionary journeys brought gentiles into the Church.

Both the Isaiah and the Mark passages
are interpretations of ancient historical events,
but what does all that mean to us 2000+ years later,
and **how is that relevant to our lives in our context?**

Now I was all in favor of punishing the wicked and greedy tenants,
until I considered that I am a tenant, a guest in God's Creation,
and sometimes I have withheld a few things from God.

The challenge to us is this:
are we being faithful with the vineyard that God **entrusted to us?** ...

... **our vineyards** --- our lives, our stuff, our plans, our security
our future, our goals, our families, our churches, our careers,
our concerns, our investments, our successes, our struggles,
our tireless strivings & accumulations through our hard work ?

So **how are we doing with the vineyard that God has entrusted to us?**
Am I living like those greedy, conniving & faithless tenants,
who act falsely and live as if the vineyard belongs to them?

We are God's guests on this earth, like those tenants in the parable.
And as we are reminded by Psalm 24:1
The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.

But sometimes, like those greedy and self-serving tenants,
we try to control the vineyard God has marvelously provided for us,
we try to hold stuff too tightly, afraid there may not be enough.

My attitude toward possessions is not always faithful to God.
I can lose sight of the One who's always provided for me.
I don't always honor the true owner of the vineyard.

The vineyard represents far more than just material possessions,
but also includes all of the blessings we've received from God,
such health, talents, family and even years in which to live---
all of which are intended by God to yield **fruits of the kingdom.**

But is the whole message and point of this parable to induce
more guilt and shame that we're not doing nearly enough,
and that we're not faithful, fruitful and righteous enough?

If so, then where is the grace, the hope and Good News in all this?,
or is this passage all about threat, failure and dire consequences?

Surely the most significant thing we need to know in this life
is that we belong to Christ and we are the beloved children of God,
called to be caretakers of God's creation, this world,
where we live as tenants in this vineyard of the Lord.

Yes, I do believe the parable is teaching about faithful stewardship,
about our attitudes, generosity & what we do as temporary tenants.
But it's about far more than just doing good works and trying harder,
for our true home, it's not in the vineyards of this finite world.

As God's chosen & precious ones, this world isn't our ultimate home,
and our life's goals are not defined by what happens in this world.

The Christian life is not decided by whatever we face in this life,
but by the promises, gracious love and steadfast mercy of the Lord.

Imagine with me how our lives and perspective might be different,
if we did truly trust & submit **our all** under the Lordship of God?

How might our lives and our perspective change and be different,
if we did truly see ourselves, our lives and all they contain,
as borrowed **vineyards of blessings** that **still belong to the Lord**?

1st - our losses would be much easier to bear
for we wouldn't really ever lose anything of our own --
because it would always be God's loss, and not our stuff.

Yes, that stuff, my stuff is mine to use and enjoy for a while,
but still all of it really always belongs to the Lord God.
so how can I lose what really never belonged to me anyway?

That same perspective also applies to my health and vigor,
since this body I'm using for now is only on temporary loan,
it's just until God gives me **my way better spiritual body**
for life eternal as promised in the Kingdom of Heaven.

2nd - our relationship to our stuff and possessions would change
We could truly enjoy things and experiences
for their usefulness and their intrinsic delight
rather than some artificial desire to accumulate.

That would be a more joyful contented way to live, to walk with God -
a grateful life would be much less tense, a more pleasant journey,
and that, I think, is what our loving God wants for us.

3rd - our life attitude and perspective would be one of gratitude,
not claiming that I've earned what I have, but knowing that
all I have is only because God generously entrusted it to me,
therefore, giving of our time, our talent, even our money
would be joyfully returning to God what already belongs to our Lord.

Our stuff and possessions of this world are temporary & will not last,
and will turn out to be worth very little for a brief time
in the face of God's infinite grace, hope and promises.

4th - our attitude in life would become one of absolute trust in God
Think about how much easier watching the news would be
if we were totally confident that God is active & at work...
... and have no feelings of anxiety since God's already got this.

These are challenging, confusing and changing times we live in.
None of us knows what lies ahead or will be in the news tomorrow.

But like it or not, this is our world, our culture and circumstance,
and God has placed us here intentionally, called us and equipped us
to serve according to his will and purpose for such a time as this.

There is great comforting assurance in the truth of God's sovereignty
that our Lord is wise and good, gracious and all-powerful,
and is accomplishing his healing & saving purpose & intention.

So the goal is to deepen our understanding and recognition of God,
and of the work of God's grace in our lives and in the world,
to which we are called to faithful and active participation.

And so each day we are given new and fresh opportunities to live

more fully and faithfully into the grace and blessings of God.

So today I'm going to pause, reflect and reconsider deeply,
how am I doing with all the elements of the vineyard
that the Lord has entrusted to my care and stewardship?

And at the end of my days, when I stand before my Maker,
what kind of tenant will Jesus say that I have been?

Hear the word of the Lord from John:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

You are my friends if you do what I command you. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, **fruit that will last.**

(John 1:14, 15:14, 16)