

Prayers

Opening prayer

It is wonderful, heavenly Father, to know that You have surrounded us with thousands of witnesses to Your faithfulness and Your love. You have given us thousands of angels who stand guard to protect us, and thousands of fellow believers who testify to Your love and inspire us to greater things. Heavenly Father, in these and many other ways, You have given us all we need for fellowship, support and protection, and we praise You! ALLELUIA!

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: PREJUDICE

1. For yourself

Confess to God any prejudices you know you have and ask Him to help you uproot any other prejudices that get in the way of your witness as one of God's people

2. For your friends and family

Think carefully about whether you have any favourites amongst your family; who benefits from your affection, and who does not? Come before the Lord to sort out any ungodly attitudes you may have developed towards others in your family

3. For the church and its work

Pray against prejudicial attitudes within the church, and seek the Lord's forgiveness for His people

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for any in your neighbourhood or country who are the victims of unnecessary prejudice

Meditation

As we begin our work today;

Give us a heart to seek peace with each other;
Give us a mind to seek the truth with each other;
Give us the strength to work well with each other;
Give us the hope to have confidence in each other;
Give us such love that is ready to forgive one another;
Give us a desire to share fully with one another;
Give us compassion to care properly for one another;
Give us the emotions to truly feel for each other;

And so may we honour You this day.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 5: 1-7

- ¹ Let me sing for the One I love
my love-song about His vineyard:
The One I love had a vineyard
on the side of a fertile hill.
- ² He dug it, cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
He built a watchtower within it,

- and carved out a wine vat in it;
 He expected a good crop of grapes,
 but it yielded wild grapes!
- ³ So now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
 and people of Judah:
 Judge, if you please,
 between me and my vineyard.
- ⁴ What more could I do for my vineyard
 that I have not done for it?
 When I looked for good grapes,
 why did it yield wild grapes?
- ⁵ So I will now tell you
 what I will do to my vineyard.
 I will remove its hedge,
 and it will be eaten up;
 I will break down its wall,
 and it will be trampled down.
- ⁶ I will set it aside for destruction;
 it will not be pruned or hoed,
 and it will be overgrown
 with briars and thorns;
 I will also command the clouds
 so that they do not rain on it.
- ⁷ The vineyard of the LORD of hosts
 is the house of Israel,
 and the people of Judah
 are plants in which he delights;
 he expected justice, but saw bloodshed;
 righteous, but heard a cry!

Review

Isaiah famously writes a love-song from God to His people, in which Israel is likened to a treasured vineyard. But tragically, the vineyard yields no grapes!

This passage is called the 'Song of the Vineyard', and it is a tragic poem describing the deep sadness of God at the failure of His people. The poem is an important Old Testament prophecy because the idea of God's people as His vineyard is one which is found in several places within Scripture (see Hosea 10:1f., Ezekiel 15:2f. John 15:1f.). The story told by the poem is simple enough. Isaiah recites the poem on behalf of the Lord, who likens His work with Israel to that of a farmer who prepares and plants a vineyard. The farmer uses all the best methods, but discovers that his vine does not produce the sweet cultivated grapes required for wine-making, but bitter wild grapes that have the wrong acidity for wine-making. The Lord is therefore forced to do away with his vines and abandon the vineyard (5:6).

If you have followed these studies of Isaiah, your head will now be spinning! Yesterday (reading from chapter 4), we discovered the most wonderful promises of God to His people. He declared that He would bring Israel through her coming troubles, and would provide them with perfect protection by means of His presence by 'cloud, smoke and fire' (4:5)! Yet this great promise came after Isaiah had previously delivered the most shattering of prophecies against Israel, citing the arrogance of its women and the failed leadership of its men in Jerusalem (ch.3). Isaiah's prophecies appear to swing ever more violently between extremes; at one moment we hear about the Lord's passion and love for His people, and at another moment we read about His judgemental wrath against the Israel's sins!

Some might say that Isaiah's prophecies demonstrate a certain 'two-faced' attitude of God towards His people, for as we read through the book we do not know what we are going to hear about next; love and compassion, or justice and retribution! Isaiah prophecies both that God will punish Israel's sin (1:7,8; 3:2,3; 3:25,26), but he also prophecies that God has a purpose for some of the 'survivors' of His people (4:2), through whom He intends to do His work in the world. We need to know more about what this means, and we will only discover this if we read through the rest of the book of Isaiah, and in particular, discover how his prophecies change after the special call of God described in chapter 6. Yet there are some conclusions we can reach even with the limited picture we have at our disposal.

The general picture we should hold in mind is that of a broken-hearted God; He is desolate because His own chosen people have rejected Him and gone their own way. Most of us are aware of the complex feelings we all have when we have been rejected by someone we love. These feelings combine the passions of love with abhorrence, and it would be fair to say that Isaiah's prophecies paint a picture of God as One who is certainly heartbroken that His people have rejected Him. Sin has its consequences and will be met with punishment, but God's love is not simply destructive; He has higher plans and purposes (see chapter 4).

If we do not have this balance firmly fixed in our minds, then we are liable to misunderstand Isaiah 5. Undoubtedly, this poem reads like a religious horror story, but the 'Song of the Vineyard' (together with the rest of chapter 5) begs the very important question; what will the Lord do about this sorry state of affairs? God does indeed have a great plan of salvation both for His own people and for the rest of the world, moreover, He is about to reveal this through the life and work of Isaiah. The introductory passages in Isaiah (chapters 1 to 5, prior to the famous 'call of Isaiah' in Isaiah 6) serve to highlight the critical tension between God and His people because of sin. The people of Israel, just like people of all time and all places, liked to think that they could live as they pleased, and something had to happen to restore the relationship between them and the God who had made them and chosen them.

Going Deeper

We will look further at some of the details of the poem, though its general theme is readily understandable. What is interesting, however, is how the 'picture' of the vineyard appears in the Old Testament prior to Isaiah's use of it in this prophecy. Secondly, if we look in the New Testament, we will find that Jesus used the picture of the vine and the vineyard at critical points in His own ministry. The 'Song of the Vineyard' both built on scripture and provided a base for what was to come.

The setting in the 'Song of the Vineyard'

The 'Song of the Vineyard' consists of four 'stanzas' of Hebrew poetry, and in the first of these (5:1,2) it is the prophet Isaiah who speaks (or sings!), declaring what the Lord has done. He describes the normal actions taken by someone who wanted to grow a vineyard, choosing the ground, clearing the stones, selecting the right plants and planting them, building the right structures to look after the vine and keep out unwanted animals, and creating a winepress out of some nearby rocky outcrop. In just the same way that Jesus would one day tell a parable (see later), Isaiah created a word picture and then came to a conclusion, which in this case was startling. What should have resulted in good fruit had produced 'wild grapes'!

This was not just a matter of 'bad' being the end result instead of 'good', for anyone listening to Isaiah would have known even without the explanation given in the fourth stanza (verse 7), that 'the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel and the people of Judah are the plants in which he delights' (5:7). The point was this; the vines were 'chosen', but they produced 'wild' fruit. In other words, the lives work and witness of God's people had proved to be no better than that of Gentiles or pagans! This was a scandalous state of affairs in Judea and Jerusalem, and no doubt some who heard Isaiah say this could hardly believe their ears. This was Isaiah's sharp way of putting across what he had been saying since the beginning of his prophecies; which was that when the people of God sinned, they behaved in a way which was no better than the nations around them; they were unjust, they impoverished the poor and they worshipped idols (1:1-31).

The questions about the vineyard posed by God

What should be done about this state of affairs? This is the question addressed in stanzas 2 (5:3,4) and 3 (5:5,6), and in both of these, Isaiah changed to reporting the speech of God instead of speaking himself. Isaiah had set the scene, but it was up to God Himself to declare the consequences of what had happened, and in the second stanza, He began by asking what more could He have done? Surely He had done enough for the vineyard to be successful? This was reasonable to ask, but the song holds an amazing paradoxical twist, for we realise that God was speaking to the people of Judah themselves! What did they make of what had happened? What more could God have done for them (5:4)? Why did they continue to sin (5:4)? God used the song as a method of asking His own people why they had sinned against Him! In Hebrew, the grammar of a question conveys whether the expected answer is a 'Yes' or a 'No'. In verses 3 and 4, the grammar of the question implies the answer 'No'. In reality, the breakdown between God and His people was the responsibility of the people, the 'vineyard', and not of God.

In the third stanza, God speaks for a second time, but this time to pronounce judgement. It was his intention to allow a comprehensive course of action which would render the vineyard unusable, firstly by leaving the plot open to the animals and the beasts of the field to eat the plants and then let it become overgrown (5:5) with weeds and 'thorns and briers' (5:6) followed by the greatest curse of all in that part of the world; drought (5:6). It is not certain, but it is just possible that Isaiah was aware of a previous reference to 'thorns and briers' in Scripture. This comes in Judges 9:14,15, where the 'thorns and briers' otherwise translated 'bramble' figure in a poem at the heart of the book of Judges, which sarcastically describes the most lawless

period of time in the life of Israel and Judah. Without going into the full meaning of the passage from Judges, Isaiah's use of this reference harks back to that time when God's people were ungovernable; it is not something we might easily pick up on today, but it may well have been something which people recognised in Isaiah's day.

Discipleship

Application

As God's people the Church, we know that Jesus has saved us and that we have access to the Throne of Grace through Jesus. This is basic to our Christian beliefs, and it is hard to go back into the Old Testament and read that God punishes His people for their sins. Surely, we say, God does not do that; He is a loving God and He has sent Jesus to save us. I do not disagree that Jesus has come to save us and that we are now God's people in a new era of salvation, rather than the era of anticipation of the Messiah in which the people of Israel lived. However, we should not try and suggest that sin or its consequences have changed; sin is still sin, whoever commits it and the consequences of most sins are the same whoever commits it. Jesus has cracked the problem of how sin separates us from God and we depend upon that, but the world in which we live is still the same.

We can learn from the 'Song of the Vineyard' that God is still in the business of growing vines; we know this because Jesus calls us 'branches of the vine' in John's Gospel (John 15:2f.). Our options therefore are to accept the Lord's rule, His hand upon our lives and sometimes His 'pruning' (John 15:2), or to reject it and find that we do not bear the fruit He requires and we become as it says in our passage today; 'wild grapes' (5:2)! If it is the second path we choose, then we will place ourselves in the same position as the people of Judah to whom Isaiah spoke this prophecy. God will act justly against all who choose not to do His will. Unfortunately, it is still easy for people, even church people who would call themselves Christians, to live a life which is not in obedience to the Lord, and repeating the sins of past generations. If we are truly born again of the Spirit of God then we are pruned in order to bear fruit, but if we have gone our own way then there is no escaping God's justice.

Questions for groups

1. Why do people sin today, and why do Christian people battle with sin when they know that Jesus has died to save them?
2. How does the Lord act in judgement now, when His own people do not do what He has asked of them?
3. In the light of this passage, is it right to think of the church as like a 'vineyard'?

Discipleship challenges

- *Do you feel like a fruitful branch or not? And is what you feel really true of your life and what you do? The only way to sort out the difference between these two questions, if there is any, is to talk about it to someone else!*
- *Pray for the church of God, and pray against those who seek to destroy it by rebelling against God from within it*

Final Prayer

Your love, O Lord, draws me onwards, through all the fears and doubts, the trials and temptations I experience. Your love has drawn me to the Cross where, inexplicably, all the things of this world fall away and I am empty before You! Fill me up O Lord, and make me worthy of my call! AMEN
