

A.B. Simpson:

"Now will I sing to my beloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard." (Is. 5:1.)

The fifth chapter of Isaiah is a sort of parable in poetry and song very similar to one of the parables of our Lord, as recorded in the twenty-first chapter of Matthew. This parable was followed by a series of woes addressed by Christ to the Scribes and Pharisees, just as Isaiah's parable of the vineyard is followed by a similar series of woes. (Matt. 23: 13-29; Is. 5: 8-22.)

I. The vineyard.

He describes the selection of the site in a very fruitful hill. Later, in the seventh verse, he tells us that the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel. The fruitful hill, where He planted this vineyard, was Mount Zion. "He fenced it." This, no doubt, refers to His separation of Israel from the nations, the restrictions and safeguards He placed around them through the law and ordinances which He gave to them and the peculiar isolation of the land and the people from all other peoples.

"He planted it with the choicest vine."

This refers to the oracles of God, the Word of revelation which He gave to them and all the covenant privileges and blessings which He committed to them. The tower and the winepress which follow are part of the picture of the vineyard and still further refer to God's provision for the spiritual culture of the chosen people and the blessed fruit which He expected to come from the love and grace invested among them. This is no new figure, but a very familiar one in the Old Testament. "You have brought a vine out of Egypt," says the Psalmist, "You have cast out the heathen and planted it. You prepared room before it and caused it to take deep root and it filled the land. The hills were covered with the shadow of it and the boughs thereof were like the goodly cedars. She sent out her boughs unto the sea and her branches unto the river. Why have You then broken down her hedges so that all they which pass by the way do pluck her? The boar out of the wood wastes it and the wild beast of the field devours it."

So Jesus uses the same figure of His own people. "I am the Vine, you are the branches." The richest and most valuable of all the products of nature is used to represent the richest of God's graces to His people. But just as the devil has perverted the vine of the earth to the basest and most destructive purposes, so the vine of the Lord's planting has been assailed by the adversary and turned aside from its divine purposes through the unfaithfulness of men.

II. The wild grapes.

And so the prophet quickly turns from the beautiful vision of the divine Husbandman and His care for His vineyard to the failure of the vineyard. (Is. 5: 2.) "He looked that it should bring forth grapes and it brought forth wild grapes." The peculiarity of the wild grape is that it is purely natural, an ungrafted fruit. Therefore it represents most fittingly the quality of all mere natural and human goodness. Human nature can only produce wild grapes; luxuriant and beautiful the vine may seem, but the fruit is worthless. So are all the fruits and graces that grow upon the stalk of humanity. It is only when it is cut back and Christ is grafted into the stalk of our old human nature that there is any good in us. All the failures of the Old Testament were intended to demonstrate this fact, and still men are looking for the development of goodness through education and Christian endeavor instead of through fellowship with the cross of Jesus Christ and entering into His death and resurrection life.

The prophet then proceeds to describe these wild grapes by a series of woes which differentiate and distinguish the various forms of sin in a picture which is as true today as it was in the days of Isaiah.

1. The first of these is greed. Each of these specifications begins with a woe. "Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, until there be no place that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth." The spirit of monopoly had begun in Isaiah's time, and the men of great wealth were buying up the whole land and laying it out in vast estates, so that the common people were crowded out of house and home, and the soil that the Creator gave for the support of the people was being used for the luxury of the proud.

Isaiah was not a socialist, but the whole spirit of divine legislation is against selfishness, greed and monopoly. It is no sin to be wealthy, but it is a fearful sin to absorb wealth in the spirit of greed and spend it in selfish

luxury. A true citizen will always regard his wealth as a trust for society and his fellow men. There is nothing more alarming in the spirit of our times than the colossal fortunes that are being built up and the selfish and godless use that is being made of them by so many.

The apostle James tells us that these are the signs of the last days. "You have heaped up treasure in the last days."

2. Selfish and sensual pleasure and unreasonable and unseasonable indulgence in appetite and sensual enjoyment. "Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, until wines 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."

It is not so much the sin of drunkenness that is here condemned as the sin of pleasure-seeking, of which drinking is a part. These devotees of self-indulgence give up the whole day as well as the whole night to feasting. The effect of this voluptuous life is the deadening of conscience and all spiritual life. "They regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of His hands." It was the same condition of brutal sensuality which the prophet Amos denounced in the Northern Kingdom, "That lie upon beds of ivory and stretch themselves upon their couches and eat the lambs out of the flock and the calves out of the midst of the stall; that chant to the sound of the viol and invent to themselves instruments of music, like David; that drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the chief ointments, but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph."

A life of self-indulgence deadens every high and holy feeling of the heart and makes men selfish and indifferent to God and the claims of their fellow men. They rest in their delicious dream of security, until suddenly the sky darkens, the crash comes and the fearful picture of Isaiah is fulfilled. "Therefore hell has enlarged herself and opened her mouth without measure and their glory and their multitude and their pomp and he that rejoices shall descend into it."

3. Presumption. "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 near and come that we may know it." (Isa. 5: 18, 19.) These are the scoffers who the apostle Peter says shall come in the last days saying, "Where is the promise of his coming?"

They were abroad in Isaiah's time. They made light of the prophet's message and the prophet's word. They put aside all finer fears and feelings and drew iniquity with cords of vanity and sin with cart rope. They hardened their hearts in brutal atheism and laughed at the idea of God, righteousness and judgment to come. They saw no sign of the coming tempest, and in their fool's paradise they went on in reckless defiance of God and man. So still men sometimes harden their necks against the warnings of heaven and God sits in the heavens and laughs, for He sees that their day is coming. It does not often happen that these reckless men are permitted to repent. Like Korah, Dathan and Abiram in the days of Moses, they are permitted to work out to the full the judgment of heaven.

4. False teaching and perverted moral ideas. "Woe to 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." This is another class of moral evils. It is a very subtle form of sin and a very serious one. It is the false philosophy, poetry and religion that come as angels of light and aim at the perversion of the human conscience and the obliteration of all true convictions of right and wrong. It insidiously seeks to undermine virtue by painting in the poetry of passion the charms of license and the delights of sin. It makes the beautiful, rather than the true, the aim of life and subverts the stern authority of God's Holy Word and makes it all a myth and allegory.

It is abroad today in the poetry of passion, in the popular novel, in the meretricious theater, in the suggestiveness of fashion, in the easy manners of society, in the mixed conditions of the church itself, in the false teachings of apostates cloaking over sin through ecclesiastical indulgence, in the gauzy sophistries of Christian Science, which do away with all real moral principles; and still more, in the unholy mysteries of Theosophy, Spiritualism and occult science that are pouring over us from the Orient with its filthy tide. Our modern literature, our modern plays, our modern society are full of it. The word "sin" is being eliminated from the popular ethics of our day, and compromise, expediency and sentimentalism are taking the place of God's eternal law and the claims of conscience and righteousness. God says to all these things, "Woe to them that call evil good, that put darkness for light and bitter for sweet."

5. Drunkenness. "Woe to them that are mighty to drink wine and men of strength to mingle strong drink." It is

not so much the vice of becoming drunk that is here denounced as the power to drink like a beast and not get drunk. It is the sensual animalism that can load itself with liquor and lead others into stupid, beastly insensibility, and yet glory in its own self-control and ability to drink without limitation. This is downright beastliness, and yet the picture is not hard to find in our Christian lands, which, above all other lands, are blighted and disgraced with the curse of drunkenness. The woe that Isaiah here pronounces is one that reverberates through all the centuries of the corridors of time, all the vaults of hell. It is the saddest wail ever extorted from human sin and sorrow. It is indeed the devil's most dreadful curse upon lost humanity, and fearful indeed will be the punishment of every man and woman that has any part in spreading it among his fellow men.

6. Self-conceit and pride of intellect. "Woe to them that are wise in their own eyes and prudent in their own sight."

These are the men that had no need of the counsel of Isaiah or the Word of God. They were a law to themselves. The generation is not yet extinct. Pride of intellect, self-sufficiency, all human culture: these form the greatest obstacle to the reception of the Word of God, and it is forever true that "if any man will be wise, let him become a fool, that he may be wise, for He takes the wise in their own craftiness." How very sad that very much of the culture of even the present age is arrayed against Christianity. It is because man hates to acknowledge his own ignorance and nothingness and take his place at the feet of Jesus and learn of Him. Therefore the mysterious words of Jesus Christ are always true of the followers of the kingdom of heaven, "I thank You, oh, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hid these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight."

7. Unrighteous judgment. There is one more class here described, although they are included in the last woe. "Which justify the wicked for reward and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him." (Is. 5: 23).

Perverted judgment for the sake of gain, to wrong the innocent and to whitewash the vile: these were the characteristics of men in high places in Isaiah's time; and God denounces their wickedness in the most severe and unmeasured terms. When the fountains of justice are corrupted and the very courts of law become market places for bribery, violence and oppression, then the very life of a nation is in peril.

III. The harvest.

Therefore the prophet can no longer keep back the vials of God's wrath, and the most vivid metaphors are used to describe the coming judgment. It will be like the devouring fire as it sweeps over the prairie stubble. "Therefore, as the fire devours the stubble and the flame consumes 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.

It will be like the terrific earthquake as it rends the mountains. "Therefore is the anger of the Lord kindled against His people and He has stretched forth His hand against them, and has 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."

It will be like the invasion of a desolating army as it sweeps like a whirlwind over the plains. "And He will lift up an ensign to the nations from afar and will hiss unto them from the end of the earth and, behold, they shall come with speed swiftly; none shall 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' hooves shall be counted like flint and their wheels like a whirlwind." (Is. 5: 26-28).

It will be like the roaring of a pack of lions as they leap upon their prey. "Their roaring shall be like a lion, they shall roar like young lions: yes, they shall roar and lay hold of the prey and shall carry it away safe and none shall deliver it." (Is. 5: 29.)

It will be like the raging tide as it sweeps away the barriers and breaks over the land in desolation, "And in that day they shall roar against them like the roaring of the sea." (Is. 5: 30.)

And it will be like a land over which the darkness of Egypt has fallen. The heavens are black with anger and sorrow and terror hangs like a pall of impenetrable gloom, "And if one look into the land, behold, darkness and sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof." (Is. 5: 30).

Isaiah Chapter 8 THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD

All this came to Judah in a little while. All this has been coming from age to age to nations and races that have brought upon themselves these woes by the corresponding sins and crimes.

All this came upon Assyria and Babylon in their turn when they at length were down under the storm of judgment. All this came to Jerusalem when she perished under the cruel talons of the Roman eagle, and all this is coming to the civilized nations of today when their sin shall have grown ripe for the winepress of the wrath of God. And just as certainly will it come into the life of the individual, for "they that sow the wind shall reap the whirlwind," and even in the present age to a great extent it is literally true. "Indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that does evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile."

The evil grapes must find their place in the winepress of the wrath of God. "Be not deceived, God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap; for he that sows to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption, but he that sows to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting."