

The Stink-berry Harvest

Isaiah 5:1-30

Halifax: 5 April 2009

Introduction

Today in our study of Isaiah we come to chapter 5.

- This chapter presents a very bleak picture to us of God's people fallen under His displeasure.
 - Such we have seen in these introductory chapters, but in the other chapters there have been rays of hope breaking through—
 - at least the mention of a remnant.
 - When Israel was pictured as a desolate field in chapter 1, there was at least a little hut that still remained...
 - Chapters 2-3 (where there was eternal and temporal judgement pronounced) were followed by chapter 4 where there was a glorious and beautiful branch remaining in all the devastation and destruction.
 - We saw that there would be remnant that would be protected and even purified through all the judgement that would come.
 - We must never forget that there is always such a remnant according to election...

But here in chapter 5, the LORD's rejection of the nation as a whole is seen...and the hope is not mentioned.

- It stands as a warning to us that God will not be mocked.
 - If the visible covenant people who have His oracles and protection continue to bring forth corruption,
 - The day will come when the LORD will cast them off.
- Isaiah uses the imagery of a worthless vineyard here—imagery that our LORD Jesus uses again in His ministry many years later...
 - He presents it as a song or poem...
 - The Hebrew scholars point out that this is nothing short of a literary masterpiece that cannot be translated—
 - As Delitzsch says,
 - “The figurative rhythm, the musical euphony, the charming assonances in this appeal, it is impossible to reproduce.”

- But as well done as this piece might be from a literary perspective, its message is one of horror...
 - In the song Isaiah presents his friend, his beloved, as having a vineyard that he carefully provides for...
 - He does everything necessary to insure a good harvest...
 - Isaiah says:
 - Isa 5:1-2: My Well-beloved has a vineyard On a very fruitful hill. He dug it up and cleared out its stones, And planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, And also made a winepress in it; so He expected it to bring forth good grapes...
 - But what was the outcome?
 - Isa 5:2... “instead it brought forth wild grapes”... stink berries...
 - Grapes that are completely worthless and unusable...
 - The word used to describe them is a word that is used to describe the stench that arises from dead bodies, or the smell that comes from dead flies in perfume.
- Isaiah presents this picture and then he asks his hearers what the owner of this vineyard ought to do...
 - He has not told them yet that the vineyard represents them...
 - He asked them to make a judgement based on the situation in the story.
 - In this way, he uses the same technique that Nathan used when he went to confront King David about his adultery...
 - He tells a story about a man who had many flocks and herds, but who takes the one little ewe lamb of a poor man to provide for his guests...
 - David is enraged, and declares that the man should surely die!
 - Then Nathan says to David, “You are the man!”
 - David, by taking the one wife of another man, has done worse.
 - So here, the story of the carefully cultivated vineyard is presented and the hearers are asked to make a judgement...
 - Of course there is no use in continuing to labour with such a vineyard!
 - But then in v. 7, Isaiah declares that He is talking about the Vineyard of the LORD of Hosts which is the House of Israel—
 - the LORD’s own covenant people!
 - The Lord had tenderly cared for His people, but they have brought forth nothing but stink-berries.
- Then Isaiah proceeds to describe the fruits of the stink-berry harvest in some detail, and the judgement that will result.

As with the other sermons from Isaiah, I want to show you how this applies to the church in our day...

- We will look at three things...
 - First, I want to show you how the LORD has provided for our fruitfulness.
 - Second, I want to examine the stinky fruit that we have brought forth.
 - Third, I want to look at the resultant judgement that is threatened.

- And remember that in doing so, I speak to the visible church as a whole of which we are all apart who are baptised in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
 - You are brought near to Christ and He is presented to you in God's gracious covenant...
 - You, therefore, with the whole church, ought to bear good fruit.

So first of all,

I. Consider how the LORD has so fully provided for our fruitfulness...

A. This is illustrated for us in the Song of the Vineyard...

1. We are told that it was in a good location, on a fruitful hill where maximum sunlight would be available...
 - the ground was properly cultivated and cleared of stones...
 - a wall and a watch tower were built to protect it from predators...
 - and there was a winepress prepared for the extraction of the juice...

2. Now we dare not try to press the imagery of the particulars—looking for parallels with the removal of the stones and all the rest...
 - But we need only to see that the LORD has provided everything for His church to be fruitful and to exhibit their fruit.
 - Consider all that He has provided for us!
 - a. First of all, He has brought the glorious gospel into our purview...
 - He has made it known to us that He has sent His Son to die for our sins...
 - And that He has offered Himself on the cross for us... as an offering of atonement for our sins...
 - And that He, the Father, has accepted this sacrifice for sin...
 - And that He has raised Him from the dead and exalted Him to His right hand where He reigns—
 - where He intercedes for us...
 - and where He pours out His Spirit upon us to transform us.

- b. And besides all this, the LORD has given us a church, called out from the world, to be His own...
 - He has given to us holy apostles who have given us His word to direct and guide us as a church...
 - In the Word, which He has inspired, He tells us of Christ and He tells us how He wants us to live—to put off the old man and to put on the new...
 - And He promises us both the forgiveness of sin and grace to live the life He has called us to live if we will but look to Him.
 - And to comfort us and strengthen us even more, He has given us the sacraments,
 - exhibiting to us in a visible way what He has promised to do for us in our salvation—cleansing us and nourishing us up in Christ.
 - And He has given us standing officers in the church, ministers and elders and deacons, to care for us and to guide us in the way...
 - to expound the word to us, to warn us, to guard us from heresy and to set an example for us.
- c. And with all this, He has also given us the Holy Spirit—
 - to illumine the word to us, to provide strength for us to bear fruit, and to empower those who lead us...
 - and to strengthen us in our prayers and give us assurance that we have full and free access to the Father in prayer.

TRANS> As in the song, having provided all this for us,

B. He has every reason to expect us to be fruitful!

- As verse 2 said,
 - “He expected it to bring forth good grapes...”
- 1. This is what the Father is looking for!
 - This is the reason He provided all these things for us.
 - As Jesus tells us in John 15, the Father is glorified when we bring forth fruit...
 - It shows forth His gracious work of salvation in a ruined fallen people!
 - It delights Him to see His image beautifully reflected in us...
 - For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works...
 - We are His creatures and He restores us to our original beauty.

- He makes us into a people who live with one another as He has lived with the Son and with the Holy Spirit for all eternity...
 - And He makes us into a worshipping people who see the Father's glory and adore Him and lay down our lives for Him.
2. This does not mean that the Father is truly taken by surprise by our lack of fruit...
- a. It is not that He expects fruits in the sense that he *thinks* it will come...
- But rather that He expects it in the sense of expecting it from us as what *ought* to be forthcoming.
 - He knows that if there is to be this fruit that He delights in,
 - there must be a deeper work than what He has provided for the visible church...
 - Even a deeper work than providing the Saviour and the Holy Spirit and the word for us...
 - There must be that inward transforming work of grace that enters our lives so that we will come to Christ and continue in Him.
 - That is what He does for all those He elects...
- b. But you see, the visible church—the covenant community—is much larger than the elect...
- And they all have the benefits of His provision for the visible church...
 - And it is always true that they, of all people *ought* to bear good fruit...
 - And it is always true that whenever they don't they are highly culpable.
 - There is no excuse for it at all!
 - For the LORD has provided everything they need to be fruitful.
 - The provision is there...
 - It is just that they are too hardened and too stubborn to come.
 - From our human understanding,
 - We sometimes wonder why the LORD doesn't just go ahead and do a saving work in all of them since he is fully capable of it...
 - Why does He call many but only choose a few in which to do this deeper work of transformation?
 - All we can say is that He does what He does for His own glory.
 - It is not for us to question Him or to deny what He tells us that He has done...

- And it is for us to recognise that with or without that special gracious working of God which we call effectual calling,
 - the obligation is upon every one of us to repent and believe the gospel, and then to bear much fruit for the glory of God.
 - God has provided all that we need,
 - and our refusal to benefit from what He has provided (if we have refused) will stand for all eternity as an illustration of just how worthy we are to be judged—
 - of just how wicked we are to spurn such a great salvation.
3. And inasmuch as we by His grace do bear fruit that is pleasing,
- We see how indebted we are to Him for all He has provided for us to be fruitful... to be beautifully fruitful...
 - And we see how deeply humbled we should be to know that apart from His special grace, we would have also spurned Him.
 - Jesus says, no one will come to me unless the Father draws him.

TRANS> Seeing God's gracious provision for our fruitfulness and His desire and expectation for us to be fruitful ought to spur us on to be more fruitful.

II. But just look at the stinky fruit that comes forth from God's covenant people.

- **This is brought forth to us in the woes that Isaiah pronounces...**
- **If use them to examine the condition of the visible church today, we will find many parallels.**

A. First, there is the stinky fruit of covetousness...

1. You can see this in verse 8 where Isaiah speaks about those who join house to house and field to field until there is no place left to dwell...
 - God gave Israel a very wonderful system of ownership in which each family was given land on which they could provide for themselves,
 - and the law had requirements for this land to be returned to these families in the Jubilee if it had been rented out...
 - But in every society there are covetous men who are very ingenious at finding ways to get around the law and say they didn't...
 - And these men, seeing that land could only be obtained through the family, allowed themselves to be adopted by those who properties they wanted to permanently own.

- In this way, they multiplied houses and lands until they owned everything in sight!
- John Chrysostom once said that covetous men are so intent on owning everything that they would even take the sun from the poor if they could.

TRANS> The whole design of the law is that you would try to help others keep their own property so that they could provide for themselves.

- And that is still the principle that ought to be practiced...
 - Not that we are tied to the same rules of land ownership, but we ought to have practices in place that would promote such principles.
 - But what do we see instead?
2. Now I would ask you, is covetousness not eating up the church today?
- a. We have so much but we are never satisfied...
 - Our attitude, even in a simply job, is not that we are there to bless others and provide what is good for them...
 - but that we are there to do as little as we can for the maximum return.
 - b. And because we always want more than we have been given,
 - We have found a “legal” way to cease what belongs to others that everyone considers acceptable...
 - A whole system of borrowing has been developed that passes the bill we have drawn up to future generations!
 - It is so wrong for us to vote in a government that does this, but we vote them in because this is what we want!
3. And one of the most destructive things about this covetousness spiritually is way it takes away our hearts...
- We are incessantly focused on getting things...
 - Instead of meditating on how we may honour Christ, we meditate on the things we want to get.
 - I do not mean that ownership of much property is wrong in itself...
 - Job had great riches and was blameless, but his focus was on using his wealth with thanksgiving to God and for the blessing of others.
 - Too often, even those who have far less, have their minds on their possessions without reference to God...
 - Their covetousness eats away their soul—takes possession of them so that the LORD is forgotten.

TRANS> After covetousness,

B. Isaiah speaks of drunkenness and debauchery as the second sort of stinky fruit...

1. This is brought out in verses 11-12—

- Here you have those who follow intoxicating drink from morning until evening...
 - Talk about something that takes the heart away from the LORD!
 - Instead of serving their neighbour in honest labour and caring for their family, these ones only thought of getting away from it all drunkenness and partying.
- The problem was not that they enjoyed their music and their feasting,
 - for the Lord commends such things...
 - but the problem is that they used their wine and their song to forget God... and His judgement...
 - As it says in verse 12, they did not “regard the work of the Lord or consider the operation of His hands.”

2. That is the great problem with the drunkard—

- He drinks to escape from God—He drinks to avoid God—He drinks to avoid His responsibilities before God...
 - He will bear no sacrifice and no hardship for others—all he wants is to get away from it all...
 - This is frequently done with drink, but it is also done with entertainment—when entertainment is used to avoid responsibility.
 - When entertainment crowds out the Sabbath...
 - When entertainment crowds out family worship...
 - When entertainment crowds out personal prayer and study...
 - When the heart is set on entertainment so that it is your meditation all the day and God’s Word has no place...

C. The third piece of stinky fruit is a pursuit of sin and denial of God...

1. This is described in verse 18-19 with a very vivid picture—

- The one who should be bearing fruit for God is seen deliberately drawing sin along with him...
 - He hitches it up to himself with cords and ropes that way you hitch a horse up to draw a wagon or a plough!
- You know how sometimes we are said to be drawn away into sin?

- That is a bad thing— we know how powerful sin can be...
 - But here is something even worse...
 - God's people are seen as drawing sin to themselves—going out and looking for it in heedless defiance of God...
 - They are labouring to sin, pursuing sin as a prize, looking for new ways to sin!
 - There are a lot of men who would be very fruitful if they laboured and devoted their meditation even half as much to bearing fruit as they do to pursuing adultery...
 - They plan, they spend their wealth, they use their time—all in the pursuit of wickedness and uncleanness...
2. And to live this way, they must also disregard the Lord and His warnings...
- They must ignore the checks of conscience and keep pressing on in the pursuits...
 - You must pretend that God's judgement will not come upon you—that He does not care about what you are doing...
 - These ones do not want to think about God...
 - They suspend belief in Him unless He shows himself...
 - "Let Him make speed and hasten His work, that we may see it," they say...
 - They pretend that there is lack of the proof they need to follow God—a lack of evidence.
 - There probably isn't a God, so go on and enjoy your life...
 - They pretend that He is not clear and that it is all uncertain...
 - Calvin points out that here is the difference between the reprobate and the elect...
 - The reprobate have to see God's judgement before they will believe, but for the elect, the word alone is sufficient.

TRANS> The fourth piece of stinky fruit is presented to us in verse 20-21.

D. It is what we might call perverted judgement.

- Isa 5:20-21: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight."

1. This certainly describes the church in our day!

- We have churches that not only tolerate and wink at sin, but who actually promote sin as something good!
 - I think especially about those who promote abortion as a loving thing to prevent an unwanted child from having to live...
 - Or of those who promote sexual perversion by allowing sodomites to marry...
 - and all the while they act as if they are doing good in the world.
 - But we do not have to go to such extremes to engage in this sin...
 - We all seem to have great dexterity when it comes not only to justifying our wickedness, but turning our wicked acts into virtue!
 - Parents who are petty and sour toward their children fancy themselves to be administering godly discipline...
 - And those who never raise their voice and never chasten their children fancy themselves to full of godly gentleness and love when in fact the Bible says they hate their children for their refusal to discipline them...
 - Elders in the church make the same justification of their ways... be they severe or be they lenient.
 - And there are those who fancy themselves as being faithful witnesses at work when it is rather the case that they are lazy and avoiding the work that the LORD has given them to do...
 - There are the greedy who call themselves prudent and the lazy who call themselves free of covetousness.
2. What it all comes down to is that we become wise in our own eyes...
- It all begins with setting up your personal subjective preferences as the standard of judgement...
 - Many people who object that “we are not supposed to judge” are the very ones who do this...
 - What they mean when they say that is just the opposite of what the Lord means...
 - What the Lord means is that we are not supposed to go by our own feelings and preferences...
 - What they mean is “Do not bring God’s word to bear upon me—leave me to walk in according to the dictates of my own heart.”
 - This is stinking fruit...
 - The Lord wants to see us full of fruit that is rooted in His word,
 - not fruit that is rooted in our own subjective preferences...

- It was following our own wisdom (or rather that of Satan) that brought about the fall in the first place...
- It is for us to be meek and teachable before the word of God, not assertive of our own ideas.

E. The fifth piece of stinky fruit is the perversion of justice...

- This is described in verse 22 & 23.

1. Once again wine is in the picture.

- Almost every society has its mighty men...
 - They may be men who are mighty in battle—in defending the nation...
 - Or men who are mighty in government—able to lead the nation in uprightness and integrity and godliness...
- But a society has surely lost its way when the mighty man is the one who can put away the most wine!
 - the one who can mix the best drink!
 - When these are the heroes and the ones who are admired,
 - that society has lost its way!

2. There is a complete shift in a wicked society's definition of a hero!

- We need to see to it that our sons grow up to be true men, not strong fools!
 - Men who are heroes because they are upright and full of integrity and strength for what is just and right.
 - Too often our heroes are those who don't even know how to love a wife and children...
 - they are heroes in sports or in drinking or in covetousness, or in perversion...
 - We need to see to it that we teach our children to admire those who are true heroes.
 - It is amazing how much influence Hollywood has had on our sons.
 - There are so few that are strong enough to lead.

TRANS> So you see the stink-berry harvest—it is all around us and it is repulsive to God.

- He has provided for us that we might bring forth good grapes, but all we have to show are stink-berries that are good for nothing.

- Sadly, that is what characterises the visible church as a whole in our day, even as it characterised the covenant community in Isaiah’s day.

III. So what will the LORD do with His worthless vineyard?

A. He brings His judgement upon it...

1. First, this is illustrated in the song of the vineyard...

- The question as to what the owner of the stink-berry vineyard ought to do is put to the men of Judah and Jerusalem...
 - verse 4: “What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it?”
- The LORD is now the speaker and He declares that He is going to cease caring for it...
 - He is going to take away its protection and let briars and thorns grow up in it... He is going to stop providing rain to nourish it...
 - Thus the LORD does...
 - When we will not make use of the protection He has provided for us, He takes it away...
 - When we do not receive the Spirit and the Word, He removes them from us so that we no longer have them...
 - He takes them away and leaves us to our own way.
 - This is a terrifying thing...
 - If you do not bear fruit with all the provision that the LORD has given you, the provision will be taken away...
 - False teachers will come, heresies will spread, perversion will grow up, enemies will overtake us...
 - The lamp-stand is taken away!
 - Do we not see this happening in the church today?
 - It is difficult to find a church where the Word of God is even preached.

TRANS> After presenting His judgement in the illustration of the vineyard,

2. The LORD then goes on to speak of specific judgements that He will bring upon His people in their rebellion with respect to the woes he has pronounced...
 - a. Are they busy adding to house to house and field to field as we say in v. 8?
 - Then He will see to it that their houses are desolate—

- they will be emptied of their covetous inhabitants who will be the first to suffer when the enemies come!
- Those who have the most suffer the hardest when the enemies come...
 - God also promises that they will have pitiful returns in the fields that they have unjustly multiplied to themselves...
- b. He promises that the partiers who disregarded his work and his judgement (in v 11-12) will be taken into captivity...
 - Instead of freedom, there will be captivity...(v. 13)
 - Instead of feasting, hunger...
 - Instead of drunkenness, they will know thirst...
 - Instead of pomp and jubilation, they will be swallowed up by the hungry grave—
 - Sheol, the grave, is pictured as a hungry beast who will swallow them up.
 - Then all that arrogance by which they disregarded the LORD will be completely subdued and God alone will be exalted...
 - As verse 15 shows, they will see that He is El—denoting his natural perfections...
 - And that He is holy, denoting His moral perfections...
 - They will be taken from their place—their fields will be trampled—but the LORD will be exalted over all.
 - This is what was brought out so clearly in chapter 2 where we saw that those who are loud and arrogant will be humbled in the day of judgement...
 - Their reckless arrogance will not last forever.
 - This is what will come upon these heedless partiers...
- c. And then in verse 24-25, the Lord pronounces His judgement upon those who have pursued sin and have overturned God's ways...
 - those against whom woes were pronounced in verses 18-23...
 - You see in verse 24-25 that His anger is presented as a consuming fire.
 - A burning fire that has been enflamed and cannot be quenched until it has utterly destroyed them...
 - It is seen to envelop them and overtake them as fire consumes stubble and chaff...

- It is said to leave neither root nor blossom—neither what is below the ground nor what is above.
 - Though many in the church do not wish to see God in this way, this is the way He presents Himself to us...
 - In fact, a big part of the problem with these is the very fact that they refuse to regard the LORD as a threat...
 - As we saw, that they suspend belief in Him and dare Him to take action if He is unhappy with them...
 - It is for this very cause that He judges His people...
 - And note well,
 - it does say in verse 25 that His anger is aroused against **His people**—
 - the covenant people—
 - the ones who have all the promises and the law, but who despise it and bear no fruit.
 - And note well,
 - It says that the anger being aroused is will not be turned away even after it has been unleashed upon them as fire...
 - There is yet more to come.
3. In verses 26-30, God’s judgement is yet further described—
- now as a powerful army coming in with inexhaustible vigour and strength...
 - a. I want you to notice that God Himself is the one who summons the army to come forth!
 - It is not that He merely allows them to come and devour Israel—
 - He raises up a banner to rally them together and whistles for them to come forth at His command...
 - Be assured, brothers and sisters, that no army moves unless God moves it!
 - There are many who speak of Him allowing things like 9/11 to happen...
 - but we must understand that He is the one who causes these things to happen...
 - There will be more about this when we get to chapter 10, but here it is clearly introduced.

b. And look at what this army is like... an army that seems to be invincible:

- Look at the vivid description given to us in verse 27-29:
 - Isa 5:27-29: No one will be weary or stumble among them, No one will slumber or sleep; Nor will the belt on their loins be loosed [this is the belt that holds their garment up for the fray and on which their sword or dagger is carried], Nor the strap of their sandals be broken;
 - 28 Whose arrows are sharp, And all their bows bent; Their horses' hooves will seem like flint, And their wheels like a whirlwind.
 - 29 Their roaring will be like a lion, They will roar like young lions; Yes, they will roar And lay hold of the prey; They will carry it away safely, And no one will deliver.
 - You see that they are shown to take God's covenant people without anything to slow their advance—and without any one to deliver...

c. In verse 30, the roaring of the lion is changed to the roaring of the sea...

- The army is seen as a roaring sea coming against God's rebellious people...
- This is where the picture becomes very bleak...
 - God's people, seeing this army coming upon them as a raging sea look to the land...
 - But all the see is darkness all around...
 - There is no escape, there is no light, and there is no ray of hope.
 - It is a dreadful picture of complete hopelessness.
 - v. 30 "And if one looks to the land, behold, darkness, sorrow, and the light is darkened by the clouds!"
 - This is the utter destruction that comes upon the sinful nation.

B. So where is the hope in all this?

1. There is none—not here—

- That is the point—
 - it all ends in utter destruction and darkness...
- That is how it will be the covenant people who do not abide in Christ...
 - They will be devoured by the judgement of God.
 - That is what every member of the church can expect who is not vitally joined to Jesus Christ with living faith...

- who is not joined to Him so that good fruit appears.
2. Isaiah is showing us here that there is no hope even in the covenant people apart from Christ...
- God will destroy His own vineyard for lack of fruit.
 - It is Christ who will be presented in the ensuing chapters as our only hope!
 - In Isaiah 6, amidst all this destruction, He is presented as seated upon His throne in majesty and holiness, filling the temple with glory...
 - He is seen as the one who sends Isaiah forth to declare His judgement.
 - He is the one who will bring that judgement to bear upon them...
 - Yet, He is the one who will preserve a tenth—a remnant according to election!
 - He is the one that Israel was rejecting and He is Israel's only hope.
 - He is the one that the visible church is rejecting today—and He is our only hope!
 - If you reject Him, it does not matter what else you may have done...
 - You have no hope—nothing but darkness and judgement.
3. So what can I say to all of you who have Christ so near to you?
- What can I say to you who have God's full provision?
 - To you who have even heard His word preached today...
 - Who even today have been called to abide in Him—
 - to bear fruit that the Father delights in...
 - He has provided Christ to you for this purpose...
 - O my friends, do not ignore this call!
 - Come to Christ, abide in Him and let His word abide in you...
 - Let it fill you until it controls your tongue and your walk and your hands and your eyes...
 - and even your very inmost thoughts...
 - Come to God's rich provision and be fruitful!
 - That is what the Father delights in.
 - That is what He has provided for...
 - That is what all this is about.
 - Come to Him and be fruitful!

- Without Christ, there is nothing but darkness and judgement!