

Woos and woes: a love song.
Isaiah 5:1–30
9am Walgett and 3.30pm Colly 20 Sept 2015

How would you deliver a message that wasn't going to be popular?

Isaiah sings a love song. But in this love song he woo's his listeners with a sweet serenade, then woes them with a stinging stab.

It all begins with a love song in Isaiah 5:1–2 that he sings to the people of Jerusalem and Judah.

I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.
He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit.

Who is 'the one I love'?

And who is 'his vineyard' that he cared for so much?

And why did it yield 'bad fruit' after so much love and care?

But before getting answers to those questions, we hear the lover of the vineyard ask the dwellers in Jerusalem and Judah what they would have done to the vineyard after it yielded bad grapes.

In verses 5 and 6 we are told that the vineyard will be destroyed. The hedges and walls around it will be removed. It will be forsaken so that it is overrun with weeds and left to dry out with no rain.

The people of Jerusalem and Judah would have been listening thinking that is exactly what the vineyard deserves. That's what they would have done if it was their vineyard.

But here comes the sting in the love song, verse 7:

The vineyard of the LORD Almighty
is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the vines he delighted in.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

Isaiah is saying: ‘This love song is about you! God delighted in you, but now because of the bad fruit you yielded you are to be destroyed.’

And if that isn’t painful enough to hear, those last words of verse 7 would have ringed in their ears: ‘And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.’

The original Hebrew words sound very similar: The Lord looked for *mish-pat* (justice) but found *mish-pak* (bloodshed); for *se-da-kah* (righteousness) but found *se-a-kah* (cries of distress).

In English, we could say: The Lord looked for the *righting* of wrongs, but found his people *inflicting* wrongs; he looked for *right* living but heard the cries of *wrong* living.

So what was the ‘bad fruit’ of bloodshed and cries of distress that God found in Israel?

Isaiah answers this with ‘woes.’ The word ‘woe’ is like shaking your head in shame and disgust.

Woe to the property seekers, 5:8–10: Isaiah is shaking his head in disgust at the greedy land grabbers who have taken more than their share of land. In doing this they have kicked others off the land forcing them into poverty and slavery to the rich land-owners. Those property seekers will have lots, but end up lonely (verse 9) and with empty stomachs (verse 10).

Woe to the pleasure seekers, 5:11–17. Isaiah shakes his head at those who love to party without thinking of the LORD. The ones who gobble up food will be gobbled up by death (verse 14). The ones who normally feast, will have their land feasted on (verse 17). There will be a reversal of fortunes – the party-goers will be humbled as the LORD is raised high by his justice and proved holy by his righteous acts (verses 15 and 16).

Woe to the fools, 5:18–21. Here there are three woes. Verses 18 and 19 to those who make fun of sin and God’s judgment. Verse 20 to those who don’t know right from wrong. And verse 21 those who think they are wise and clever. They were fools who hadn’t thought of the consequences of their actions.

Woe to the false heroes, 5:22–30. This is a society that has really lost its way. Heroes are those who drink excessively, who are corrupt and who deny justice to the innocent. It is alarming that much of our world could be summarized by what Isaiah is saying here. We love gaining property and real estate, parties and binge drinking. Yet, sadly we take no time to reflect on the kind of world this creates.

Isaiah quickly turns to describe the judgment that is coming. Burning. Decay. And the upraised hand of God. Even more frightening is that (verse 25) this all comes from the hand of God and his anger is not turned away.

The battle scene of 5:26–30, with an unstoppable army coming swiftly at the whistle of God, is the Assyrian army. That’s exactly what happened in world history. Here it’s clear that this judgment is the work of God.

This is what will happen to the vineyard of Israel because of the bad fruit they have yielded.

All these word pictures are deadly serious. God's judgment is well deserved but painful and awful. No wonder Isaiah keeps saying 'Woe!'

How did it get this bad?

Verses 24 and 25:

for they have rejected the law of the LORD Almighty
and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel.

This is what happens when the people turn their backs to God and stop listening to his Word.

So what about us today?

How can we not make the same mistake?

Jesus picked up the vineyard image. Where Israel failed, there was one faithful Israelite who became the new and true vine. In John 15:1–4, Jesus said to his disciples:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me."

We can only produce good fruit if we remain in Jesus Christ. That is, trusting and obeying his word.

And so this puts us in the same seat as Isaiah's first listeners who heard the love song about the vineyard. Our Father, the gardener, has loved and cared for us. In fact, he has loved and cared for us more than his people in ancient Israel. God has given his Son Jesus to die for us.

Jesus went on to say (John 15:12–13): 'My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.'

Friends, this is the standard of love that God calls us to today. It matters how we treat others.

When the LORD looks at us will he see justice, or bloodshed?

When the LORD looks at us will he see righteousness, or hear cries of distress?

This is a stark reminder for us to listen to the Word of God so that we remain in Jesus and bear good fruit. Lest any of us be cut off from the vine.

This is a stark reminder for us to consider the consequences our actions have on others around us. Though Isaiah's original hearers lived in a different time to us, God's character remains the same today. He detests the sins of greed and pleasure-seeking that ignores him and his Word.

Perhaps a good question to consider this week is: 'What consequences are my actions having on others around me?'

'Am I loving others, or am I selfishly using them for my own gain?'

Let's pray:

LORD Almighty, humble us through your Word the Bible. Teach us to love justice and righteousness, as you do. Thank you for the love you have given us through your Son Jesus. Help us to love others as you have loved us. Amen.