

RELIGION

Scripture of the Week

Psalm 31

Isaiah's Song Of The Vineyard: Are Those Wild Grapes I See?

BY MICHAEL LINDSEY
Dean of North Portland Bible College

The text for the Sunday School lesson (International Series) for next Sunday is Isaiah 5:1-7. We again want to encourage the faithful Sunday School teachers in our churches, by making available to you advance copies of these weekly columns for your use in preparing lessons. You may request this service by phoning NPBC at 288-2919; leave a message if necessary.

A story about raising grapes may seem to be a long ways removed from our churches and our nation, but I'm convinced that this "song of the vineyard" was written to illustrate some vital principles that are as true today as they were in Isaiah's day, some 700 years before Christ.

Isaiah lived in a culture that had a heritage of faith--faith in the same God Christians worship today. Their grandparents, by and large, had been men and women who testified to the great mercies of the Lord, and had raised their children to obey his Word, including the Ten Commandments. The leaders, both in government and religion, had become very corrupt, but they still kept up a facade of religious piety to keep their influence with the people. But the society as a whole was breaking

down--violence, greed, injustice and dishonesty were just facts of daily life. Does any of this sound familiar to you?

The Lord gave Isaiah a message to communicate to the people of Israel and Judah, a message they didn't want to hear. So the Spirit of God (see 2 Pet 1:20-21) led Isaiah to tell them a story, a parable in the form of a song, so they might receive the message with both their minds and their hearts. Like most parables, this one used an aspect of life everyone then was familiar with--the cultivation of a vineyard. Before we try to apply this to ourselves, let's try to re-live the parable as Isaiah would have first told it. [By the way, the Lord Jesus also taught several parables based on vineyard keeping and fruit bearing--skim through Matthew 20 and 21 for several parallels to Isaiah 5.]

The song begins, "My well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill." Who is Isaiah's good Friend? He doesn't tell us, yet. Isaiah directs our attention to the vineyard. The people of Israel lived in hilly country, and many vineyards grace the hillsides. But vineyards were not for everyone. They took a lot of work to establish, and years of waiting before the vines grew large enough to produce a full crop. The vineyards symbolized the fruitfulness

of Israel itself, and they were passed on from generation to generation. So someone like Isaiah's Friend had to have a long-term commitment to make that vineyard succeed.

The land of Palestine is so filled with rocks that the farmer has to remove them from the soil so it will support the grape vines. The Arabs say that when God created the world, he sent an angel out carrying two bags of rocks for the whole world. As the angel passed over Palestine, one bag broke, so that half of all the stones in the world are in Palestine. Farmers and their families continually work to remove more stones so the ground will be more productive. They use these stones to build fences, boundary markers, watchtowers, and a winepress with a vat to save the juice.

Isaiah's Friend did everything he could to insure a good vineyard--he used the best vine starts, provided the best protection against animals who would steal the grapes and ruin the vines, and constructed a full-scale winery (by their standards) right there in the field. The central point is that the vineyard had the very best character it could have, and the fruit (grapes) should have been the very best, too. Instead, when the vineyard started producing, its grapes were "wild," that is, small, inedible,

worthless fruit which the Palestinians still call "wolf grapes."

Suddenly, the song changes key, and the Friend himself speaks (vv. 3-6 in our text). He asks the audience, the people of Jerusalem, to give him advice. What has he failed to do, to produce a good vineyard? No one answers--it's certainly not his fault the way the grapes have turned out. So the Friend of Isaiah is fully justified to destroy the vineyard; if the vines could talk, what excuse could they give? The Vinekeeper tells how he will remove all protection from the vineyard, and allow its enemies to totally devastate it, and then let it grow wild, like its fruit.

As a final blow, Isaiah's Friend "will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it" (v.6). Now this is no ordinary vineyard owner, for he can command the elements of nature. At this point (v.7) Isaiah explained his parable, and probably surprised many of his audience. The nation Israel is the vineyard and its vines; the Lord of hosts (Yahweh Sabaoth) is Isaiah's beloved Friend. And the fruit of the nation Israel is wild grapes, ripe for judgment.

What were these grapes? Isaiah explains that the grapes are phony substitutes for godliness. He uses a play on words (a pun) in his Hebrew language,

to show how phony their lives were. The Lord was looking for mishpat, "Judgment" [or better, "Justice" (NIV)], the fruit of a culture that respects human rights and divine law. But he found mishpat, "bloodshed" (NIV), a total disregard for humanity. Wild grapes indeed!

Then the Lord looked into the hearts of his people. He wanted to see the fruit of tsedaqah, "righteousness," hearts set on doing right by one's fellow human being, no matter what the consequences. Instead, he found tse' aqah, "a cry of distress" (NIV), as the poor and powerless called on the Lord to save them from the oppressors. These grapes are enough to make you sick!

Outwardly, Israel was the chosen people of God. Inwardly, they had rejected that privilege, and the responsibility of being a blessing to other nations. They had chosen to worship other gods, to practice immoral behavior, and to exploit the weak and poor among them. In our text, the Lord emphasizes the last of these sins. It was impossible for Israel as a society to continue to live lives of greed, pleasure and indifference to others' needs, without falling under the judgment of Almighty GOD. And this judgment did come, as the Babylonian armies devastated the land, and

then in turn the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans tread through the land and ruled it (recall v.5 in our text).

The same principles do apply to our nation today. The United States is certainly not God's "chosen people," but it has a heritage of Biblical values and an awareness of the Lord's blessing both materially and spiritually. If our nation continues to subvert its justice system, devalue human life, encourage violence in both the media and real life, idolize the rich who get richer by exploiting the poor and devastating the environment, and deny the value of honest work, then God's judgment will surely fall on this nation, for we have produced "wild grapes" despite his attention and care for us.

And the same principle applies to the Christian people of America as well, all the more because we are God's chosen people of (1 Pet 2:9-10), blessed with every spiritual blessing from him (Eph 1:3). If we don't take a stand against social evils like those mentioned above, we have only ourselves to blame as the society declines and falls. I personally don't think we've reached that point yet; if the Lord can look at our lives and see fruit of justice and righteousness, he may yet bring a revival of faith that will save our land.

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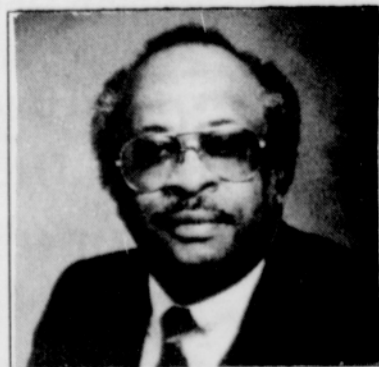
Study Phone: 289-1911

Sunday Service
10:45

Sunday School
9:30

Bible Study
6:00

Evening Service
7:00 P.M.



Pastor, Rev. James C.E. Faulkner

Theme: Whatever you're going to do
for the Lord, do it now

1 Peter 4:11

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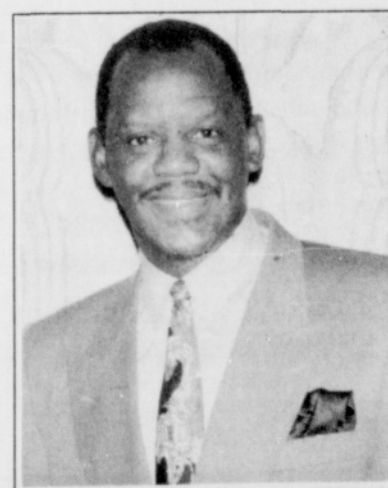
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Women's Bible Class

5:00 pm.

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