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Isaiah - Barrenness and Fruitfulness



Isaiah - Steve Gregg

Isaiah's motif of barrenness and fruitfulness speaks of Israel's struggle with righteousness and faith. In comparing men to trees and vines, the prophet emphasizes the importance of producing fruit of value, rather than simply existing. The speaker, Steve Gregg, highlights Isaiah's warnings about false prophets and unfruitful behavior, and the importance of repentance and righteousness in producing the fruit of the Kingdom of God.

Transcript

This theme that we are coming to now, that is woven all the way through Isaiah, is actually one of my favorite motifs. When we talk about the different themes and motifs in Isaiah, I always look forward to discussing this one, and I'm not even sure I could tell you why. I don't know what it is about this that just does something for me, but it's always been one of my favorite ones.

And that is the motif of barrenness as opposed to fruitfulness. And I mentioned in our last lecture, in passing, that when we were talking about the covenant and God marrying his people, one of the main things a man would marry a woman for was to start a family, at least in those days, and therefore having children. A woman who could not have children and could not give her husband heirs to the family estate was a woman who would feel shame about that.

She'd feel like she had let her husband down. And, in fact, this was such a shameful thing and such a tragedy, if a woman could not give her husband children, she herself might offer another woman to him to bear children. We see this, of course, in the case of Abraham and Sarah.

She was not able to have children, so she said, take my handmaid Hagar and have children by her. So important it was, and so inseparable from the idea of having a marriage, was that you'd have fruit, you'd have children, offspring. And, of course, Israel and almost all nations in those days were agrarian societies which depended on farming as well.

And so the idea of fruitfulness comes in when we think about crops, and it comes in when we think about having children. And the imagery of fruitfulness and barrenness applies both to agricultural imagery and childbearing imagery in the book of Isaiah. And what's very clear in the book of Isaiah is that God is looking for fruit from his people.

Now, before we get into the passages that talk directly on the subject of fruit, we need to be aware that in the symbolism of the book of Isaiah and other prophets, people are sometimes likened to trees. Now, not all trees are fruit-producing, but, of course, some trees do produce fruit, and therefore this is connected to our exploration of the subject of barrenness and fruitfulness. This has to do with what God is looking for from his people.

And people in Isaiah are sometimes, in some passages, likened to trees. In Isaiah chapter 7 and verse 2, it says, meaning King Ahaz and his family, Now, trees of the woods are swayed with the wind, and certainly I doubt if the people were swaying literally as trees, but they were shaken in their hearts. Their courage was lost, and it's likened to trees being shaken by strong winds.

Now, in chapter 10 and verse 19, when he's talking about God conquering Assyria, he's talking about how their forces will be decimated, and their armies and their population will be reduced to almost nothing. In talking that way, it says in verse 19 of Isaiah 10, Now, you might say, well, how do we know that's not talking about literal trees, that it's not talking about defoliating the land or cutting down all the trees? Sometimes armies did that. When they invaded a country, they cut down all the trees and used the wood for siege works and so forth, for ladders and such to get over the walls to invade a city.

Often, in fact, Josephus says that when the Romans came against Jerusalem, they cut down all the trees for miles around. So he says that which had formerly looked like forests and parks was just a bare desert when the Romans cut down all the trees. So how do we know that's not talking about that here? Maybe the Babylonians who invaded Assyria cut down all their trees.

But this is not so, because this same thought is expressed a few verses later at the end of the chapter. In verses 33 and 34, it says, Now, a bough is, of course, a limb of a tree. He will cut down the thickets of the forest with iron, and Lebanon will fall by the mighty one.

Now, he identifies the high-statured ones that will be hewn down. The word hew is a verb that speaks of cutting down a tree or cutting up wood with an axe. The high ones will be axed.

They'll be cut down. The haughty ones, he identifies them as the proud ones. Now, that is the theme if we would read the whole chapter 10, which we will on another occasion.

We'd find that the great objection that God is raising to the Assyrians and what is going

to bring judgment upon them is their haughtiness and their arrogance. So he's likening them to proud trees of Lebanon. And they're haughty, and they'll be cut down like trees.

And it talks about how the trees that will be left will be few in number, so few a child could count them. And that presumably is a child that is not capable of counting very high. In chapter 14 and verse 8, it's talking about Babylon falling.

And it says, Indeed, the cypress trees rejoice over you, and the cedars of Lebanon, saying, Since you were cut down, no woodsman has come up against us. Now, Babylon is likened to a tree that's been cut down. And all the trees that have been threatened before, or at least Babylon is likened to a woodsman who cuts down trees, and the nations that had been threatened by him before are now rejoicing that Babylon has gone down because no one else comes to cut them down, these trees.

Commentators say that the cypress trees and the cedars of Lebanon represent Israel and Syria, the two nations that had been defeated by Babylon. They are vindicated by the fall of Babylon. And it's like the trees are rejoicing over that.

The people are, of course, likened to trees. Likewise, in Isaiah 55 and verse 12, a Messianic passage says, You shall go out with joy and be led out with peace. The mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing before you.

All the trees of the fields shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorns shall come up the cypress tree. Instead of the briars shall come up the myrtle tree.

It shall be to the Lord for a name and for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. Now, we have the trees clapping their hands and the mountains rejoicing. You might say, Well, this isn't really comparing people to trees.

It's more like comparing trees to people. It may be just poetic language about mountains and trees and birds and all kinds of things rejoicing. And it certainly could be.

To say trees clap their hands is to anthropomorphize trees. Trees don't actually have hands. We might picture trees clapping their branches, but they're not hands, so it's not literal.

They don't have hands. So, obviously, we could say, Well, trees are being likened to people, not the other way around. Possibly.

But Isaiah does specifically refer to people as trees in some places. And this could be talking about people rejoicing, but they're likened to trees. For example, in Isaiah chapter 61 and verse 3, it says that Christ is proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness, that they, that is, the children of Zion, may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he

may be glorified.

So it's rather unambiguous here. The children of Zion, God's people, are called trees of righteousness. Now, trees of righteousness, no doubt, is depicting fruit trees whose fruit is righteousness.

In Isaiah 5, which we'll see later in this session, Israel is likened to a vineyard and a vine from which God sought fruit. In Isaiah 5, 7, in that connection of Israel being a vine, it says that the fruit that God sought was justice and righteousness. So in the imagery of the vineyard, Israel is supposed to produce fruit.

The fruit he's really looking for is spiritual. It's justice and righteousness. Now the people of God are seen to be trees of righteousness, which might mean trees that produce the fruit of righteousness that God has been seeking.

In any case, if that is the nuance or not, we see that there's an unambiguous reference to people under the imagery of trees. Now, not only trees, but any fruit-producing plant, because God is looking for fruit. Now what he's looking for is spiritual fruit, but it's cast in the imagery of ordinary fruit from a tree or from a vine.

And the most, probably the most important passage on this is Isaiah 5 that I just mentioned. And we should take a look at that because it, first of all, it comes early in the book and sets the tone for God's desire for fruit. And where we see very clearly that human beings are compared with a plant that produces fruit or should.

Isaiah 5, we're going to look at actually this whole chapter or this whole section at one point, but just verse 7 right now. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant plant. He means his vine plant.

He's looking for grapes. It's in a vineyard. The plant is the men of Judah.

Okay, so men are not only compared to trees, but also a vine. In every case, the idea is men are supposed to produce fruit for God of a sort. And he says he looked for justice.

That's the fruit he was seeking. The grapes he looked for was justice, but what he found instead was oppression. He sought righteousness, but instead what he found was weeping, weeping of people who were being oppressed.

This idea of people being trees or fruit producing plants is found frequently in the New Testament. You know the famous expression of Jesus, you shall know them by their fruit. It's not about people, the fruit they produce, and he likens them to trees.

Actually, so does John the Baptist. In Matthew chapter 3 and verse 10, it is John the Baptist speaking. He says, even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees.

Therefore, every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

The meaning of this statement in the connection is that God is now making a judgment in the land of Israel between those trees that produce fruit and those that do not. He means those people, those Jews who produce fruit and those who do not.

This is a distinction being made between the remnant in Israel and the apostate in Israel. The remnant is going to be preserved, but the fruitless trees are the apostate. They will be cut down.

You may remember in Luke chapter 23 when Jesus was actually carrying his cross up the hill to be crucified. It says in verse 27 of Luke 23, Luke 23, 27. It says a great multitude of people followed Jesus as he carried his cross toward Golgotha and women who were also mourned and lamented him.

But Jesus turning to them said, Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For indeed, the days are coming when they will say, blessed are the barren, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nourished, nursed. Then they will begin to say to the mountains, fall on us and to the hills, cover us.

For if they do these things in the green wood or the green tree, some translations say what will be done in the dry tree, that is. Now, this is an enigmatic statement, but the point is the Romans were doing this to Jesus. Yet he's a green tree, that is a living tree, a fruitful tree.

But Israel was a dry, dead, fruitless tree. What are the Romans going to do to them? If they do this to me, what will they do to you is his statement. He's saying, you're feeling sorry for me, you ought to be feeling sorry for yourself and for your children.

Why? Because some of them and their children would be alive within 40 years from that time when the Romans would come and do worse things to Judah than they were actually doing to Jesus. Although it couldn't get much worse, Jesus implied, you think this is bad, wait to see what they do to you. A dry tree.

Judah was a fruitless tree and therefore came under judgment. Jesus described himself as a living tree, a green tree, obviously suggesting that he is bearing fruit, but Israel is not. In Matthew 7, verse 17 through 19, Jesus said, even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. The same thing that John the Baptist said in chapter 3, verse 10.

Therefore, by their fruits you will know them. Who? People. Prophets in this case, false prophets.

He says, you've got to watch out for false prophets, you'll know them by their fruit.

People likened to trees or plants that produce fruit. And there are other places in Matthew and elsewhere, somewhere in your notes, we won't take time to look them all up.

Now, in contrast to comparing people to fruit bearing plants, some people are compared to thorns and briars, which obviously are not fruit bearing. They're worthless plants, not worth keeping around. And therefore, always mentioned in connection of, you know, about to be burned.

In chapter 9 of Isaiah, in verse 18, it says, For wickedness burns as the fire. It shall devour the briars and the thorns. Briars and thorns are in contrast to fruitful plants.

And kindle in the thickets of the forest. They shall mount up like rising smoke. This briars and thorns, I believe, is a reference to the wicked people, who are contrasted from fruitful people.

God's looking for fruit. Some people are of absolutely no value to God in that they cannot produce fruit. They are no better than weeds.

In chapter 10, in verse 17, it says, in Isaiah 10, 17, Again, I believe thorns and briars are as symbolic here as trees and vines are. They're references to different kinds of people, those who do and those who do not produce fruit. Consider what the writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 6 on this subject.

Hebrews 6, 7 and following says, For the earth, which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and briars, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned. Now, here, the focus is on the earth producing something, not on the things that are produced so much.

But people are not here compared to thorns and briars. But earth that produces thorns and briars is unfruitful. And so the imagery of thorns and briars comes up in Isaiah.

You'll find it a number of times. It reminds me of a parable in the Old Testament that was told in Judges chapter 9 by the son of Gideon, the last surviving son of Gideon, after Abimelech had killed all the other sons. Abimelech was a son of Gideon, but he killed his 70 brothers and only one escaped.

And this surviving son told a parable to condemn basically what his brother had done. Abimelech wanted to make himself king over Israel. Well, Israel didn't need a king, of course.

Their father, Gideon, had refused that honor. After he had defeated the Midianites, they offered Gideon the position of king. He said, no, that's not going to happen because the Lord is your king.

But once Gideon was dead, his son Abimelech thought, no, I kind of like the idea of being king. So he killed his brothers and had himself proclaimed king. He hired some people to proclaim him king.

And his only surviving brother who escaped, Jotham, went up on a mountain some distance away safely and called back to the city of Shechem that had made him king and gave this parable. It's in Judges 9, 8. He said, the trees once went forth to anoint a king over them. And they said to the olive tree, rain over us.

But the olive tree said to them, should I cease giving my oil, olive oil, with which they honor God and men, and go and sway over the trees? That is, hold sway, rule over the trees. Then the tree said to the fig tree, you come and rain over us. But the fig tree said to them, should I cease my sweetness and my good fruit to go sway over the trees? And the tree said to the vine, you come and rain over us.

And they're becoming less and less picky at this point. They're not even going to other trees. They're going to a vine and say, you rule over the trees here.

They're getting more desperate here. And the vine said to them, should I cease my new wine, which cheers both God and men, and go sway over the trees? Obviously, they can't get anyone to cooperate. So then all the trees said to the bramble, which is a weed, a thorn bush, you come and rain over us.

And the bramble said to the trees, if in truth you anoint me as king over you, then come and take shelter in my shade. But if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon. And then he makes the application that Israel has asked Abimelech to be their king.

But Israel doesn't need a king any more than trees do. What in the world would trees do with a king? They don't do anything. They just stand there.

They don't need a king. It's ridiculous to suggest that trees would need a king. And when they come to the olive tree or the fig tree or the vine and say, why don't you be king over us? They say, hey, I already have something worthwhile to do.

I'm already producing olives or grapes or figs. I'm already worth something. I don't need to do something worthless like be a king over the trees.

Only something that's already worthless would agree to the position, a bramble. It has no value itself. It has nothing to offer.

Therefore, it might consider the position. What he's saying is Israel has no more need for an earthly king than the trees do. God is the ruler.

No one who had anything to offer society would ever accept the position. Therefore, his

brother Abimelech is being compared to a bramble, who the only reason he wants to be a king of Israel is because he doesn't have anything else to offer. He's worthless.

And therefore, well, I guess I got nothing better to do. I'll be king. That's not exactly the attitude that Abimelech had, but that's the idea.

The idea is fruit trees have value. Brambles have none. Why? Because fruit trees produce something of value.

Brambles produce nothing. So the thorns and briars in Isaiah are like the brambles, worthless people. Now, having said that, we need to also remember that fruitfulness in Isaiah is connected with childbearing, the imagery of childbearing is the fruit of the womb.

God is looking for fruit in the sense of offspring from his wife, the holy nation, Israel. And, of course, children are born by women. And so sometimes men are likened to women.

They're likened to plants that can bear fruit. They're likened to women that can bear fruit. So in chapter 19 of Isaiah, verse 16, it says, In that day Egypt will be like women.

This is not referring to them having children particularly, but it's just likening men or Egypt, probably their armies and their kings and the nation, to women and will be afraid and fear because of the waving of the hand. In other words, there's a comparison of men, probably the rulers of Egypt, to women in that they're not brave, they're not warrior-like, they're shrinking away from danger. In chapter 3, verse 12 of Isaiah, In chapter 3, verse 12, he says, As for my people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them.

Now, commentators are not agreed as to whether Isaiah is saying that there were actually female rulers in Israel. There actually was one a few generations before Isaiah. Athaliah had made herself the queen by killing her grandsons, who were the heirs to the throne, and imposing her rule just like Abimelech had done in the book of Judges.

She was an illegitimate ruler. She was the mother of the previous king, and when he died in battle, she didn't want her grandsons to get the position. She wanted it, so she had her grandsons murdered, and then she made herself queen.

In that case, a woman actually did rule over Judah. That was some time earlier, not during the time of Isaiah, however. Most commentators think that what he's saying is the men who rule over you are essentially women.

They're wimpy. They're effeminate. They're not strong rulers.

The people who oppress you are like children, not actually saying they're literal children or women, but basically it's intending to insult the leaders who actually are men, but

likening them to children and women rather than men. But in terms of childbearing, the idea of men or our nation bringing forth children like a woman does comes up a number of times. In chapter 13 and verse 8, many times when a nation is under judgment, it is described as if it is in travail, like a woman having labor pains.

In chapter 13, verse 8, this is talking about the judgment coming on Babylon. It says, Now, this is not an example, and the verses I'm giving you are not all examples of God seeking fruit through his people and therefore likening them to having children. I'm just saying that in general, the idea of men being likened to things that can potentially bring forth fruit, women bearing children, plants bearing fruit, is a metaphor that is often used in Isaiah.

Then it gets more specific as to God seeking this kind of fruit himself from his people. In chapter 21, verse 3, it says, Therefore, my loins are filled with pain. Pangs have taken hold of me like the pangs of a woman in labor.

I was distressed when I heard it. This is Isaiah himself talking about his own inner grief that was sharp and painful. He felt like he was going into labor like a woman.

In chapter 23, in verse 4, he says, Be ashamed, O Sidon, for the sea has spoken, the strength of the sea, saying, I do not labor nor bring forth children, neither do I rear young men, nor bring I up virgins. The sea does not produce children. Perhaps the sea might be a reference to the Gentile nations here, as in Isaiah 54, 1, where the barren woman represents the Gentile nations, but she will, in fact, bear more children than will Israel for God.

In chapter 26, verse 17, As a woman with child is in pain and cries out in her pangs, when she draws near the time of her delivery, so have we been in your sight, O Lord. We have been like a woman in pain. This is referring to the fact that Israel as a nation has suffered great calamities.

They've been overrun by the Assyrians, for example, and had many of their people slaughtered. The nation is like a woman in pain, in pain similar to labor pains. One might expect, in fact, that they would produce some fruit from this.

A woman in labor usually can be expected to have a baby. But Israel is like a woman in labor. But look at the next verse.

We have been with child, we have been in pain, we have, as it were, brought forth wind. What he's saying is we thought we were going to have a baby, we just passed gas. That's what he's saying.

I mean, it's literally what he's saying. We have gone through all the pains that would justify seeing fruit. A baby should have come out of all this.

But instead, all we did was pass wind. We brought forth wind. In other words, we didn't produce the fruit.

Israel has suffered so much, but in vain. They should have, through their suffering, brought forth fruit for God, but they did not. That's what Isaiah is saying.

Remember in Revelation 12, the remnant of Israel is depicted as a woman in labor. And she brings forth a child. That child is Jesus.

That's how Revelation 12 begins. I saw a woman, a great wonder in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon at her feet, and a crown of 12 stars on her head. And she labored as she was giving birth to a child.

And her child, a man child, was to rule the nations with a rod of iron. A reference to Christ. It's a reference to Israel, in that case the remnant of Israel, who produced Christ, through whom God fulfilled the promise to Abraham that he would bring forth a seed that would bless the nations.

He did bring forth that seed through the seed of Abraham, through the offspring of Abraham, but not all of them, but through the faithful remnant. Mary, Joseph, the family of John the Baptist, they were all part of the faithful remnant of Israel. And it was through that group that Jesus came to the world.

But Israel is likened to a woman in labor before Jesus is born. No doubt it's a reference to the very many trials that Israel faced in the years before Jesus came. They were like labor pains of the nation when they're about to bring forth Jesus.

However, in Isaiah's day they went through labor pains of a sort too. But they didn't bring forth Jesus, they didn't bring forth fruit, they just passed wind, so it says. Now, in chapter 42, verse 14, he says, I have held my peace a long time.

I've been still and restrained myself. Now I will cry like a woman in labor. I will pant and gasp at once.

I will lay waste the mountains and hills. This is actually God crying out like a woman in labor. He's bringing forth fruit.

Israel won't do it. He's going to have to do it. And this is often the case in the book of Isaiah.

God marveled that there was no man, that there was no intercessor, so he says, his own arm brought forth salvation. He had to do it himself. He says, I've trampled the vineyard of my anger alone.

No one was with me. God ends up having to do for himself what he expected Israel to do for him. And so it was God who eventually brought Jesus into the world.

Sure, it came through the Jewish remnant like Mary, but it was God, not Israel as a whole, that produced the fruit. The fruit is the seed, the seed of Abraham, Christ, the Messiah. Many times people, when I was growing up, had me convinced that we owe a great debt to the Jewish nation today.

They say we Gentiles, especially Christians, really owe a lot to the Jews because they gave us the Bible. They gave us Jesus. I mean, how could we not be thankful to the Jews for that? I took that as true without much thought for a long time until I realized, wait a minute, the Bible that they gave us are the books of the prophets.

They killed the prophets. The Jews didn't give us the prophets. God gave us the prophets in spite of the Jews who didn't want to let them live.

The Jews tried to wipe out the prophets. God gave us the prophets. God gave us the scriptures in spite of them.

How about Jesus? The Jews tried to kill Jesus. The Jews did kill Jesus. Then they tried to keep Jesus from being preached to the Gentiles.

In spite of them, God brought Jesus to us. It's not Israel that gets the credit for what benefits have come through them. It's God.

God did it himself in spite of them. As I said, we were in labor. We could have produced a baby.

We didn't produce anything. No fruit from us. But God now goes into labor.

God is going to himself have to do the fruit bearing. He's going to have to produce the Messiah. The nation has let him down.

Now we come to the more specific places where God emphasizes that what he wants from his people is fruit. Remember Jesus said, of certain people you'll know them by their fruit. Good fruit from good trees.

Bad fruit from bad trees. Nonetheless, God wants fruit. Every tree that doesn't produce fruit, he's going to cut down and throw into the fire.

This is all references to people. Paul talks about fruit. In Galatians 5, 22, he says, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, goodness, and so forth.

He lists the kinds of things God's looking to be produced in our lives. He calls it fruit. The Holy Spirit must produce that because we can't do that ourselves.

But we find, as we go back now to Isaiah 5, to which I've alluded and we even looked at briefly, part of earlier, I'd like to just read this parable. Isaiah 5, 1. Now let me sing to my well-beloved a song of my beloved regarding his vineyard. Vineyards are for producing

grapes.

My well-beloved, Isaiah says, God is his 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 it brought forth wild grapes. Wild meaning uncultivated. They might as well have grown without any help at all.

He put a lot of effort into removing such obstacles as would prevent him from having a good vintage. He bought a good piece of property. He put a good vine in it from good stock.

He removed all the things in the soil that might interfere. He put a hedge around it. He put a winepress in it.

He did all the things that a man would do hoping to get a good vintage and get some good wine out of this deal. But he says when he came at harvest or vintage time, he didn't get good grapes. He got wild grapes.

That is such grapes as might grow on their own without all the work that was done by him. He cultivated, but he didn't get the fruits of his cultivation. Now we already read verse 7 where he says, the vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel and the men of Judah are the pleasant plant.

He was looking for justice. He was looking for mercy. That's the fruit he wanted to see.

What's that mean? It means that when God established the nation of Israel, he gave them every opportunity to produce good fruit. What good fruit? Justice, righteousness. God wanted a just and righteous people, people whose nationhood, whose politics, whose economy would reflect just dealing and things, life that was righteous in the sight of God, the right kind of living.

To do that, he gave them all the things necessary. He gave them a piece of property where he banished all the bad influences. The Canaanites had to go so that Israel was given an opportunity to have a fresh start without influence from evil, from outside.

He gave them his laws, the very best laws given to any nation in history, laws that define righteous and just conduct. He cultivated Israel. He dealt with Israel.

He sent them prophets. He sent them leaders. He gave them his word and so forth.

He worked on them like a man might work on his site preparation for a vineyard or a field that you want to get some fruit from. He did everything he thought would be necessary to get from Israel a people of justice and a people of righteousness. That's the

fruit he wanted from them.

Instead, when he came and looked at what they produced, it wasn't any better than the wild plants outside of Israel produced. They weren't any better than the Moabites or the Edomites or the Ammonites or the Philistines who had not been ever cultivated by God. All of his cultivation, all of his effort was wasted, he felt.

He said in verse 3, And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, please, between me and my vineyard. Who's in the right here? Who let who down? Let's make a judgment. Someone's in the wrong here.

I had expectations and they weren't met. Am I the one who's unreasonable? Judge between me and my vineyard. We've got a complaint here.

I did all that I could possibly do for the vineyard. I can't be held at fault for this, he says. It must be their fault.

He says in verse 4, What more could have been done to my vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then did I expect it to produce good grapes and it did bring forth, why did it bring forth wild grapes? Now, this question, of course, is really theologically pregnant. Especially when we hear that many people's theology tells them that God has something called irresistible grace. That God just decides who he wants to save and makes it happen.

That God just decides what results he wants and sovereignly brings it to pass because there is no other will that can conflict with his will in their theology. God's will in their eyes is always done. And this thing called irresistible grace is like a tractor beam that God possesses.

He wants someone saved. He just has to get them in sights of his tractor beam and they are drawn irresistibly to him. They become righteous.

They become believers. They become repentant. They become what he wants them to be.

That's the irresistible grace of the Calvinist theology. But God doesn't seem to have that operating in the Old Testament. He says, actually, I can't think of anything I haven't done.

I can't think of any options that were open to me that I have not employed to get good results here. There must be another will other than mine involved here. Because I wanted good grapes.

And that's not what happened. I did everything in my power to make that happen. And yet there was something else that made it not happen.

What could that have been? It was the evil, stubborn, free will of those who had another plan other than God's. And he acts as if he didn't have any other resources that he had not already employed to get the results he wanted. When he wanted good grapes, what more could I do to get it? He seems to be saying, I exhausted my options.

I exhausted my resources. And there was yet something not in my power. And that is the rebellion of free moral agents who are in the final analysis, given the final vote, as to whether they'll be righteous or not.

God does all he can to woo. Jesus said, no man can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. So we have all been drawn, but not irresistibly.

He tries to draw some who don't come. Jesus said, oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how many times I would have gathered your children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you didn't want to.

I wanted to. You didn't want to. I wanted to gather you, but you would not, he said.

Obviously, there's no teaching in scripture that says God gets everything he wants from people and that man's free will cannot resist him. God says that he has been resisted, unfortunately, to the harm of the people who resist. If you resist God's will, you do so to your own hurt.

Look over at Isaiah chapter 65. Isaiah 65, 12. God says, therefore, I will number you for the sword.

You're destined to die in war. And you shall all bow down to the slaughter. Because why? I called, but you didn't answer.

Now, if God's the only one who decides whether we answer or not, and not us, what's he blaming them for? I called, you didn't answer. Well, God, don't you know there's this thing called total depravity? Don't you realize that I can't answer unless you sovereignly regenerate me and draw me by your irresistible grace? Aren't you aware of that, God? That when you call, you can't expect me to answer unless you make it happen, because that's your job, God. You've got the irresistible grace.

I've got the total depravity. That's Calvinism. And God doesn't seem to realize that.

He seems to think it's their fault. He says, that's why I'm going to slaughter you. Because I called you, and you didn't come.

He doesn't, in any sense, take personal responsibility for himself, saying, of course, I didn't choose you. That's why you didn't come. You weren't elect, and you couldn't come.

God knows nothing of that doctrine. That didn't come up until Augustine, 400 years after

Christ. He says, I called, you didn't answer.

When I spoke, you didn't hear. But you did evil before my eyes, and you chose, sounds like choice, free will, you chose that in which I do not delight. I wished you had chosen one thing, but you chose something else.

Now look over in chapter 66, Isaiah 66, verse 4. So God says, I will choose your delusions and bring your fears upon them, their fears upon them, because when I called, no one answered. When I spoke, they did not hear. But they did evil before my eyes and chose that in which I do not delight.

Now, obviously, that's a refrain that we just read, except there's something new in this one. He says, you chose that in which I do not delight. Therefore, I will choose the consequences that you will suffer.

I will choose your delusions, because you chose wrong. That's the sovereignty of God. You see, a king is sovereign if he holds all the cards, if he has the final say.

To say that a king is sovereign doesn't mean he micromanages every decision that his subjects make. A sovereign king makes the rules and enforces the rules. He has the right to.

That's what sovereignty means. He's sovereign. He can make the rules.

No one can answer to him. Or that's to say, he doesn't answer to anyone, I should say. Everyone answers to him.

He doesn't have to answer to anyone for his deeds. He does what he wants, and he's got every right to do it. That's what sovereignty means.

Many kings are called sovereigns, and they are. But that doesn't mean they micromanage the lives of everyone in their domain. It doesn't mean that they decide who everyone's going to marry, what time they're going to get up in the morning, what they'll have for breakfast.

Micromanagement is not what sovereignty is. You see, Augustine's view introduced an idea of sovereignty that was not in the church prior. And Augustine's view of sovereignty would better be called meticulous providence.

Meticulous providence means that God providentially makes happen everything meticulously. Meticulous means down to every detail. Absolute sovereignty to the Calvinist means meticulously providential intervention.

So that if you sin, that was ordained by God. If you don't sin, well, that was ordained by God. If you get saved, God ordained it.

If you don't get saved, God ordained that. It is actually taught that God ordained that Adam and Eve must inevitably fall. That was in his plan.

It was part of his decree. Everything is in his decree because he's sovereign, they say. But that's not what the word sovereign really means.

Sovereign doesn't mean the king controls everybody's lives. It means he sets the rules and enforces them. God made the rules.

They broke the rules. He punished them because that's his right to do. They can't break the rules and get away with it because he's the king.

He's sovereign. He has the right to enforce his own rules. He can make any rules he wants to and enforce them.

He's sovereign. But that doesn't mean that he dictates who will and who will not keep the rules. He simply dictates what will happen if they don't.

That's sovereignty. He says, you chose what I didn't want you to choose. I called, which means I wanted you to come.

You didn't come. I spoke, which means I wanted you to hear, but you didn't hear. You wouldn't listen.

So now it's my turn to choose. I will choose what you will suffer for what you've done. That is the teaching of God's sovereignty in the scripture.

And so Isaiah says, God planted a vineyard. He really, really did want good fruit. He didn't get it.

God doesn't always get what he wants. And he wonders, God himself wonders, what more could I have done? I did everything I can do, and you guys just didn't cooperate. And so what he says in Isaiah 5, verse 5, now please let me tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned, and break it down, down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will lay it waste, so that it will not be pruned or dug, and there shall come up briars and thorns. I will also command the clouds, that they not rain any rain on it.

Now, in other words, I gave Israel a chance, a good chance, every advantage, but they didn't produce the fruit, so they don't have any chance anymore. This is actually, no doubt, the meaning of Jesus' acted parable when he came to the fig tree. And it's recorded in three of the gospels, but in the final week of Christ's stay here on earth before his crucifixion, he was going to Jerusalem from Bethany one day, and he saw this fig tree, and he was hungry.

It had leaves. Now, in Israel, usually the leaves do not appear before the fruit. One of the gospel writers, I think it was Mark, tells us it was not really the season for figs yet, so we might not be surprised that the fig tree ended up having no fruit.

It was not the season. But, on the other hand, some fig trees did have early fruit, and usually if they had leaves, that was an indication. So, though it was not the season for fruit, this fig tree was advertising that it had fruit.

And so Jesus, being hungry, came and looked under the leaves and found no fruit. And he said to the tree, no one will ever eat fruit from you again. And it withered up and died, and no one ever ate fruit from it again.

Jesus never gave an explanation of the meaning of that parable, but most scholars of almost every theological persuasion believe that fig tree represented Israel. A fig tree is supposed to produce fruit. Israel was supposed to produce fruit.

Israel had all the foliage. They acted all religious. The Pharisees had all the outward show of being righteous, but when you looked under the leaves, there was no real fruit there.

It was all pretense. It was all show. And so Jesus curses the tree, saying no one's going to eat fruit from you again.

It's all over for you, Israel. You had your chance to produce fruit. You didn't.

Now you won't have a chance anymore. You're gone. No more fruit from you.

And that's what Isaiah 5 says. I gave them the opportunity. They didn't produce good fruit.

I'm going to tear them down. No more fruit. No one's going to dig or till this garden anymore.

This garden has had its chance. This vineyard, it's got a different destiny now because it didn't take advantage of what I did for it. Now remember Jesus said in John 15, he said, I am the true vine.

My father is the husbandman or the caretaker of the vine. He says, you are the branches. Now in Isaiah, the vine was Israel or Judah.

Now Jesus comes along and says, I'm the true vine. In other words, I'm the true Israel. God was looking for fruit from Israel, the vine, the vineyard.

He didn't get it. He'll get it from me. I'm the true vine.

And any branch that abides in me is going to produce much fruit. In other words, the church, Christians, who are appendages of Christ himself, like branches or appendages

of a vine, like members of a body, those who are in Christ and who abide in him will produce the fruit that God was looking for and is the new Israel, the new vineyard. Let me show you something in Matthew chapter 21.

I'm sure it's familiar to many. But in connection of Isaiah 5, it's very significant because Jesus gives a parable from which he borrows deliberately the imagery of Isaiah chapter 5. In Matthew 21, verse 33, Jesus said, Hear another parable. There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a tower.

This is not verbatim but clearly repetitious of Isaiah 5. God says, I planted a good vine in a fruitful hill. I built a tower, put a hedge. I did all the things to make this vineyard fruitful.

Jesus is using language from Isaiah 5 in order that his listeners may know he's referring to Israel here just as Isaiah was. And then he adds something Isaiah didn't. He says, and he leased it to fine dressers and went into a far country.

Now, the vineyard is the same as in Isaiah but there's a new element here. Isaiah doesn't mention this. God entrusted his vineyard to people who were caretakers, who were supposed to cultivate it and do all the things necessary that it would produce fruit for God.

These are the leaders of Israel. God put leaders, prophets, priests, kings, judges. He gave Israel leaders whose task was to encourage them to be a holy and just and righteous people.

The leaders, however, apparently fell remiss on this and Israel never really came through. Here, the leaders are held responsible in this parable. Verse 34, now when vintage time drew near, that's the time that God felt he should get some fruit out of this vineyard.

He sent his servants to the vine dressers that they might receive its fruit. The fruit again is justice and righteousness, remember. So the servants that God sends to Israel to get justice and righteousness are the prophets.

That was in fact the message of the prophets. God sent his messengers saying, Israel, where's the fruit? God wants you to be just. God wants you to be righteous.

Instead, you're not. And so the prophets come from God saying, where's the fruit? The owner wants the fruit. He owns the vineyard.

He's supposed to get fruit. And the vine dressers took his servants and beat one, killed one, and stoned another. Again, he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them.

So this is simply a summary of the whole Old Testament time when God's sending prophets to Israel one after another. They all get similar treatment. They get killed, stoned, beaten, thrown out.

This is how Israel treated the prophets. It's like the leaders of Israel were supposed to be producing fruit. The prophets pointed that out and got themselves beat up or killed for that.

Then, verse 37, last of all, he sent his son to them saying, they will respect my son. Now this is unambiguous. This is a reference to Christ's coming.

It's chronologically later than the servants who got beaten and thrown out. Last of all, he sent his son. So the servants were before the time of Christ, the Old Testament prophets.

Now we are brought to the time of Christ himself. Jesus has appeared in Israel. He's got the same message the prophets did.

Be righteous, be just, produce the fruit God wants. Is it going to work better this time? He says, surely they'll respect my son. Notice this phrase, last of all.

This is Israel's last chance. God gave them chance after chance after chance after chance. They killed his prophets.

Jesus comes. It's their last chance. No more chances for Israel after this.

They got to get it right this time or they will never have a chance to produce that fruit again. Like the fig tree that's cursed and no one will ever eat fruit from it again. So, when the vine dressers saw the son, they said among themselves, this is the heir.

They knew it was the son. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance. In other words, we're just the squatters here.

We're just the tenants in this vineyard. His dad owns it, but this is the one who's going to inherit it. If he does, he gets it from us.

We lose it, he gets it. But if we kill him, we can hang on to it. We got squatters' rights.

Possession is nine-tenths of the law. When the father dies, we'll just stay here. We've been staying here all this time.

We'll just kill the son because he's our only rival to the ownership of this vineyard. Let's kill him and then his inheritance will be ours. That's apparently the motivation the leaders of Israel had when they saw Jesus.

Jesus is the Messiah. He's the King that God has sent. If we don't kill him, he'll own the vineyard and it doesn't look like he's going to keep us on his cabinet.

So, we better get rid of him and then we can maintain the control we've had all along. And so, they killed him. And Jesus says, Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, this is not the second coming, this is obviously 70 A.D. It's the coming of the owner.

What will he do to those vinedressers? They said to him, the audience said to Jesus, he'll miserably destroy those wicked men and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons. In other words, the owner is not going to give up on his desire for fruit. But he's going to have to find new laborers in his vineyard to produce it.

These ones, they've got to go. Not only do they have to go, they've got to die. They're murderers.

He's going to utterly destroy those miserable murderers. And then he's going to give the vineyard to someone else who will do what they're supposed to do, produce the fruit. Now, Jesus says a few remarks there, and then he affirms what they said in verse 43.

He says, Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. Now, from you means from Israel. The nation that is going to bear the fruits is the church.

He has given the fruit-bearing task, an assignment to us now. Hence, every branch in me that abides in me, Jesus said, will bear much fruit. Christians are the ones who are the branches attached to Jesus.

He's the true vine. We are in him and we are the fruit-bearing ones if we abide in him. What is that fruit? Justice and righteousness.

In other words, a true disciple of Jesus follows Jesus' teachings and their life exhibits justice in their dealings and righteousness in behavior. This is very clear in the New Testament. Christians live righteous lives.

I realize that we've been taught, no, we're just righteous by faith. We're just imputed righteous. No, we are indeed imputed righteous by faith if our faith is genuine, but if our faith is genuine, we are not merely imputed righteous.

We are also made righteous. So that John says in 1 John chapter 3, let's see, there's so much reference to righteousness in 1 John, I've got to get through. Verse 7 of chapter 3, little children, let no one deceive you.

He who practices righteousness is righteous. Now, of course, we are righteous by faith, but how do we know if we are among those who are indeed made righteous by faith? Well, you can tell because we're practicing righteousness. The one who practices righteousness demonstrates himself to be righteous.

You can claim to be righteous. You can say, I'm justified by faith. I'm righteous before God.

Well, let's see. Let's see if you are. Show it.

If you practice righteousness, then you are making a truthful claim. You are really saved. You are indeed righteous.

But it says, he who practices sin is of the devil. That's not saved. So, righteousness is still the fruit that is produced in God's vineyard.

It's just that Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. And through us, he produces the fruit that God always desired and which he was not able to get, apparently, from Israel.

We saw, of course, in chapter 26, 18 earlier that Israel was in labor to produce a child or fruit that didn't produce fruit, just wind. So, Israel failed to produce fruit, but God has determined that he will get his fruit anyway. And I realize I need to quit real quick here, but let me just show you a few verses, and we'll be done showing that God has determined that he will, in fact, get his fruit in the final analysis.

In one of the earliest messianic passages in Isaiah, the second one in chapter 4, verse 2, it says, in that day, the branch of the Lord, which refers to Christ, shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth, or the fruit of the land, could go either way, shall be excellent and appealing for the remnant. That is, there will be fruit in the land. There will be fruit in the earth.

When the Messiah comes, that'll be the solution to the problem. The problem was Israel never produced the fruit. The solution is Jesus.

He comes as the branch, as the vine, and then there will be, indeed, beautiful fruit, the kind of fruit God's been looking for all along. Chapter 37, verse 31, it says, the remnant who have escaped from the house of Judah shall again take root downward and bear fruit upward. We are rooted and grounded in Jesus, and we bear fruit because of our attachment to him.

That is what is predicted here. God has determined that the fruit he did not get from Israel, he will get from us. And in Isaiah 61, verse 3, we actually saw this.

There's where it refers to us as trees of righteousness. Isaiah 61, 3, the latter part of that verse says, that they, the children of Zion, may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord. We are God's trees.

We are God's planting now, and righteousness is the fruit produced by these trees. In the same chapter, verse 11 says, for as the earth brings forth its bud, and the garden causes the things that are sown in it to spring forth, so the Lord will cause righteousness and

praise to spring forth before all the nations. A garden produces fruit.

God says the earth will produce righteousness, fruit, and praise to God. Interesting that he says, as the garden causes things to grow that are sown in it, and the earth brings forth its bud pretty much on its own, that is human beings can't make that happen. We can put the seed in, but we can't make it come out.

Only God can do that. There's powers of nature that are in God's control, not ours, so that it would appear to us the ground itself makes the seed to grow. Jesus picks up that very image in Mark chapter 4 and tells this particular short parable about it.

Mark 4, 26 through 29. Jesus said, The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow. He himself does not know how, for the earth yields crops by itself.

It's the same thought, of course, that he's taking from Isaiah 61. The garden itself causes the plant to grow. The earth yields crops by itself.

First the blade, then the head, after that the full grain, which is the fruit, this is a grain fruit, in the head, but when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come. Now, in all likelihood, the harvest here is the end of the world, the second coming. When he comes to harvest the earth, when does that happen? When the grain has ripened.

Jesus sowed seed, it grows. He's producing fruit, but it's not all at once. It's first the blade, then you've got the head of grain on the stalk, then the fruit matures, the grain ripens in the head, and when the grain is ripe and mature, then it's time for the harvest.

In other words, we want Jesus to come back right now, but he's waiting for fruit. He's been waiting for fruit all these hundreds and thousands of years. He's still waiting.

Israel claims that in Isaiah, we have not brought about righteousness in the earth. Well, the church hasn't yet either. Individual Christians have been righteous people, but the church has not brought about a righteous community that testifies to the ownership of God.

And Jesus said, we'll be gradual, it'll take time. It's going to be the blade first, then the head, then the ripe grain in the head, then when the grain is fully grown and mature, then he puts in the sickle. It would be silly to do so earlier.

I mean, we want Jesus to come down and get us out of this evil world, and that would be a wonderful thing, but we've got to remember he's got something besides our comfort in mind. He's got his agenda. His agenda is that the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord, and he will not fail or be discouraged until he has established justice in the earth.

And the islands, the coastlands await this fruit to be brought to them. So, this is one of the themes we see frequently in Isaiah. There's more to it we'll take in our next session after we take a break.