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Alastair Roberts

The Lord's judgment against his vineyard. The death of John the Baptist.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 5. Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines.

He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it. And he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

I will make it a waste, it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting.

And he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry. Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land. The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing, surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant.

For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah. Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them. They have lyre and harp, tambourine and flute, and wine at their feasts, but they do not regard the deeds of the Lord, or see the work of his hands.

Therefore my people go into exile for lack of knowledge. Their honoured men go hungry, and their multitude is parched with thirst. Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite, and opened its mouth beyond measure, and the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude will go down, her revelers and he who exalts in her.

Man is humbled, and each one is brought low, and the eyes of the haughty are brought low. But the Lord of hosts is exalted in justice, and the holy God shows himself holy in righteousness. Then shall the lambs graze as in their pasture, and nomads shall eat among the ruins of the rich.

Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood, who draw sin as with cart-ropes, who say, Let him be quick, let him speed his work, that we may see it. Let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw near, and let it come, that we may know it. 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 shrewd in their own sight. Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink, who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right. Therefore as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will be as rottenness, and their blossom go up like dust.

For they have rejected the law of the Lord of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them, and struck them, and the mountains quaked, and their corpses were as refuse in the midst of the streets. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still.

He will raise a signal for nations far away, and whistle for them from the ends of the earth, and behold, quickly, speedily they come. None is weary, none stumbles, none slumbers or sleeps, not a waistband is loose, not a sandal strap broken, their arrows are sharp, or their bows bent, their horses' hoofs seem like flint, and their wheels like the

whirlwind. Their roaring is like a lion, like young lions they roar, they growl and seize their prey, they carry it off, and none can rescue.

They will growl over it on that day, like the growling of the sea, and if one looks to the land, behold, darkness and distress, and the light is darkened by its clouds. Isaiah chapter 5 seems to mark the start of a new section of the book, opening with the song of the vineyard. Several commentators, Christopher Seitz being one example, argue that the material of chapter 5 originally formed a single block with material from chapter 9 verse 8 to 10 verse 34.

Chapter 6 verse 1 to 9 verse 6 has, they argue, been inserted within it. This claim is based, among other things, upon the presence of the key phrase, for all this his anger has not turned away and his hand is stretched out still, which is in verse 25 of this chapter, but also a refrain repeated in the supposed other half of the divided unit that now brackets the inserted section, in chapter 9 verse 12, 17 and 21, and then in chapter 10 verse 4. This theory recognises the presence of woe oracles in both of the supposedly divided sections. As Brevard-Chiles rightly notes, however, this theory suffers from such heavy theoretical ballast as to obscure rather than illuminate the biblical text.

The vineyard imagery that we find in the opening verses of chapter 5 is also found elsewhere in scripture. Psalm 80 verses 8 to 16 is perhaps one of the most prominent examples. The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.

Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven and see! Have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted, and for the son whom you made strong for yourself. They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down. May they perish at the rebuke of your face! There is a return to the imagery of the vineyard later in Isaiah in chapter 27 verses 2 to 6. In that day a pleasant vineyard, sing of it! I the Lord am its keeper.

Every moment I water it, lest anyone punish it. I keep it night and day. I have no wrath.

Would that I had thorns and briers to battle! I would march against them. I would burn them up together, or let them lay hold of my protection. Let them make peace with me.

Let them make peace with me. In days to come Jacob shall take root. Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit.

Jesus of course famously uses and reworks imagery of the vineyard in his parable of the wicked vine dressers. Imagery used from vineyards is also elsewhere associated with love poetry. The song or parable of the first seven verses draws back from the immediacy of Jerusalem's sin and the judgment that awaits it in Isaiah's day, offering a parable that helps the hearer grasp the larger reality of Israel's dire condition.

As elsewhere in scripture a parable can provide an arresting new way of framing and

perceiving a situation. Verses 1 to 2 paint the picture. Verses 3 to 4 invite the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah to cast judgment.

Verses 5 to 6 declare the sentence and verse 7 renders the meaning of the imagery more explicit. Isaiah introduces this passage as a love song sung for the sake of his friend or beloved concerning his friend's vineyard. Yet any romantic expectations on the hearer's part are soon dashed as the love story the prophet sings swiftly turns sour.

In the text three sets of imagery are artfully fused. There's the romantic imagery, the arboreal imagery and legal imagery all interplaying with each other. The vine is also in some sense a bride and the defendant in a lawsuit and the planter is also a bridegroom and the wronged party.

The prophet is both the singing friend of the bridegroom and a prosecutor of his friend's case against an unfaithful spouse with the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah serving as the jury in verse 3. As in Nathan's story of the ewe lamb delivered to David in 2 Samuel chapter 12, the party being judged is presented with a parable calling them to pronounce judgment upon themselves. You are the vine. The imagery of the song is artfully chosen.

The imagery of vineyards and gardens on hills are associated with love poetry in places like the Song of Songs chapter 1 verse 14 chapter 2 verse 15 or 8 verses 10 to 12. It also however recalls Eden, Noah's vineyard and also are related to the temple. He built a watchtower in the midst of it.

The blessed and good wife is elsewhere compared to a fruitful vine in the centre of the garden of her marriage bearing good fruit in places like Psalm 128 verse 3. The chosen vine was to provide the owner with the necessary grapes by which to make high quality wine. Yet when the fruit was gathered the fruit was that of wild uncultivated grapes, perhaps subtly hinting at marital infidelity. The Lord challenges the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah, What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? The sentence upon the vineyard swiftly follows.

Its hedge and wall of protection will be destroyed, allowing wild beasts to ravage it, and it shall be rendered a wasteland bearing thorns and thistles, parched for lack of rain. In the destruction of the vineyard the painful themes of the fall in Eden are recalled. Thorns and thistles will grow where once a well-watered and beautiful garden lay.

If the hearers of Isaiah's parable were in any doubt, his point is made very explicit in the conclusion. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. The indictment is summed up with a death poetic twist.

He looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry. The Lord desired a society of right and just relations. Such justice would be displayed not

merely in the deliverance of righteous judgments by the rulers and judges of the people, but also in the economic and social relations among the people more generally.

The indictment involves a play upon words. The word bloodshed looks like the word for justice in the Hebrew, and the word outcry like the word righteousness. It is as if the owner of the vineyard were inspecting its fruit, and although from a distance it looked like the cultivated grapes of righteousness and justice were being born in the vineyard, as he came closer it became apparent that they were quite the opposite.

Only the wild grapes of outcry and bloodshed were to be found. The parable of the vineyard is followed by a litany of woes addressed to the wild grapes that the nation is producing, identifying various forms of their sin in succession. Verses 8-10 speaks to greed and economic oppression.

All of the people were supposed to enjoy the gift of the land. However, wealthy landowners had been accumulating land and driving the poor away from it. They had been reducing the poor to destitution or to landless and economically vulnerable labor.

The Lord would judge such oppressors with the covenant sentence of futility. Their great properties and vast estates would be rendered desolate, and their land would be unfruitful. The failure of the vineyards of the oppressors to yield to their masters is, of course, a fitting judgment for a people that had only just been likened to a vineyard producing only wild grapes for the one who had planted it.

Verses 11-12 address the drunkenness, debauchery and decadence of a people who ran after wine and devoted themselves to feasting, yet neglected the Lord. They give the entirety of their days to revelry, from when they rise up in the morning to when they lie down in the evening. They are also usurping the place that meditation upon the law ought to have in their lives.

Their preoccupation is solely feasting and decadence. The sentence to be cast upon them is once again fitting to their sin. They would be expelled from the land that they had sought to accumulate to themselves and from which they had excluded others.

Those given to obsessive feasting will go hungry and thirsty. Indeed, they would be the victims of the enlarged appetite of the grave, which would devour them at its coming great banquet. Just as chapters 2 and 3 had explored the contrast between the Lord and his mountain being exalted and man in his pride being humbled and brought low, so the Lord's holiness would be demonstrated while the greed and the proud wicked would be abased.

The land of the rich would become wilderness and waste, grazing land for flocks and their ruins places where wandering nomads might set up temporary camp. In verses 18-19 it is the brazen practical atheism of the people that comes into view and is

condemned. They have committed themselves to the practice of wickedness, as if they were devoting the entirety of their efforts and energies to it, as if they were straining their backs, dragging it along as if with cart ropes.

They cynically mock at the justice of the Lord, believing that there is no evidence that the Lord will act in their situation. Along with the practical atheism of the wicked is the perversion described in verses 20-23. They care little about truth and readily pervert justice for bribes, denying people righteous judgment in their cases.

They celebrate what is evil while condemning what is good. Many of those being judged are presumably among those who are supposed to teach the people and yet they are compounding their darkness. The sentence upon this wicked people, upon the perverse vineyard, is pronounced in verses 24-25.

They would be reduced to stubble, dry grass and rotten wood that would be good for nothing but fuel for the fire. All of this is on account of their rejection of the word and law of the Lord. From these metaphors we move to more literal images.

As the Lord came upon his people in judgment, his advent being described in theophanic language, their corpses would be scattered like refuse in the midst of the streets. One of the great lessons that the people needed to learn was that the Lord was over all of the nations, the nations that terrified them, with whom they were compromising in their foreign policy out of fear. All operate at the command and behest of the Lord.

Verses 26-30 present the Lord summoning nations against his people. The nations are powerful, arrayed for battle, and yet it is the Lord alone who commands their actions. These enemies, empowered by the Lord, are described as if they were relentless natural forces, their horses' hooves so are compared to flint, the wheels like whirlwind, the sound that they make to the roaring of lions, their actions to those of a predatory beast, and their coming like the inrush of a growling sea or dark storm clouds.

Just as the Lord controls the elements and the meteorological forces of the world, so he controls the powers of the nations, and he will wield them against his unfaithful people. A question to consider, what aspects of a vineyard, its fruit, its working, its produce, and its processes are used as parables and prophetic imagery here and elsewhere in scripture? Mark chapter 6 verses 1-29. He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.

And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses, and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us? And they took offence at him. And Jesus said to them, A prophet is not without honour, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own

household. And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them.

And he marvelled because of their unbelief. And he went about among the villagers teaching. And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.

He charged them to take nothing for their journey except to starve, no bread, no bag, no money in their belts, but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. And if any place will not receive you, and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.

So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them. King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known.

Some said, John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him. But others said, He is Elijah. And others said, He is a prophet like one of the prophets of old.

But when Herod heard of it, he said, John, whom I beheaded, has been raised. For it was Herod who sent and seized John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.

And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to put him to death, but she could not. For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias' daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you.

And he vowed to her, Whatever you ask me I will give you, up to half of my kingdom. And she went out and said to her mother, For what should I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl.

And the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. Mark chapter 6 begins with Jesus teaching in his hometown of Nazareth with his disciples with him.

He teaches in the synagogue and many see what he is doing, recognize the wisdom he is speaking with and the power of the works that he is performing. However, it seems as if the true recognition that this invites is immediately lost as their presumed familiarity with his family and his origins prevents them from recognizing him. Indeed, rather than responding properly, it leads them to take offense at him.

The psychological movement here is really remarkable, yet illuminating. Jesus addresses a saying to them about the failure of prophets, hometowns and households to honor them. The familiarity that people have with a prophet can lead them to domesticate them and fail to appreciate the power of their message.

We can often attempt to do this when we encounter something that challenges or unsettles us. Like the people of Nineveh, rather than moving from the remarkable character of something to reconsidering ourselves, our behavior and our thinking in light of it, we try to domesticate it, to subdue it to that which is familiar to us, to something that poses neither challenge nor threat to us. We try to put the new wine into the old wineskins, to squeeze the unsettling idea into categories that will tame it, by naming it.

This is always a danger for people who are familiar with the things of God. At a certain point, eyes can glaze over and a word heard enough times can be heard no more. Familiarity breeds both contempt and insensitivity.

Jesus couldn't do any mighty work there because of their unbelief, not because he was without the power, but because they had no faith to receive it. We should remember that Jesus didn't usually go out of his way to heal people, rather people came to him. And it's quite likely that the problem here is simply that only a very few sick people even bothered to approach him seeking healing.

Everyone else, inoculated by their sense of familiarity, just stayed home. Jesus calls the twelve here and sends them out two by two, giving them authority over the unclean spirits. The accenting of that authority that they have over the unclean spirits is in keeping with Mark's treatment of Jesus as the anointed champion, doing battle with the forces of evil.

They're sent out in twos, like spies preparing for the later conquest in Numbers chapter 13. They are sent out without provisions, dependent upon the people that they are sent to for their sustenance and their supplies. It's a test of hospitality, as we see in the story of Sodom in Genesis chapter 19, or as in the story of Rahab and Jericho in the book of Joshua.

If they're not welcomed, they will shake the dust off their feet, marking out the place for judgment in the future. As they go, they extend the message of the kingdom, calling people to repent in preparation for the coming reign of the Lord. And the message is confirmed with attendant signs.

News of this, Jesus' ministry and the ministry of his disciples, comes to King Herod. Herod was largely a puppet ruler, but being called king here may highlight the conflict between two kings, or between two royal figures, like King Saul, opposed the anointed David. Herod believes that Jesus is John the Baptist resurrected.

There's clearly a resemblance between the two. As John performed no mighty signs, we must presume that the resemblance was chiefly in the boldness and the content of their teaching. Herod had a complicated relationship with John, which perhaps reminds us of King Saul's relationship with the prophet Samuel, who anointed David.

Herod heard John gladly, even though John rebuked him for his sin in having his brother's wife. And the fact that John would rebuke Herod to his face is an indication of John's prophetic boldness. The story of John the Baptist plays off the story of Elijah.

Herod is like Ahab, he's spurred on by his manipulative wife Herodias, who's similar to the character of Jezebel. John has already been compared to the character of Elijah in the way that he dresses, in his ministry in the wilderness, and in other respects, so it's not surprising to us that he is presented in a similar sort of relationship with the king and his manipulative wife, in this case as Elijah had with Ahab and Jezebel. The description of Herod's birthday feast reminds us of events in the book of Esther.

In that story it begins with a feast and there are several details within it that are repeated within the story of John the Baptist and Herod. In Esther 2, verse 9, we are told, Furthermore, the declaration of the king that he would give the woman who requests up to half his is something that we find in the book of Esther again, in chapter 5, verse 3, verse 6, and chapter 7, verse 2. Herodias in this story plays a sort of anti-Mordecai to her daughter, just as Mordecai is the guardian of Esther who advises her on how to save her people, so Herodias is the one who advises her daughter in how to take the life of the prophet. And the daughter is like Esther, but a reversal of Esther, one who uses the favour of the king to destroy rather than to protect life.

Herodias is also like Zeresh, the wife of Haman who spurred him on in his attempt to kill Mordecai, the man who wouldn't bow the knee to him. We see this in Esther, chapter 5, verses 9 and following. The whole story makes Herod look very weak too.

He's manipulated by the women around him, he's called a king but he's not really a king and his behaviour reveals his weakness too. The head of John the Baptist is presented as if it were a platter at a feast. The flesh of the prophet is food and this is immediately followed by a contrasting meal as Jesus feeds the 5,000.

While the party of Herod feasts upon the flesh of the saints, Jesus miraculously feeds his followers. One final thing to reflect upon, Herod was wondering whether John had been resurrected. The resemblance between Jesus and John the Baptist was quite noticeable.

However, Jesus was not John the Baptist raised from the dead. Nevertheless, there is a foreshadowing of Jesus being put to death and of his resurrection here. A question to consider, the people of Nazareth recognise Jesus as the carpenter, the son of Mary, while King Herod recognises Jesus as John the Baptist whom he beheaded.

What do these forms of recognition or misrecognition say about the people who make them? How might reflecting upon such bad examples help to instruct us in adopting a more accurate recognition of who Christ is?