

When a brother or sister goes astray

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Please help us, O Lord, to hear your word rightly and for me to speak your word rightly and for us to come reverently to you.

Not to tell you what to say to us, but to listen to what you have decided you are saying to your people and to us here. Amen.

Christianity has a wonderful message, but is it this? Is this the message of Christianity? Because God is a God of love.

He thinks you're wonderful and just wants you to realize it. I think churches can give the impression that that's what the Christian message is.

To say you're all wonderful people. God loves you and the problem is you just don't realize how much he loves you. That's not the Christian message.

[1 : 06] The Christian message says, because God is a God of love, he sent his son to die for obnoxious, foul sinners like us who totally deserve his judgment.

God does not say we're all wonderful people. He says we're sinners. And we're not in need of appreciation, but mercy.

Because God is a God of judgment. In other words, his love does not neutralize his moral outrage at our sin and mean that it never happened.

Or that he switches that off. God saves us in a way that gives full weight to our sin's total unacceptability. And I think that's what this chapter and these chapters are about.

It's about the activity of God as judge. So as we look at chapter 5, I'm going to say three things. Number one, the reasonableness of judgment.

[2 : 11] Two, the specifics of judgment. And three, the future under judgment. And for those of you who are interested in the way your Bible works out, you look at verses 15 and 16, which says, So man will be brought low and mankind humbled and the eyes of the arrogant humbled.

Well, that matches chapter 2, verse 11, where it said the eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.

So there's a carryover from chapter 2. And verse, in chapter 5, verse 25, Yet for all this his anger is not turned away and his hand is still upraised.

Carries on over into chapter 9, verse 12. For all this his anger is not turned away and his hand is still upraised.

And chapter 9, verse 17. For all this his anger is not turned away and his hand is still upraised. And chapter 9, verse 21. Yet for all this his anger is not turned away and his hand is still upraised.

[3 : 20] And chapter 10, verse 4. Yet for all this his anger is not turned away and his hand is still upraised. So there's a carryover of that theme of the remaining anger that is not quenched by anything that has yet happened.

There is more anger to come. That's what it keeps on saying. It's a rather threatening and sober thing to say. And in between those chapters we've got some chapters of people encountering God. Chapter 6 is Isaiah encountering God and chapter 7 is King Ahaz encountering God. So you get a human dimension to how this works out when the rubber hits the road in actual human life.

But the theme is carrying on through these chapters. The chapters about Isaiah and Ahaz are wrapped around with the ongoing non-finished judgment and wrath from the Lord.

So let's then look at the reasonableness of judgment. The chapter begins, chapter 5 begins, I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard.

[4 : 47] 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. So we come to this subject of judgment asking, is this really a good thing about God?

Because in human beings often anger is an unworthy thing. People get impatient and have bad temper.

And you say, I don't think God could possibly like that. It's such an ugly characteristic in a human being. Hastiness, being out of control.

Well, is that what it's like with God? And the answer is that God is angry, but it's not impatient, bad temper, titchiness, uncontrolledness.

It's actually very controlled. And in this chapter we see that he only judges after everything else has been tried.

[6 : 02] It comes as a picture of a vineyard. And the thing about vineyards is that you want grapes on them. And he tells us about the vineyard.

Verse 2, he dug it up. He put it on a fertile hillside. He dug it up, cleared it of stones, planted it with the choicest vines, built a watchtower in it, cut out a winepress as well, and he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.

That's an interesting story. And then he goes on to say, well, actually, it's a story about you guys, speaking to the original hearers. Now, you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judea, judge between me and my vineyard.

What more could have been done for my vineyard that I've done for it when I look for good grapes? Why did it yield only bad? Now, I'll tell you what I'm going to do to my vineyard. I'll take away its hedge. It will be destroyed.

I'll break down its wall. It'll be trampled. I'll make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated. Briars and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it. The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel.

[7 : 17] And the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. It's one of these sort of parables where you get taken along with it until you realize it's about you.

Well, that's the vineyard is the house of Israel, the house of Judah. It's that city. And God says, this is the way this picture, this parable works.

He says, look at the effort I've put in, verse 2. In this parable, the owner dug it up and cleared it of stones. That's effort, isn't it, to do that? He put a lot of time and trouble into clearing the ground.

He began it well. He planted it with the choicest of vines. And if Israel were to look back in her history, she could say, Abraham is the father of the nation.

He was a man of faith called the friend of God. You couldn't have a better beginning than that, could you? Or if you think of the history of them as a nation, who was their leader?

[8 : 26] Moses, the humblest man on earth. A man who spoke to God face and face. The beginnings were, you know, you couldn't fault the beginning. And God says, in this vineyard, I gave it strong protection.

I built a watchtower in it, verse 2. And God did indeed protect his people in many, many ways. Many, many ways down through their history.

And he said, I have been looking for good fruit. I looked for a crop of good grapes. There's some good grapes.

But, says God, what I actually got was bad fruit. And I looked up the original. Bad fruit is just one word. And the, the connection of it is with a bad smell.

Stinky, stinky fruit. Remember when I was a little boy in Bridge North, there was a walk next to the hospital in which I was born. And there were damson trees that hung over the path.

[9 : 35] I don't know whether, I think there were damson trees. The, the damsons dropped onto the path, got squashed, and you would be, find yourself walking through this, of sort of smelly, decayed fruit.

And that's the, that's what comes to my mind of bad fruit. So I've got some smelly, stinky fruit that's got stuck on people's shoes there.

And he says, for example, end of verse seven, he looked for, what sort of fruit is he looking for? Justice.

Hebrew word, sorry, Hebrew word, a mishpat, but he found bloodshed. Hebrew word, mishpat. It's a pun, isn't it?

I looked for mishpat, I found mishpat. I looked for order, justice, and I found violence, bloodshed.

[10 : 41] And then there's a second one, I looked for righteousness, but heard cries of distress. Righteousness, sedekah. Cries of distress, sa'akah. I looked for sedekah, I found sa'akah.

I looked for righteousness, but I found people crying out because they were being mugged. is it not reasonable for a farmer to expect fruit?

Isn't what we're being told here that there is, it is entirely reasonable. What God, the way God is approaching this is entirely reasonable. Fruitfulness, you go right back to the beginning, Genesis 1, verse 28, when God made the human race, he said, be fruitful and multiply.

He made human beings to be fruitful in various senses, but I think fruitful is a right thing to do. And for his own people that he took and protected and planted in this land, there's a particular expectation that they should be fruitful.

That's what he's saying. I looked, I gave you, I looked after you so carefully, I gave you these privileges and what's unreasonable about expecting a response from this?

[12:14] Some sort of gratitude, some sort of appreciation, some sort of willingness willingness to please me, some sort of understanding of the relationship that we're in.

Of course, it's true generally about being human that God has given us many privileges just by being human.

We don't have to be any particular ethnicity. God has given us all sorts of privileges, he's our maker and isn't it reasonable for him to expect that we should be thankful, that we should give him glory because he's bigger and greater than we are.

And the text says, well, what do you think? Well, to judge, it says in verse 3, now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

What do you think? What makes sense? What more could I have done for my vineyard than I have done for it? What could I possibly have done more for my vineyard?

[13:31] I've been so generous, I've given so much and he gives us, we're told in Acts 17, he gives everybody life and breath and everything else and we are therefore, aren't we, obligated to him as our creator.

Isn't it fair and right and just normal for him, for us to be grateful to him and want to please him and he asks this question, why, verse 4, when I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?

Why? And it's a good question, why? And there's actually something completely inexplicable about sin.

Why do we sin? Now of course, there's no shortage of people who say, oh well there is an explanation, I sin because of my upbringing, I sin because of my genes, I sin because of the pressures of society on me and there's some truth in those things but until we realise that sin is not something we can excuse ourselves from because of our genes, because of my upbringing, because of the pressures on me but to say, I sin and that's wrong and that's my fault and I've got no explanation and no excuse and when God says, why the bad grapes, we say, there's no, I can't think of a good reason, it's just me, it's my fault, that's what sin is like, it's without excuse, it's just wrong and the tax collector had it right when he said,

God be merciful to me and he didn't say, God be merciful to me, it's a problem with my social worker or God be merciful to me, it's a problem with my society, he just says, God be merciful to me, I'm a sinner, it's a fundamental truth which we have to take on board if we're to get anywhere right with the God of the Bible.

[16:07] Let's look now at the specifics, that was the reasonableness of judgment, let's look now at the specifics of judgment because going on into the next bit of the chapter, you will have noticed and you can count them if you like, there are six woes and I think there are two long woes and four short woes or something like that, I didn't go into it as deeply as that but let's take those woes as being specific grapes, specific stinky grapes and let's go through those six specific of judgment.

The first woe or the first bad grape I think we could call materialistic greed. Woe to you who add, this is verse eight, house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land.

The Lord Almighty has declared in my hearing, surely the great houses will become desolate, the fine mansions left without occupants, ten acre vineyard will produce only a bath of wine, a homer of seed, only an ephor of grain.

And the woe here is against the materialistic greed who are these people who are not just putting on a conservatory on the back of the house but they're sort of grabbing land from people around them.

The social system in Israel was meant to produce equality so that people couldn't get rich at the expense of the poor.

[17 : 49] It was meant to keep things level but this seems to have been disregarded by these people who have the power just to grab land, to take away the land which other people had a right to and add house to house and join field to field.

And he says to them you will be desperately disappointed. Your great houses will become desolate, the fine mansions left without occupant and your vineyard will produce hardly, I don't know what a bath of wine is but presumably a very disappointing outcome of wine.

New Testament would agree with that that it wouldn't say that it's wrong to be wealthy but it does say don't put your hope in uncertain riches.

Don't depend on your wealth as if that's your God. Don't put your trust in your wealth because it's uncertain.

The second woe, verse 11, I think we could describe as escapist pleasure seeking. Woe to those who rise early in the morning to run after their drinks, who stay up late at night till they are inflamed with wine.

[19 : 08] These people live constantly under the intoxication of alcohol or if we were nowadays we'd say substances which is a euphemism isn't it?

Other things that give you a high intoxication of alcohol and the intoxication of music because of course music is intoxicated. verse 12, they have harps and lyres at their banquets, tambourines and flutes and wine.

They escape, they're seeking to escape from real life, the life in a universe ruled by a holy God and all they are concerned about is escaping into more wine, more substances and this music scene. Bible doesn't say alcohol is wrong in itself, Bible doesn't say music is wrong in itself but it does say that escaping into those things so that fills your whole world is as it says in verse 12 having no regard for the deeds of the Lord no respect for the work of his hands you've built a little world which is so full of itself that it excludes God and he said that is just not on they don't think about the work of his hands there's no room in this world of alcohol and music to think about well for them it would have been the exodus that God redeemed!

them from Egypt in our world now we can say there's no room for remembering the cross of Jesus Christ they have no respect for his deeds and the work of his hands and for lack of understanding verse 13 people will go into exile because they haven't thought about this because their worldview of thinking and therefore acting and choosing has squeezed God out and filled up the space with something else it mentions the grave verse 14 therefore the grave enlarges its appetite we'll come back to that in a moment no seriousness about God in this life means no security from God in the life to come and then we have a little extra bit here where it says in verse 15 so man will be brought low and mankind humbled and the eyes of the arrogant humbled but the

[21 : 48] Lord almighty will be exalted in his justice and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness and as it seems to be two sides of the same coin as human arrogance is put down God exalts himself in his justice that's his mishpat and he shows himself holy in his righteousness that's that word tzedakah again so as human beings are brought low God is exalted!

and seen to be great that's a good thing isn't it? it's a good thing for God to be glorified it's a tough way for that to happen but it's a good thing for God to be glorified and he's glorified here in the humbling of human society and in the exalting of his own justice and holiness moving on in the woes we got to verse 18 woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit and wickedness as with cart ropes I think this is a picture of people putting huge effort into freight you know they didn't have trains didn't have lorries in those days if you wanted to move a load of bricks or a load of timber you tie it all up with ropes and you just pull and he says this is what they seem to be doing with sin they are almost making an industry out of sin and deceit woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit and wickedness as with cart ropes putting huge effort into this transportation of sin in various forms and they're not short of sarcasm verse 19 to those who say let

God hurry let him hasten his work so that we may see it come on God let it approach let the plan of the holy one of Israel come so we'll know it sarcasm they're taunting God they're saying we don't see you do very much come on!

God come do a few tricks for us we're very keen on that it's extremely irreverent isn't it to speak to God that way it's sarcastic taunting defiance of the holy one verse 19 let the plan of the holy one how they dare call upon the holy one in his power and majesty as if to say come on God do some tricks for us woe number four a reversal of what God and conscience say is right 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 they take these opposites and turn them round we find this reversal it's not a new thing it's happening now the reversals of what is evil is said to be good the things that are said to that are actually darkness are said to be light we use all sorts of modern words for that being progressive being liberal whatever but things that in society in the past would have been seen wrong but tolerated now become celebrated and you see the whole thing has gone completely upside down and

God says this is bad fruit woe to those who call evil good and good evil fifth woe in verse 21 this is a short woe woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight sort of self defining arrogance without wishing to be particularly unfair to the BBC there are instances on telly of people who are clearly have no time for Christian faith and are put on as wise people giving us wisdom and like it says in Romans professing themselves to be wise they became fools and these extremely clever people come out with such stupid things that's the way it is they're wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight Calvin when he talks about the role of theology says that what this does is to give us a knowledge of ourselves and a knowledge of

[27 : 11] God when we the two go together when we know how great God is we realise how small we are when we know how holy God is we realise how sinful we are when we know how infinite God is we realise how limited we are we don't define ourselves by ourselves we understand ourselves in the presence of God in the sight of God and that's the right way to understand ourselves not being wise in our own sight and as a practical piece of advice Paul says to Christians in the Roman church don't think of yourself more highly than you ought but think of yourself with sober judgement in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you he says think of yourself rightly as somebody who has received grace from God and don't be wise in your own eyes sixth woe is in verse 24 woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine champions at mixing drinks who acquit the guilty for a bribe but deny justice to the innocent these are experts in evil

Paul says to the Corinthian church in understanding be grown up in what does he say in understanding men I have to paraphrase it in evil be children you can be naive you don't have to know all the details of all the evil that people can do you don't have to be an expert in that be an expert in understanding the things of God in understanding be men these people are experts in well verse 22 drinking they're champions at mixing drinks and he then couples it with the way this works out in terms of justice you acquit he says the guilty for a bribe it's corruption isn't it it's called corruption so his word is to justify the guilty for a bribe that's what a corrupt judge does he says to the guilty person let you off you're fine no problem and he does it because somebody has given him some money which he puts in his back pocket and God says woe to you who do that to treat the guilty as if righteous and then the other side of the coin who deny justice to the innocent to turn aside the righteousness of the righteous so have somebody before you who is clearly righteous and has a plea or a cause or a complaint to be looked at and you just turn that aside kick it into the long grass is what you'd say nowadays woe to you if you do that those are the six woes and let me add a seventh example of bad fruit and this is hundreds of years later same city

Jesus on Palm Sunday entered the city and you remember right at the beginning he sort of acts this out he goes to a tree with and looks for fruit on it it's not the season for figs it's full of leaves but he still gives it a chance and says even though I'm pretty sure there's no fruit here I'm going to have a look and there is no fruit and he says may no one ever eat fruit from you again and the tree withers and dies it's sort of a parable of what Jesus does as the last judgment for this city to come along and look for fruit he looked very hard he looked for the things that God has itemized he looked for the knowledge of God he looked for reverence understanding respect for God and love for one another and what he found was irreverence pride greed greed for money greed for spiritual power because the

Pharisees you remember as I think Pilate rightly perceived it was out of envy that they crucified Jesus Jesus came and looked for fruit and there's a text which says judgment must begin at and we're going to fill that in and you might say judgment will begin with the well what does it say judgments must begin at the house of God so rather than us looking outside and saying in a rather pharisaical way I thank God that we're okay to say we too come under this for our thoughts and words and deeds and our response is

God be merciful to me a sinner so let's come to the third thing about the future under judgment so where does this chapter lead us on to well it leads us on to chapter 6 but we're not going to chapter 6 just yet what does the chapter itself say about the future well it says hard things verse 5 it says

about this vineyard I'm going to take away its hedge and it will be destroyed I will break down its wall it will be trampled I'll make it a wasteland neither pruned nor cultivated and briars and thorns will grow there I will command the clouds not to rain on it so what he says about this vineyard is a removal of protection the removal of privilege for this vineyard and the garden will become a desert and the occupants what does it say about the occupants it doesn't say anything about the occupants in there but verse 13 and 14 says my people will go into exile the grave enlarges its appetite you say that the occupants of this vineyard will be removed either to a distant place or to the grave and that's a pretty distant place so let's put the occupants being moved out when Jesus says the same sort of thing in his day he actually tells us as a story about tenants in the vineyard and he comes to the end of it and he says a similar thing what do you think will happen what do you judge about this and the answer is he will kill those tenants and he will give the vineyard to others and his listeners are aghast because what he's saying is that the privileges that the Jewish nation had of being the nation under the protection of

[35 : 00] God that that will those privileges will be removed from them and given to others and they say dirty Gentiles coming into our temple filthy rubbish foreigners partaking in our sacrifices may this never be you know get a sense of their horror at this thought but of course if you're one of the others it's good news isn't it we could go into the vineyard that would be amazing so those people that come into the vineyard it's good news and of course it is good news because through that breaking down of the barriers us because we're the filthy Gentiles can come into the things of the holy God of Israel it's sad for them but what what a favour to us we come in of course we should add to this this remarkable saying of

Jesus knowing full well all this history of vineyard stuff and Jesus just cuts right to the heart of it and he says do you know that the vineyard thing it isn't about ethnicity God God favoured the men of Judah and the people in Jerusalem he favoured them but he took it away from them because the heart of the matter is this that the true vine says Jesus is me and the secret of fruitfulness is not being Jewish or any other ethnic thing the secret of fruitfulness is belonging to Jesus it's not a classic thing for Jesus to say he just steps right into this whole stream of history and prophecy and says let's cut to the chase I'm the vine if you belong to me you produce fruit if you abide in me you produce fruit he has the stern bits if there's no fruit you get cut off if you produce stinky fruit you get cut off but there is a secret here of fruitfulness that

I am the true vine if you belong to me if you abide in me you produce fruit so what is what else is God promising when verse 15 and 16 he's promising that he will be exalted the Lord's triumphant exaltation the Lord almighty will be exalted by his justice the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness brothers and sisters when God shows his judgment he hasn't flopped it's not a failure for God to show justice it is his triumph he says human beings will be ruined but he will be exalted if God were to enter into judgment now and say there's just freeze history where it is now and if God were to take the day of judgment now it would be his glory he's exalted in judgment but he's he does give something some more specific to this particular situation in verse 17 he's saying that there will be human ruin and a depopulation of that particular area and he prophesies a very specific invader because

God used the nations to bring about his judgment they were like instruments in his hand and this is a reference to Assyria he will lift up a banner verse 26 for the distant nations he whistles for those at the end of the earth I can't do a whistle like a sheep dog anybody could do that like that where you whistle for the sheep dog to come that was your opportunity don't do it again now but God just sort of whistles for the Assyrian right time to come in the time of waiting is past the day of grace is gone and the Assyrian is whistled for to come in and he's cruel they come swiftly and speedily none of them grows tired or stumbles no one slumbers or sleeps not a belt is loosened at the waist not a sangle thong is broken their arrows are sharp their bows are strung the horses hooves are like flint their chariots like a whirlwind they roar like that of the lion they grow as they seize their prey to carry it off with no one to rescue it's an appalling picture

God says I've been so reasonable so patient hundreds and hundreds of years of patience time and time again my patience is vast but it is not infinite I do care about justice and the day is coming the Lord has this controlling signal and we end the chapter with verse 30 darkness and distress even the light will be darkened by the clouds and that's where we end the chapter darkness gloom distress clouds there they are it's a horrible picture it ends up hopeless now as we go on into the future chapters there will be hope but at this particular point there's nothing of hope there is a

hopelessness here later on he'll talk about chopping down all the trees but a stump will shoot up and later on he'll talk about the barrenness of the daughter of [41 : 22] Jerusalem but a child will be born he will say all those things but he doesn't say it here and he's going to talk about in chapter 9 verse 2 to those who sat in darkness a great light has dawned to those who living in the shadow of death have seen a great light he's going to say that but he doesn't say it here and the reason I think there's a reason for that that before we can appreciate how wonderful the light is and the hope is we have to first grasp that without it we are helpless and hopeless Jesus put it this way and I think he's putting the same thing he says unless you become like little children you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven when he talks about little children he's not saying I want you to be as charming as little children and he's not saying I want you to be as cute as little children he's saying

I want you to realize you're as helpless as little children because that's the thing about little children isn't it newborns in particular unless somebody picks them up they can't do a thing unless somebody feeds them they can't do a thing unless somebody keeps them warm they're totally vulnerable that's what Jesus is getting at unless you realize your total helplessness your total vulnerability that you need to be picked up by someone else you need to be held by someone else you need to be nurtured by someone else unless you get that you can't enter the kingdom of heaven so I'm going to ask you do you get that is that how you think about your own spiritual life unless the Lord had lifted me unless the Lord forgave me I would be completely sunk God helpless and hopeless we sinners had been if he never had loved us till cleansed from our sin but to him be the glory because he lifted me unless you become like little children you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven or to put it in the way that tax collector so rightly said this is where we come down to God be merciful to me a sinner we're going to sing number 705