

God's love song

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Date: 07 August 2016

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[0 : 0 0] Our first reading this morning is from Isaiah, chapter 5, as Charles says, can be found on page 687. 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 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.

[1 : 1 0] 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 effort.

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.

[2 : 2 3] Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite, and opened its mouth beyond measure. And the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude will go down, her revellers 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 card 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.

Woe to those 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.

[3 : 32] 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. Woe to those who are heroes at the same time.

Woe to those who are heroes at the same time. Woe to those who are heroes at the same time. Woe to those who are heroes at the same time. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still.

He will raise a signal for nations afar off, 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, all their bows bent. Their horses' hooves 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.

[5 : 04] And if one looks to the land, behold, darkness and distress. And the light is darkened by its clouds. So page 1087 in the Bible Church Bibles.

Gospel according to John chapter 15. Jesus said, burned. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this that someone lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends. For all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. When the teacher said this, I knew I was in trouble.

It wasn't just the way he said it, it was the way he looked when he said it. His cheeks were redder than red, beetroot, and he looked like he was about to explode. He was called appropriately, and this is true, Rosie Bullcock. And as a result of an unfortunate cricketing accident, one of his fingers was permanently pinned into a supposedly natural curve, but it just looked like a velociraptor's claw. And that claw was pointing at me. I'd done something wrong, and I was going to be punished. Today we're looking at Isaiah chapter 5, verses 1 to 30, and the people of Judah have done something wrong, and they're going to be punished.

[9 : 07] Woe, woe, woe, woe, woe, woe, woe. God says woe not just five times like Rosie Velociraptor Bullcocks, no, no, no, no, no, no, but six times. Woe to those who join house to house. Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they might run after strong drink. Woe to those who draw iniquity.

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes. And woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine. The people of Judah are in trouble, big trouble. But why?

And what does that have to do with us? And why should we care? So who's Isaiah? Well, he's a prophet, prophet, and he relayed messages from God to the people of Judah for about 50 years. And he did this 700 years before Jesus Christ was even born, during the reign of kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Now, the Israelites' fortunes were changing. They'd gone from prosperity to exile.

The nation had split into two kingdoms, the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom, Judah. And Judah had Jerusalem and the temple. And they saw themselves as God's faithful people because they continued with all the Old Testament sacrifices. They felt confirmed in this because they were at peace and they were relatively prosperous under Uzziah. And so Isaiah's message in chapter 5 is a massive wake-up call. Isaiah is relaying a message from God, a stark message from God that warns the people of Judah of a coming judgment. The people of Judah are in trouble, big trouble. God expects good grapes. God had done everything for the people of Judah, so he was expecting them to love him, trust him, and live for him. Just look at verses 1 to 2.

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.

[11 : 39] Isaiah is singing about a vineyard, a vineyard that belongs to God, and God planted it in the best possible place. He carefully prepared it and planted it with the best possible vines, and God watched over it constantly. God wasn't going to leave or abandon this vineyard. The vineyard even had a wine press. Everything was there to create the finished product. It was perfect. It could not be any better, and good grapes were a no-brainer. God was expecting good grapes. Verse 4, what more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? I'm growing grapes down at my allotment. I had this wild idea that I might make my own wine, you know, Chateau Dulwich or maybe a nice Pinot Broadbent. I bought myself a book, and I read it enthusiastically, only to discover I needed to hire an excavator to dig a trench three feet wide by three feet deep and fill it with tons of quality topsoil and sand. So after careful consideration, I dug a few holes, stuffed them with home-based bargain compost, and dumped my vines in.

Well, God carefully prepared his vineyard. He dug it properly and cleared it of stones. God was expecting good grapes, and God deserved good grapes. It's three years since I planted my vines, and I'm naively hoping for good grapes, but I can't be there watching over it and checking it all the time. Last year, my first and only bunch of grapes appeared. I was delighted, and after doing the usual showy Facebook posts, I returned the following day to harvest my precious bunch, but it had been eaten. I can't be there all the time. What I need is a watchtower, and to be in that watchtower, watching over all my vines all of the time. God's vineyard had a watchtower, and he was watching over his vineyard all the time. In last year's movie-watching world championship, yes, such a thing exists. The winners only managed to watch 123 hours of continuous movies before taking their eyes off the screen. The rules are very strict. Take your eyes off the screen, and you lose. The movie-watching world champion managed just five days of constant watching. But God was watching over the people of

Judah constantly for a lot longer than five days, and he's watching over us constantly, forever. The vineyard Isaiah sings about represents the people of Judah, the people of God. And God did everything for the vineyard. God did everything for the people of Judah. He brought them out of bondage in Egypt. He gave them the promised land, the Ten Commandments, and an amazing leader, Moses.

God was expecting a crop of the finest grapes. For the people of Judah, good grapes meant complete obedience to God. And complete obedience meant keeping God's commandments. And top of the list were put God first and only worship God. God had to be the center of everything they did. God had to be who they lived for. They had to love God with all their heart, soul, and might.

And what are bad grapes? Well, this is where the woes come in. Woe, woe, woe, woe, woe, woe. God holds up six bunches of wild bad grapes to show the people of Judah what's wrong. Six woes.

[15 : 43] Bunch one, verse eight. 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. Some people of Judah were greedy land grabbers. The rich were buying up all the land and leaving the poor poorer than before.

Land was an inheritance to each family, and it wasn't to be taken away from them. If they had to sell their land, it was to be returned to them in the year of Jubilee. This meant no one would permanently lose their inheritance. But some people invented laws that superseded God's laws and arranged for land to be taken permanently. Doing this was disobeying God. Bunch two, verses 11 to 12.

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. Some people of Judah were alcoholics. As soon as they got up in the morning, they wanted a drink, and that's probably after a night of drinking. How can they possibly be good and do good with such an addiction? And they're not sober enough to see the good that God is doing for them. Bunch three, verses 18 to 19.

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. Some of the people of Judah were liars.

They were manipulating and twisting things to make themselves look good and tear down others. They were so full of pride, they were challenging God to judge them. Bunch four, verse 20. 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. Things are really bad if people think good deeds are evil deeds, and evil deeds are good deeds. Things are out of control if people can't judge what is right and wrong.

[18 : 09] Bunch five, verse 21. Woe to those who are wise in their eyes and shrewd in their own sight. Not only were they alcoholics, the people of Judah thought they'd figured out everything. They didn't need God.

They had an answer for everything. And the final bunch, bunch six, verses 22 to 23. 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. And the people of Judah perverted justice. They were quite happy to take money and see an innocent man convicted. The people of Judah were bad grapes. Very bad grapes.

My neighbor has a vine growing across the front of his house. A couple of years ago, given that my allotment vines were producing nothing, he let me harvest his vine in exchange for a bottle or two of my soon-to-be-brewed 2014 vintage. However, I was a bit blasé during the pressing stage and thinking that quantity was better than quality, our juice the best and the worst of the harvest.

Yes, the finished product was absolutely dreadful. There were far less bad grapes than good grapes, but the bad simply contaminated the good. So the people of Judah living godless, sinful, and selfish lives were bad grapes, and the people of Judah living godless, sinful, and selfish lives were producing bad grapes, and the bad were contaminating the good. God gets bad grapes. So did God get good grapes? No.

Did God get bad grapes? Yes. Verse 2. 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. Verse 4. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it when I looked for it to yield yield grapes? Why did it yield wild grapes? And verse 7. He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed. For righteousness, but behold, an outcry. God looked for the vineyard to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes, bad grapes. Now with everything God had done for the people of Judah, surely they could have been good grapes, but no, they were bad grapes.

[21 : 01] On a hot summer's night, rather like the ones we've had recently, I remember being slumped in a chair watching television in my college's TV room, and I had by my side a cool and refreshing cup of orange squash just waiting for me to drink it.

A cup of squash was something I'd lovingly prepared, a nice big cup, not too much squash, and plenty of really, really, really cold water. The TV room was dark and crowded, and for a joke, some of my so-called student friends had decided to use my cup of squash as an ashtray.

And when I came to drink it, I didn't sip because I was hot and thirsty. I knocked it back. So whilst I was expecting something cool and refreshing, sweet and delightful, what I actually got was something disgusting and repulsive.

And the contrast between the delightful and the repulsive is something I'll never forget. God was expecting good grapes and got bad grapes. Imagine God's disgust. We're not just talking about a cup of squash, we're talking about the people of Judah, a nation, something that God had protected and nurtured, lovingly cared for.

What did God do? God's judgment. Well, the rich were getting richer, the poor getting poorer. Righteousness had no meaning, strong drink was cool, and so were parties and celebrations without God.

[22 : 40] People were wicked and deceitful. They considered evil good and good evil. There was no justice for the innocent. Bribery was the way to go. And everyone thought they knew it all.

They deserved punishment. And they got it. Verses 5 to 6. 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. God had done everything for the people of Judah. He had given them everything they needed, but they turned away from him.

Having given them everything, created the perfect vineyard, God took it all away because they ignored and disobeyed him. Just picture it.

[23 : 38] He's taking away the hedges so the protection will go and everything will be eaten and devoured. He's taking away the walls so the protection will go and everything will get trashed and trampled. It will become a wasteland.

There will never be rain. So only weeds, briars and thorns will grow. It will go from being everything to being nothing. In a way, we're no better than the people of Judah.

Do we ignore and disobey God? Are we good grapes or bad grapes? Top of the list of God's commandments to the people of Judah and to us are put God first and only worship God.

God has to be the centre of everything we do. God has to be who we live for. We have to love God with all our heart, soul and might. And if we're honest with ourselves, often our thoughts are not on God.

They're on other things. Even a little bit of rottenness makes a good grape bad. So yes, we are bad grapes. In 1 John 1 verse 8 we read, If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

[24 : 50] We are bad grapes and we deserve to be judged and punished just like the people of Judah. So the people of Judah deserve to be punished and they were going to be punished.

But look at the severity of the punishment, verses 24 to 30. Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble and as dry grass sinks down in the flames, so their roots 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.

[25 : 55] Not a waistband is loose, not a sandal strap broken. Their arrows are sharp, all their bows bent. Their horses' hooves 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. The people of Judah rejected God's laws. The people of Judah rejected God's words and God was angry. Very angry.

So he stretched out his hand and struck them. Verse 25. Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people. And he stretched out his hand against them and struck them.

But we're not talking about a little smack here. The wake of the smack, a smack that shook mountains, was bodies everywhere strewn about like rubbish.

[26 : 58] Picture the aftermath of the out and bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. It's a horrible, horrible scene. And God was still angry. Look at the rest of verse 25.

For all this his anger has not turned away and his hand is stretched out still. His hand was ready to strike, to smack again. And God sent all the nations from the ends of the earth to finish them off.

This wasn't a rag bag of an army. They were fit and didn't tire. They were quick. They were well armed and well equipped and they were scary. Very scary. Verse 29.

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. There was no escaping this punishment.

They could not be rescued. No, no, no, no, no. So there I was with Rosie Bullcock's Velociraptor claw pointing at me.

[28 : 01] And I knew I was in big trouble. He looked so angry. The way he spoke, the way he looked, the way he pointed that claw made me feel so guilty.

Which I was. And so helpless. He had the power to take everything away from me. He could make me write lines. He could give me detention.

He could expel me. What had I done? I know you want to know. But that's not the point. I remembered his anger.

I remembered his power. And I remembered my shame. And I tried to live a better life, not exactly perfect, whilst I was at school. And to this day, I remember his anger, his power, and my shame at how I'd let him down.

And we should remember God's anger at the people of Judah. We should remember God's power and the severity of his punishment. We should remember the seriousness of rejecting God and the seriousness of rejecting his words.

[29 : 09] We should recognize that we're all bad grapes. And we all deserve God's judgment. But if we're all bad grapes and we deserve God's judgment, surely that means we'll be punished too?

Absolutely. Yes. We'll be punished. But I hear you say the title of today's talk is God's great love for his people or God's love song. Isn't this talk about an angry God punishing?

Where's the love in that? Well, the woes in verses 8 to 23 are woes, not no's. This is God, not Rosie, Velociraptor, Bullcock.

These are woes, not no's. And the woes show grief, sorrow, and distress. The people of Judah are breaking God's heart.

He loves the people of Judah. But they need to learn. They need judgment and punishment. They need to be disciplined. The discipline is given out of love. Like good parenting with a child, the discipline is given out of love.

[30 : 14] And because God loves us, he gave the punishment we deserve to his son, Jesus Christ. He gave the punishment we deserve to his son, Jesus.

Jesus came down to earth and led a sin-free life, a life wholly obedient to God. Jesus was as good as a good grape could be. Despite this, he was crucified and died a terrible death.

And that death, that punishment, is the punishment we deserve. In 1 Peter 3, verse 8, we read, For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteousness for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

So as Christians, we can live a life free from the burden of sin because the righteous Jesus took our punishment. And if we believe that Jesus is the son of God and that he died for us, we can live a life knowing that we will not be punished when Jesus comes again to judge.

God loves us. In John chapter 3, verse 16, we read, For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should perish, should not perish, but have eternal life.

[31 : 33] If we believe in Jesus, we receive God's love and God's grace, and we will not be punished when Jesus comes back to judge. But reject Jesus, and we will see God's anger, not love.

And in John chapter 3, verse 36, we read, Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, for the wrath of God remains on him.

Ignore and disobey Jesus, reject Jesus, and God's wrath and anger will be on us forever. Despite Rosie Velociraptor Bawcock's anger over my disgraceful behavior, he didn't punish me.

And I think it was his grace that set me on the right path. Mind you, a few years later, I accidentally chipped the paint off his brand new Audi. But that's another story.

Remember, God is watching over us all the time, forever. And we, whatever we might think, are bad grapes. And the punishment we deserve is horrendous.

[32 : 51] And the only way we can avoid the punishment we deserve is to believe in Jesus. If you're here today and you believe in Jesus, that's wonderful. But don't feel smug.

Live your life accordingly. Live your life loving God and his Son Jesus with all your heart, soul, and might. And if you're here today and you don't believe in Jesus, please think about how that makes God feel.

Remember what happened to the people of Judah. And I urge you to investigate the claims of Jesus further. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, as we live our daily lives, help us to remember how it hurts you when we reject you.

Help us to remember that we're bad grapes and deserve to be punished. Help us to remember that through your grace, you gave the punishment we deserve to your Son, Jesus.

Help us to love you and your Son, Jesus, with all our heart, soul, and might. Amen.