Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

“How Long, O Lord?”
Scripture: Isaiah 5-6
Code: 80-398

Well, it’s such a joy to come now to time around the Lord’s Table, and we do that because there is no aspect of God’s work in our lives for which we are more thankful than the provision of the Lord Jesus Christ as a sacrifice for sin.

I told you, this morning, that in preparation for this I would endeavor to give you a bit of a perspective on the times in which we live, from the Word of God. And in order to do that I...I want to draw your attention to a passage that has been really a staple in my understanding through the years—the fifth and six chapters of Isaiah, fifth and sixth chapters of Isaiah. It wasn’t too long ago that we spent a wonderful couple of months in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, but chapters 5 and 6 are also very definitive chapters.

Keep in mind that Isaiah’s responsibility as a prophet was to declare judgment coming on his people. He was given the responsibility and fulfilled it to the letter to pronounce judgment, judgment from God, the wrath of God. And that’s what the opening 39 chapters are about; they’re all about judgment and they...they indicate to us not only the nature of God’s judgment, but the reason for God’s judgment. And when you come to chapter 5, you have really a very dramatic scene that lays out the reasons why God is going to judge the people of Israel, and He’s actually going to use the Babylonians—the judgment was the Babylonian assault, the Babylonian raids. The Babylonians came in, literally destroyed the city of Jerusalem, and hauled away the Jews in three different deportations—and for all intents and purposes, destroyed their culture for a period of seventy years and more.

And you know that story, taking them captive into Babylon, the ones that they didn’t slaughter. But this was a judgment of God and in the fifth chapter of Isaiah, Isaiah is given a picture of this judgment in a parable. And he says it’s not only a parable, it’s a singing parable. He says at the beginning of the chapter, “Let me sing now for my well-beloved a song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.” This is a song about a beloved who is seen as a vineyard, and this is God who is the singer. The song is a dirge. It is a funeral song. It is a sad song. It is a song of death and destruction—and that on someone who is well beloved. He’s talking about the people of Israel as the beloved of God and singing their death song, their funeral song.

And the song goes like this. “My beloved has a vineyard on a fertile hill.” This speaks of the land of Canaan, the land of milk and honey, the fertile hill, as fertile as any soil on the planet, that magnificent

land against the Mediterranean was potentially, of course, a garden spot, and it became that for the people of Israel. God, it says in verse 2, “dug it all around, removed its stones, and God also planted it with the choicest vine.”

These are metaphors for everything God did to establish Israel in the land. He dug it all around what would be; they would put a moat around a vineyard in order to keep animals from being able to get to it and destroy it. And God actually put barriers and limitations and strictures in the laws that He gave the people of Israel to isolate them and to protect them from easy interaction with the nations around them that were full of idolatry. You plant it with the choicest vine.

That is to say that even the strain of humanity that we know as the Jews was the noblest of humanity. “Built a tower in the middle of it” could well refer to the city of Jerusalem, the great parapet, the great tower and the place of sacrifice**.** But the whole point here is not so much the details of the metaphor as to say that God put this people in the best place, under the best conditions, with the best hope for success. Everything that God did was the very best that He could do. He put them in the best place, protected them in the best way possible, built a tower in the middle of it which then becomes a place where they can see their enemies coming, at which Jerusalem was, of course.

As a result, He expected it to produce good grapes. He expected it to produce good grapes but it produced only sour berries. That’s what the Hebrew says. It’s a play on words. It’s essentially almost the identical word.

Everything that God did for Israel was the best that a man could do for a vineyard, metaphorically speaking. It was the best that God could do to put them in a place of blessing. So in verse 3 God calls on people who judge Him and, “Now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, men of Judah, judge between Me and My vineyard. What more was there to do for My vineyard that I haven’t done in it?” What could I have done? “When I expected it to produce good grapes and it produced worthless ones.” Why did that happen? Why? “Is that My fault?” God is saying. And the answer to that is, “Of course not. The noblest people in the finest place, with the best protection and the best provisions, it isn’t God’s fault.” The implication is that it’s their fault with what they did with such amazing divine opportunity.

So verse 5 then asks the question, “Now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will move its hedge and it will be consumed.” I’ll remove its protection, the hedge would be built as a protection, and it will be consumed. I’ll break down its wall; again an indication of protection. “It will become trampled. I’ll lay it waste; it won’t be pruned or hoed, briars and thorns will come up. I will charge the clouds to rain no rain on it.” This is God metaphorically in the same language pronouncing doom on Israel. “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts,” verse 7, “is the house of Israel.” That’s who I’m talking about and the men of Judah, His delightful plant, that’s who I’m talking about. “And He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed.” Another play on words. He looked for *mishpat* but behold *mispach**.*** He looked for righteousness and behold, a cry of distress. He got the opposite of what He

should have received. Israel failed in every sense to be who they should have been, given the privileges that they were given. And so He pronounces judgment through this song, this parable song.

Then starting in verse 8, and really what is a very remarkable indictment of Israel, He lists the sins that characterize Israel and brought them to judgment. The first one is grasping materialism: “Woe to those who add house to house, join field to field, until there is no more room, so that you may have to live alone in the midst of the land!” This is consuming, grasping materialism where people literally accumulate and accumulate, and accumulate, and accumulate without regard for anyone else until they have isolated themselves in the midst of everything that they possess. And judgment will come and the houses, the many houses, will become desolate, even the great and fine ones without occupants.

With all the fields that they have, there will come a famine in verse 10, “ten acres of vineyard will yield only one bath of wine.” That breaks down to about four gallons of wine for ten acres of vineyard. Those are famine conditions. And a homer...one “homer of seed will yield but an ephah of grain.” That would be 48 gallons, would in the end only yield 4.8 gallons of usable seed.

So the first indictment is on their materialism, their accumulation, the fact that they eat and drink and flourish and have no regard for God. The second sin is designated by the second woe in verse 11. And by the way, word...the word “woe” is really an exclamation; *hoy* in Hebrew is what it is. It’s a pronunciation of judgment. And the second woe is because of drunken pleasure-seeking, “Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may pursue strong drink, who stay up late in the evening that wine may enflame them!” And verse 12 talks about their parties, accompanied by music: “but they don’t pay attention to the deeds of the Lord, nor do they consider the work of His hands.” That probably is a reference to the dissipation of their bodies, as they dissipate their bodies in drunken pleasure.

Verse 14 says that death will swallow up the mindless merrymakers. “Sheol has enlarged its throat and opened its mouth without measure; the splendor of Jerusalem...and her din of revelry and the jubilant within her, descend into it. The common man will be humbled, the man of importance abased,” as God judges them for their drunken pleasure-seeking.

Down in verse 18 you have the next woe, “to those who drag iniquity with the cords of falsehood, in sin as if with cart ropes.” That’s quite an interesting statement. That’s defiant sinfulness. That’s a defiant approach to sin. That is literally “they drag their sin around as if it were something to parade.” It pictures these people as filling up a cart with all their iniquities and parading it through town for everyone to see—defiant, blatant, open, flagrant sinfulness. And they are so defiant, verse 19, that they say, speaking of God, “Let Him make speed, let Him hasten His work, that we may see it; and let the purpose of the Holy One of Israel draw near and come to pass, that we may know it!” In other words, if God doesn’t like it, let’s see Him do something about it. This is defiant sinfulness. This is

shaking the fist in the face of God.

Verse 20 comes to the next woe. “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light, light for darkness; substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!” This is moral perversion; moral perversion where what is evil is considered good, what is good is considered evil. This is a complete twisting and reversing of morality. Evil becomes good; good becomes evil; darkness becomes light; light becomes darkness; bitterness becomes sweet; sweetness becomes bitterness.

Are these starting to sound a little bit familiar? Grasping materialism, consuming materialism, drunken pleasure-seeking; defiant sinfulness shakes its fist in the face of God and moral perversion that twists and perverts everything.

But that’s not all. Verse 21, “What are those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight?” That’s arrogant conceit, arrogant conceit where everybody thinks that his opinion trumps everyone else’s. This is arrogant conceit. This is a people who submit themselves to no law, who submit themselves to no divine moral code, or to no God, or to no authoritative testament, to no Bible, to no Scripture. But whose approach is that they have the wisdom, all the wisdom they need to solve everything and to understand everything, coming up from inside them. Arrogant conceit. They don’t bow the knee to any revelation. They don’t bow the knee to any authority. They don’t bow the knee to any moral code.

And then verse 22, it steps into the category of leadership. “Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine and valiant men in mixing strong drink.” What you have here is just corruption, and particularly among leaders because the word “heroes” and the word “valiant” does refer to leaders. These are leaders who actually, in verse 23, justify the wicked for a bribe and take away the rights of the ones who are in the right. This is a kind of leadership that is inebriated. This is a kind of leadership who drinks strong drink, who aren’t protecting their powers of concentration and judgment, and who can be bought off, who can be bribed, and who are eager to take the rights of the ones who were in the right; in other words, they’re unjust. This is severe collapse of a nation.

And the things that I see here are things that I see in our own nation—a massive kind of grasping materialism, drunkenness, pleasure-seeking, a pleasure-mad culture, sinful at a defiant level, morally perverse, arrogantly conceited and corrupt in its leadership. That’s a formula for judgment in any situation. And the judgment is then described, starting in verse 24, as a tongue of fire consumes stubble. How fast does a fire burn dry grass? How fast does dry grass collapse into the flame? He says in verse 24. That’s how fast the divine judgment is going to come. Why? Verse 24, the end of the verse, “They have rejected the law of the Lord of hosts and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.” You reject the law of the Lord, you despise God, and you are set for judgment on account of the anger of the Lord. “On this account, rather, the anger of the Lord has burned against His people.

He stretched out His hand against them struck them down."

And it was severe. "The mountains quaked, the corpses lay like refuse in the middle of the streets. For His anger is not spent, His hand will still be stretched out." And He's describing the actual arrival of the Babylonian hoards and the massacre. In fact, He refers to them in verse 26 as a "distant nation." He's going to whistle and they're going to come with speed and they're not going to be weary in their trek. And they're not going to stumble, and they're not going to slumber; they're not going to sleep; they're not going to slow down to rest; the belt is going to be at the waist not undone. And the sandals are not going to be taken off; and the arrows will be sharp and the bows will be bent; and the hoofs of the horses will be like flint and its chariot wheels like a whirlwind. It's just very graphic. The roaring of this force will be like a lion as when it roars over its young; lions that growl seizes the prey, "carries it off with no one to deliver it." That's what's going to happen in this Babylonian Captivity.

Same God still rules in heaven. Same God still has the same standards. When you have a culture of people who defy God, and maybe the definitive point is in verse 24, "They have rejected the law of the Lord of hosts and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel." When you do that collectively as a people, and you have not the covenant protection that Israel had, you're in a situation of judgment—same God, same standards. And if the anger of the Lord is burned against His own people, and He stretched out His hand against those who were the people of His covenant, that He calls earlier in the chapter His well-beloved, then those who are not so protected by the covenant have much to fear, much to fear.

And so we see the judgment and we see the reason for the judgment. And then we would ask the question, So how do we respond when we're in a nation that is doomed to divine judgment? How do we respond?

Come to chapter 6 for that, and just briefly, just a couple of things to think about. The first thing that you want to remember is that God is still on the throne and that's where Isaiah was. If you're Isaiah now, by now you're really struggling because you're hopeful as a preacher that the message is going to be positive. You would like to be able to say you're going to be forgiven, there's going to be a revival, everything is going to be fine. God's going to protect you as a people. He's going to keep you in the land. You're going to flourish. You're going to be blessed. That's what Isaiah would wish the message would be. He is deeply distressed that the message is what it is. So much so that it may enter his mind that maybe God has lost control, maybe some things have happened behind the scenes that we don't know about. So "in the year of King Uzziah's death"—chapter 6 verse 1—the year of King Uzziah's death would be about 740 B.C., so we're about 40 years before this, or 140 years before this captivity really begins. Isaiah knows it's coming, and Uzziah is a king who has been on the throne 52 years. And for the whole reign of Uzziah has been peaceful—power in the cold war—silencing and shutting down all the threats of his enemies that the people were flourishing on the surface. Everything looked great, prosperity all over the place. Everything was peaceful on the

surface. It looked good.

And then Uzziah got a little bold and stepped into a category he didn't belong, the priesthood, and God killed him with leprosy. And so God sort of signals the coming judgment by killing the king. And you can imagine having the same ruler for 52 years, and because the whole duration of his rule everything was going to well, the people assumed that he was the symbol of the blessing and the protection of God. And then he was killed by God.

Isaiah needs some help here. The nation has gone bad and the one man who seemed to be a symbol of God's blessing on the land has now been executed by God. You can read the story in 2 Chronicles 26. So "in the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord." God secures his hope by giving him a vision of Himself. This is a vision. This is a vision. "I saw the Lord." This is not an emotional experience; this is not a human experience. This is a divine revelation in the category called vision. It is reality, but it is spiritual reality not physical reality. It's something the mind sees, the eyes see in a spiritual sense; but it's not a dream, it's a divine revelation. And it's not reality in the sense that we know reality. I can tell you nothing more about it. It is the revelation of God to the senses through images and pictures that are neither a dream nor a normal reality, but are given by God. And he "saw the Lord," and here's the important part: he saw Him "sitting on a throne, high and exalted, lofty with the train of His robe filling the temple."

The train of the His robe is the *Shekinah* glory that comes off God, that represents His majesty and His glory. And the "seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face." Even the created angels can't look on the full glory of God and survive. "With two he covered his feet," because it was holy ground, and with two he hovered like a celestial helicopter waiting to be dispatched to do the will of God. And one of those seraphim cried out to the other in an antiphonal way, "'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.' And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of Him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke."

He had a vision of the temple. In the temple he sees God exalted, lofty, elevated, lifted up; and God's majesty, God's full glory, God's angelic force is around Him and His holiness is celebrated. And the point is simply this: God is saying to Isaiah nothing has changed about who is in charge. Okay, that's the point. God is still on the throne. And I would say that to you. God is still on the throne and the program is still under His control. He is still holy, doesn't do wrong. He is still majestic, omniscient, doesn't make mistakes, perfect wisdom, perfect knowledge. He is still the all-powerful One, no one can overpower Him. He knows everything; He has the power to do everything; He has the plan which He will work. And no matter what's going on down here, He is still reigning supreme.

Isaiah is overwhelmed by His holiness. And he says, "Woe is me," and he uses a word he used six times in chapter 5 to pronounce judgment; so he pronounces judgment on himself. "I'm ruined! I'm a

man of unclean lips, and live among a people of unclean lips." Why are you saying that? You're the best man in town, in the country. You're the prophet; you speak; God speaks. No, he knows he has an evil heart, and it's manifest in his speech as it is with every sinner. Why are you saying that about yourself? "Because I've seen the King, the Lord of hosts." And I just want to say to you that whatever is going on in the world, however dark it might seem, the Lord is still King. He is still absolute Sovereign.

We confess that we're sinners, that our knowledge is limited, that our usefulness is limited, that our capacities are limited by our sinfulness. Then in that moment, "one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs and he touched my mouth. He said, 'Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.'" In the midst of this darkness, in the midst of this doom that's being pronounced on Isaiah's world, he has a vision of God and God cleanses him. God cleanses him.

What kind of person is God looking for in a time of crisis in a nation of crisis, in a period of disaster and judgment? What kind of people is God looking for in a world that is on the brink of doom? What kind of people? Humble people who recognize their sinfulness and come to be cleansed from off the altar. The altar that we come to is not the altar here but the altar of the cross where Jesus was sacrificed. That's what God is looking for. He's not looking for masses of them; He's just looking for willing ones. You find that in verse 8. "Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?'"

What do you mean by that? I have to send somebody to these people. I have to send somebody. There's still time before judgment. There's still some years before judgment. As I said, this is about 740 B.C.; it's going to be 603 before everything really starts to happen and the captivity begins. There's time, so who am I going to send to be the warning voice?

"Then I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'" "Send me." And I think that's how we have to view the world in which we live. It is a world on the brink of judgment. We don't know how much time there is until the judgment. But we have to, first of all, have a vision of God and understand that He is in charge; He hasn't abdicated the throne. He is still the Sovereign; He is still the King. He sits on the throne. He is who He's always been and always will be. He is the unchanging, immutable God. Everything is completely under His control. And what is happening fits into His plan.

But what's He looking for in this hour? He is looking for people who are humbled by their own sin, who come to be cleansed—in our case by the provision of Jesus Christ through whom our iniquity is taken away and our sins are forgiven. And who will step up and say, "Lord, send me, send me to this population on the brink." That's what He's after.

Now without going through the rest of all of it, there's a promise at the end that the cities are going to be "devastated," in verse 11, "without inhabitant." Houses are going to be without people. The land will be utterly desolate. The Lord is going to remove people far away. It's going to be horrible when this breaks loose. But there will be a tenth portion, there will be a "stump," verse 13, there will be a "holy seed."

In other words, God has already identified a people that belong to Him, already a tenth—the doctrine of the remnant, the elect, the stump, the holy seed—so that in our world, in our day, in our time God has His seed, God has His people, God has His remnant as the world catapults toward judgment.

And what does He want? He wants those who will step up, recognize their sin, come to have their iniquity taken away and their sin removed, and who when asked, "Whom shall I send?" will be able to respond, "Here am I Lord, send me!" I don't know how much time we have. I don't know how many generations we have before the Lord comes in His final holocaust of judgment of which this was just a small preview. I don't know how much time we have but I know that the purposes of God will come to pass, and I know that they are connected to what's going on in the world and God brings judgment when there is sin that reaches epic levels. We've reached that level, Romans 1. We are where these people were. God, based upon the same standards, is soon to judge, as we must believe. How much time do we have? I don't know how much time we have. Isaiah's people had over a hundred years; I don't know if we have a hundred years. But for whatever time we have, we need to remember that God is on the throne and He is calling us to be the people who will go to the remnant who are out there to be gathered together for salvation. That's how you face the world you live in, whatever that world is like.

You go back to the early history of Israel—or whether you go back to the history of the world on all kinds of fronts—the world has always been a dangerous place to live. It's always been cycles of judgment; that's been human history. People live out Romans 1 again and again and again and again through all of human history and end up in judgment and destruction and death. But God has always called for a force of people who would go for Him to reach the holy seed, the remnant, with the gospel, to gather together His holy people.

In that sense, nothing's changed. There's just a great urgency about things in our time. We want to be that people.

Father, as we come now to the Table of the Lord, we are deeply thankful for the fact that You've saved us, that is just beyond our comprehension. We bless You and praise You that You have given us salvation in Christ, that You have found us and You have put the coal to our lips and burned away our iniquity and our sin and given us forgiveness through Christ. Thank You now that You've called us to this world to be a part of the force through whom You gather Your own to be the beautiful feet of those who preach the gospel. Lord, use us in that way and open up new doors for us as the times get

more difficult and as the world gets even darker—our world gets darker—and may we be the shining lights, may we be what Jesus said we are, to be the light of the world. May we be the points of light that can attract Your own; may we be faithful to that end. What...what sacred calling this is and how privileged we are. Thank You for saving us.

We come now to this Table, Lord, ask that You prepare our hearts now, that You'll open our hearts to think about the greatness of our salvation and to offer thanks for that salvation and for all that comes out of that salvation, as Paul said, being blessed with all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies, in Christ Jesus.

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