

The Vineyard of God Isaiah 4 and 5

“What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?” That’s the question God asked of His Old Testament people in chapter 5, verse 4. For by bringing them out of slavery in Egypt and into the land He had promised to their ancestors, He had indeed tilled their soil, planted their vines, and done everything else necessary for them to produce the finest of grapes: the fruit of justice for their neighbors and the fruit of righteousness and true worship for Him.

But all the Lord received from His vineyard was disappointment. Instead of caring for one another, God’s people built themselves big houses just so they could have drinking parties (5:8-12, 20-23). Instead of making sure that everyone received the justice they deserved according to God’s perfect Law of love, they made up their own rules, deciding for themselves what was right and wrong. And then they took bribes to look the other way when people broke the laws of man as well as the Law of God.

So, is it any wonder that God decided to remove His hedge of protection from around His people (5:5)? Is it any wonder Isaiah said God would allow the unbelieving nations to carry His people off into exile (5:13, 26)? And that’s exactly what happened, as the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and the Babylonians killed most of the people of Judah, taking only a tiny remnant into captivity.

“What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?” Couldn’t God ask the same thing of us modern Americans? For as Katherine Bates described as she stood atop Pike’s Peak, the Lord has indeed given us spacious skies, amber waves of grain and majestic mountains. More than that, through the great outpouring of His Spirit in the revival called the First Great Awakening, He inspired our ancestors to shake off the shackles of merely human kings and set up free and independent states, states where their God-given rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness could fully and finally be achieved.

But have the states we established for ourselves used our freedom any more wisely than the Ancient Israelites used theirs? How are we doing where it comes to righteousness, the attempt to govern our lives not according to our reason or experience or tradition, but only according to God’s Word? As the mentally ill and the addicts insist on the right to camp out on our sidewalks and in our parks, are our alabaster cities still gleaming? As husbands insist on the right to abandon their wives and children, have our human tears ceased to flow? Is it really crowning our good with brotherhood to allow men to claim the right to invade spaces and activities once reserved for women? As our state and federal legislatures have abandoned the freedom to do what God wants in order to embrace the freedom to do what we want, haven’t we called evil good and good evil? Haven’t we substituted darkness for light and light for darkness?

But are we Americans doing any better as individuals? Like those Ancient Israelites, our houses are bigger and bigger: in 1960, the average size home was about 1,200 square feet, while today it’s 2,300. But at the same time, the families in those homes are getting smaller: American women in 1960 gave birth to an average of 3.4 children, while the birth rate today is only 1.7 – well below the number necessary to replace the population. Part of that decline, is of course due to abortion, which has claimed the lives of more than 60 million Americans since 1973. But part of it is due to the weakening of

the institution of marriage: in 1980, only 6% of forty-year-olds in the United States had never been married. Now, it's 25%.

Moreover, even though the COVID pandemic is over, have we held on to unhealthy habits of isolation? Yes, we Americans have the liberty to worship God as we choose, but according to Barna research, only 38% of us are regular churchgoers, while 43% are unchurched. Worse yet, 34% are "dechurched," folks who have, for whatever reason, decided to walk away from the gatherings of the faithful.

But even if we are still coming to public worship, how many of us have refused to let go of long-standing grudges or resentments, remaining distant from fellow believers instead of seeking genuine reconciliation with them? How many of us refuse to admit our own sins or the sins of our ancestors, denying the need to help those who have been hurt so badly for so long? In short, are we modern Americans producing the sweet grapes of justice for one another and righteous worship for God? Or have we contented ourselves with the worthless grapes of self-centered isolation and bitterness?

"What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?" The good news is that God answered His own question in Isaiah chapter 4. For in spite of His people's unfaithfulness to Him – no, because of that unfaithfulness – God sent them the Branch of the Lord, the promised Son of David, the Messiah, the Christ. And just as verse 2 says, Jesus was indeed beautiful and glorious, displaying the grace and truth of the Father to us in the merciful way He lived, and in the self-sacrificial way that He died.

Moreover, with His very own blood, He washed away all the filth of the daughters of Zion, just as verse 4 says, forgiving all who trust in Him of even the worst of the sins any of us have ever committed. And as Jesus rose from the dead, He gave all His people the power to live holy lives, just as verse 3 says, lives that are free from the selfish bloodshed in which we have been enslaved.

In fact, Jesus has filled all His people with His Holy Spirit, the Spirit Who as verse 4 says judges us, convicting us of our sin by bringing to our attention all the ways in which our lives are out of accord with God's Word. And the Spirit also burns away all the remnants of sin from within us, purifying our hearts day by day, molding and making us more and more into the image of Christ Himself, enabling us to live as He lives and love as He loves, producing the sweet grapes of justice toward one another and righteousness toward God.

In fact, as verse 5 says, Jesus gives all His people the opportunity to live in the presence of God, not just after we die, but right here and right now. For whenever we draw near to the Lord in prayer and praise, whenever we give God the worship and adoration that He alone deserves, we get a glimpse of His glory, the same glory He showed His people as He led them through the wilderness with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And since we know He is with us in the Person of Jesus Christ, we know He will shelter us from all the storms of life that come our way.

This is what God has done for His vineyard, for His people: He has given Christ to us. And this is what we celebrate whenever we come to the Lord's table. For remember: the disciples who gathered around Jesus for His Last Supper weren't any more deserving of His love than those Ancient Israelites were, any more worthy than we modern Americans are. No, Jesus knew Judas would betray Him – and yet Jesus knelt and washed Judas' feet. Jesus knew that all the rest of His disciples would abandon Him, and that Peter in particular would deny Him three times that very night – and yet Jesus gave them the bread and the wine which pointed to the greater gift of His body and blood.

And He still gives Himself to those who are ready to admit that we've made a hash of our lives, that we've abused our freedom. He offers to wash with His blood those who will turn away from our self-centered rebellion and trust in Him as Savior. He invites unworthy sinners to take His very self into ourselves, becoming part of His body so that we might live His life of self-sacrificial, unconditional, faithful love for one another as well as for our Lord.

So, yes, let us come to the table to receive God's gracious welcome and His cleansing pardon. But let us not leave the table unchanged. Instead, in the power of the crucified and resurrected Christ, let us seek to restore all that our individual and collective sins have destroyed, one relationship at a time. As we reach out to one another in love, let us all seek God's grace to make the kind of America Katherine Bates dreamed about in that magnificent hymn: an America that abandons self-gratification in favor of self-control, an America that seeks to preserve and extend liberty through obedience to more and more righteous laws, an America that sees nobility of spirit as true success, an America marked by the brotherhood of all Christians from sea to shining sea. For this is the fruit of the vineyard that God deserves: our unwavering love and loyalty for Him, and our self-sacrificial, unconditional love even for the worst of sinners, sinners like all of us.