

## ISAIAH – LESSON SIX

### ISAIAH 5:8-30

#### Vv. 8-23 – The Harvest: Wild Grapes! Six Woes!

Vv. 8-10 – Woe to greedy land-barons

God's people were characterized by avarice and greed. The rich took advantage of the poor by buying their houses and lands until, for all practical purposes, the rich owned them all. The poor lived under conditions that in our day and age might characterize a third world country with some living in their cardboard huts. Micah described their conduct well: "1 Woe to them that devise iniquity and work evil upon their beds! When the morning is light, they practise it, because it is in the power of their hand. 2 And they covet fields, and seize them; and houses, and take them away: and they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his heritage. 3 therefore thus saith Jehovah: Behold, against this family do I devise an evil, from which ye shall not remove your necks, neither shall ye walk haughtily; for it is an evil time (Micah 2:1-3)."

In vv. 9-10 God reveals the punishment that will be administered because of the conduct in v. 8. God speaks to Isaiah ("in mine ears") and through him tells the covetous hoarders of houses that they shall not enjoy their ill-gotten property because the houses will be desolate. Their houses may be great and high and comfortable but they shall be without inhabitant to enjoy them. Moreover, the land that they have taken will be barren and unproductive. Moses had promised that if the people were rebellious that the land would be cursed, would not bring forth increase or bear fruit (Lev. 26:20; Deut. 28:16-19). Notice in verse 10 that both examples use a 10 to 1 ratio. Ten acres of vineyard will produce 1 bath<sup>1</sup> (about 6 gallons) of wine. A homer (about six bushels) of seed will produce an ephah (one-tenth of a homer) of grain. Could it be

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1. There is disagreement over the size of a bath. Some say it is about 36.44 liters that would be a little over 9.6 gallons. Josephus puts it at about 10.56 gallons. The Rabbis considered it to be about 5.3 gallons.

that God is imposing a “reverse tithe” upon the greedy? In any event, both harvests were only a tiny part of what would normally be expected.

**Vv. 11-17 – Woe to heavy drinkers**

“Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” Or so they say. Such is not the case, however, when, like the men of Judah, they were late to bed because they were “inflamed” with drink. They were early to rise so that they could start the process all over again. For them it was not a matter of once-in-a-while; it was a daily habit. According to the Hebrew scholar, Delitsch, that which they drank came not only from the grape, but from other sources, especially “wines made from fruit, honey, raisins, dates, etc, including barley wine or beer.”

V. 12 reveals that they were not only drunkards, but that they were partygoers and revelers. Revelry and debauchery have always been the brother of winebibbers. God’s people were too busy having a “good time” to attend to the things of God – “they regard not the work of Jehovah, neither have they considered the operation of his hands.” The difference is that between daylight and dark, between Jehovah God and Lady Gaga. They were too busy running riot to attend to religion. They were fixing to learn the truth of Proverbs 23:31-32: “31 Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, When it sparkleth in the cup, When it goeth down smoothly: 32 At the last it biteth like a serpent, And stingeth like an adder.” They ignored the God of Glory. They gave the judgment of God no thought, or, if they did, they believed that God would not lift a hand against them. After all, they were his chosen people!

Edward Young suggests that the work of Jehovah that they ignored was, in its broadest sense, the work of “God in history to accomplish His purposes of redemption.” He adds that the conduct in which they were engaged was that they were “too occupied with those very sins which were speeding it on to destruction.” He concluded, “If men are too occupied with sin, their horizon is so restricted and narrowed that they cannot see sin’s final consequences.”

Vv. 13-14 speak again of God's judgment. The people go into captivity.<sup>2</sup> Their captivity will arise from lack of knowledge. They knew not the things of God. They knew not the consequences of their sin. They knew not the working of God. They did not know the signs of the time. See Hosea 4:6. They only knew how to have a "good time." Those who drank long of the wine and partied into the night will now be famished and thirsty. The second "therefore" in v. 14 indicates that the judgment is not yet finished. Sheol in this context is probably a reference to the tomb that awaits all. It is pictured as a famished beast opening wide its mouth to devour its prey. The partying people in large number, with their pomp and circumstance, revel their way into its jaws.

Vv. 15-16 recall the language of chapter 2 (9, 11, 17). Men both humble<sup>3</sup> and great are brought low. On the other hand Jehovah of hosts, the sovereign God above whom there is nothing or no one, will be exalted in his justice, and the God who is Holy<sup>4</sup> will be sanctified in righteousness.

The end result is that wanderers and animals shall roam the waste land that once flowed with milk and honey and where the vineyard of the Lord had been. The "fat ones"<sup>5</sup> whose luxuriant homes are now waste places are gone. There are only wanderers or sojourners who will not even make it a permanent home.

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2. This is one of the early instances in Isaiah of the "prophetic perfect" tense. When God has said either directly or through his prophet that something will happen, it is spoken of as if it had already occurred because it is so certain to happen. Put differently, that which God has said will come to pass will absolutely come to pass. The caveat is that we must determine whether the promise of God is conditional. For example, if God says that if A happens B will happen, B's failure to happen when A has not occurred is not a failure of God to keep his promise because the promise was conditional. Many of his promises, exhortations, and threats to the chosen people were of this nature.

3. Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew lexicon defines the Hebrew word translated "mean" in the ASV as "*be bowed down, prostrated, humbled, by 'y; by man.*"

4. This does not mean that the acts of God are holy, though they are. It is asserting that holiness is one of His attributes. Since he is holy in His nature his acts cannot be otherwise.

5. Semitic idiom for what we might call "fat cats" today.

### **Vv. 18-19 – Woe to them who are enslaved to sin**

This woe is pronounced upon those who are so enslaved to sin that they are pulling its load as if they were beasts of burden. The cords with which they draw their iniquities are falsehoods; they draw their sins with a cart rope. They are slaves to their sin-ridden way of life. Truly the way of the transgressor is hard (Prov. 13:15)! There is no more severe taskmaster than sin. Egypt never treated Israel any worse than they were treating themselves. Worse yet is the attitude that they display toward their God. They ridicule Isaiah who has warned them of impending judgment by saying in our vernacular “Let him bring it on. Let’s see what he can do.” They even mock the name by which Isaiah often calls his God – the Holy One of Israel. Surely the people of God had become atheists, at least of the practical sort<sup>6</sup>. They would not believe unless they saw God in action. How easy it is to be flippant when the skies are clear, but how our attitude changes when the lightning flashes and the thunder rolls and the earth begins to shake. Then we call for the mountains to fall upon us and seek a cave in which to hide (see 2:19). It is too late to sing, “Rock of Ages cleft for me. Let me hide myself in thee.”

### **V. 20 – Woe to those who confuse moral distinctions**

Of this passage, Keil and Delitzsch write: “The fourth woe: *‘Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who give out darkness for light, and light for darkness; who give out bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter.’* The previous woe had reference to those who made the facts of sacred history the butt of their naturalistic doubt and ridicule, especially so far as they were the subject of prophecy. This fourth woe relates to those who adopted a code of morals that completely overturned the first principles of ethics, and was utterly opposed to the law of God; for evil, darkness, and bitter, with their respective antitheses, represent moral principles that are essentially related (Matt. 6:23; Jas.

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6. A practical atheist is one who says he believes there is a God but who lives as if there were not.

3:11). . . .” Truly irreverence and deep depravity are bedfellows. Those who ridicule God and dare him to do what he said he would do are also those who break down all moral distinctions redefine all ethical obligations. Does that remind you of any society with which you are familiar? Perhaps the one within which you live?

#### **V. 21 – Woe to the self-deceived**

The woes keep coming and the conduct continues to degenerate. This woe is pronounced upon those who believe that they are smarter than God – wise in their own eyes and prudent in their own sight. When the wisdom of God is rejected that leaves only one source – man. Will he never learn (Isa. 55:9; 1 Cor. 1:18-25)?

#### **Vv. 22-23 – Woe to the perverters of justice**

Isn't it a blessing for a nation to have mighty men and men of strength. That is certainly true when they lend their might and strength to the building up of that which is good and right. That is certainly untrue when, as here, they lend their might and strength to win drinking and drink-mixing contests. V. 23 indicates that these men were judges and rulers who, when they were not busy with drinking bouts, spent their time in taking bribes to deprive the righteous of righteousness and justice. Their greedy hearts were interested only in profit as a result of which justice was for sale to the highest bidder. The poor didn't have a chance. The powerful judges had the power to get away with it and so they did it. But did they have the power to get away with it?

#### **Vv. 24-30 – A Terrifying Judgment**

This conclusion to the list of woes tells us that they did not escape the consequences of their evil deeds. They had sown their seed; harvest time was here. Instead of a seventh woe we have another “therefore” introducing judgment. Isaiah uses two illustrations from nature to describe the judgment – fire (v. 24) and earthquake (v. 25) resulting loss of life so great that it lay as refuse in the street. All of this disaster is traced to one primary cause, “they have rejected the law of Jehovah of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.” Here Isaiah gets to the bottom line for all of the conduct described in the six woes. The Psalmist said, “Thy word have I laid up

in my heart, That I might not sin against thee” (119:11). When the law of God is rejected and his word despised there no hope for either person or nation.

Bryan Bear writes, “Yet for all of this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is till upraised’ occurs again in 9:12, 17, 21 and 10:4 to denote God’s persistent anger even amid terrible judgments. Isaiah’s words emphasize how seriously God takes sin, whether he finds it among unbelievers or among his people.”<sup>7</sup>

But a more terrible judgment is on the way (v. 26-30). God is raising a flag and calling nations from afar, from the end of the earth, and they shall respond and come quickly. They will not get tired or slumber and sleep. They will not loosen their war dress or take off their shoes. Their arrows are sharp and their bows are ready. Their horses will not become lame or their chariots get flats. They shall roar like a lion as they lay hold on their prey and carry it away where none can deliver them. They shall roar as the sea and if anyone looks at their land they will see only darkness and distress with clouds darkening the light. Hurricane Ike has hit the land.

Isaiah does not identify the source from which these marauders come at this point, but he subsequently names Assyria (7:17; 8:7; 10:5; etc.).

Need we worry? Absolutely! That which Isaiah is describing here is characteristic of our nation and of far too much of the church. Now as then it is the result of an erroneous worldview. Our society has become ego centered – there is no meaning to life except that which we give it and there is no absolute truth, only a truth for ourselves that we believe which may and probably does differ from the next person’s truth. The consequences of this no meaning/no truth philosophy are staggering. We recognize that a society that permits lying and stealing and killing cannot survive, but when it comes to ourselves we cut some slack. A little lie here and a little theft there and a murder of a reputation there is not so bad. Besides such conduct is necessary to get ahead in this dog-eat-dog world. What a change! Until this change began America was a place that lived based on honesty. We were guided by a Biblical ethic

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7. *Encountering The Book of Isaiah*, p. 58.

and moral which made us a law-abiding nation admired by other nations. Now we have become a nation for which there is no God other than ourselves. We obey the laws of the land selectively and ignore the laws of God. After all, we are certain that obedience to God's laws does us no good, keeps us from having fun, and makes us different from everybody else. The truth is that the little moral and ethical conduct that remains in this country exists because those who came before us made right choices and left an inheritance for us. We are now destroying that last little bit. We believe that we can obtain all the benefits of life by living only for ourselves and our own pleasure.

Can it be that this worldview is actually invading the church? Look at the results of studies of those who claim to be Christians in the broadest sense of that term in today's world. Christian teenagers are as apt to cheat in school as any other teenagers. More than half think there are no absolute moral standards. Divorces among those called "evangelicals" now exceed the national norm. Can we really claim that we are following the One who created us in his image? We are certainly living as if we do not believe that God has created this world with certain spiritual principles that are as immutable as the natural principles that he placed in nature to control it.

How did we get here? V. 24 tells us – we have rejected the law of Jehovah of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. There is a right and a wrong and they exist because the God of Glory established them, *i.e.*, because God said so. He is holy and commands us to be holy. He expects us to be holy because we are made in his image. There is no other reason that can explain what has gone wrong. While commercials like "Go for the Gusto; you only go around once" contribute to it, they would have no impact but for our having forsaken the word of God and its authority.

Unless there is a God in heaven whose word and authority determines that which is right and that which is wrong, there is nothing to keep right from becoming wrong, wrong from becoming right, truth from becoming falsehood, and falsehood from becoming truth. As a church, and now specifically now as a congregation of the Lord's people we must be certain that we bow before the God of Heaven and his authoritative word. If we fail in this respect, the salt will have lost its savor and God will be excluded

from our lives, except perhaps in name only and that mostly in vain.

We must realize that such fallen lives will have consequences. We understand that when we violate the physical laws of God fatal consequences can follow. Jump off of the Empire State building and see if that is not true. We may say that we have broken the law of gravity, but that is not true. We have proved it. We have demonstrated it. But we have not broken it. It has broken us. When that has happened, people don't get angry at the law of gravity and blame it for what happened. They speak of the foolishness of the one who leaped.

The same thing is true of God's spiritual laws. We may reject them and refuse to follow them, but we cannot do so without eternal consequences. We refuse to admit that we have disobeyed God's laws. Even if we should admit such transgressions, because sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily our hearts are fully set in us to continue such conduct (Ecclesiastes 8:11). When those consequences come, we have not broken the immutable law of God. We have proved it. We have demonstrated it. But we have not broken it. It has broken us. It will do us no good to get angry at God and blame him for what has happened. We can only blame ourselves and our foolishness for our eternal loss.