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A SONG OF UNRETURNED LOVE

Gardening and growing things can be a satisfying experience. Even before it starts getting warm, the seed catalogues come in the mail and many of us study them to find a better variety of the kinds of things we like to plant. We buy the seeds or the plants and some even start their own seedlings to be set out later in the garden. In all of this we have an anticipation of picking and enjoying the vegetable from the garden: the fresh lettuce, the snow peas and new potatoes, the big juicy tomatoes, and the crisp cucumbers. We have a sense of satisfaction when we have a good crop and if something happens that the garden doesn't produce it is really disappointing to us. If you grow fruit trees or grape vines you have a long time to anticipate a harvest and if the trees or the vines do not ever produce any fruit or the fruit is not good, then the disappointment can be really great.

Isaiah wrote a song about a farmer that had a disappointing experience with his grape vines. The song was really about the people of Israel and how they had failed to bear the right kind of fruit in response to the love that God gave to them.

ISAIAH 5:1-2 Judah was an agricultural society and the people could appreciate all the work that was needed to develop a vineyard. It took quite an investment in the land, the plants, and the hard work and years of waiting before the investment would start to pay off. As far as most farmers were concerned, if the vineyard was not successful, then he was in a lot of trouble, financially. Good vineyards did not happen by accident. There was a lot of knowledgeable planning, attention to details, and work.

Isaiah was aware of what it took to grow grapes and he worked that knowledge into the ballad he wrote. The farmer would put the vineyard on a hillside. Instead of planting the vines in rows that followed the contour in a terraced fashion, he would put the rows up and down the hill. The reason for the placement was to get good air flow at nights to prevent frost damage. The farmer would also look for land that was fertile so that the vines would be healthy.

Fertile ground and a hillside were not enough for a successful vineyard. The vines and the crop would need to be protected. Usually a fence or a hedge would be put around the vineyard to keep out wild animals that might uproot the vines or eat the grapes. In order to prepare the land for planting it would be necessary to remove the many rocks that were always there. The rocks were a nuisance; however, he used this nuisance as raw material to build a fence of protection. Instead of cursing the rocks, he made something useful from it. There is probably a good lesson for us to learn about how to deal with the annoyances in our lives.

Next came the choicest variety of plants to put into the vineyard. Then to provide a better vantage point from which to watch the vineyard he built a tower. Since he anticipated getting many grapes, he also put in a winepress. If we are looking for parallel in the church as being God's vineyard, then we can recognize that God has chosen the choicest variety in that all in the church are of the stock of the Second Adam. The tower would remind us that we need to be ever vigilant to keep out the influence of the world. In the winepress we see a coming together and a loss of individuality as people work together unselfishly to create something useful from the fruit our lives bear.

Putting in a vineyard was a lot of work and a substantial investment. In Isaiah's ballad, when the first crop was harvested the grapes were sour and not fit to eat nor useful to make wine. This was not only disappointing to the farmer but would be devastating to him also.

Of course, this song had a hidden meaning. The vineyard was the nation of Israel or Judah. The farmer was God and He had planned well and had invested a lot in this people. He picked a

"fruitful hill" in that the nation of Israel was located in the crossroads of the world. It was a rich land, flowing with milk and honey. God provided protection for the developing nation and He picked good stock for the planting. These folks were descendants of Abraham who was a faithful man and a friend of God. Finally God was anticipating a good harvest that would be marked by fairness, righteousness, and justice. However, God did not find what He expected but found that the Israelites were behaving no differently from the heathen people; that is, they were wild grapes.

Is there a parallel for the today's church? Many group that claim to be Christian have adopted the ways of the world and produce only wild grapes – the fruit of the old nature.

ISAIAH 5:3-4 The song asks the question: "What did the farmer do that was wrong, or what could he have done to make the results better?" I would guess that the average farmer that heard Isaiah's song would have concluded that the person in the song did everything that he could to insure success with his vineyard. The question that begs to be asked is, "What else could God have done for Israel to make them more faithful and obedient to Him?" The answer that a reasonable person would give is that God had done all that could be done in providing proper conditions for a bumper crop of spiritual fruit from these His chosen people. Perhaps the question should be extended a step further to ask the same question for our generation and our nation. Do you know of any other nation that has been better blessed for the past 200 (plus) years? Do you know of any other nation that has enjoyed the prosperity that we as citizen of the USA have enjoyed? I don't! Have we responded to God's grace by bearing fruit as he would like? Each of us will have to answer that question for ourselves.

ISAIAH 5:5-6 What is to be done with the useless vineyard? The song that Isaiah had written indicates drastic action. The hedge and fence would be removed so that the vineyard was no longer protected. The wild animals would be allowed to root up the vines, what remained would not be pruned or cultivated and the farmer didn't even want rain water wasted on it. We can see from the historical accounts of what happened to Judah that God's judgement did allow drastic action to happen against the nation and it was trodden down by their enemies.

At this point in the song, the careful listener might get a hint that this is no ordinary farmer that Isaiah is singing about. Not many farmers can command the clouds to not rain. But God can.

ISAIAH 5:7 Isaiah told his listeners plainly in the seventh verse that God is farmer and the nation of Israel is His vineyard. We also have identified for us the "good fruit" for which God was looking: judgement and righteousness. The wild grapes that He found was oppression and lack of justice that caused people to cry out for relief. The nation of Israel had become so dislocated from God's way that drastic action was needed to deal with the problem. This song was a warning to the people that God was going to act.

There is a lot that we can learn from the house of Israel and how they were a disappointment to God because they did not return His love. Most of us know what to do to be pleasing to God and to have a successful life. A commitment to do what we know to be right and to abandon anything else is where we must start. We as individuals or as a nation cannot bear the consequences of being fruitless in our lives or of bringing forth wild grapes.