

Title: Woe!
Text: Isaiah 5.1-30
Theme: The weight of God's wrath
Series: Isaiah #8
Prop Stmtnt: While God's ultimate purpose cannot be thwarted, his response to sin, though patient, is severe.
Aim: I aim to call us to spirit-driven, soul-searching confession.

Read Text:

1. **Listen to my song.** 1-7

Ever listen to the blues? The blues are songs of the soul. Blues are not written for orchestras or choirs. Blues are written for solos because they are lonely. The person who is singing is singing in a way that you can feel the weight of what he is under. And blues heap the weight on you like successive waves. I wrote this as an example.

My dog, he just died
My dog, he just died
My dog, he just died, my computer is fried, my girlfriend just lied, I'm gonna go hide.

Nathan wrote a song for the end of the sermon today. Just so you know, his is better. Songs of this genre in the Hebrew culture were called "laments". Like a blues song, a lament did not end with a "happily ever after" moment. They ended down, because that is where the person was. And that is how this one ends as well. There is nothing encouraging or hopeful in this entire chapter. But, we do not know that, by the way that it begins. Look at verse 1. What is the opening line? "*Let me sing a song for my beloved.*" Who wrote this? – Isaiah. So, who is singing the song? – Isaiah. And who is Isaiah's beloved? - We do not know yet. Is it a lover? Is it a friend? We do not know. But, music has a way of capturing our senses and engaging our mind all at the same time. In fact, music likes to engage the sense in order to put something into the mind, and sometimes it surprises us! And that is exactly what is happening here.

Now, keep this in mind. Before these prophecies were recorded, compiled, copied and made part of Scripture, they were often spoken. And in this case, Isaiah very likely literally sang this. The text does not give us the original setting, and perhaps Isaiah sang this often. But he sings about something that is very common and relatable to his audience. He sings about a vineyard. This is a country built on agriculture. Once a year (feast of tabernacles) they entire nation gathered together to celebrate what God had provided in the harvest that year. They knew the work of farming. They knew the sweat of shepherding. They knew the vulnerabilities that they had as farmers to the weather, to disease, even to marauders. It was a tough, unpredictable, but necessary job. Notice the detail that he goes in to. The place was chosen "fertile hill" (v.1b). There was arduous work done over a long period of time to prepare this land for planting. The stones had to be dug out. In their place "choice" vines were planted. The language speaks of specific vines that were selected with care for that soil in that climate. He even built a

watchtower, which speaks of his concern to protect this land. The watchtower and the wine vat were quite possibly built out of the rocks and stones that he had removed from the land. Without backhoes and pick-ups, this was no small task, nor a weekend project. This took a great deal of time.

Now, at this point, everyone who heard Isaiah singing this song could relate to this. Grapes grew all over that region. They knew that it was two years from the time you planted grapes to the time they could be harvested. Everything was in place for a great harvest – and, what happened? “Wild grapes!” Disappointment! Everyone has experienced this. Every person knows what it is like to work for something and give not only your back to it, but your very heart as well, only for it to let you down. But, what was Isaiah really singing about? What is an actual vineyard, or was he singing about a girl whom he pursued, who spurned him? That was possible, since vineyards were used to describe romance, marriage and even consummation. So, now, while Isaiah has everyone interested, he is about to hook the fish. Notice v.3 and 4. Notice how he draws them into the song and includes them in this. “What more was there to do for my vineyard? Any man there, who had been spurned by a girl, knew this anguish. Any person there, who had given himself to a goal that did not work out, could relate. The answer to Isaiah’s question was, “nothing.” The farmer had done everything. The fault was the grapes. So, what do you do?

Verses 5-6 take us deeper into the heart. The guy who built the wall is going to remove the hedge. The one who provided protection is now going to allow the vineyard to be vulnerable to whatever comes. And there is no doubt that the vineyard will be destroyed. The language is heavy. Broken wall, “trampled down”, made into a “waste” unkempt, full of weeds, in fact, “I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.” And now, his audience begins to realize the point of the song. There is only one who can command rain. And Isaiah now goes straight for the heart in v.7. The anguish of the vineyard keeper is revealed to be God. And the stinking grapes are the people of Judah and Jerusalem, the very ones who up to this point had been agreeing with his song. Now, go back to the opening line. Who is the beloved? The beloved is God. Isaiah calls God “my beloved”! Wow! Here is the prophet whose vision of the holiness of God causes him to tremble for his own life (chap. 6) is calling God “my beloved” in chapter 5. The more that you recognize the awesome holiness of God, and recognize the immense richness of his mercy, the more reason you have to be deeply consumed with love for him.

Now, as an aside, I want to mention something that is not readily apparent in our translations because we are not reading this in the Hebrew language in which it was written. The writings of Isaiah are not only true in their prophetic nature and fascinating in that regard, they are not only pointed in their message and soul-searching in their effect, but when you study the actual phrasing, word-play, timing and structure of this book, you realize that this is very, very good literature. Isaiah was brilliant. There are subtle things that he does that only underscore and intensify the impact of his message. This song is one of those examples. The actual structure and wording, style and balance all shows the work of a theologically astute artist who designs this song to help people feel the weight of their sin and feel what God feels. It also reveals how twisted we tend to

be in that we get upset over things that do not matter and we pass over the things that do. It is easy to be upset over the injustice of the rebellious grapes and be blind to our own sin. Do you see the big idea here? Sin not only misses the mark, but sin twists and perverts that which God made for good into something that is evil and destructive.

God has to respond to this twisting of good into evil. His response of judgment is a clear message that the rejection of his goodness and the rejection of his work is offensive and makes one guilty and liable for punishment. God rightfully demands a return for his sacrificial investment. He is not a doting grandfather who will keep giving out money even though he is ignored, even scorned. His judgment comes from a broken heart, illustrated in the tears of Christ over the sight of Jerusalem whose rejection of him, not only occasioned his death, but occasioned her destruction at the hand of the Romans.

Two final things I want to point out from verse 7: 1) God has the right to expect, even demand the right response from his people. His job is not to cooperate with your laws, but to call you to live under his. 2) Although God is omniscient; that is he knows everything; his absolute knowledge – even of our responses, does not disengage him from being personally vested into the setting. Did he know that his people were going to respond in rebellion to him? Yes! But, he is not hardened by it. He still responds with anticipation that they would do what they should do, i.e. justice and righteousness.

The rest of 5, while written as poetry, is no longer a song. Isaiah now examines the nature of the grapes; that is the nature of the people and reveals precisely what it is that God has against them. Because the word for “wild” (v.2, 4) literally could be translated as “stink-fruit” or bad, nasty fruit, I’ve summarized the message of verses 8-23 as...

2. **Look at these stinking grapes!** (8-23)

These verses are marked by 6 “woes” (8, 11, 18, 20, 21 and 22). These are the specific charges that God is leveling against the nation of Judah. *Woe* is the Hebrew word *Hoy* (say it from the gut, say it with heaviness). That is the heaviness with which Isaiah writes. His words from God are full of denouncement, but they come from a heavy heart.

A. **They are greedy** (8-10) (oiy)

God had established a system of land ownership in Israel that encouraged hard work, reward for labor and allowance for emergencies. The land that was assigned to you and your family was to stay in your family. In the extreme case where selling the land was the only way to pay a debt, you could do so, but every 50 years, the land would automatically revert back to your family. So, you did not really sell it, but rather leased it. By Isaiah’s time, this God-ordained policy had been reduced to a “nice-ideal” but not always practical. Corrupt judges were bought off by the powerful who were able to get judgments against the poor or vulnerable that divested them of their land. The enabled the greedy to be able to add to their houses to the point where they became huge estates in the middle of all of this land.

By the way, the Scriptures do not condemn wealth. In fact, there is much to say about the blessings of God on hard work and wise investments. But the Scriptures do condemn ill-gotten wealth. That is the issue here.

God's response is seen in verses 9 and 10 and his response is intense. Isaiah is saying that The LORD of hosts has spoken into my ears! He has made an oath in my very hearing and he is focused, specific and response. He has had it "up to here" with all of this greed. And once again, here is one of the themes of Isaiah. Be careful what you desire, for God just may give it to you. Here the greedy person wants a large home all alone, separate from all others and God says – Okay, you want loneliness, I'll give you loneliness. Your house will end up being desolate and abandoned, presumably because the greedy owner is taken captive of war and loses everything, and/or, all of the riches that he expected to get from all of his land do not pay off like he thought. In fact, in a 10-acre vineyard, he only is able to produce about 6 gallons of wine. Profit from that wouldn't even cover the costs of the vines, much less be something that you could live off of. We see the same thing around us. Someone builds a gi-normous house that is way too big for any one person or even a family and...then what? What do you do with this monstrosity? Your kids don't want it because they can't afford to even pay the water bill. Dusting and vacuuming is a 40 hour a week job and so, it becomes a museum. What a waste!

So, go ahead and try to take the land from others, but remember this, the land is really not yours, it is God's. And if you think that you can take the land from others, the land will simply take back from you. In the end, those who are hungry for land, just end up hungry. Mike Tyson bought a house in MA that he could not afford and sold it to rapper, 50-cent. The 50,000 square foot house has everything and nothing all at the same time. Less than a year ago, some guys broke into the house. They just wanted to hang out for the night smoking weed and relieving 50-cent of some of his wine collection. Now, I don't know what 50-cent was complaining about since one of his vulgar raps is titled "how to rob". There you go, the guy who raps about robbing, is robbed.

B. They are decadent (11-17) (oiy)

There is a connection between greed and decadence. These people have it all planned out. They desire to be wealthy so that they do not have to get up in order to go to work; they only want to get up in order to drink. Their goal in life is pleasure. If Kiss had been around back then, they would be singing, "I wanna rock n roll all night and party every day." And while drinking is the issue in view in these verses, the point refers to a life-driven by the pursuit of pleasure – that's it! I want to be so free financially and so healthy, and so disconnected relationally that I have no responsibility, no accountability, no expectations and am free to do whatever I want, whenever I want. In short, it is my way of being – God. Life like that looks so appealing from the outside and is so incredibly empty on the inside. People like this are hollow. The conversations at the parties are marked by what we did last weekend, or what we are going to do next weekend. There is no depth to reality of the moment, only the longing for the next event, the next drink, the next meal, the next experience, the next attempt to fill the bucket of life with something that is supposed to be meaningful. The irony of v. 13 sounds like the

irony of v. 10. There the hungry for land end up being hungry. Here, those who only thirst after wine are parched with thirst (13).

Like the verse before it, v.14 begins with a “therefore” and once again the irony is telling. These whose appetite for land and for pleasure is only successful at increasing the appetite of sheol for death. Only one mouth is widened, only one appetite is filled – death. The party is over. The powerful are humbled (15). In contrast, God’s justice is exalted. Back in the days of parties and pleasure, it was easy to wonder if God’s word was really true. Now, there is no doubt.

If you are the one seeking to be faithful and you see the ungodly getting away with sin, relax, God’s justice will be exalted. If you are the one sinning and thinking that since nothing has happened yet, that you are flying under radar, you had better not relax, rather, you need to repent. God’s justice will be exalted and he will make it abundantly clear that his righteousness is holy. All that you have worked for, will simply be the playground for animals and nomads.

C. **They are bound and blind** (18-19) (oiy)

These verses describe the cost of sin and they reveal the stupidity of sin. Those who hold on to sin are themselves ensnared in it. The cords of lies become ropes that shackle them to carts of sin that they drag with them. Their lives are weighted down, wasted, gaunt, gutted and yet, they are blind to it. Sin has so deceived them that they taunt God to judge them. They mock God’s patience and challenge him to do something, right here, right now! When guys like Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins go into their rants about the absurdity of God, part of me is angered, but most of the time, I feel pity for them. They know not the wrath of the Lion, whose tail they presume to step on.

D. **They are perverted** (20) (oiy)

These woes describe the downward spiral of sin. It is common to be concerned about the physical affects of sin. But sin profoundly shapes our thinking. One who is given over to it gets to the point where they are no longer able to discern the basic difference between right and wrong. I care deeply for our country, and care even more for the church. Today, in a desperate attempt for approval, the church as a whole has been sadly silent on many issues that would brand it “controversial.”

Her silence is interpreted as consent, even by her members. I could not preach on the sin of homosexuality in many churches, even though I would do it with a broken heart, without being branded as homophobic. In our culture, people fall over each other in order to show how open-minded they are to all things, except to those who are not open-minded about sin. The end result is that our culture shuns and excoriates people who dare to say that God has established a standard of righteousness that we cannot change.

E. **They are arrogant** (21) (oiy)

The 5th woe gets right to the heart of it all. All of these sins are driven by a heart that believes it can make its own laws and live above God's.

F. **They are debauched** (and proud of it) (22)

The result is a society that champions the immoral. Who are your heroes? Really. Whose life, values, do you seek to emulate? Whose story do you follow? Which star, which athlete, models the life that you aspire to? Just the fact that we pay athletes millions of dollars a year, many of whom are moral train-wrecks, and we follow the lives of stars like gods or goddesses, and then treat missionaries like third-rate people to be pitied makes it clear to me that this text may be old, but it describes us.

God's response, indicated by the "therefores" that begin verses 24 and 25 make it clear that God has not been napping. The response of God is not only severe and comprehensive, but according to v.25, it is relentless. The proud, who do not need God, the arrogant who write their own laws, the sinner who is tied to his own desires and goes back again and again to its filth is positioning itself to be kindling wood for the wrath of God. The chapter begins with subtlety and surprise. It ends with a dire, warning that is clear and terrifying in its directness.

3. **Look at what I (God) am going to do.** (26-30)

I am going to summon the nations to come, like someone whistles for a dog. They will come with their armies speedily. They will come so fast, it is like they do not need to stop to sleep, to fix their equipment or even prepare their weapons. They will be here so quickly with such overwhelming numbers that it does not matter where you go in order to find relief, there is none. Judah lost her distinctiveness. She stopped thinking like a follower of God and fancied herself as one of the other nations. What about us? What about you? Are we, really in our heart of hearts followers of God through Christ, or are we just like them: trying to find a way to get what we want from this world? Do not kid yourself. God wants you, but he does not need you. He does not need us. If we will not live as we are called, he will set us aside and raise up someone else. He does it to people, to churches and obviously to nations. The chapter begins with Isaiah calling God, "my beloved". The fact that God loves deeply and loves to be loved deeply should never, ever be mistaken for weakness. He loves us, but he loves his righteousness and his glory even more. He will chose his holy righteousness over us. If you persist in sin, then your end will be like this chapter: darkness, without hope. But you do not have to face the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Humble yourself, confess your sin, turn away from it, repent of it, and you will see and know the Lion, as the Lamb of God who died in your place. It is only when we realize how serious and severe God is about sin, and not just sin out there, but my sin, that we are ready to understand grace and ready to understand commitment. That was something (as we will seen from chapter 6) even Isaiah had to learn. I pray that we will learn it with him.