

Do You Think This Song is about You?

Isaiah 5:1-7 (NIV)

¹ I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. ² He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. ³ "Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴ What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? ⁵ Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. ⁶ I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it." ⁷ The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

"Singing is the lowest form of communication." That's a Simpsons quote that has always made me smile, and I kind of believed it. I would tell people that musicals are dumb because life is not a musical. No one actually sings their way through life and problems. Then, I got older, reflected more, and although I am still not a fan of musicals, music and singing are a huge part of my life. I think I do kind of sing my way through life. I listen to music in the car, while running, while working. I sing while we worship, sing songs after choir practice, sing in the car regardless of who is looking, and even sing impromptu random songs. Those last ones are generally reserved for my immediate family.

Isaiah, though, was not as timid of an impromptu singer as I am. He bursts into song right here recording it for generations to listen to for years to come: "I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard..." (verse 1a) In this first part, Isaiah is the singer. The one he loves is the LORD. The song is about the LORD and his vineyard. Then verse 7 tells us: "The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in." (verse 7a)

Here's the actual song: "My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit." (verses 1b-2) Granted, I'm not sure how to put these words to music, but the lyrics build great emotional imagery – as songs do. This vineyard is positioned in the best possible place: on a fertile hillside, a place known for its rich harvest, reminiscent of the great place that the Lord brought the Israelites to – the promised land flowing with milk and honey. This fertile hillside had its rocks removed, was tilled and then planted with the choicest vines – like the LORD driving out the people of the promised land before the Israelites with great leaders such as Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, and so many others. He then built a watchtower in this vineyard to give ongoing care, just as the LORD promised to be watching over his people now and always. And finally, he cut out a winepress, because he expected a great product after giving all this care and all these advantages to his people. But after all that care, the vineyard only yielded bad fruit, bad stuff, stuff that would set your teeth on edge, stuff you spit out. The Israelites were not what they should have been. The LORD's heart was broken. The song ends on a sad note.

Do you think this song is about you? Yes, it's made clear that the vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in, but do you see yourself in these lyrics? Did the Lord plant you on a fertile hillside? What events in your life led that you would be here on this specific day in this specific year so that you could hear a rich message of how much love and care that he has provided for you? Did it start all the way back when you were a baby and your parents brought you to be baptized and kept sharing God's Word with you ever since? Did life chew you up and spit you out and you were at your wit's end only to find out that someone loves you unconditionally, that at your lowest point you found out that it was all to get you to stop trusting in yourself and instead see that someone had to take care of you? Did God have to allow a lot of tilling and stone clearing in your life, that he had to remove things that were barriers to you coming to know him and how much he loved you, knowing what he did to save you from this life and this world? The choicest vines – maybe these are the innumerable opportunities that God has given you to hear his Word, to remember your baptism, how it washed you clean, made you new, or all the times you were spiritually refreshed and strengthened by the eating and drinking of his Supper? And we know that the Lord watches over us too – our coming and our going now and forever more. He is our Shepherd who guides us through life, leading us to green pastures and quiet waters. His rod and his staff, they protect us, defend us against all danger – physical and spiritual. And so, just like with the Israelites with all this care, God naturally expects that you and I would bear a crop of good grapes.

So, when the LORD looked for a crop of good grapes from your life, what did he find? Much like picking apples from my tree, not all of them are good. Some have been ravaged by worms. Others have already begun to rot. How about my fruit of faith? With the

Israelites, the LORD “looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.” (verse 7b) Do we bear fruits of bloodshed? Are we guilty of hurting others out of thoughts of revenge? Have we abused people – physically with our hands or emotionally and mentally with our words? Have we caused people to cry out in distress?

We have bore bad fruit. Because of that, we deserve the song judgment that the Lord pronounced on Israel: to have our hedge and wall taken away, to be trampled down, to have rain, pruning, and cultivation withheld from us, to be made into a wasteland. Maybe we are deserving of the same fate as the vineyard in this song.

But is this song about you? Israel’s song in Isaiah’s day was written and over, done. For their acts of bloodshed and their violence that caused cries of distress, the LORD judged them. Jerusalem was destroyed. It became a wasteland for 70 years. This song was for a specific people at a specific time. This song wasn’t about all of Israel of all time. It’s a past event. This song is over.

Your song is not over. The Lord has planted you on this fertile hillside where you have gathered around his Word and Sacraments. He has poured out on you the rain of his grace, washing you clean and nourishing you day by day with your baptism, constantly reminding you that your sins are forgiven, that you belong to God, that you have been made perfect – the choicest vine. You have a God who has tilled you and cleared you of stones so that you indeed believe in what he did for you – that he gave himself to take away your sins and to clothe you with his perfection. And he is watching over you ever day, sending angels to guard and protect us in all our ways. The LORD never slumbers or sleeps on us. He always has his full attention on you and on me, protecting us from the evil one.

Your song, our song, is different. Yes, you can point to bad fruit that we have all bore. And you can also point to the good fruit – to those times when you have lifted up the downtrodden, when you have showed concern to someone with a simple question and actually listened to the answer, when you’ve let someone strike your cheek, to wrong you, and yet you turned the other cheek and didn’t retaliate with violence or name calling. You have bore simple but refreshing fruits like giving a cup of cold water to someone, asking the cashier how their day is, writing a letter to a friend, calling them to share a story to brighten their day. You have given of your time, your talents, and your treasures in sanitizing and cleaning the church to provide a fertile hillside for others to come to and have planted into them the choicest vines of God’s grace. By God’s care and providence and grace, you have produced good fruits. And there are so many more fruits yet to come!

I don’t think this vineyard song by Isaiah is about you. You know how God has loved you and continues to love you. You know that God has given you the choicest vines of his Word and Sacraments. You know that he continues to guard and protect you. You see the good fruit that he produces in you. The end of your song will be different. You will be in heaven, as your good fruit is evidence of your faith in Jesus Christ as your perfect substitute. So, we press on to produce the fruit that God made us to bear. Our song is still being written, and every new fruit of faith in Christ is a new lyric, lyrics in a song that ends with us living and thriving in the Lord forever! Amen.