

## TCC Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> March 2014 – Sweet into sour & Grace into grit! – Isaiah 5

### **Title: “Sweet into sour & Grace into grit!”**

**Purpose:** A consideration of 6 ways that typically we can turn:

“God’s sweetness into sourness & God’s grace into grit”

### **Introduction**

#### Lunar Lander Illustration

Tell here the illustration of seeing a lunar landing in a museum in Washington DC and get them to imagine the various heat resistant layers that are used to keep the heat from the astronauts inside.

Similarly we have a way of keeping God’s grace at bay.

The apostle Paul states in 2 Corinthians 6 and Verse 1:

“As God’s fellow workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain.”
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The truth is that we can receive the riches of God and turn them into rags!!

This passage is going to explore how God’s people in Isaiah’s day did exactly that – how they turned:

- Sweet into sour!
- & Grace into grit!!

#### Constant tension

One thing that we will become accustomed to in the book of Isaiah, is the fact that there is a constant tension going on between:

- a glorious destiny – that which is yet to be
- & an awful reality – that which fills the present

And yes the truth is, that this tension, this Gordian Knot, can ultimately only be cut by God Himself, by an Anointed One whom will slowly come more into the picture.

#### God – One who is very appealing

We have to say, that even though there is frequently a great gap between the IDEAL and the REAL – we are not left with any sense of DESPAIR.

Q. And why is that?

Well because again and again we find that God is One who pursues His people.

If He does not get success one way He tries another in order to break through to His rather stubborn and stiff-necked people.

Q. So how do we see God taking steps towards us?

Well just think back to **Chapter 1** and there we were seeing how the sins of the people were **pretty BITTER** all in all and YET there was that **amazing SWEETNESS** that comes in **Verses 18&19**:

**(Isaiah 1v18-19)** ““Come now, let us reason together,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; ...”

### Need for balanced reading

There is always a need for paying attention to detail when we are reading the prophets because otherwise it is all too easy to just think that there is rather a lot of judgment and thus to dispense with these books rather too hastily and miss the wonderful gems that are there.

If we are only reading judgment then we are not reading the book aright.

It is a bit like people that come to the OT and simply see LAW. Somehow their lack of proper balanced reading has blinded them to the fact that before ever we had LAW we had PROMISE (you remember all those wonderful covenant commitments that God made to people like Abraham).

And even if there weren't these promises, the LAW on its own is full of God, His love, His kindness, His amazing grace.

Q. After all, what kind of Laws would a loving God make – if not ones that are altogether loving, kind, fair and altogether good for people?

### The heart of God laid bare too

Q. So what else do we see, then, aside from RAW JUDGMENT?

Well what you notice is:

- not just that God reasons and pleads with his people
- he also reveals His tender heart

Look at the opening chapter, for one example:

**Isaiah 1 verses 5&6** "Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness- only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil."

Again and again when God is revealing the JUDGMENT that is going to come, He is ALSO revealing the sadness and brokenness of His heart SIMULTANEOUSLY.

So actually you learn a lot about God way beyond the simple fact that He is Holy and therefore He must, at some point, act according to His Holiness and dispense JUSTICE against SINFUL people.

### A chapter in 2 parts

Isaiah 5 is a chapter in two simple parts, it is all poetic, and if you like both parts can be considered as songs.

And the FIRST PART is a LOVE SONG which I'm going to entitle:

## 1] "A Song of Sweet Love" (Verses 1-7)

This chapter starts in an unusual way – it begins with a song, as the **NIV** heads it **"The Song of the Vineyard"**.

Try and put yourself in Isaiah's shoes for a moment:

Q. How well received do you think he would have been as a prophet delivering hard-hitting messages from the LORD?

You can imagine that people might have tolerated him for a while – but when people don't respond they become quite hard of hearing. (In fact, tradition has it that Isaiah met a rather ugly end being put into the hollow trunk of a tree, on the orders of wicked king Manasseh, and then promptly sawn in two – the book of Hebrews talks about people who suffered this fate and possibly it was an anonymous reference to Isaiah).

Q. So what does Isaiah do?

Well he gets inventive and turns himself from standard PREACHER OF THE WORD to a SINGER OF SONGS. (And no they weren't secular songs – Spiritual Songs – but songs nonetheless).

A point of application for our own day

Q. Do you not think there is a point of application for our own day?

Q. Do we get a decent hearing today?

Well very often we do not, perhaps people stifle a yawn, maybe they just say to themselves, Oh yes Christianity, that's really passé now – we've tried it as a nation and it is definitely out!

So clearly this presents a big challenge to us – that is if we are not simply to capitulate and give in without a struggle.

What **Isaiah 5** does is to send out a challenge to our CREATIVITY & FLEXIBILITY in presenting the Word of God, the Gospel to people of our disinclined day and age.

(I suppose you could take our involvement with Kennet Radio as one example close to home – we use every artistic and professional capability we can muster and we wrap the gospel undiluted inside.)

Songs – powerful & memorable

Songs have a powerful place in Scripture – and if you think back you can probably remember some that have been penned and see their deep significance.

Take for example:

- **Exodus 15** – the first song of Moses after the people have just crossed the Red Sea on dry ground and seen all their Egyptian enemies drowned
- OR – **Moses’ second song**, which comes at the other end of Moses’ ministry, just before his death, where he sings a song that will stand as a judgment against them when the people turn away from God in the future (it is there in **Deuteronomy 32**)
- OR – you could take **the Song of Deborah** (in **Judges 5**), which reinforces the lessons that God’s people, especially the male leaders, should have learned from the recent victory against Sisera.

Songs carry a special power all of their own.

Listen to what **John Calvin** says in his commentary on Isaiah:

“It was therefore necessary to present a striking and lively picture of their wickedness; and in order that it might have the greater weight, he made use of this preface; for great and memorable events were usually described in verse, that they might be repeated by everyone, and that a lasting record of them might be preserved.”

**He goes on:**

“The instruction becomes more widely diffused than if it had been delivered in plainer language. For the same reason Isaiah composed this song, that he might present to the people a clearer view of their wickedness; and, undoubtedly, he handled this subject with magnificent and harmonious language, for the highest skill is commonly exercised in the composition of poems.”

#### A VINEYARD

So this is a Song and it is a song about a VINEYARD – and this has, in fact, already surfaced once briefly in:

**Chapter 3 and Verse 14** “The Lord enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people: **“It is you who have ruined my vineyard; ...”**

Clearly it is not a song about any old vineyard, this is a song that turns out to be in the form of a parable, a parable speaking about God’s people under the image of a beautiful vineyard.

#### Imagining Isaiah – Intimidating?

You know sometimes when you are going to meet up with someone for the first time and when you don’t know what they look like – Q. Do you tend to form in your mind a picture of the person?

I know that I do – Q. And I wonder whether you have a sort of mental picture of what Isaiah might have looked like from reading this book?

Perhaps he is a rather fiery character with strong arms and with totally unruly hair that goes in all directions – penetrating eyes, all-in-all a rather intimidating sort of figure.

#### Actually full of love and affection

Well looking at **Verse 1**, I think we would very much need to adjust our mental image:

**Verse 1** "I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside."

It is unusual for the prophets to express their own personal feelings and affections towards God. Most of the time they are simply acting as preachers, as God's mouthpiece.

So it is good that we have a little reminder of the deep love that they had for their God.

#### God's love for His vineyard

Well that's **Isaiah's love** for his Lord – but this song says a lot about **God's love** for his people, for his vineyard and this is seen by the care he takes:

- (verse 2) he digs over the hilly ground, he gathers together all the stones and re-uses them to build walls around the plot. He gets only the very finest vines to plant in the fertile soil.
- He puts in place a watchtower to keep away any marauding bands and carves out a winepress.

God has spared nothing for his vineyard his people.

Q. I wonder if that is the way you see God and His care over you?

#### Stinking fruit

All is well down to Verse 2 but then the song begins to turn because things are not turning out the way that they should do.

"Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit."

And it is the same in **Verse 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?"**

The word rendered BAD here, is in other translations WILD but the root word in Hebrew seems to be one that in other situations refers to something that cause a stink – so possibly we could render something like STINK FRUIT!

#### 180 degree reversal

So this is properly shocking.

But things are steadily getting worse as we go through this carefully crafted SONG – because we now enter a complete reversal – everything turns around 180 degrees and everything is being removed and demolished.

No doubt the people would have a sense of OUTRAGE at this OUTCOME. They would naturally say things like:

- "What on earth could have gone wrong!"
- OR "This is impossible"
- OR "Completely outrageous – I've never heard of such a thing before!"

## Nathan and David

Q. Do you remember the story of David and Bathsheba?

Where David commits adultery – and afterwards how God sends a prophet to speak to him.

Q. Do you remember how Nathan the prophet delivers God's message to David?

It came in the form of a simple story:

**2 Samuel 12 verse 3-6** "here were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

"Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."

And then Nathan turns to him and says "**YOU are the man!!**"

And this is exactly what we have here in **Verse 7**:

(Verse 7) "The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight."

Bamm!! It would have hit them right between the eyes:

- **yes, the initial shock & outrage:** because the PERFECT VINEYARD should produce only STINK FRUIT
- **then the added twist:** that the vineyard owner is going to now reduce it to rubble!!
- **finally the punchline:** this song is about **Y-O-U!!**

Sentence very memorable – play on words

And God does not leave them in the dark as to why this is all happening – he says:

**Verse 7b** "And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress."

As we've seen in the last few chapters Israel & Judah have been evidencing a wider and wider social gap between the rich and the poor and this is all down to greediness and injustice.

Isaiah builds into this statement a double play on words in the Hebrew language. It goes something like this..

"And he looked for **MISHPAT**, but saw **MISHPAH**;  
for **TSEDAQAH**, but heard **TSE-AQAH** of distress."

Isaiah has added a last deft poetic touch so that they would be easily able to remember the final analysis

of God's complaint.

A question we should start to ask ourselves

Let me quote from one commentator who gives us the question that we should, at this point, be asking ourselves:

(Ray C Ortlund Jr.) "The question is, "Are we bearing the sweet fruit consistent with the beauty of grace, and are we yielding an abundant harvest commensurate with the abundant grace God has invested in us?" If the answers to those questions are not encouraging, let's have the honesty to ask ourselves why."

Transition to part 2

Well, if Isaiah 5 starts with **A SONG OF SWEET LOVE**

It goes on with #2, what I'm going to call:

## 2] "A Song of Sour Lament" (Verses 8-30)

In coming to this second part we are going to see:

- 6 common ways in which we resist the grace of God
- OR (put it another way) 6 answers to that massive great question in Verse 4 Q. "**Why did it yield only bad**"? (There in the middle of the LOVE SONG)

A second song

Now when we think of a LAMENT (which is essentially "a complaint") and we come across the word "**WOE**", this should not be interpreted as though Isaiah is entering into a rather **extended RANT**.

No – this word "**Woe**" is effectively the opposite of that word "**Blessed**" and is equally translated at other places "**ALAS!**" – it evokes sympathy and feeling, because people are missing out on and upending the sweet grace of God and making it very bitter indeed.

WOE/Grace-Defeater #1 – Greed

Verse 8 reads "Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land. "

Leviticus 25 makes it very clear that God owned the land and that his people were the tenants and every family had a permanent allocation that could not be robbed off them. The reason for this was so that there would never be a permanent class of the dispossessed that would develop.

But what we see here are rich people that are out to get richer at the expense of those that are poorer. Covetousness is a very common sin and it is a very cardinal sin – it is that one covered in the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment that we should not look longingly at what others have wishing that it was ours.

At root greed is a form of heart idolatry that says that God is \*NOT\* sufficient for me, His grace is \*NOT\* enough and I must take matters into my own hands and start grabbing things whenever an opportunity

presents itself.

### Not all progress is progress

It is a fact of history that not all things that were considered great steps forward actually turned out to be such unqualified successes.

Take, for example, the city wall. This was a technological advance – it kept unfriendly people out and gave security. EXCEPT, of course, when there was a fire in the city – and then it had the effect of keeping the people in – OUCH!!

See one of the consequences of their greed – read Verse 8 again:

**Verse 8** reads “Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left **and you live alone in the land.** “

The truth is it’s a lonely life living on an island or living in a castle!

Notice also another consequence that they had into the bargain and for which they had not anticipated.

When you step forward to grab your own GRACE – God, the provider of all true sweet grace, steps back.

You can see it there at **Verse 9&10**:

(Verse 9&10) “Surely the great houses will become desolate, the fine mansions left without occupants. A ten-acre vineyard will produce only a bath of wine, a homer of seed only an ephah of grain.”

Sweet grace is something that God alone is best at and one of the fastest ways to short-circuit that is to do the job yourself via GREED & GRABBING – (in this particular case – “LAND GRABBING”).

### WOE/Grace-Defeater #2 – Inflation

**Verses 11 & 12** read “Woe to those who rise early in the morning to run after their drinks, who stay up late at night till they are inflamed with wine. They have harps and lyres at their banquets, tambourines and flutes and wine,…”

In **Romans 8 verses 5&6** we learn that it is possible to essentially divide up all of humanity into two categories:

“Those who live **according to the sinful nature** have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in **accordance with the Spirit** have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.”

These 2 categories are:

- being sensate – controlled and driven by the physical senses, the flesh
- OR being spiritual – being controlled and driven by the power of the Holy Spirit

The 2 options that we have could be spelled out like this:

- EITHER we allow ourselves to be INSPIRED through God and His Holy Spirit indwelling us



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- OR we opt for going down the route of being INFLAMED by other excessive pleasures & pursuits

Remember what the apostle Paul said in **Ephesians 5 and verse 18** (he spells out the same 2 choices):

“Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.”

## 2 Therefore

Notice the first pair of THEREFORE’s that follow and match up with these opening 2 “GRACE DEFEATERS”:

And here are spelled out the ULTIMATE END for these sorts of people:

### **\*\*\* READ Verse 13 & 14\*\*\***

- Those inflamed from the sensual pursuits, who have dulled discernment will go into exile and those who were people of rank will die of starvation
- Those who have formerly filled themselves with food and drink will only know hunger & thirst

### WOE/Grace-Defeater #3 – Blatant sinners

The third woe is in **Verse 18 & 19**:

### **\*\*\* READ Verse 18 & 19\*\*\***

The image here is of people dragging a heavy cart along with ropes, and this tells us really two things:

- ONE – that sin is a burden – sin promises much and delivers little and places a burden upon you.

It is a burden because sin is literally a drag.

It is also a burden because sin sits heavy upon your conscience - -you are always having to try and silence the weight of guilt that is upon you.

- THE SECOND THING IS – that sin deceives us, it lies to us – and we place the blame for our unhappiness elsewhere.

We turn and blame God that we are so unhappy – we become hardened and learn to articulate the frustrations and emptiness within as we read in **Verse 19**.

What about:

### WOE/Grace-Defeater #4 – Label-changers

This comes out at:

**Verse 20** “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil,  
who put darkness for light and light for darkness,

who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.

## Olives

\*\*\*ASK QUESTION – STRAW POLE\*\*\* Q. I wonder how many of you like Olives?

When I was younger – I could not understand how anyone could like things as bitter as olives – but you know the older you get your tastes seem to shift a bit more across from the sweet to the bitter end.

My Dad always used to say it was an “acquired taste” and one of the ways that sin works is that it gives to us some ACQUIRED TASTES which are not the beautiful sweet tastes that God would naturally have us enjoy.

And the way which sin helps us to adopt these without question is that it likes to play with our terminology. It conveniently swap labels.

## WOE/Grace-Defeater #5 – Misplaced Self-confidence

**Verse 21** “Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight.

Remember how in our evening series on the Sermon on the Mount, as we have been going through those 8 beatitudes, how the very opening one was: “Blessed are the poor in spirit...”.

This is the attitude of one who realises that they do NOT “cut the mustard” at a spiritual level – that when it comes to having spiritual acumen that comes from themselves – they are empty, their spiritual bank account is not filled by their own endeavours or abilities.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (one of the greatest preachers of the 20th century) wrote, in commenting on this passage:

“Sin is very clever; it always brings forward its reasons, its arguments. Sin knows us so well; it knows that we like to think of ourselves as highly intelligent people. So it does not just tell us, “Do this”; it gives us reasons for doing it, and they appear to be so wonderful. But the whole point is that in reality they are specious; they are empty and foolish. The reasoning is always false reasoning. The arguments are always wrong.”

Q. I wonder are you too big in your own eyes? If so, recognise that this is another way of developing “**grace-resistance**”!

## WOE/Grace-Defeater #6 – Bingeing

The last of our of 6 woes comes in **Verse 22**:

(Verse 22) “Woe to those who are **heroes at drinking wine** and **champions at mixing drinks**,...”

We do live in an age of excess, we have what we call an increasing culture of “**BINGE DRINKING**”.

And when you think this through a bit: Q. Why are people doing this?

A friend we have who is quite into this sort of thing said that although she does much like the taste of alcohol, she does it because she likes the feeling it gives her.

Alcohol provides a mechanism for temporary escape from the pain of life lived without God. Drinking alcohol is a way of medicating our despair – anaesthetizing our pain.

### Private & Public too

And before you think to yourself – well what a man or woman does behind closed doors is his or her own business – it doesn't harm anyone – well notice that the very next verse indicates that these self-same people as the ones that are taking bribes and letting the guilty get away with murder.

It is one of the things that our culture likes to suggest isn't it that just because somebody's private life is in tatters doesn't disqualify them from holding prominent office.

The Scripture here bears out what is common sense – that if you can't manage your own private life, you should not be allowed to govern anything bigger.

### 2 More Therefores

Well as Isaiah has rounded off his 6 WOES – he brings another 2 THEREFORE's followed by a fitting climax.

And in the middle of these 2 therefore we get the summation of why God is dealing so decisively with them:

Verse 24 – the second half “...for they have <b>rejected the law of the Lord Almighty</b> and <b>spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel.</b> ”
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They are both unreasoning and unreasonable.

God is left with no choice.

### The Assyrian Judgment (Verse 26-30)

See how Isaiah wraps up this episode – we see a really terrifying picture of a human army (which historically would have been the Assyrians & the Babylonians) – a picture of a human army that has seemingly “divine-type” attributes.

- They're able to run and not grow weary
- They're not going to slumber or sleep
- Their chariots are like whirlwinds etc. etc.

Notice how the ferocity of this tail section – matches and contrasts with the matchless beauty of the opening few verses and the tender grace that God pours on his people, upon his beautiful vineyard.

## **CONCLUSION**

I wonder this morning:

Q. Whether we have been effective in using various of the 6 **grace-defeaters** listed with the woes above?

Are you demonstrating, like the in Isaiah's day how to turn:

- Sweet into sour!
- & Grace into grit!!

Q. Are you one who is receiving God's beautiful grace basically in vain?

Let me end by re-reading Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 6:

"As God's fellow workers we urge you \*not\* to receive God's grace in vain."

- See the sweetness of His **gospel grace** – let it not become **grit** instead.
- Receive the **riches** of God, let them not be taken and transformed into **rags!!**

As Jesus said – and this is, in the final analysis, the acid test:

(John 15 verse 8) "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear **much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.**"

AMEN