

Martin Luther on Isaiah 5:1-7 (LW 16)

I will sing to my beloved the canticle of my cousin concerning his vineyard.

I have said that this passage concerning the pavilion and the shade should be commended to us since in these figures Christ is symbolized and set forth as our Mediator and Preserver. Then I said also that the prophets offer words of comfort after threats, the latter for the sake of the ungodly, the former for the sake of the godly, fainthearted, and troubled. Now, the promises and consolations concerning Christ are repeated so often for this reason, that the flesh cannot believe that anyone is justified by another person's righteousness. Now follows

I will sing, etc. It is a characteristic of the ungodly that no matter how much Scripture is set before them they do not fear God, they are not frightened by His threats nor stirred by His promises. And what is worse, the ungodly, that is, the self-righteous, insist that the promises apply to them, but the threats to the heretics, that is, the truly godly. Thus that word of the psalm is altogether true: "There is no fear of God before their eyes." And even when they experience some suffering in their body, there still is no fear but boasting that they are being punished for righteousness' sake, not for the sake of their sins. Therefore when the prophet saw that neither threats helped them nor promises stirred them, he said: "Well then, we shall sing; maybe they will take my song to heart."

Of my cousin. A cousin, the closest and dearest friend, that is, Christ. It has become usage to employ this word for friends, not for blood-relatives. I like Jerome's translation, because Christ also by blood was a relative of Isaiah, because He, too, was of the tribe of Judah. To His honor he composed and sang this song. His vineyard. This is the theme of the song, for he would have to explain that the character of this song is that of a vineyard song.

Had a vineyard. We generally speak in the present tense; the Hebrews speak in the past tense.

On a hill in a fruitful place ("on a mountain horn, the son of oil"). This is the name he gives to the vineyard. They call an elevated and protected place a "horn." Horn is understood to mean the power and kingdom and dominion of the Jews, which under divine protection was sound and strong enough to crush all nations, a land commanding and victorious, a hill towering over all other realms. This hill is also a "son of oil." This is an expression like son of one year, that is, one year old. The hill is given this name because it is rich with oil. A son of perdition, or son of death, is one who has damnation and death; a son of oil, one who has oil and is rich with oil; a son of the right hand, that is, of what your right hand is or has. In Hebrew, a son of oil is one who is described, as to origin or makeup, rather than merely referred to by demonstrative pronoun; thus a son of death, namely, he who belongs to death. A hill of oil is one that has olive oil, that is, one that is fertile. It is as if he were saying: "God gave this land complete fertility, wealth, fatness, etc., but He gave them for a good use and for His own glory."

2. He fenced it. שָׁרַק. Nothing but top-quality vines. This means he planted it with the choicest vines and should therefore not be interpreted in any other way, and this meaning should be maintained. He fenced it in, that is, he built the wall out of stones.

Picked the stones out of it. He grubbed out the rocks, he cleaned it up. All this is said allegorically. In this clause he wants to say: He took good care of the vineyard. Some interpret the fence to refer to the protection of the angels, which is not unacceptable to me. However, it is more satisfactory to construe the fence as being the Law, which Paul explains thus in Eph. 2:14: He has destroyed the wall of hatred through the Law, so that without the Law we might grow together into one body. By the Law the Jews were isolated from all other nations, and this, I say, was their prerogative, that from the Law they were informed regarding the will of God.

Stones are the elect Gentiles. A Canaanite was chosen soon after the Law was given ... that they might be like all the holy princes, Abraham, Isaac, etc., and judges, kings, and prophets. Thus David was a chosen vine and a noble stem.

Tower. Some refer it to the temple. But I would prefer to interpret it of the entire worship that was held either in the temple or in the tabernacle or wherever they came together to the Word of God. This is the tower, that the name of the Lord was there, the promises, the mercy seat, the Word of God. Solomon also has this in mind: "The name of the Lord is a strong tower" (Prov. 18:10). This was the place of refuge for the Jews, because God dwelt there. Concerning this we read in Deuteronomy (12:5): "You shall seek the place which the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put His name and make His habitation there."

Winepress. If you want to refer this to the altar of burnt offerings, I have no objection. But I myself think it refers to the mortification of the old man, of whom Rom. 12 speaks. Here also our body becomes an altar of

burnt offerings, on which we bring the sacrifice of a contrite heart (Ps. 51:17). Tower is for the sake of the use of faith, winepress for the sake of the use of mortification.

Wild grapes. The grapes are wild, of sour taste. "Are grapes gathered from thorns?" asks Christ (Matt. 7:16).

Therefore the grapes represent works, good grapes are good works, bad ones are evil works, the kind the Jews did, who killed not only the prophets but also Christ, and were adulterers, robbers, etc. This song reproves the Jews, who were well built up from the beginning and yet did not produce good fruits. So we turn Christ's best bounties to bad use, while one preaches Christ for his own glory, another for his belly, another to gain many followers, as Paul says (Phil. 3:19). Such acts are not grapes but wild grapes.

3. Judge between me and my vineyard. The prophet says these things with great sternness and summons to judgment. He could no longer stand by, he had done everything possible. Judge. And now he explains this parable himself.

5. And now I will tell you. He prophesies the punishment and perhaps the final destruction of the kingdom of Israel. "I will not hide my judgments, but you will see them openly."

Hedge. He means the administration of the Law, for the Jews had a twofold kingdom, civil and spiritual. The spiritual kingdom was gone when in Babylon they did not have their temple worship or sacrifice. The political kingdom, too, had been laid waste at that time, though not wiped out. However, both were taken away from them by the Romans after Christ. Of this he is prophesying here. He speaks of things too horrible to be applied to the Babylonian Captivity. The caretakers of the vineyard are the prophets and priests, who cultivate it with the Word and the Holy Spirit; and these God wants to take away from them, namely, the teachers of the truth and of faith and of the proper interpretation of the Law. This is the height of God's wrath.

6. To prune is to rebuke, convict, and condemn the unbelieving and to revive faith, namely, to trim off what is unneeded and useless.

To hoe is to plow the land so that it may receive the seed and the rain and not be hindered in bearing fruit either by stones or by the native hardness of the earth. This, then, is the preaching of repentance and of the forgiveness of sins, namely, through the Law and the Gospel. The heretics, Turks, and many nations teach many things, but they do not clear the ground and do not plow, but they trample the ground and burn it up. They appear to be cultivating the land, but in reality they are laying it waste.

Briers shall grow up. Where the Law is not truly preached, unrecognized sins cannot be reproved. Because of the force of the Law, sins are of necessity disregarded, and whatever is thorns and hides sins is of necessity overlooked; thus the cure cannot be applied, and grace cannot be preached. If one preaches man's own merits, when will he preach repentance and grace? What is not evil does not need the Gospel and therefore neither the revealing of sin nor the revealing of the cure. Therefore the thorns are certain excellent men and such as reason calls saints, yet they are without the Spirit and faith, they know neither works nor the goal of faith, and they vex wretched souls. Thereafter they will be deprived not only of prophets and priests of their own nation but also of apostles and their successors, who are the clouds sailing around the world. Paul says, "Behold, we turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). The wholesome rain is the Gospel. The matter is self-explanatory.

7. For the vineyard of the Lord. The Lord had embraced this people as a mother her son. Therefore he calls it a branch and pleasant planting, attractive and delightful. This is justice, that the Law takes its course, that the innocent are not mistreated and the criminals do not escape punishment. "Gold and silver make the straightest things crooked." "Power, partiality, and money prevent just verdicts." Righteousness is what imparts benefits and renders good to the deserving.

A cry, namely, of those who suffer violence and tyranny, their complaint against tyrants. Here he explains what grapes and wild grapes mean, that is, allegorically.