

# The Book of ISAIAH – Chapters 1-39

## Catholic Scripture Study

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**Memory Verse:** Isaiah 5:4

*What more was there to do for my vineyard,  
that I have not done in it?  
When I looked for it to yield grapes,  
why did it yield wild grapes?*

## A Harvest of Wild Grapes (5:1-30)

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### I. OVERVIEW (5:1-30)

The celebrated parable of the vineyard introduces the next series of prophetic warnings which apply to Jerusalem. The parable and its message occupy the whole of chapter 5.

Our Lord's parables concerning the vineyard are based upon this passage (see, for example, Matt. 20:1ff; 21:28, 33-41; and Mark 12:1).

Chapter 5 brings us back to the realities of Israel's condition during the time of Isaiah's prophetic ministry. Whatever the future might hold, however redemption might occur, the plain fact was that their present sin somehow must be faced and dealt with.

Once again, without transition, the tone shifts from hope to judgment.

Once again, as real as the future hope maybe, the prophet wants his readers to know that apart from a radical change of behavior, the only way for that hope to be realized is through the fire.

The chapter divides fairly clearly into three sections.

1. The first is a graphic illustration (or parable) of a vineyard that despite the farmer's careful work produces only wild (sour or rotten) grapes (5:1-6).
2. Next is the explanation of the parable, in which the prophet declares that Israel is the vineyard, God is the father, and the sour grapes are Israel's sinful behavior (5:7-24).
3. The conclusion (5:25-30) states that the enemy nations are being called in to destroy Israel, just as the wild animals were called in to destroy the useless vineyard.

## II. SONG OF THE VINEYARD (5:1-7)

The prophet sings a love song to God (my beloved) concerning his vineyard, which was planted on a very fertile hill.

Isaiah uses the metaphor of a vineyard in a parable that points out the current situation in Judah.

The passage itself provides clues on how to interpret the metaphor.

**Read: Isaiah 5:1-7**

***[1] Let me sing for my beloved***

***a love song concerning his vineyard:***

***My beloved had a vineyard***

***on a very fertile hill.***

***[2] He dug it and cleared it of stones,***

***and planted it with choice vines;***

***he built a watchtower in the midst of it,***

***and hewed out a wine vat in it;***

***and he looked for it to yield grapes,***

***but it yielded wild grapes.***

***[3] And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem***

***and men of Judah,  
judge, I pray you, between me  
and my vineyard.***

***[4] What more was there to do for my vineyard,  
that I have not done in it?***

***When I looked for it to yield grapes,  
why did it yield wild grapes?***

***[5] And now I will tell you  
what I will do to my vineyard.***

***I will remove its hedge,  
and it shall be devoured;  
I will break down its wall,  
and it shall be trampled down.***

***[6] I will make it a waste;  
it shall not be pruned or hoed,  
and briars and thorns shall grow up;  
I will also command the clouds  
that they rain no rain upon it.***

***[7] For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts  
is the house of Israel,  
and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting;  
and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;  
for righteousness, but behold, a cry!***

### **A. Let Me Sing for My Beloved (5:1)**

The words of the parable commence as a true song, but they soon pass over into lamentation and an explanation of the parable.

This song has to do with One who was beloved by the prophet. It concerned the Beloved and His vineyard.

- As the prophet soon makes apparent, his friend is the LORD Himself.

## **B. He Dug it and Cleared it of Stones (5:2)**

The prophet then explains the care with which the Owner prepared his vineyard. What loving and tender care, time and energy, the Owner expended upon His vineyard!

The ground of Palestine is unusually stony, and the Owner (the Lord) devoted all the care necessary to prepare the ground well.

Like a farmer, He prepared the vineyard (Israel, the Promised Land), digging it up, clearing it of stones (Israel's enemies) and planting choice vines (Judah) to make a flourishing vineyard.

The care and skill required over a very long time to build up a successful vineyard make it an excellent metaphor for God's care of Israel.

## **C. Wild Grapes (5:2)**

The farmer built a watchtower (prophets) in the midst of his vineyard to protect it, and dug a wine vat expecting the vineyard (the people) to produce sweet, succulent grapes. But the vineyard yielded wild or sour grapes (wicked people).

Everyone who heard Isaiah could empathize with the farmer's hard work and anxious expectation. Likewise, every one of them could feel the shock and disgust over the bitter fruit.

***What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it (5:4)?***

The answer, of course, is "Nothing!"

As a result judgment is now inevitable!

## **D. God's Response (5:5, 6)**

Whatever may have been his hearers' responses, Isaiah wants them to have no doubt as to what the Owner will do. He will not merely

abandon his worthless vineyard; he will also assist in its destruction.

He will take down the hedge, break down the wall and leave the vines unprotected from animals, either grazing or wild ones. He will even withhold rain, so intense is the Owner's anger.

If the vineyard can produce only wild grapes, then there's no use cultivating it. It may as well return to a wild state.

### **E. The Parable Explained (5:7)**

The prophet now interprets and explains the parable and its application to Israel.

It is possible that some or most of Isaiah's audience had not yet understood the application of his parable to themselves. The prophet does not leave them in doubt. In terse phrases he unveils and drives home the awful portent of his parable.

The vineyard is Israel, and the source of God's delight and the object of his desire. Yet the fruit of God's labor is not the justice and righteousness he had worked for, but instead oppression and violence and bloodshed.

Israel's destruction is not mentioned. It does not need to be, for once the connection between Israel and the vineyard has been made, and the coming judgment is inexorable.

Later Jesus uses a similar parable to point out how the leaders of Israel had murdered the prophets (Matthew 21:33-36).

### **F. The Church**

As the heir of ancient Israel, the Church, too, is prefigured in the story of the vineyard. The Second Vatican council remarks on this when it comments on the metaphors that the Bible uses for the Church.

# The Seven Woes (5:8-25)

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## I. OVERVIEW

In this section Isaiah specifies the kind of “wild grapes” (sins) which Israel has produced. The passage contains six woes or laments (vv. 8-10, 11-17, 18-19, 20, 21, and 22-24), which close with the threat of a punishment even harsher than they have suffered so far (vv. 25-30).

The term “woe” contains the idea of both a lament and a threat.

- The prophet is not merely angry and threatening.
- He is also grief-stricken over the sins of his people.

He lists and denounces six kinds of sin committed by the people of Judah and Jerusalem. These woes (sins) will bring divine punishment upon them.

It is another way of lamenting the behavior criticized earlier in the parable of the vineyard. These woes will occur when the Assyrians later invade Israel and reduce the wealthy to exile or poverty.

The six woes (laments/threats) can be summarized as follows:

1. Greed (vv.8-10);
2. Self-Indulgence; (vv.11-17);
3. Arrogance, unbelief (vv.18-19);
4. Denial of moral truth (v.20);
5. Wise in their own eyes (v.21);
6. Injustice (vv.22, 23).

## II. THE FIRST WOE - GREED (5:8-10)

**Read:** Isaiah 5:8-10.

***[8] Woe to those who join house to house,  
who add field to field,  
until there is no more room,  
and you are made to dwell alone  
in the midst of the land.***

***[9] The LORD of hosts has sworn in my hearing:  
"Surely many houses shall be desolate,  
large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant.***

***[10] For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath,  
and a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah."***

### **A. First Woe (5:8)**

***Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field*** describes how the wealthy abuse their power to accumulate more and more and will end up with nothing. The wealthy landowners buy up all the property that they can until their houses touch one another.

They selfishly build up their wealth, without giving any thought to others.

- The punishment that God will impose for this will be extreme poverty, described quite dramatically here.

The beautiful homes will be empty. Ten acres will produce only one bath (6 gallons) of wine. The fields will yield only ten per cent of the seed, both of which amount to almost nothing.

### III. SECOND WOE – SELF-INDULGENCE (5:11-17)

#### A. Overview

The second woe is the longest. Two verses describe the crimes of the accused (vs. 11-12), and the judgment that awaits them takes up the next five verses (vv. 13-17).

***[11] Woe to those who rise early in the morning,  
that they may run after strong drink,  
who tarry late into the evening  
till wine inflames them!***

***[12] They have lyre and harp,  
timbrel and flute and wine at their feasts;  
but they do not regard the deeds of the LORD,  
or see the work of his hands.***

***[13] Therefore my people go into exile for want of knowledge;  
their honored men are dying of hunger,  
and their multitude is parched with thirst.***

***[14] Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite  
and opened its mouth beyond measure,  
and the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude go down,  
her throng and he who exults in her.***

***[15] Man is bowed down, and men are brought low,  
and the eyes of the haughty are humbled.***

***[16] But the LORD of hosts is exalted in justice,  
and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness.***

***[17] Then shall the lambs graze as in their pasture,  
fatlings and kids shall feed among the ruins.***

#### A. Crimes of the Accused (5:11-12)

The second woe refers to those who engage in drunkenness and dissipation, celebrating (reveling) while ignoring the Lord and the

way He works in the world; in their case ignoring the coming judgment.

The revelers no longer have any interest in or ability to recognize how God is at work in the world.

When the passion for pleasure has become uppermost in a person's life, passion for God and his truth and his ways is squeezed out.

Furthermore the use of alcohol in the quest for pleasure can only heightened the degree to which one becomes insensitive to responsibilities and values.

***They do not regard the deeds of the LORD, or see the work of his hands (v. 12).***

What are the deeds of the Lord they do not regard? It is the coming judgment that the Lord is about to bring against the rebellious nation.

- The judgment was necessary in order that God might accomplish His plan of salvation.

As a punishment for not appreciating all the Lord has done for them, and not heeding the threat of coming judgment, they will go into exile (v. 13).

### **B. Judgment of the Accused (5:13-17)**

Verses 13-17 describe the judgment that awaits them, that is, the consequences of their sins – their self-indulgence. They suffer these consequences because God has withdrawn his protection (Read Ps. 81:12-17)

- The people will be thrown out of their land (exiled and made captive), and deprived of its rich produce.
- In place of feasting and drunkenness, there will be starvation and death (***Sheol has enlarged its appetite***).

“Sheol” is the Hebrew word for the abode of the dead, a place where the dead continue to exist in a shadowy state, cut off from God.

- In place of proud affluence and prosperity, there will be degradation and ruin.

The nation has become so steeped in sin it does not know **(for want of knowledge – v.13)** that the catastrophe which is to come upon it is a result of its own doings, and that in this catastrophe the judgment of God is to be seen.

Finally cleared of corruption and depression, the land will be filled with justice and holiness, and God’s people will live in peace and security like lambs grazing in their pasture.

### **C. Application**

Once again, the punishment fits the crime. As these wealthy and noble people have focused on what goes down their throats, the day will come when nothing goes down (v. 13). And just as they have opened their mouth wider and wider to take in more, so death will open its mouth yet wider still and suck them all down.

## **IV. THIRD WOE - CYNICISM (5:18-19)**

**Read:** Isaiah 5:18-19

***[18] Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood,  
who draw sin as with cart ropes,***

***[19] who say: "Let him make haste,  
let him speed his work***

***that we may see it;***

***let the purpose of the Holy One of Israel draw near,  
and let it come, that we may know it!"***

## A. Attachment to Sin (v. 18)

The third woe presents a strange sight. A heavy cart is being laboriously drawn, not by work animals but by men; straining and tugging. They are yoked like beasts and hitched to a heavy wagon, and, just like the beasts, these men draw the heavy wagon behind them.

- This wagon is their own iniquity and sin.

By this image we are made to see the close connection between the sin and the one who commits the sin, and the strong ties (**cart ropes**) between the sin and the sinner.

## B. Deliberately Chosen

They have not fallen into sin. They have consciously chosen evil and make a concerted effort to maintain that choice.

This is the tragedy of sin! What was once done somewhat innocently, or at least naively, becomes something we must do, at any cost, even though in order to continue in sin we must explain away God and his moral law.

## C. Tempting God (v. 19)

These people delight in sinning. They seek out ways to do it more aggressively, all the while insisting that if such a course of action is so bad, the great God, this **“Holy One of Israel”** Isaiah keeps going on about, will certainly take some action against it.

They are tempting God. They dare Him to punish them. “Bring on the judgment!” they say.

In the meantime, they intend to maintain their lifestyle, indulging themselves at all costs.

## V. FOURTH WOE – MORAL PERVERSION (V. 20)

***[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!***

### A. Denial of Moral Truth

In the fourth woe, Isaiah continues his denunciation of those who mock God's ways. He denounces the revolt against all moral authority.

In order to justify their own behavior, they must, by the most sophisticated reasoning possible, demonstrate that their evil behavior is good; their darkness is light, and their bitterness sweet.

This attitude is the end result of the refusal to admit the absolute authority of the revealed Word (cf. v. 24). For sin is not content to live alongside righteousness any more than disease will coexist with health.

- **Sin can only be satisfied when righteousness is destroyed.**

### B. Application

Pope St. John Paul II, in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* # 93, points out the Christian's duty to be a consistent witness to moral truth, even at the point of suffering and grave sacrifice.

“Indeed, faced with the many difficulties which fidelity to the moral order can demand, even in the most ordinary circumstances, the Christian is called, with the grace of God invoked in prayer, to a sometimes heroic commitment. In this he or she is sustained by the virtue of fortitude” (*Veritatis Splendor* #93).

## VI. FIFTH WOE – WISE IN THEIR OWN EYES (5: 21)

***[21] Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes,  
and shrewd in their own sight!***

The sounds of the first woe have barely died away before we're face to face with another. The two woes are closely related, and this probably explains the fact that no punishment has been inserted between the two.

The breakdown in moral truth is probably to be found in the fact that the nation no longer relied upon the wisdom of God but upon its own wisdom.

What we have here is a general condemnation of reliance upon the supposedly autonomous, independent mind of man. Utterly lacking is a heeding of the command, "Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the Lord and depart from evil" (Prov. 3:7).

## VII. SIXTH WOE (5:22-23)

***[22] Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine,  
and valiant men in mixing strong drink,  
[23] who acquit the guilty for a bribe,  
and deprive the innocent of his right!***

### A. Social Injustice

Verses 22 to 23 are a kind of graphic summary of the points made in vs. 8-21.

Here are pictured the great men of the nation, who are only great behind the bar. The terms used refer to military heroes and champions, but these are only champions at mixing drinks.

When the corrupt courts are called upon to judge a case, they can be depended upon to free the guilty and convict the innocent – if the price is right.

The judges justify the wicked; they declare that the wicked person stands in a right relation to the law; they pronounce upon him a sentence of justification.

### **B. Disintegration of Society**

Courage, honor, and bravery mean nothing. What matters is how many beers a man can hold before going under the table.

Innocent and guilty? Who can tell the difference? Who *cares* if there's a difference in a society where serving oneself is all that matters?

This is a vineyard gone completely wrong. The grapes are all bitter and human sophistry (false logic, fallacious reasoning) cannot make them sweet.

### **C. The Judgment**

The pattern is repeated as before where judgment follows each woe. The judgment is divided into two parts, each introduced by the word "Therefore."

The first part (v. 24) describes the fate of the wicked in two images, burning like stubble, and decaying like the root or blossom of a plant.

The second part (v. 25) describes an earthquake.

### **D. Burning Like Stubble**

***[24] Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble,  
and as dry grass sinks down in the flame,  
so their root will be as rottenness,***

***and their blossom go up like dust;  
for they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts,  
and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.***

The sinful action of the nation is now summed up in a general statement. They have ***rejected the law of the Lord*** and ***despised his word***. It is by means of the sins already described that the nation has forsaken God.

### **E. Earthquake**

***[25] Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people,  
and he stretched out his hand against them and smote them,  
and the mountains quaked;  
and their corpses were as refuse  
in the midst of the streets.  
For all this his anger is not turned away  
and his hand is stretched out still.***

Despite all that has occurred, God's anger is still not satisfied. Stroke after stroke has fallen; Israel remains unrepentant, and God's anger is still directed against his people.

## **VIII. THE SUMMONS OF THE ENEMY NATIONS (5:26-30)**

### **A. Overview**

The woes (disasters) have prophetically spelled out the grounds for the judgment of Judah.

God will now use the great Assyrian nation, which had been growing and increasing steadily in its power, as the instrument of His judgment.

It was to come from afar, indeed, from the ends of the earth. With this poetical expression Isaiah simply wishes to indicate that the enemy is at a great distance from Palestine.

God will use Assyria with its powerful military forces to wipe out everything in Israel, including corruption and injustice. Vv. 26-30 contain the first of several graphic, urgent descriptions of an approaching enemy army.

Isaiah makes it clear that the coming destruction is not merely because the powers of Assyria and Babylon are so great. In one way their greatness and power has nothing to do with it. No, it is not these military and political powers to which Israel must come to terms. It is God's moral character.

These passages speak of confrontation between man and God and of man's ultimate responsibility before his Maker.

**Read:** Isaiah 5:26-30

***[26] He will raise a signal for a nation afar off,  
and whistle for it from the ends of the earth;***

***and lo, swiftly, speedily it comes!***

***[27] None is weary, none stumbles,***

***none slumbers or sleeps,***

***not a waistcloth is loose,***

***not a sandal-thong broken;***

***[28] their arrows are sharp,***

***all their bows bent,***

***their horses' hoofs seem like flint,***

***and their wheels like the whirlwind.***

***[29] Their roaring is like a lion,***

***like young lions they roar;***

***they growl and seize their prey,***

***they carry it off, and none can rescue.***

**[30] They will growl over it on that day,  
like the roaring of the sea.  
And if one look to the land,  
behold, darkness and distress;  
and the light is darkened by its clouds.**

### **B. He will raise a signal . . .**

The invasion starts with a signal from God.

Just as “by the word of the Lord the heavens were made” (Ps. 33:6), so military leaders like Tiglath-Pileser III, Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Chaldeans, and Cyrus, king of the Medes and Persians, act on God’s command.

Whatever happens, throughout all creation, is under God’s control – a theme to which we shall return.

“**Raising a signal**” refers to some kind of flag: the word is used of a pole raised high for all to see (Num. 21:8 – the bronze serpent) as well as of a sail or a pennant on the mast of a ship (Is. 33:23).

“**Whistling**” compares God’s own authority over the massed armies of Assyria to a man’s effortless control of his dog, or his bees.

### **C. It Comes Swiftly**

When God acts, the response is immediate. Indeed, the enemy comes swiftly: **and lo, swiftly, speedily it comes! (v. 26)**

The mockers had asked, “Why does God not hasten? **Let him make haste, let him speed his work that we may see it (v. 19).** Isaiah reflects upon their taunt. “Quickly, as a swift one, so the enemy will appear.”

### **D. The Attacking Army**

Isaiah’s describes the Assyrian army “under God’s command” as strong, well-disciplined, and devastatingly efficient. The soldiers

are physically fit, fully alert, their dress and equipment in immaculate condition. Their weaponry is the best.

- Israel doesn't stand a chance because God has withdrawn His protection (see Ps. 81:11-16).

**[31] "But my people did not heed my voice;  
and Israel would obey,  
[32] So I left them in their stubbornness of heart,  
to follow their own designs (Ps. 81:11-12)**

### **E. The Face of the Enemy**

The enemy is ready for attack. He's fierce and bold, and is determined to succeed. This enemy is like a wild lion that roars and carries off its prey.

Like the lion, once this army has seized its prey and begun to drag it off, there will be no one to deliver Israel from its mouth.

Clouds overshadow the land of Judah: The light has gone; the darkness reigns, black and still and heavy.

### **F. Impending Doom**

Three vivid images round off the picture of impending doom: the roaring of lions, the thunder of waves, and a darkened sky.

It is not difficult to connect these images with scenes of war: the sound of a huge army on the move, blood-curdling war cries, brutality, looting, pillaging, wave upon wave of irresistible forces pounding the walls of a city, the sky blackened with the dark smoke from burning fields and houses.

The Assyrian armies in particular had a reputation for ruthlessness and deadly efficiency.

This is the fate that awaits Israel because of its lack of repentance, and obedience to God. God could deliver Israel; He is the only one that can do so. God, however, will not deliver, for it is better that Judah should be punished.

## Preparation for Isaiah Week Six - The Lord Calls Isaiah (6:1-13)

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1. Read Chapter 6 of Isaiah
2. Read Chapter 2 of ***Come and See Catholic Bible Study – Isaiah***, and answer questions 1-10.