

THE SONG OF THE VINEYARD

– MAY 21. – ISAIAH 5:1-12. –

"Let me sing to my Well-Beloved a song of my Beloved touching his vineyard."

TO THIS LESSON, as to the last, we have a Divinely-inspired key, for the words were quoted by the Great Teacher and applied by him to the Jewish nation, as indeed the Prophet himself explains. What the Prophet styles a song we might properly term a parable or story. God is represented as having planted the nation of Israel as his own vineyard. He gathered out the stones, or removed the difficulties, and planted in it the choicest vine, the richest promises – promises of the Messianic Kingdom and the blessing of Israel and all the families of the earth. He provided a watch tower for it in the Prophecies and a hedge about it in the Law and the Prophets and in all the arrangements made for that holy nation. It was proper that he should look for choice fruitage from so favorably-situated a vineyard, but the results were unsatisfactory. The fruitage was not in harmony with the promises he had planted, but wild grapes, sour, small.

This condition prevailed until the time of Jesus. Although troubles upon the nation were from time to time permitted by the Lord, the breaches were always healed and the nation was preserved. Its walls of Divine protection and guidance were maintained and its watch tower. John the Baptist was the last of the Prophets. Since his day the Lord has fulfilled to natural Israel the things mentioned in this prophecy. The hedges have been broken down. It has been laid waste. No care has been taken of it. The beasts of the field, the Gentile nations, have ravaged this vineyard and, by Divine intention, no rain of Divine blessing, comfort, encouragement and fructification have come upon the Jewish people in all these more than eighteen centuries.

THE PROPER KIND OF FRUIT

What was the proper fruitage which the Lord had a right to expect from this vineyard and why did he not find it? He tells us in this very prophecy: "For the [R4795 : page 105] vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: God looked for judgment, justice, but behold oppression! He looked for righteousness, but instead, heard the cry of the oppressed." In other words, God's Covenant with Israel was that they should have the blessed privilege of being his people, and the having of his Divine favor was dependent upon their faithful observance of the Divine Law. He knew that they would not be able to keep the Law perfectly. He knew that he would not get perfect grapes, but he had a right to expect much better than he found – to expect heart endeavors, even if there were fleshly imperfections.

The demands of the Law were supreme love for the Almighty, governing every thought and word and act, and a love for the neighbor as for oneself – an unselfish love. The observance of this Law, in its spirit at least, to the extent of the ability of the flesh, was the requirement. Had there been such fruitage in Israel at the time that Jesus presented himself to them eighteen centuries ago, they would have been ready to constitute the spiritual Kingdom, which would then and there have been established, according to Divine promise. But their unreadiness led to the breaking down of their entire system. They did not have love enough toward God, nor love enough toward their fellows.

We are not to understand from this that Israel was more degenerate than the remainder of the world. The contrary of this, we believe, is true. But then the other nations had not been specially planted and specially hedged about and specially watered and specially guarded. Where more was given more was required. And when more was not found the faithful few were gathered out and the vineyard temporarily abandoned. We are glad, indeed, to note from

the Scriptures that the time is coming when that same vineyard shall be restored under still [R4795 : page 106] more favorable conditions, during the Messianic reign of glory and heavenly power. But it is still in disorder.

The succeeding verses of the lesson complain of the disposition of the Israelites to take advantage of each other; and the result of this was great riches on the one hand and great poverty on the other. This Prophecy reminds us of the Great Teacher's words when he said, "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, for ye devour widows' houses" – you take possession of the property of the poor, perhaps, sometimes, in a technical, legal way. You are not filled with that love for your neighbor as yourself which would lead you to assist the poor, the widow and the fatherless and to be generous toward all. The sin of selfishness, avarice, indicates a lack of the Spirit of the Lord and good will toward all. The majority of the Jews of our Lord Jesus' day were tainted with such selfishness and hence were not in a condition of mind acceptable to the Lord for constituting the spiritual, the Bride class – except the few, "the remnant," mentioned by the Prophet.

The Lord indicated how he would punish the selfish. Ruin would come upon the great estates and the earth would not yield returns for the labor. Thus selfishness would have its reproof and penalty along temporal lines, as well as costing the loss of spiritual privileges.

APPLICATION TO SPIRITUAL ISRAEL

God's dealings with fleshly Israel not only represent the principles of Divine government and requirements, but also the requirements of natural Israel's service, as the Scriptures show, and they typify spiritual Israel. As natural Israel failed to be ready to accept Jesus at his first advent – except "the remnant" – so spiritual Israel, called "Christendom," will fail to be ready to receive him as the great Messiah at the establishment of his Kingdom. Note the care with which the Lord planted his Church, gathering out all the difficulties at the time of its establishment. Note the heavenly, spiritual promises,

exceeding great, with which he surrounded the Church, as his vineyard. Note that it is of the Father's right-hand planting. Note the Watch Tower of Grace and Truth established by the Apostles. Note the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

In the end of this Age comes a harvest time for spiritual Israel, as in the end of the Jewish Age there was a harvest time for natural Israel. Here, as there, only "a remnant" will be found worthy of the Kingdom – the great, nominal mass will be found unworthy. And why? Because the spirit of worldliness and selfishness is the prevalent one, instead of the spirit of the Lord, the spirit of meekness, gentleness, love. Only with the few is *God first*. Only with the few is there a spirit of full consecration to do the Divine will. Only with the few is there love of the brethren and a willingness to lay down life one for another. (John 15:13.) Only with the few is there even business honesty, justice. Today selfishness is heaping up treasure and the results, we may be sure, will be unsatisfactory – "a time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation." – Dan. 12:1.

Moreover, as the Prophet proceeds to show, the accumulation of wealth has generally an injurious effect upon the rich – idleness, music and wine and disregard of things Divine. The "remnant" now will be a sufficient number to complete the "elect." The Kingdom of glory will be established and all the families of the earth will, shortly after the time of trouble, begin to recognize the long-promised blessing. Indeed, the "time of trouble" will be used of the Lord to humble the world – to prepare mankind to receive properly the blessings of the Kingdom.

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