

“Song of Woe . . . Who Will Go?”

Isaiah 5:1-6:13

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Have you ever been called an ostrich? People used to think ostriches buried their heads in the sand out of fear, but the birds are actually turning their eggs with their beaks. For years, the ostrich’s behavior was used as an analogy for those who refused to face the truth or signs of danger.

In this lesson’s passages, the **spirit** of the ostrich analogy is accurate regarding Israel, who ignored God and refused to recognize sin as sin.

Pastor Jack Hibbs said, “According to the Jews, even to this day, the poetic language in Isaiah is considered some of the most beautiful words in the Hebrew language.” Chapters 5 and 6 of Isaiah support his statement.

In chapter 5 we’ll learn that:

- Israel was steeped in stubborn sin
- Israel sustained spiritual darkness
- Israel was given sobering reminders of sin’s consequences

In chapter 6 we’ll learn that:

- Isaiah was convicted of his sin
- Isaiah was cleansed of his sin
- Isaiah was called to preach about sin

Let me tell you a Bible story. Once upon a time, there was a landowner who planted a beautiful vineyard. In it he built a watch tower, a wine press and a wall around it. Does this story sound like it’s from Isaiah 5? Well, keep listening.

The vineyard owner rented his vineyard to tenants to care for it in his absence. When the owner sent servants to collect fruit from the vineyard, the tenants beat and killed the servants. When the owner sent his son to the vineyard, the tenants killed him too.

That parable was told by Jesus about 740 years **after** Isaiah wrote chapter 5. Through His parable, Jesus condemned first-century Israel, pronouncing “woes” against the religious leaders. Shortly, we’ll see that Isaiah also condemned Israel for **their** “woes.”

In Isaiah's parable, the vineyard owner, who is God, **loved** his vineyard, Israel. He did everything to ensure its fruitfulness. He placed the vineyard on land he knew was fertile.

He cleared it of stones and planted the finest grapevines whom he "delighted in" (5:7) - ones He hand-picked from all over the world. Moses told Israel: "The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be His people, His treasured possession." (Deuteronomy 7:6)

Also, in Isaiah's parable, to protect his vineyard from animals and thieves, the owner built a tower. He carved out a winepress to gather the wine he **assumed** would be harvested.

He expected the vineyard to yield good fruit, but it produced "wild" or "worthless" grapes. Matthew Henry wrote, "Wild grapes were the fruits of the corrupt nature. They were sour and bitter."

God had chosen the nation of Israel to be unique and fertile and to bear fruit of righteousness. Chapter 5 tells us **why** the vineyard, Israel, did not produce what the vineyard owner expected. They failed to live by their covenant with God and produced rotten, worthless fruit of unrighteousness. The vineyards in both Jesus' and in Isaiah's parables were about Israel, and in both, Israel failed to produce righteousness.

Then God entered the narrative. One can almost hear His grief when, through Isaiah, He asked Israel, "What more could I have done for My vineyard than I did? Why, when I expected a yield of good grapes, did the vineyard yield worthless grapes?" (5:4) The "wild grapes" they produced was their unrighteous lives.

God would also tell the prophet Jeremiah to tell Israel: "I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against Me into a corrupt, wild vine?" (Jeremiah 2:21) Israel should have been honest and answered: "Well God, even though we **promised** we would live righteously, we had our fingers crossed."

The vineyard owner's recourse was to destroy His worthless vineyard, Israel. "I will remove its hedge, and it will be consumed; I will tear down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland. It will not be pruned or weeded; thorns and briars will grow up. I will also give orders to the clouds that rain should not fall on it." (5:5,6) Then, Isaiah wrote that Israel would bear the consequences of six "woes".

Today, we often use the word "woe" in humorous, ridiculous ways: "Woe is me. I can't choose between a purple or rose gold iPhone." "Woe is me. I can't choose between a brownie or chocolate chip cookie."

However, the Hebrew word "woe" expressed profound sorrow or warning of impending disaster. The six woes, we might call them "clusters of bad grapes", were sins that led Israel away from God.

The first woe was materialism and greed. Rather than being content with the land God gave them, the wealthy oppressed their neighbors and took their land. They built large estates and isolated themselves from "riff raff." Consequences for this woe would be that Israel's agriculture-based economy would plummet because God would withhold rain, and crop production would decrease. Eventually their grand homes would be deserted.

The second woe was drunkenness and carousing. Rather than living for God, the people started and ended their days drinking, living for self-indulgent activities which led to debauchery. The consequences for the second woe was that Israel would be invaded and the people exiled. None would escape, not even dignitaries. Those who survived would be humbled in defeat. Instead of enjoying produce of the land God gave them, the land would be overrun by animals and foreigners.

The third woe was that Israel were mockers of God. They showed arrogant contempt for the Lord about His judgment to come. They taunted Him to bring it on: "Let the plan of the Holy One of Israel take place so that we can know it!" (5:19)

The fourth woe was redefined truth. "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter." (5:20)

This verse characterizes "man's reversal of moral order", or "moral relativism." The people called evil: good; and called good: evil. They exchanged God's truth for their own interpretation of truth.

Sins that plagued Isaiah's society plague our own. People justify sinful behavior and redefine God's Word. Believers need to courageously call what is evil to be evil; call what is good to be good; proclaim there **is** a difference between sinfulness and God's holiness: that there **will** be consequences for claiming God's Word doesn't mean what His Holy Spirit has spoken.

The fifth woe was arrogant pride and false wisdom. "Woe to those who consider themselves wise and judge themselves clever." (5:21) The Israelites were impressed with themselves, arrogantly trusting in their own wisdom rather than God's. Like the Burger King commercial from the 70's, we think it's best when we have it our way, but God says: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end, it leads to death." (Proverbs 14:12)

About 800 years after Isaiah, Apostle Paul wrote that people had not changed. “There is no fear of God before their eyes. (Romans 3:18) People “claimed to be wise” (Romans 1:22) and “exchanged the truth about God for a lie.” (Romans 1:25)

In today’s world, technology, achievement, and affluence tend to make people “wise in their own eyes.” People either forget or **won’t** believe in the immeasurable power of God.

The sixth woe was drunkards and corrupted justice. Israel’s leaders were corrupt, world champion, drinkers. Instead of providing honest rulings, they took bribes and deprived the innocent of justice. One cannot read the Old Testament without being gob smacked [always wanted to use that in a lecture!] by God’s patience with Israel.

About patience, someone said: “My tolerance for idiots is extremely low today. I used to have some immunity built up, but obviously there is a new strain out there.”

Throughout the Old Testament, God sent prophet after prophet, warning after warning, opportunity after opportunity, for Israel to respond to His mercy. God’s patience was exhausted; therefore, He would send judgment after judgment. Isaiah described God’s judgments.:

JUDGMENT: GOD’S BURNING WRATH

The first judgment of Israel’s unrepentant sin was likened to an unquenchable fire that would consume everything in its path. Because Israel had rejected and scorned the law of the Lord, they would be like a dried-up plant that would burn all the way to the root and then disappear.

JUDGMENT: DEVASTATION LIKE A NATURAL DISASTER

To explain God’s “burning anger against His people” Isaiah used imagery of a massive earthquake which litters the street with dead bodies. The Lord’s anger would continue to burn and strike again. Isaiah painted a terrifying picture as if God’s hand was raised up in the air, ready to smash down on sinful, stubborn, faithless Israel, the nation God loved. More terrifying verses followed.

God would “whistle” for foreign nations (Assyria and Babylon) to drag Israel into exile. Those nations were brutal, controlling their captives with mass deportation and torture and stripped them of their cultural and religious practices.

JUDGMENT: WEAPONIZED NATIONS

Isaiah continued using strong imagery to describe the invading nations as weaponized and fierce. “Their arrows are sharpened, and all their bows strung. Their horses’ hooves are like flint; their chariot wheels are like a whirlwind.” (5:28) The enemies would be ready for war with sharpened arrows for their bows, powerful horses and chariots, the sound of which would be deafening, like a whirlwind.

JUDGMENT: FIERCE NATIONS

“Their roaring is like young lions; they growl and seize their prey and carry it off, and no one can rescue it. On that day they will roar over [the land] like the roaring of the sea. When one looks at the land, there will be darkness and distress; light will be obscured by clouds.” (5:29,30)

Metaphorically, the attacking enemies were described as ferocious lions who would kill and carry off their prey. Tsunami-like destruction would roar over and devastate the land. Darkness and distress and clouds would block out light.

And then.....chapter 5 abruptly ended. I was exhausted reading Isaiah’s haunting depictions of God’s severe judgment on His own vineyard - His chosen people.

This section of Scripture was written about 2800 years ago, but the lesson God wants for us hasn’t changed because **He** doesn’t change. God cannot overlook sin, and He will judge sin whether it happened in 740 B.C. or happens in 2025 A.D.

The Lord wants us to live righteously, embrace His grace offered through Jesus Christ, and bear fruit of a faithful relationship with Him. For those who crave Christ’s appearing: the crown of righteousness is ours, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award on that day.” (2 Timothy 4:8)

In chapter 6, Isaiah gave his readers a spectacular vision of God in heaven that included: fiery, flying beings proclaiming God’s holiness, an amazing redemption and commission of one of God’s greatest prophets, a “shortlist” of Israel’s sins, the judgments which would come as well as the promise of a future, holy remnant.

It’s been suggested chapter 6 be divided into three parts: “woe” which speaks of Isaiah’s iniquity; “lo” speaks of Isaiah’s cleansing; and “go” speaks of Isaiah’s commission.

Isaiah was about 25 years old at the time and was either given a vision or actually placed in the temple in heaven to see the enthroned Lord God. Isaiah wrote: “I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, and the train [hem] of His robe filled the temple.” (6:1) God’s “high and lofty” throne represented His majesty, authority and superiority. The length of a person’s royal robe typically implies importance.

For example, the longest train on a royal brides’ wedding dress was Princess Diana’s. It trailed 25 feet behind her and was so long it had to be folded like a bedsheet to fit into the carriage! However, whether symbolically, metaphorically, or actually, the **Lord’s** royal robe was so magnificently massive, His chamber could only contain the mere **edges** of it! King Solomon said: “The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain You.” (1 Kings 8:27)

Apostle John referred to Isaiah 6:10 when he wrote explaining that many Jews refused to believe in Jesus because they continually rejected God and God would have their disobedience made permanent. In John 12, John wrote: “Isaiah said this [Isaiah 6:10] because *he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about Him.*” (John 12:41) It was **Jesus** whom Isaiah saw on the throne in heaven!

The “Him” Isaiah saw was the preincarnate Lord Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, “The great God of glory seated on a throne high and exalted, the One whom the seraphim sang of His holiness! Jesus the God of heaven and earth; the Creator of fiery seraphim and of lowly caterpillars alike; the One who shaped the mountains and who spread the stars throughout space – it was **He** whom Isaiah saw in the throne room!” (Christ Centered Exposition)

Near the throne, fiery, flying, angelic beings served the Lord God. “Seraphim were standing above Him; they each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.” (6:2) In our limited finite minds, we cannot imagine what these majestic beings looked like. Seraphim were six-winged beings and stood in God’s presence. Their name means burning or fiery ones. About them, theologian S. Lewis Johnson said: “There is nothing cold near the Lord God.”

Isaiah then witnessed worship in heaven. The seraphim called to each other in voices that shook the foundations of the temple - a triple proclamation of the holiness of the Lord and His glory: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. His glory fills the whole earth.” (6:3) It’s believed the seraphim repeated “holy” three times because there are Three Persons in the One God. Holy is the Father. Holy is the Son. Holy is the Spirit.

I love these quotes about God’s holiness: “The Lord exists outside of all creation. If all creation were to dissolve, the Lord God would remain. He is set apart from humanity. His nature, or essence, is divine, not human.” (Enduring Word Commentary) And A.W. Tozer put it this way: “We must not think of God as the highest in an ascending order of beings. God is as high above an

archangel as He is above a caterpillar. The gulf that separates the archangel from the caterpillar is finite, while the gulf between God and the archangel is infinite.”

The angelic, six-winged seraphim flew around the room calling out to each other in worship of God, and the temple was filled with smoke because of God’s presence and power! What a scene!

Being in the presence of the great I AM, seeing seraphim filling the air in the heavenly chamber of the King, hearing them proclaim God’s holiness, surrounded by thick smoke and feeling the floor shake, must have overwhelmed Isaiah, and he became convicted of his and Israel’s sins. How did Isaiah respond to what he saw and heard and felt? “Woe is me for I am ruined because I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips, and because my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” (6:5)

Who can reflect on God’s holiness and **not** be led to a deep realization of our sin, to **not** realize how unworthy we are, and to **not** be grateful to be redeemed?

The seraphim were also God’s agents of purification. Removing a coal from the altar, a seraph flew to Isaiah, touched his lips and declared, “Now that this has touched your lips, your iniquity is removed, and your sin is atoned for.” (6:7) The seraph had to use tongs to remove the coal from the altar, so it had to have been scorching, yet Isaiah didn’t react in pain. Touching his lips with the coal symbolized two things: the cleansing of Isaiah’s mouth - the instrument God would use for his ministry – and his atonement which was necessary to receive his commission.

Then Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord ask: “Who will I send? Who will go for Us?” (6:8) In the Lord’s question, did you notice the pronouns “I” and “Us”? The Lord referred to Himself in both the singular and the plural because He is Three in One!

Without hesitation Isaiah volunteered: “Here I am. Send me.” (6:8b) He was in the presence of the Almighty; he had acknowledged his sin; he knew the need among his people; he had been touched by God’s cleansing fire. What else could Isaiah have said?

Recognition of God’s holiness and redeeming love is the greatest motivation for Christian service and ministry. Just as He did through Balaam’s donkey, God can speak through whatever and whomever He chooses, but God does seek volunteers. There’s no forced labor in His army.

“Once Isaiah **connected** with the LORD, was **convicted** of his sin, and **cleansed** from his guilt, then he was ready to serve God.” (enduringword.org)

The book of Isaiah is praised for its poetry, yet there are some puzzling passages in its poetic prose, one being these verses in chapter 6. “And [God] replied: Go! Say to these people: Keep listening, but do not understand; keep looking, but do not perceive. Make the minds of these people dull; deafen their ears and blind their eyes; otherwise, they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears, understand with their minds, turn back, and be healed.” (6:9,10)

Did God really command Isaiah to preach a message the nation was forbidden to understand, to listen to or to see? Not at all. God told Isaiah the people **won’t** listen to or understand his message because they were already too far into their sin to repent before judgment began.

You may ask, “What did God’s people do for their minds to be so dull, their ears so deaf and their eyes so blind?” We just read why in chapter 5 but elsewhere in Scripture it says about Israel:

“The children I raised and cared for have rebelled against Me. My people don’t recognize My care for them. They are evil people, corrupt children who have rejected the Lord. They have despised the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on Him.” (Isaiah 1:2-4) “The more [My people] were called, the more they went away from Me.” (Hosea 11:2)

“My people would not listen to Me. They kept doing whatever they wanted, following the stubborn desires of their evil hearts. They went backward instead of forward.” Yet the Lord would continue to send His prophets, but He told them: “When you tell them all this, they will not listen to you; when you call to them, they will not answer.” (Jeremiah 7:24-27)

Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. They served idols, abandoned the Lord and provoked Him to anger. Time after time they called upon His name and He saved them because He loved them and had great pity on them, but again and again they turned their back on Him. (Judges Chapter 2)

God does not deliberately make people spiritually blind, deaf, and hard hearted. But the more people resist His truth, the less able they are to repent and receive God’s grace. God commanded Isaiah to preach a message that would result in spiritual deafness and spiritual blindness because that’s how the people **chose** to live, in resistance to God and in rejection of His righteousness.

In Romans, Paul wrote: “Because [the unrighteous] do not think it worthwhile to acknowledge God, God delivers them over to a corrupt mind to do what is not right.” (Romans 1:28)

Why doesn’t the Ruler of the cosmos impose His will and **make** everyone obey? Well, nowhere in all Scripture does God exercise His authority like

that. God wants all people to “be holy as He is holy” (1 Peter 1:16) and to live with Him for eternity, but He will not force them to do so.

Then Isaiah asked the Lord, “How long will I have to preach this message to hardened hearts?” Isaiah was to continue until the Lord’s judgments against Israel were completed – until the cities and land were in ruins, empty, desolate, and the people were driven into exile. Sadly, Isaiah would enter eternity before seeing the end of God’s judgment.

The destruction would not stop, for even if ten percent of the people remained in the Lord, judgement would continue. But hope **would** follow judgment which Isaiah explained using the metaphor of a tree. When a tree is cut down and the stump remains, deep inside the stump is a remnant of that tree - a “holy seed” that will grow again. (6:13)

Biblically, the word “seed” refers to “descendants.” In Scripture, “holy seed” refers to the nation of Israel. The “holy seed” means new growth will come from the dead stump of Israel. Even though Isaiah’s generation would not respond to his preaching, there would be hope in the “holy seed” - the “holy remnant” – those who **would** remain faithful to God, who **would** survive, and Israel **would** be restored. Even in judgment God did not fully abandon His people. “Judgment and hope” is a major theme throughout the Bible and the 6th chapter of Isaiah is a revelation of such judgement and hope.

The children of Israel were just like us and God recorded their struggles with righteousness so that we would run toward the grace He offers us.

I hope Isaiah 5 and 6 have inspired you, as they have me, to draw closer to God, to learn more about His unfathomable holiness and to consider how to respond when God calls to do whatever He asks of because each of us can be an Isaiah.

Isaiah presented a scene of heavenly worship with flying seraphim crying out before Jesus the Christ, “Holy, Holy, Holy”. Consider singing or reading the words to that glorious hymn.