

## A Medieval Parable?

*Isaiah 5*

He stumbled into town around 4:00am. It was cold and he was hungry. The only thing left in his bag was one stale end of a stick of bread. A morsel and a short nap was all he could afford, then he had to gain audience with the king. How could he take time for himself when everything around him was falling into ruin? But everyone was asleep, no one would see him at this hour. "There must have been a hundred ships in that harbor. How many men must each one hold? Will they heed the warning before it is too late?" he asked to himself. "If only I could figure out how to get them to see what I have seen? They would listen. They would have to listen. I will make them listen."

He rested his head on a familiar patch of grass near the center of the cities commerce and began to eat. He had been in this town before, a long time ago. They probably wouldn't remember him. But he remembered them. Ah yes. There was no place else like it. If anyplace would hear, they would. Everyone in this city was friendly. They genuinely loved to welcome strangers. There would be no trouble at all finding a family to give him food and shelter for a couple of days after his errand was complete. After all, they took care of everyone in this place.

His eyes began to roam about the city. "And to be able to spend a day in worship at that magnificent cathedral of theirs, now that would mean true rest for the my weary soul," his mind halted at the idea of it. He remembered it well. Never before had he seen such a delicate balance of fear, reverence, knowledge, love and kindness blended before in the worship of God. The place was simple and ordinary, yet so profound. It looked so common, but he sensed this otherworldliness to the place. And that priest, his dear old friend, had such an uncanny ability to open the word and speak forth a truth that would bring comfort to even the most troubling affliction.

"To be able to gaze upon God again in the splendor of his majesty, in his exalted position as the King enthroned on high!" It gave him hope that the king of this city would in fact listen to his message. Where God's people are a fortified wall, a city is a strong tower, and her king is a very fortunate man indeed. This took his mind off of the danger that he knew was so near to them all. Now there was something to look forward to, even if it was for just a brief moment before he was off again. Then at once the blackness took him and he remembered nothing else.

He awoke to the most odd sound in his ears. Gauging from the sun and the heat, it couldn't be later than 7:00am. The drums, the screaming... it sounded like war, and it was coming from the very same church at the far end of the street! "That's impossible. I can't be too late," he worried and rose with renewed determination to deliver his message before it was too late.

As he approached the holy place, he was shocked to see that it was not a revolution, but riotous revelry that came from inside those walls. "Now that is a huge statue," he thought to himself. "That was not here before." But it provided a place to view the scene before him without anyone noticing his presence. The shock of seeing full-grown men and women intoxicated in the early morning in the sanctuary made his knees begin to wobble.

"What has happened to this place? He thought to himself. What demon has taken possession here?" As he looked around, he noticed a group of drunkards assembling together near the front, raising their mugs high while yelling obscenities. But this was not

the front he remembered. It was slowly beginning to dawn on him that it was not just the people who were acting strangely. Everything inside the building had changed too. "It is as if the holy place has been transformed into a, now what does that remind me of?" The most unlikely of things came to his mind. Though the walls on the outside still remained, he was sure that the inside now looked exactly like that place that he had seen on his travels to the land of the Greeks. This was not sanctuary. It was a theater. "This is a place for entertainment, not worship!"

He began to listen to a man that looked like a priest, but he noticed that it was not his old friend that was talking. "This strange looking young man *must* be a priest," he thought. "This *is* still a temple after all, isn't it?" As he continued to gaze at the stark contrasts that his past brought to his mind, he noticed that the young man was not wearing the traditional garment. Instead, he was sure that this priest wore the clothing of... a *peddler*. As soon as this thought came to his mind, the words confirmed it. A gigantic group of people that had to include 2/3 of the whole town were gathered around a transformed temple to be entertained by a salesman, and it sounds as if he is trying to sell them healing remedies or something.

For the next hour he listened with great agitation rising in his soul. The people were now quiet and attentive as they listened to this strange "grocery gospel." Without batting an eye, this clever conman was telling these "worshippers" all of the health benefits that to be gained by eating tree bark and rubbing leaves on their skin. The only difference between what he was presently hearing here and what he had heard in that town far to the east was that this "priest" invoked the name of God in these products that he had for sale. And it seemed to be working too, for money was exchanging hands at an alarming rate inside the temple. These poor saps were purchasing their own personal relic that they called "The Cross of Christ Chronic Dis-Comfort Cutter."

At just that moment, his head jerked to the left, a natural reflex from being tapped on the shoulder. "Greetings, stranger," the gleeful voice yelled out! "Let's hurry. The worship service is just about to start!" Apparently, this sales pitch was merely the tithe before the talk. Immediately, the man found himself being carried along by a flood of bodies as they rolled their way down towards center stage.

A few moments later, darkness descended upon the hushed room. A flicker of light shone dimly on center stage. Then another to the left. And another behind it. In all, there were eight candles that began to move in a bizarre boogie ballet. The music began softly and moved slowly. The worshipers were hypnotized. They were clearly being manipulated for something to come. After a time, the dance and music began to pick up pace and volume. This lasted well over an hour, so that by the time the speaker was ready on stage, no one was in any sort of a mindset to think about anything.

It seemed that this was exactly the point. Because for the next 15 minutes the "preacher" spoke. The strangest part of all was that he never said anything of substance about anything. This man did not talk about the God that used to be spoken of here. Instead, it seemed that this priestly Aladdin was conjuring up a Genie god to grant three wishes of anyone in the audience. No strings attached. A great fair tale was now being told in a once proud hall that had been erected in devotion to a very different God indeed.

The stranger began to feel queezy and sick to his stomach. He had to get air. He had to escape this blasphemous orgy of self-indulgence. He found himself running at full stride away from the neo-sanctuary until he was too winded to continue. Then he sat down at the place he had rested at earlier and began to weep bitterly. "This is not a place that will hear

the news of the terror to come! Everyone is so completely enamored with themselves and this new god of self, not to mention being completely drunk and incapable of reasoning clearly, that there is no hope. All is lost."

At that instant, he heard a familiar voice. "Stranger!" the man cried out. It slowly began to dawn on him that before his eyes stood his old friend the priest. "What has happened here, priest?" Why are you wearing those shabby clothes? Your hair is unkempt and matted. You look terrible. What is going on in the temple? Who is that man that leads these people astray? Why is everyone drinking at 7:00 in the morning?..."

"Slow down," the priest said calmly, but with the same forceful and soothing tone that the strange messenger had remembered. "I am no longer a priest. I am a singer. I was forced to leave my calling by young and new forces that now control this city. Now I spend my days as a minstrel prophet to this city, going from house to house, playing on the streets, or anywhere I can be heard, warning the people of what is to come."

"What is to come?" the man replied? "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said the former priest, "that I have heard from God. It's not like he spoke to me directly mind you. We both know that God doesn't do that anymore. Rather, I heard from God as I was contemplating the Holy Scripture, particularly the prophet Isaiah. Now, Isaiah's song has become my song."

"What song is that?" inquired the man.

"Let me sing it for you," and the singer began to enter his own world, preparing his mind and his voice to carry the tune in an appropriate way to fit the lyrics. And he began to sing,

Now will I sing to my wellbeloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My wellbeloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes.

And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; *and* break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: And I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briars and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts *is* the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry.

Even as the tune was vanishing with the breeze, the singer sat silent for a few moments, languishing as if in another place, as if the weight of the world had been cast down upon his shoulders. He was heavy and could not be moved.

Unexpectedly, the stranger to the city found himself weeping uncontrollably. Great heaves of emotion began to overtake his entire body. It was as if this former priest had just spoken about the ships that he had seen the harbor that were even now burning as their crew burned all route of escape. They were coming to conquer, and nothing would prevent this destiny from being fulfilled.

Yet, nothing in the song spoke of such disaster, at least not explicitly. This made the man curious and he began to ask the singer to explain his song. "Though the song ends here," the former priest began to say, "Isaiah has much more to say than this. You are right to conclude that the fate of the vineyard is terrible. Woe to all who live in such times as these. Behold the words of the prophet and the *Seven Woes of Tears*,

**Woe** to those who add house to house and join field to field, Until there is no more room, So that you have to live alone in the midst of the land! (5:8).

**Woe** to those who rise early in the morning that they may pursue strong drink; Who stay up late in the evening that wine may inflame them! And their banquets are accompanied by lyre and harp, by tambourine and flute, and by wine; But they do not pay attention to the deeds of the LORD, Nor do they consider the work of His hands. (5:11)

**Woe** to those who drag iniquity with the cords of falsehood, And sin as if with cart ropes; Who say, "Let Him make speed, let Him hasten His work, that we may see it; And let the purpose of the Holy One of Israel draw near And come to pass, that we may know it!" (5:18)

**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)

**Woe** to those who are wise in their own eyes, And clever in their own sight! (5:21)

**Woe** to those who are heroes in drinking wine, And valiant men in mixing strong drink; Who justify the wicked for a bribe, And take away the rights of the ones who are in the right! (5:22-23)

"Here ends the seven woes that complete the misery of God's people," the singer lamented. "A terrible doom is pronounced upon those who have rebelled and forsaken the Lord. Unless a people repent and trust anew in God by faith alone, they will not escape the coming judgment for such arrogance as this."

The stranger sat in silence as the singer continued. "There are seven marks of a people that lead to such a pronouncement as this. When these woes are embodied by a nation, what may be on the horizon but disaster?

**First**, the people forget that they are merely tenants of the land, that their permanent home awaits them only on the other side of the age. Moses had given a law to the children of Israel that the land was not to be bought permanently, even by Israel. It belonged to God and they were mere keepers of his property (Lev 25:23-28). It seems that over time, as things get better and better in a culture, the people begin to forget this truth and covetousness slowly creeps in so that we want ever increasing security in this life. God told the people through the prophet, 'Surely, many houses shall become desolate, even great and fine ones, without occupants' (vs. 9). My old friend, look around you. There are mansions and castles in every corner of our hamlet that are no longer occupied by anyone. They just sit there as monuments to a bygone age. Our people have gone mad with wealth and the lust for more treasures and more things. Where is the end of their trinkets and idols? Their superstition causes them to trust in the most foolish of things, things that not a one of them would have trusted in even a few short years ago.

**Second**, the people begin to pursue the pleasures of this life. Their lives become so empty in the mad pursuit for that which passes away that the moment they get out of bed, they are consumed with forgetting their problems through strong elixirs." With that this priestly bard began to sing another song, "We are the hollow men. We are the stuffed men. Leaning together. Headpiece filled with straw. Alas! Our dried voices, when We whisper together Are quiet and meaningless As wind in dry grass Or rats' feet over broken glass In our dry cellar."<sup>1</sup> As quickly as it began, it was over and the singer once again began to talk,

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<sup>1</sup> The Hollow Men, T.S Eliot.

as if no song had even been sung. "You saw it yourself just moments ago I believe in the temple. What were they consumed with in their hollow religious stupor I might ask you?"

The chill of the moment began to rush back into the man's mind. "I saw things in the old church that I have observed throughout the world, but which in a thousand years no man has dared bring into a holy place," he began. "Selling and carousing, dancing and singing. It was a giant party. But nothing was said about God; nothing of truth, that is. Their god was a genie that does our bidding. I couldn't take it any longer. I had to get out of there."

The singer began again, "have you considered the words of the Prophet? They have banquets with lyres and harps, tambourines and flutes and wine. But they do not pay attention to the deeds of the Lord, nor do they consider the work of His hands (vs. 11). I think the most terrifying words I have ever read follow next. '**Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge.**' He continued, "And their honorable men are famished, And their multitude is parched with thirst. Therefore Sheol has enlarged its throat and opened its mouth without measure. And Jerusalem's splendor, her multitude, her din of revelry, and the jubilant within her, descend into it. So the common man will be humbled, and the man of importance abased, The eyes of the proud also will be abased. But the LORD of hosts will be exalted in judgment, And the holy God will show Himself holy in righteousness. Then the lambs will graze as in their pasture, And strangers will eat in the waste places of the wealthy' (vs. 13-17).

The ancient people of Israel didn't get it. They perished and went into exile because they had substituted the real God with a candy-man. Their worship was jubilant, but pagan. Their society was filthy rich, but richly oppressive. Their people were sincere, but sincerely wrong. They would not heed the word and were punished by death.

"Friend," the sullied singer continued, "I'm an old man now and I have seen a lot of things. But there is something wickedly familiar with what you saw in the temple and what I have seen in the history of those early people. There is a new evil afoot that has not walked this realm in a thousand years in our land. The ways of our fathers and their fathers before them have been utterly forsaken by our youth.

One of the facets of youth is their lack of knowledge. It's natural. That's why education is so important. People are no more born with the knowledge of God in salvation than they are born knowing calculus. One gains knowledge only as one is willing to grow and mature. **But these people have been bewitched by an evil force.** They are doing everything in their power to remain children. At every turn they indulge in entertainment, sports, drunken festivals, they refuse to read books anymore, they will not work hard for their families but only play children's games. Like a little baby, they cry when they don't get what they want when they want it. God is my witness that for these past many years I tried to instill knowledge in the people at the temple. I was far too aware that where there is no knowledge there is no hope. But one cannot fight a culture of death and of youth and of immaturity.

It was not only the priests who were run out, but the elder politicians, policemen, and professors as well. These forces knew that if they wanted to teach their own "new" ways to the people, that they had to remove the accumulated wisdom and maturity of the city as a whole. Destroying any link with the past was their first step. It wasn't just the people who were attacked, but the very concept of institution. Oh, they went for the heart and they found it. Now, the whole city stammers around from place to place, without purpose and without knowledge in this world. Such a horrible lot in life, they think they are well fed, but they are starving. Deceived by their own greed and lust. As God said that Israel would perish for lack of knowledge, so I fear that the same woe is now upon this city."

There was silence then for a few minutes. Neither man would speak. Both seemed consumed with their own thoughts. One had predicted the disaster that the other had seen was even now taking shape.

Suddenly, the singer began to wail out more commentary. "Friend, there are seven woes, here. Not just two. As the prophet also said, how can a society survive when it violently drags sin into its streets on the cords of lies? I told you about the *politicians*? Such a truth is no more visible than it is here in our city. What was once an honorable profession of service to the king has been rotted out by lies and deceit. No longer do the people care about issues and truth. Everything is about self, seeking re-election, destroying the competitor, gaining power. The lies and deceit that come from those serpents tongues betray the identity of the lord that they worship. And the priests are no better. 'They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace.'

The new *professors* have taken a "new" approach to the education of our citizens. Their ethics classes teach good for evil. Their creation classes substitute darkness for light and light for darkness. Their cooking classes substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. And the people haven't the foggiest idea what is going on. They just float down the current like a barrel heading for a rocky doom at the end of a high waterfall.

Our *leaders* are wise in their own eyes. They live by celebrity rather than substance. You have not seen it, I venture. But the counsel meetings in this city no longer deal with plans and issues, but with who is the smartest and greatest among them. Their arrogance will be their downfall.

The *courts* have taken the law of the land and discarded it in the waste bin out back. The *judges* are now inventing their own laws, abusing their power to make straight that which is crooked, while the rights of those who are right are taken away. My friend, I have never seen such wickedness in my lifetime – and that has been a good while now.

The stranger began to think about it. This was now the fourth city he had entered on his journey to see this particular king. He had not taken much time to rest in those places, but come to think of it, it was beginning to dawn on him that things were not right in those towns either. There was a shortness in the tone of the villagers. They seemed uneasy welcoming him into their fellowship, even if but for a brief lunch. It was subtle, but he began to think about earlier days, how in city after city he would always see people talking to each other on the streets, in the yards. But now, everyone seemed more interested in tending to the inside of their own palaces. "Could it be that in those places, whenever people came together that it was not much different from what he had witnessed just this morning?" The thought brought him back to the present.

"There is something different throughout the whole realm, and not just here," the stranger began to mutter. "I was so looking forward to coming to see your king because I just knew that here I would gain an audience and a listening ear, one that heed the dire warning that I bring."

"Dire warning?" the singer inquired? "You have said nothing of this to me. What is this omen you hide in your heart?"

The stranger prepared his message for the minstrel. He was hoping to give his message to the king, but now this was beginning to seem like a fools errand. "I have seen ships," he began. "Many ships. They have landed in the harbor to the east and I fear that they do not bring with them trading supplies. It is a host built for one purpose: War. We are being invaded!"

"Then Isaiah's words loom large in our sight indeed, my old friend," and the singer once again retained that far off look that he got when bursting into song. Slowing and quietly, his words came

at first. "To those who say, 'let God hurry, let him hasten his work so we may see it. Let it approach, let the plan of the Holy One of Israel come, so we may know it' (5:19-20)." Then Louder came the taunt, "You mock in your high places the only one who is enthroned on high. You say he does not see us, he does not know what we are doing." (Eze 8:12) He was so loud at this point that a crowd began to gather around him. At once his words were a bursting dam, a mighty flood to consume all in its path. "But the Lord Mighty in Power will be exalted by *his* justice and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness. (5:16). "Therefore the grave enlarges its appetite and opens its mouth without limit; into it will descend their nobles and masses with all their brawlers and revelers (5:14). "Listen you wicked, man will be brought low and mankind humbled, the eyes of the arrogant are humbled. As tongues of fire lick up straw and as dry grass sinks down in the flames, so their roots will decay and their flowers blow away like dust; for they rejected the law of the LORD almighty and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel (5:24)."

A curious thing then began to happen. *A hush came upon the people.* Suddenly, the stranger sensed something familiar. He had not felt it since last he was in this town worshiping in that old shrine. The feeling was as real as the song he now heard. You could see a change in the faces of the gathered. The filmy coating that covered so many of their eyes now vanished to become clear pools of wondrous life. **There was fear here, and reverence.** Amid the silence, something was moving among these people. Was it the wind? A small haggard woman began to sing along, as if remembering a nursery rhyme from her youth. Suddenly another chimed in. In a short time a mighty choir was singing the lament of the prophet with conviction and determination.

The song continued, but now it was a mighty thunder, more booming than ever. "Therefore the Lord's anger burns against his people; his hand is raised and he strikes them down. The mountains shake, and the dead bodies are like refuse in the street." The leaders of the town and the priests of the temple began to gather, mocking and spitting curses upon the throng gathering in ever increasing proportions. "Stop that, you fools. You know he won't hear your cry. Come back inside and let us finish our *true* worship in the God's sanctuary."

The voices were not to be silenced. Neither argument, nor bribe, nor threat was going to stem this tide. The light of the Word was shining brightly, breaking through clouds of darkness that had penetrated this realm for so long. The manna of the word was feeding a people long starved into feeling that never again could they be fed such satisfying and beautiful food.

The words would haunt the nightmares of the bravest soldier. A doom was being pronounced upon the very people who were soon to be overtaken. And they were pronouncing the doom... upon themselves! And their song went forward like an unstoppable army, "Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised. He lifts up a banner for the distant nations" (5:25). 'Come to my banner, to fight against my beloved,' the Warrior God cries out. "He whistles for those at the ends of the earth. Here they come, swiftly and speedily" (5:26). *My beloved will no longer stand. Her vine must be cut off for she no longer produces any good fruit.*

*My army does not grow tired and they do not stumble. Not one slumbers or sleeps; not even a belt is loosened at the waist. Not even the forces of nature will slow them from fighting for me against my people. Not a sandal thong is broken (5:27). Their arrows are sharp, all their bows are strung, upraised ready for the signal. Their horses' hoofs seem like flint, their chariot wheels like a whirlwind (5:28). Their roar is like that of the lion, they roar like young lions; they growl as they seize their prey and carry it off with no one to rescue (5:29). In that day they will roar over it like the roaring of the sea. And if one looks at the land, he will see darkness and distress; even the light will be darkened by the clouds (5:30).*" Abruptly, the song stopped and the people began to shake with the revelation of what they had just sung. They knew what they sang, but they didn't understand what compelled them to do it. Yet, each person *willingly* participated in the unprecedented event. No one forced them into it. They were simply compelled.

"There is one more woe," the singer spoke loudly over the startled crowd. "Stranger, I have not yet told you about the last woe." "That's right," replied the soft voice. "I have only heard *six* woes. I was not so taken aback as to miss that. What woe could possibly follow all that we have just heard? We are already undone."

"It is ironic that you would say *those* particular words, stranger. For this is exactly what Isaiah himself said at the completion of *his* song.

"Hear then, the last woe." The song was simple and profound. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. Then I said, "**Woe** is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isa 6:1-5).

"Everyone who hears my song, hear now its application. Six woes belong to a nation. The seventh belongs to you. If you want to avert the disaster that is upon you, you must see the King of Glory. You cannot afford games any longer. Behold, the ships are in the harbor. What you have sung is coming to pass before your eyes."

Immediately the crowd began to stir. "Ships? What is this nonsense priest?" a voice asked. "What I mean is that the stranger here has seen a vast army and they are even now making their way to our land, to destroy our homes and ruin our crops. Today is the day of fulfillment for our city and her leaders. For many of you standing here, the sun will not come up tomorrow."

"Then all is lost" another voice yelled. "We must flee for our lives." The *stranger* then took up his voice and began to speak. "You may flee like cowards. Or you may stay and fight. The Spirit of God has moved here this day, perhaps we can still avert this disaster if we will only repent and pray and work towards that end."

"Perhaps," the singer replied. "And Perhaps not. This I do not know. Yet, one thing is sure. There is another disaster to come upon *all* peoples, of which we are the first. Isaiah's song is both past and future for all people. 'Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts and you did when you provoked the Lord' (Ps 95:8). The seventh woe can be your salvation. As Isaiah saw the Lord, he called down a curse upon the day of his birth. He humbled himself, then accepted his fate. But God had mercy upon him, because God delights in showing mercy. Though our city lie my end up in ruins and our people be taken captive by pirates, know that your own soul will be saved on that day. At this late hour, there is nothing more to do than throw yourself at the feet of the Great High King and presume upon his mercy. Trust in the mercy of this God and his beloved Son who has paid an infinite debt in the place of those who trust in him."

"On that day," his last song began, "sheep will graze as in their own pasture; lambs will feed among the ruins of the rich" (Isa 5:17). "Then one of the seraphim flew to Isaiah, with a burning coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs. And he touched the prophet's mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven."