

A Study in Isaiah 5:18–30

The Last Four Woes: Drawing Iniquity, Reversing Good and Evil, Pride, and the Coming Judgment

We are reading Isaiah chapter 5, beginning at verse 18.

"Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart-rope; that say, Let him make speed, and hasten his work, that we may see it; and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it."

"Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter."

"Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight."

"Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink; which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him."

"Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust; because they have cast away the law of the LORD of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel."

"Therefore is the anger of the LORD kindled against his people, and he hath stretched forth his hand against them, and hath smitten them... For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still."

"And he will lift up an ensign to the nations from far, and will hiss unto them from the end of the earth; and, behold, they shall come with speed swiftly... Their roaring shall be like a lion, they shall roar like young lions; yea, they shall roar, and lay hold of the prey, and shall carry it away safe, and none shall deliver it. And in that day they shall roar against them like the roaring of the sea; and if one look unto the land, behold darkness and sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof."

The Six Woes — Setting the Context

Isaiah chapter 5 contains six woes. The first is in verse 8 — Woe unto them that add house to house. The second is in verse 11 — Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning that they may follow

strong drink. We take up at the third, in verse 18, and continue through to the end of the chapter. The subject of the whole chapter is judgment: recognizing the difference between good and evil, and pronouncing each according to its true nature. Each of the woes names a specific form of departure from that right judgment.

Woe 3 — Drawing Iniquity with Cords of Vanity (v. 18)

Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart-rope. The contrast with Hosea 11:4 is illuminating: I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love — that is God drawing His people. But here it is men drawing iniquity toward themselves with cords of vanity. A cord connects two things. Vanity in Scripture often means emptiness. So what we see here is emptiness as the connecting cord between these men and their iniquities. They pursue after something worthless, and what they succeed in drawing toward themselves is willful transgression.

There is also the picture of labor in this verse. Drawing a cart is heavy, toilsome work. Sin is exhausting — though the man in it may not feel it that way, imagining himself to be enjoying it. But when he is delivered from it, he discovers what a load it was. Sin is not light. It is a cart-rope's worth of burden. And one remarkable detail: you can draw something with a rope, but you cannot push it away. Iniquity can be drawn toward oneself; it cannot be pushed away. The only deliverance is from outside — Christ removing the burden, casting it away.

There may also be a proud pretension in this verse. God is the one who draws — He drew Israel with bands of love. But here man takes to himself the role of the drawer, the one who pulls and determines what comes toward him. This is of a piece with the haughty words of verse 19, where they challenge God to be quick about His work, and with what is said of those in verse 17 who took to themselves what rightly belonged to God. The fat of the offerings was God's; those who took it were taking upon themselves what belonged to Him. So too here there may be a proud usurpation — man acting as the sovereign drawer rather than the one who is drawn by God's love.

Cart-ropes also appear implicitly in 1 Chronicles 13, where David brought up the ark of God on a Philistine-style cart. The oxen stumbled; death came upon Uzzah. Cart-ropes are not named there, but they are implied. Philistine sins in Scripture are particularly notable because they involve looking to the natural resources of the promised land to produce fruit for God without first going through Jordan and Gilgal for the cutting off of the flesh. That is a particularly obnoxious form of spiritual compromise. The mention of cart-ropes here calls that to mind.

Drawing Iniquity — and the Challenge of Verse 19

Verse 19 is a piece of sarcasm and profound unbelief. They say: Let him make speed, and hasten his work, that we may see it; and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it. This has something of the same character as Herod's hope to see a miracle done by the Lord Jesus when Pilate remitted Him to him. It is wrapped-up unbelief. The implication is: we do not believe any of this, but if He would hurry up and show us something, then we might. That is not faith. It is the demand for signs by those who have already closed their hearts.

And it is provocative. How obnoxious it must be to God that man would not only disbelieve His declared purposes but demand that He produce results on a timetable of man's own choosing. The verse actually connects forward to verses 26–30, where God does answer that challenge through the coming judgment — something they were very much going to see. There is terrible irony in challenging the Holy One of Israel to hurry and show them His counsel. In due time He will. But by then it will be too late to speak of we may know it.

Verse 19 also exhibits a real independency from God's rule. Men put themselves as judges over God, as it were, demanding that He perform. Right judgment begins when I place myself under the judgment of God — not when I sit in judgment upon Him. This is like those described in Luke, who rejected the counsel of God against themselves in not being baptized of John. The character of right judgment is to take sides against oneself with God.

Woe 4 — Calling Evil Good and Good Evil (v. 20)

Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter. This is a 180-degree reversal. This is not Laodicean neutrality, where things are lukewarm and grey and one cannot tell whether it is cold or hot. This is the complete inversion of right and wrong — evil called good, good called evil.

There is a moral order in the three pairs given. First, evil and good — that is the moral dimension. What flows from calling evil good? Darkness. And what is the fruit of living in that darkness? Bitterness. So the three pairs hang together: moral inversion leads to spiritual darkness, and spiritual darkness leads to the bitterness of the soul. It is like the downward course of Cain: inversion, darkness, destruction.

Verse 20 implicitly acknowledges a standard outside of the one who judges. Evil, good, darkness, light, bitter, sweet — these are all defined by a standard external to the one making the proclamation. Verse 21 goes further: there they do not even acknowledge that the standard is external to themselves. They have set themselves up as their own standard. The difference between verse 20 and verse 21 is between perverting God's standard and abolishing the very idea that there is one. Both are woes. But they represent successive stages in departure.

It is imperative to understand how God defines things. If God defines something as evil, it is evil. If He defines something as good, it is good. Those definitions cannot be altered. Judgment must be based upon those definitions, or it does not deserve the name judgment. Judgment is just — and the Lord Jesus said: My judgment is just, because I seek not my own will, but the will of the Father who sent me. One of the devices for reversing moral definitions in Israel was what the Lord condemned as corban: a device by which an act of disobedience was offset by a financial gift to the temple, so that the net result of doing evil could be presented as a positive outcome. Paul addressed the same principle in Romans 3:8 — shall we do evil that good may come? Whose condemnation is just.

Woe 5 — Wise in Their Own Eyes (v. 21)

Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight. This flows naturally from the previous woe. When a man has perverted the moral definitions and rejoiced in his perversions, he becomes wrapped up in them, characterized by them, and eventually regards himself as wise for having done so. Pride is the natural fruit of moral perversion.

The Lord Jesus said that the Father had hidden things from the wise and prudent — and He did not mean merely the naturally clever. He meant this evil kind of wisdom, the self-satisfied prudence that sees no need for anything from outside itself. It is the precise opposite of humility and dependence. And pride is a disgusting thing in a creature of God. There is only One who is wise and prudent intrinsically, and it is not man.

Darby's summary on free will is apt here: the pretension of the first man not to be totally lost. That is the heart of it. The middling man, neither very good nor very bad, pluming himself on being reasonably decent — that is the pretension. And the more a man reverses good and evil, the more he convinces himself of his own wisdom in having done so.

Woe 6 — Mighty to Drink and Justifying the Wicked for Reward (vv. 22–23)

Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink; which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him. Proverbs 31:4–5 gives the principle directly: it is not for kings to drink wine, nor princes strong drink, lest they drink and forget the law and pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted. That is exactly what we see here. The mixing and drinking leads to perverted judgment, and the perverted judgment has a price — they justify the wicked for reward.

Justifying the wicked for reward characterizes much of what passes for legal practice today, as well as much broader social and political perversion. It is a form of inverted judgment on the grandest scale.

And take away the righteousness of the righteous from him — at the cross of Christ this was done in the most extreme case ever known. He was numbered with the transgressors. It was a grave injustice, a totally false and wrong judgment. The name and righteousness of the Lord Jesus has never yet been publicly vindicated in this world. But it will be. And that is the foundation for our patience as Christians.

The greater the light that a people has received, the severer the judgment when that light is rejected. The servant who knew his master's will and did not do it was beaten with many stripes. Those who have had the scriptures, the revelation of God, and the word of the Holy One of Israel are held to a higher account than those who have not. This is why Revelation 17 speaks of double judgment upon Babylon — double unto her double for all her sins. And the four hallelujahs that follow in Revelation 19 are the only occurrence of that word in the New Testament, reserved for the overthrow of the worst of perversions. Psalm 9:17 says: the wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God — not those that never knew Him, but those that have known Him and forgotten.

The Root and the Blossom — and the One Great Cause (v. 24)

Verse 24 states the consequence: their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust. The image is of root and branch together — a thoroughness in God's governmental judgment. What seems well-rooted proves to be rotten. What appears to be blossoming goes up as dust. And the cause is stated plainly at the end of the verse: because they have cast away the law of the LORD of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

There is a beautiful distinction in the two designations. The law of Jehovah of hosts — He is the Commander of armies, and His law comes with that authority. But also the word of the Holy One of Israel — He has communicated. He has spoken. Those communications are to be treasured. That word has come from Him, and to despise any part of it is a very serious and offensive thing. To cast away the law and despise the word is to be left in darkness, with no sunrise. The light has not risen for those who will not receive His word. God has given us sixty-six portions of His word — sixty-six love letters from God, as one has said. For the Christian, those same communications reveal the Father's heart and the person of the Lord Jesus in a way that goes far beyond even what was known to the godly Israelite.

Verses 25–30 — God's Anger Still Stretched Out; the Ensign to the Nations

Verse 25 summarizes the governmental consequence: therefore is the anger of the LORD kindled against his people, and he hath stretched forth his hand against them, and hath smitten them. And yet — for all this, his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still. This refrain appears three times in chapter 9 as well (verses 12, 17, 21), each time noting that despite blow after blow of

judgment, the anger has not ceased and the hand is still stretched out. The judgment has not yet exhausted the account.

Verses 26–30 describe the instrument God will use — an unnamed but terrible military power summoned from afar, none weary, none stumbling, none sleeping, bows all bent, horses' hoofs like flint, wheels like a whirlwind. Their roaring is like a lion, like young lions. They shall lay hold of the prey and none shall deliver it. And when one looks to the land, there is nothing but darkness and sorrow. The end state is: the light is darkened in the heavens thereof.

The challenge of verse 19 will be answered. They asked to see His work, to know His counsel. They will see it — in the darkness and the roaring and the sorrow of judgment. God is not slack. He does hasten His purposes in due time. But the hearts of those who issued that challenge were not in a fit state to receive what His counsel truly offered. That is always the trouble. The Lord is presented; He tests the state; and the state is found wanting.

May we receive His word with humility, putting ourselves under His judgment rather than presuming to sit in judgment over Him.