

Country music is famous for its sad love songs, its songs about love gone wrong. One of the best and most famous is by the late, great George Jones: "He Stopped Loving Her Today."

If you don't know the song, it's a guy singing about his friend. The friend couldn't let go of his love for the woman who left him. The friend didn't stop loving his ex, until that day when they bury him in his grave.

*He stopped loving her today  
They placed a wreath upon his door  
And soon they'll carry him away  
He stopped loving her today*

Hard to get much sadder than that.

Our Old Testament lesson, oddly enough, also has a guy singing about his friend, and about a love gone wrong.

Isaiah begins, "Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard."<sup>1</sup> Beloved here is not a lover, but more like a best buddy. More on that in a minute.

And the love song seems a little weird:  
"My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill."<sup>2</sup>

That's an odd love song to us: "My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill."

We'll also come back to that in a minute. But for now, let's keep going.

We've got the vineyard on a choice and fertile piece of property. That's good. The owner clears out all the rocks from the soil. Israel is like New England in this respect—lots of rocks that have to be cleared. Lots of work to do. Also, Isaiah says that the owner built a watchtower in the middle of the vineyard, and hewed out a wine vat in it.<sup>3</sup>

This ancient Israeli wine vat is not like ones we have. You go out to one of the wineries south of town and you'll see big stainless-steel tubs to crush the grapes in. That's not what we're talking about. This ancient Israeli wine vat isn't even like the movies, where you see women stomping grapes in big wooden tubs.

No, Isaiah says the guy "hewed" the wine vat. In other words he carved it out of the bedrock. This is what they did in the Middle East. Very little wood. Lots of rock. So it's a big stone vat carved into the hill. Very labor intensive.

And there's that stone watchtower built in the middle. The tops of these towers would be good places to keep a lookout. But these towers were also designed to be storage places.

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<sup>1</sup> Is 5:1

<sup>2</sup> Is 5:1

<sup>3</sup> Is 5:2

They were constructed to hold the wine on the bottom floor in a cool dark place so it could ferment properly.

So Isaiah's buddy is not just planting a few vines in his backyard one weekend. Isaiah's buddy is planting a vineyard, AND building a winery, AND building a warehouse out of rock. This man is going to a lot of effort and expense to build his vineyard and winery.

But, we're told, "He expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes."<sup>4</sup> Literally it yielded 'stink berries.' Rotten, nasty, stinky diseased grapes.

What did this guy do wrong? Nothing. Great location. The best vines. Lots of hard work and building state of the art facilities.

And, I can't resist the pun... the guy had GRAPE EXPECTATIONS. He expected a good harvest of grapes, and he did everything right. Yet he got bad grapes.

Now, you may be thinking, "Wait a minute. You said this was a love song? "

"Vines? Vineyard? Rock buildings? Love song???"

Actually, in the ancient Middle East they would have immediately recognized this as a love song. It's a type of love song a best man would sing about the groom at a wedding feast. And anything referring to crops, or fruit trees, or vines would immediately have been recognized as a reference to the bride.

So, this is very recognizable in Isaiah's culture as a love song by a man about his best friend, and his best friend's new wife. And such songs would usually be joyous.

Ah... But this is a sad love song. The groom does everything right in this relationship. But the message is, his bride doesn't. And she produces a crop of bad grapes, which probably means children with another biological father. She's been messing around on her husband. So, this is a song about unfaithfulness. This is a song about a love gone wrong. Sounds like something you could hear on a country radio station today.

But all of a sudden, there's a change. The song about a love gone wrong turns into something else. Isaiah is reeling us in, and we don't even realize it. He's pulling us in before he springs the trap.

The audience is suddenly asked to be judge and jury for the groom. It starts as a sad love song. Now it's a legal parable.

"And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Is 5:2

<sup>5</sup> Is 5:3-4

And the expected answer is "nothing." 'You did everything right. It's the vines that chose to yield nasty grapes. It's your spouse who was cheating on you. Dude, it's not your fault.'

But then, as soon we've been impaneled as the jury, there's another switch. Now that we've bought into the fact that the vineyard owner is in the right, we get a directed verdict from the bench. The owner acting as judge says:

"And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge... I will break down its wall... it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briers and thorns."<sup>6</sup>

Notice, the owner's not going to destroy the vineyard. He's just going to remove his protection from it. No more wall. No more protective hedge. No more pruning. No more pulling weeds.

If the vines are going to run wild, then the owner is going to let them really run wild.

Basically, if the unfaithful spouse has made up her bed, then she'll get to lie in it. She won't be punished. She'll simply get to experience the consequences of her bad behavior.

Okay. Sounds fair. Actually, people in Isaiah's time would say it's a lot better than she deserves.

And that's when Isaiah springs the trap.

"For the vineyard belongs to the LORD of hosts."<sup>7</sup> Wait. That's who we're talking about? The LORD of hosts? Yahweh Sabaoth? He's the jilted lover? He's the aggrieved plaintiff? Ooh.

Yes, Isaiah says. It's God.

And what's more, the vineyard is the house of Israel. 'Oh' the people of Judah and Jerusalem would say. 'The house of Israel. Those people that split from us in the civil war 200 years ago.'

'Well those folks are a pretty wild bunch. I can see them not being faithful to God.'

But then the rest of the sledgehammer falls. Yes, Isaiah says, "The vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting."<sup>8</sup>

People of Judah. It's not just your neighbors to the north. It's also you. You also have not been faithful to the Lord.

And then the big charge at the end of this love song:

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<sup>6</sup> Is 5:5-6

<sup>7</sup> Is 5:7

<sup>8</sup> Is 5:7

God "expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!"<sup>9</sup> It's even more poetic in Hebrew.

God expected *MISHPAT* but saw *MISPACH*,  
*ZEDAQA* but heard *ZE-AHQA*.

God wanted justice. In Isaiah, justice means fair relationships in society. The opposite of justice is the economically and/or politically powerful in society doing anything they want, taking advantage of the poor. No due process. Might makes right. The golden rule as the one who has the gold gets to make the rules. God wanted justice, but the people are acting violently.

And God wanted righteousness. God wanted his people to be in relationship with him. But the people chase after other gods, and the people chase after their own selfish goals.

And so, the message is clear. You've been unfaithful to God. And God is going to let you experience the consequences of your bad behavior.

God isn't raining down fire and brimstone punishment because of their bad behavior. But God will withdraw his wall of protection from them. And they will experience the consequences of their bad behavior.

You don't want to act like you're my people?' God is basically saying.

'Then I won't act like you're my people. Deal with that for a while.'

This is tough love. But sometimes tough love is necessary. Is God being harsh and mean? I don't think so.

Parents know that you can't hover around your children and rescue them all the time. At times you have to let them experience the consequences of their behavior.

That's what God is facing with his people. In the middle of his pain, in the face of his people's rejections, God's love for them never changes. And God longs to gather his people back again. God longs for the day when his people will turn back to him in love, again.

Later, in Isaiah 27, God sings of his vineyard again. He sings about how he longs to water it and guard it and weed it and protect it.

He just wants that vineyard to cling to him and not be in rebellion.

"Let it cling to me... Let it make peace with me," God says.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Is 5:7

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 27:6

That's God's longing. He longs to be with us, to be in relationship with us. God wants to be our Father and Spouse and Beloved.

And sometimes we respond to God with love. And sometimes we turn away in apathy or even in rebellion.

Yet God always waits lovingly and patiently for us. We may turn away. But God longs for us to turn back.

We may be unfaithful to God at times. But God is always faithful to us.

God creates us to bear spiritual fruit—to love God with our whole heart and mind and strength, to love our neighbors as ourselves.

At times we may produce the fruit of love in our lives. At times we may live and act lovingly. At times we might not.

Yet whether or not we're acting lovingly, God is always loving towards us.

Yes, our poor response to God's love may make for a sad love song at times.

But thank God that his love is always there for us.

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