

# Grace, grace, and more grace

Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:23-36

*Isaiah 5:1-7*

Let me sing for my beloved  
my love-song concerning his vineyard:  
My beloved had a vineyard  
on a very fertile hill.  
He dug it and cleared it of stones,  
and planted it with choice vines;  
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,  
and hewed out a wine vat in it;  
he expected it to yield grapes,  
but it yielded wild grapes.  
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?  
When I expected it to yield grapes,  
why did it yield wild grapes?  
And now I will tell you  
what I will do to my vineyard.  
I will remove its hedge,  
and it shall be devoured;  
I will break down its wall,  
and it shall be trampled down.  
I will make it a waste;  
it shall not be pruned or hoed,  
and it shall be overgrown with 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 people of Judah

are his pleasant planting;  
he expected justice,  
but saw bloodshed;  
righteousness,  
but heard a cry!

*Matthew 21:33-46*

Jesus said, "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

## **Introduction**

I think we have all had our moments of great disappointment when someone does not live up to our expectations. You give someone else your trust, your confidence, your money. Many of us know the pain of trust that was not honored.

You have worked hard for many years, and you invest your savings in a fund that promises great returns. If that fund does not live up to your expectation, this can be so frustrating...

You have some employees who really do not perform as they should, in spite of the training, and support, and salary you give them. This is very upsetting.

Among friends, we can also be very hurt, if our friendship is betrayed by someone you always supposed to be a friend... but in the end, you find out he was just using you.

### **1. Grace of God – gives us magnificence**

Jesus told a story of a wealthy landowner who was deeply disappointed in the people who leased his property. The landowner had bought the land, he planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. He did all the hard work: he invested a lot of time, money, and energy into the vineyard.

Then he leased it to some tenants and went to another country. And when the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his rent.

In Israel, the idea of a landlord who goes abroad and leases his lands to tenants, an absentee landlord as we call it, was very com-

mon; many wealthy people preferred to live in a cooler place, maybe even in Rome, to avoid the hot summers of the Middle East.

Jesus' listeners probably all knew some of the famous Jewish families who lived abroad but who were at the same time landowners in Israel, so the setting of the story was not strange to them.

They also knew the stories of the Old Testament where Israel was compared to a vineyard. Isaiah sings a song about the beauty of the vineyard, aware that God had been very good to Israel.

With great devotion and love God had given Israel everything it needed. He blessed them with a great planet, sun and moon in the sky, fine lands, lovely families, really everything they needed.

Can we deny that the Lord our God has really made our lives beautiful? We have all we need: work, food, a home, family, a community around us. We thank God for his gracious benevolence.

The landlord in our story made it really easy for the tenants – all was prepared for them. And as a landlord, he was not a demanding micro-manager.

He reminds me a bit of my landlord here in Maadi. I have had a few landlords who were mean, strict, whimsical, maybe you know that sort. But presently we have a gentleman of a landlord - he allows us to enjoy a villa with four bedrooms and a nice garden, a lovely home, he never bothers us with demands, and the rent is ridiculously low.

The dear man lives around the corner but we seldom see him – a great asset in a landlord - he behaves as a distant landlord. He only wants us to pay our rent on time, and even when we are sometimes a few weeks late, he is gracious.

God has given us all we need, and then He does not make our lives hard with tough demands, but He behaves as a distant landlord. Trusting us, that we will manage his properties well.

He gives us all we need, including a lot a freedom to enjoy our life. Graciously, He has entrusted his whole creation to us. And what He asks of the tenants is not unreasonable. Love your neighbor, live in peace, trust in God, do justice, follow Jesus Christ.

## **2. Even when disobeyed, he offers grace**

But man has a great tendency to mess up. The tenants in the story refused to pay the rent.

Jesus speaks in the first place of the leaders of Israel who did not follow the laws of God, they were not thankful for all that was entrusted to them, but they wanted to become the owners themselves.

So when the slaves of the landlord arrived, the tenants refused to pay the rent. Instead, they had the guts to kill the slaves, and when the landlord sent more slaves to cash the rent, they were badly treated again. Just as Israel had throughout the centuries killed many prophets send to them again and again.

It is easy to focus on the wicked behavior of the tenants in this parable, but much more interesting is to look at the very interesting behavior of the landlord.

If my landlord sends his *bowab*, Musa, to pick up the rent, and I kill Musa in order not to pay what will my landlord do? Even though he is a kind man, I bet that I will have half of Maadi's police-force in my home within 15 minutes, and I will be dragged to jail.

But the landlord in our story gave the tenants another chance; he sent more slaves to pick up the rent. Trying again to get his rent and actually save his tenants from punishment.

And after the next group of slaves was mistreated and some even killed, the landlord decided to send his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'

At this point the story goes way beyond the boundaries of reason, as in the ordinary course of life no property owner whose rights have been so rudely trampled upon, would have been generous enough to give the criminals still another chance. Certainly he would not have delivered his own son to those who had battered his servants.

Indeed. But mind you, it is a parable. And actually a parable depicting unreasonable sin on the one hand, and love incomprehensible on the other. Considered in this light the story is one of the most beautiful and touching ever told.

What should the landlord have done? He is in a position of power and He can retaliate. Call the police? Punish the tenants? How should he channel his anger? Will he allow his enemies to dictate his response?

The landlord decided to undertake a final effort... of total vulnerability. He did something deeply touching. He sends his son. His one and all. His life, his love.

The anonymous writer of the letter to the Hebrews would later write:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he ap-

pointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.

God spoke through prophets for many centuries, and finally, through his Son. And even though one after another was butchered, God did not stop loving.

This is the center of the story Jesus is telling us, the key to understand it. We see the self-emptying love of the owner of the vineyard. Jesus is not just telling a story about the wickedness of the leaders of Israel. He is really telling a story of the patient self-emptying love of God. A God who does not stop loving us.

They will respect my son: they will feel shame in his presence.

King Hussein of Jordan was popular in his own land, the Kingdom of Jordan. In spite of this, he sometimes faced rebellion of his 'tenants'. In the Middle East a story circulates about how King Hussein dealt with one such rebellion in 1980. Let me read from Kenneth Bailey's book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (p. 418)

One night in the early 1980s, the king was informed by his security police that a group of about seventy-five Jordanian army officers were at that very moment meeting in a nearby barracks plotting a military overthrow of the kingdom. The security officers requested permission to surround the barracks and arrest the plotters. After a somber pause the king refused and said, "Bring me a small helicopter." A helicopter was brought. The king climbed in with the pilot and himself flew to the barracks and landed on its flat roof. The king told the pilot, "If you hear gun shots, fly away at once without me."

Unarmed, the king then walked down two flights of stairs and suddenly appeared in the room where the plotters were meeting and quietly said to them:

Gentlemen, it has come to my attention that you are meeting here tonight to finalize your plans to overthrow the government, take over the country and install a military dictator. If you do this, the army will break apart and the country will be plunged into civil war. Tens of thousands of innocent people will die. There is no need for this. Here I am! Kill me and proceed. That way, only one man will die.

After a moment of stunned silence, the rebels as one, rushed forward to kiss the king's hand and feet and pledge loyalty to him for life.

King Hussein opted for total vulnerability. He acted nobly and by so doing he fanned into flame the dying embers of the rebels' sense of honor.

In line with the example of King Hussein, the owner of the vineyard in the story of Jesus hopes that the violent men in the vineyard will sense the indescribable nobility of the owner, and submit.

### **3. When rejected, He still offers grace**

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.'

Get the inheritance? How can they think that they can become the owners of the vineyard, by killing the son?

According to the Jewish collection of traditions, the Mishna, inheritance would be secured after three years of occupancy of the premises, if there was no legal inheritor and the owner had died.

So maybe the tenants hoped that the distant owner would not be able to act decisively after having lost his son? Maybe they assumed that the owner would not do anything, as he had also allowed his slaves to be killed? How dumb sin can be.

The apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Romans:

Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God should lead you to repentance?

But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God

But the tenants in the story were not impressed by the landlord's kindness. They stubbornly seized his son, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. The die had been cast.

Jesus then asks the Jewish leaders he spoke to, what the owner of the vineyard was to do with the tenants. In the story Jesus had given them enough rope, and they did not see it come. They said to him:

He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.

They fell into the trap. Jesus then said:

Have you never read in the scriptures:  
'The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone;  
this was the Lord's doing,  
and it is amazing in our eyes'?

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken  
away from you and given to a people that produces the  
fruits of the kingdom.  
The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces;  
and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.

God is immensely gracious, but do not think his grace can be stretched limitless. God is patient, but He does hold all of us accountable.

The stone rejected by the builders, but chosen by God, that is a quote from Psalm 118, and in that Psalm, the stone refers to Israel. Despised and rejected by man, but chosen by God.

But Jesus now presents himself as the basis for God's interaction with the world instead of Israel. He sums up all that God expected from Israel, and what Israel, and mankind, failed to do.

He represents God to mankind, as the cornerstone for the new humanity that God creates.

The parable shows premeditated murder of the son, exactly the response of the Jewish leaders to Jesus.

You reject the son, is what Jesus says to the leaders of Israel, and the result is that you will be crushed and the kingdom will be taken away from you, to be given to another people.

This is harsh language, it cannot be denied. But look at the bright side: Jesus does not suggest that the vineyard will be destroyed, as Isaiah predicted.

In Jesus' story, God is more gracious. He does not end his love-affair with his people in wrath, He opens a new door of grace.

Whereas for centuries God's presence in the world seemed to be confined to Israel, He now opens the doors wide for all people. The death of his son opens the door for more grace, much more.

The stone has become a cornerstone for a new building, in which not only faithful Jews, but believers in Jesus Christ from all nations are being build as living stones – people from all tribes and languages and nations.

Because of the murder of his Son, God did not diminish his offer of grace for Israel, he enlarged his offer to all. He did not do away with Israel, he kept his arms wide open – opened them even wider.

St Peter must have listened very carefully to Jesus when he told this parable. In his first letter, chapter 2:4-10, he would later write:

Come to Him as to a living stone, which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God; You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For this is contained in Scripture:

Behold, I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious corner stone, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.

This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve:

The stone which the builders rejected, this became the very corner stone,

and,

a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense,  
for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word,  
and to this doom they were also appointed.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God. You had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

### Conclusion

Israel disobeyed God, so He sent his prophets. They continued to disobey, so He sent more prophets. They continued to disobey, so graciously, God sent his own Son.

They killed his son, and in his grace, He did not wipe them out. God offers us grace, and grace, and more grace.

He keeps his arms wide open, and Israel, and all nations, are warmly invited to come and participate in his one holy nation, the church, consisting of people from all nationalities.

He has given us, his church great responsibility to bear fruit for him, with love, peace, faith. And as long as we hold onto him, even our failures he meets with... more grace.