

Whenever a prophet comes on the scene, it means that it is a critical time for God's people. It is a critical time because that prophet's message is basically this: "You have broken the Commandments. God's judgment is just around the corner, and time is running out for you to repent and turn back to Him." It is not a happy message. Rather, it is dark and foreboding and it stings you with the fear of the Lord. Its weight is meant to crush you so that there is nothing left for you to claim. If you had happened to live during the time of one of God's prophets, he would usually tell you that God is about to punish His chosen people for turning away from Him. There is no comforting word that ever comes from the mouth of a prophet until God's people have heard that harsh message: stop your sinning! They don't preach the Good News of God's mercy until the Law has cut the hearers' hearts in pieces and condemns them for the sinners that they really are.

Isaiah certainly had that message for the people who lived in and around Jerusalem over 700 years before Christ. Like in Jesus' parable, he said that they were God's vineyard, which He had planted with care. This vineyard was as perfect as the Garden of Eden in His sight. And yet these people were bad vines: instead of good, ripe, sweet grapes perfect for wine, they produced wild grapes—the bitter kind that do nothing but set your teeth on edge. They did violence to God's Name by worshiping other gods that they themselves have made up. They rejected the righteousness that God gives, for free, turned their noses up at the help the Holy Spirit gives to live a holy life, and they preferred shedding the blood of God's

prophets instead. And so here is God's Word for this critical time in the history of Israel—you will soon be destroyed. A foreign army will cut you down and trample you underfoot. If you don't end up killed then you will be deported with almost no chance of ever coming back again. Your carefully watered and fertilized land will soon become dry, weedy, thorny wasteland. This is none other than God's judgment and you will not escape it. That was what Isaiah had to preach.

Obviously, no one in the Old Testament would have liked to be a prophet. Their message is never easy to proclaim. Moses had pleaded with the Lord, using one excuse after another and then finally saying, "Please send someone else!" before he actually went to Egypt in obedience to God's command. Jeremiah complained that he was only a child and that he didn't know how to speak in front of God's people as a prophet. One man after another is thrown into the task of going to sinners and telling them that the time of God's judgment is near.

But not only is proclaiming the message a difficult task for a prophet to do, the response to that message usually makes it even worse. People with itching ears who want to hear only what sounds good have a real problem with hearing about their sin, even when the very next word is, that sin is forgiven. Deep down, whether you realize it or not, you also don't want to be stung with the fear of the Lord. For that would mean that you have failed, that you are not better than those other "hypocrites" and so-called "sinners" whom you know. That would

mean that the good things you do contribute nothing to your standing before God. It's so humiliating! To hear and believe God's Word spoken by His prophet is nothing more than giving up on helping yourself and trusting in Christ instead to save you. Nobody is ever ready for a prophet's harsh message, and some may even try their hardest to keep that message quiet.

And so, prophets will be persecuted for the sake of God's Word. According to a tradition that is outside the Bible, Isaiah was said to be murdered by being sawn into two pieces, as mentioned in Hebrews 11:37 but without saying who that was. God sends one servant after another into His vineyard, and the workers continue to beat, kill and stone them. But not only did God not stop sending preachers at crucial times pleading with His people to repent, He then sent Jesus! His death, and the deaths of every prophet who preached before Him, these deaths were none other than the Lord's doing. Every time we remember it, it is marvelous in our eyes. Isaiah himself says about Jesus: "It was the will of the Lord to crush Him." (Is. 53) As it happened to the prophets, so it also happened to Jesus.

For our Lord, just like the prophets, appeared at a critical time, too. According to God the Father's own design, just like in the parable, He sent His only Son. The message Jesus preached sounded like that of the prophets through whom He preached in time past. He also preached that God's judgment was right around the corner. And yet here was the difference: God's final, once-for-all judgment was not going to fall on His sinful people, but instead it would destroy Jesus as He stood in their place. With His crucifixion only days away at this point in Matthew 21, Jesus spoke with

urgency in His voice to call sinners to repent of their own ways, to stop sinning, and instead trust in Him to take away their sins. He wanted them to give up on trying to please God by their own good deeds and instead receive His free forgiveness and absolution. It was truly a critical time for God's people—it was indeed the fullness of time. For God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that He would get the punishment and we would have God's righteousness and good favor.

Fellow citizens of heaven, this is now a critical time for you! God's judgment is right around the corner, and time is of the essence. The day of God's final verdict is at hand. All those other times when God handed out punishment, those were really the first installments of the great Last Day, the Second Coming of Christ that will soon be here. I tell you now, be ready for that day! Stop your sinful thoughts, words and deeds that test the patience of your heavenly Father. God's punishment is still very real and we have every reason to fear His wrath. Why? Because it is all too easy to reject God's Word. It is all too easy for you to say, "I know all this stuff already." But do you believe it? Can you defend it if someone challenges you? All who refuse to believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins will be deported to the permanent punishment and damnation in the everlasting fire of hell. This would have been your future were it not for Jesus, who took your place and He already suffered hell for you.

So if you are crushed under the weight of what you have done, or how you have offended God and alienated your neighbor and you realize that there is nothing within you that pleases God, then the sight of Jesus despised and rejected, hanging on the

cross—this is the Lord’s doing for your sake, and it is marvelous in your eyes. Your sins are all paid for, and your guilt is taken away. The coming day of God’s judgment is a day when you will finally see your Lord face-to-face and He will welcome you with open arms.

Though you were torn down and destroyed by the law that you read in the Ten Commandments and God’s condemnation, you are now replanted as a new vineyard by the Gospel. You are an heir of eternal life, a citizen of heaven. You as a fruitful branch are connected to Jesus the true Vine, and He uses you to bear good fruit in His vineyard, the Church. The very body and blood of Christ feeds you and waters you, and you are grafted into Him. Jesus has planted you Himself and you are the vineyard of His good pleasure. He gives you His Holy Spirit, so that by His power working in you, you can then, instead of sinning, serve others whom God has put in your path and so bring glory to Him. You had no ability within you to do good things, but it is Jesus and His Holy Spirit within you that bears the good fruit, in whatever responsibility in life or calling that God has given you.

Hear God’s Word from the mouth of His holy prophets and receive what it gives. God’s judgment is right around the corner—so do not reject His message. Recall Isaiah’s words about the vineyard of the Lord. Believe in Jesus Christ, His Son, who was sent to tear you down and destroy your sinful pride and replant you as His own vineyard, a Garden in which He delights. For the Son who was sent to the vineyard and killed—He is no longer dead. That is the happy Easter message, your punishment is gone. And joined with Christ, you too shall rise from the dead to be with Him on

that last judgment day. Until that time you have your Lord and Savior here in front of your very eyes, giving you His life-giving body and blood and proclaiming forgiveness to you. You are the vineyard of the Lord, and He has promised to take care of you until the great harvest day.

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.