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WINFIELD BIBLE SCHOOL - 2003

OUR FAITH: CHALLENGES AND CONSOLATIONS

Speaker: Bro. Michael Ashton

Exhortation: The garden of God

Reading: Mark 12 and Isaiah 5

Good morning brethren and sisters.

The bible is a book which is full of illustrations. They're, of course, not pictures apart from the fact that they're word pictures, and the mind of God, because of our weakness and frailty and because we find it much easier to understand pictures than almost anything else, has provided that means of teaching us. Yet, despite all the illustrations that there are in scripture, have you noticed that without exception, they're all based on natural things? The word **chariots** and other manmade artifacts, in bible times, but those aren't really used as illustrations, God only uses the things of His own creation to teach men and women His great truths. Even when He's teaching about the iniquity and wickedness of men, He still uses pictures from His own creation; Nebuchadnezzar was granted a vision, it was a vision of a man albeit made out of metal, but it was a man and he was being taught of man's wickedness and the things that man had to do, and how man could turn to God and be blessed by Him.

The reason that God speaks to us in this way, is because it's something that we can relate very closely to ourselves, it's something that we can capture, something we can remember, something that we can bring to mind more easily as we go around and see the things that God has made, then they're intended to teach us spiritual lessons. Our eyes are to be open on a daily basis as a result of that! and because that's the way in which God works, we shouldn't be surprised that it's also the way in which His son, our Lord Jesus, taught the gospel message and God through the Lord Jesus Christ was teaching us in those same pictures, the Lord was picking up pictures that His Father had used previously. There's an example of this in our New Testament reading today in Mark 12, it's the parable of the vineyard.

It's a parable that we know so well, it's got a very pointed message when it comes from the Lord's lips and it was directed very much at the people of His day. This is a picture that's been developing over a period of time, and it's as appropriate for earlier generations as it was for the generation to whom the Lord was speaking, and it's appropriate for us, who live in later times than the times when the Lord was speaking. But, have you ever asked yourself where the Lord got His picture of the parable of the vineyard from? Well, you're bible will probably tell you if it's a bible with a margin! there

will be a hint in the margin, well, look at Isaiah 5; well, let's follow the hint, shall we? and see what Isaiah chapter 5 has to tell us.

In the Lord's hands, as I said, the parable was directed very much at the generation in which He was living. It was speaking about the people who didn't recognize the son when the Lord of the vineyard sent him to receive the fruits of the vineyard. But back in Isaiah 5 there is a parable, just in the same way the Lord was speaking the parable, except in Isaiah 5 it's called a **song**, 'I will sing to my well-beloved, a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: 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 made a winepress in therein: and looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes'.

Now that was an aspect which the Lord Jesus didn't pick up in His parable, He didn't speak particularly about the quality of the fruit, He just said that the lord of the vineyard was going **to send in order to receive fruit from the vineyard** and we weren't told what the fruit was. But as soon as we bring Isaiah 5 and overlay it on top of Mark 12, we realize that the people of Israel were not producing the fruit that God was seeking. So there is an implicit challenge now, in the parable, because clearly the LORD God and His Son looks for fruit from us, and in our meeting together this morning, each of us individually, has to examine himself or herself, about the sort of fruit that we're producing. What is it that God is seeking from us? and more importantly, what is it that we're producing? what will it be that He'll see? what is our lifetime's vineyard producing for God? As I said, that aspect wasn't focussed on by the Lord Jesus, nor rather was it the attitude of the servants, but, of course, isn't the attitude of the servants part of the fruitfulness for which God is looking? Isn't He seeking from us, **right attitudes, right responses** to His Word and to His call? so perhaps we were wrong and perhaps the Lord was speaking about the fruit that was coming from the vineyard.

So was it Isaiah 5 then, on which the parable of the vineyard in Mark 12 was based? Are the margins of our bibles correct? Well, yes, of course, they are and yes it is based on Isaiah 5. But we'd be wrong if we thought that this is where it all starts. It doesn't start in Isaiah 5 at all! Just go back to the book of Psalms and Psalm 80, and if you think this is where it starts as well, well, you're wrong! but it's just going to help us as we move our way to find out where the picture really does commence. You see, in Psalm 80 picking up really what Isaiah 5 says, that the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel and the men of Judah, His pleasant plant, the psalmist in Psalm 80 explains in verse 8, 'Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt, cast out the heathen and planted it. Prepared room before it, caused it to take deep root, and it filled the Land. The hills were covered with the shadow of it', and so now it's speaking of the history of Israel, and how Israel as a nation was forged in the iron furnace in Egypt, and brought out from Egypt as a vine, and planted in the choice place that God had prepared for it; and the vine was able to take deep root. So verse 11, 'She sent out her boughs unto the sea, and her branches unto the river', and the psalmist now asks the question, 'why hast thou then broken down her hedges, so that all they which pass by the way do

pluck her?' and the same comment is made in Isaiah 5, because God finds that the vine now is not producing the fruit that He seeks, He's going to break down the hedges and he's going to make that vineyard into a way that people will just pass through and tread down the ground so that it can no longer bring forth, and bring forth fruit that God seeks.

The same is true here in verse 13, 'The boar out of the wood doth waste it', and of course, that's exactly what happened, the nations are described by God as beasts, aren't they? and here was a beast, a boar out of the wood; the land was left for those who would invade it, they would ravish and waste it. The wild beasts of the field would devour it'. The people now were able to cry to God, 'Return, we beseech Thee, O God of hosts: look down from heaven and behold, and visit this vine; and the vineyard which thy right hand hath planted'. Then moving ahead of ourselves, just a little comment! 'and the Branch that Thou madest strong for Thyself'. So there was another element to the vineyard because of the failure of the national plant, God now takes an individual, and it is that individual that is going to bring forth the fruit that He really seeks. As I say, that's running ahead of our story! So is this where it starts?

Does the picture start with the Israel vine being taken out of Egypt? The answer is, no! it isn't! No, the picture starts as early as it possibly can. The picture starts right back in the early chapters of Genesis and it's on that, that both God Himself and the Lord Jesus Christ draw all this information and build upon it to teach us vitally important lessons. It's very interesting that we're told more about the garden of Eden **outside** of Genesis than we're told in Genesis. Quite fascinating really, and in places where we'd not expect to find that information at all. Just look at some of these passages with me, if you will! Turn to the prophecy of Isaiah 51, a passage that's very well known to us and a verse that's well known to us, but perhaps not quite as well known as we thought it was. You see, Isaiah 51 speaks about the need for us constantly to look back to our origins to find out where it is that we've come from and, of course, that's another aspect of our self examination this morning, we need to go back in mind to the time when we first committed ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ, and ask ourselves, what is the road that we followed? where is it that we've come from? what has been achieved? what has God achieved in us as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, since first we espoused Christ?

So here in Isaiah 51, 'Look unto the rock whence ye are hewn and the hole of the pit whence ye are digged', go back to your roots, the prophet is saying. 'Look to Abraham your father and Sarah that bear you', because our hope is an Israelitish hope, isn't it? as we constantly remind ourselves. The promise then is in verse 3, 'The LORD shall comfort Zion: He will comfort all her waste places; He will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody'. I don't know if you've ever thought of it before, but this verse tells us that **Eden was a place of praise**. Eden was a place of song, of music, of melody, of harmony. When we read in Genesis, that the time of the sin of Adam and Eve and they hid themselves from the voice of the LORD God walking in the

garden in the cool of the day, it indicates to us that on previous occasions they'd been pleased to rush and speak with the angels; oh, no! this verse says, 'to sing with the angels'.

It was a place of melody, so we ought not to be surprised when it comes to the time when the temple is constructed under the commands of David and Solomon, that great preparation is made to ensure that **daily** and on a continuing basis, there will be those that lead the congregation in praise and in song, and they taught by that means, following the pattern that was established back in Eden, where the angels taught Adam and Eve by songs, by music, and that's why it's so important that our hymns express our distinctive faith that we can learn from those things and teach by those things. So the words must be right, mustn't they? and we lift our minds as well as our voices to God when we sing. So Eden was a place of gladness, of joy and a place of praise.

Well, turn over to the prophet Ezekiel and chapter 31, and these are almost phrases which you might call 'throwaway phrases' except of course, nothing in scripture is a 'throwaway phrase', it's just that they appear in places where we wouldn't have expected them, and they tell us something about the purpose of God; again, if we thought about it, we might conclude what this confirms for us, the truth of those things. In Ezekiel 31, speaking here first of all, about Pharaoh king of Egypt, verse 5, 'His height was exalted above all the trees of the field, and his boughs were multiplied, his branches became long because of the multitude of waters, when he shot forth' (very similar to that vine that was brought out of Egypt and planted in the land, but this is now speaking about a heathen king, a Gentile king). 'All the fowls of heaven made their nests in his boughs, and under his branches did all the beasts of the field bring forth their young, under his shadow dwelt all the great nations'. Verse 8, 'The cedars in the garden of God could not hide him: the fir trees were not like his boughs, the chestnut trees were not like his branches; nor was any tree in the garden of God like unto him in his beauty. I have made him fair by the multitude of his branches: so that **all the trees of Eden, that were in the garden of God, envied him**'.

So I don't know what picture you've got in your mind of the garden of Eden, but although I'm sure there were flowers there, it was not a flower garden. The garden of Eden was an **arboretum**, it was a place that was full of trees, and there is actually a quotation from Genesis in this verse that we've just read; verse 9 of Ezekiel 31, the three words, **all the trees**, is a quotation straight out of Genesis 2 verse 16, of 'all the trees' of the garden thou mayest freely eat, save of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die'. So here, the prophet Ezekiel is just picking up an echo from Genesis 2 in Ezekiel 31, 'all the trees', and they were there to teach the people, there to teach Adam and Eve in the first instance about the things of God. All the trees of Eden!

So just turn over a few chapters to chapter 36 of Ezekiel, so we've got the plant that's planted there, and we've seen it described in Ezekiel 31 as if it was Pharaoh, and we need to go back in Ezekiel 31 in a moment, just to finish off that story. But here in chapter 36 we have another aspect which was picked up in Isaiah 5 and the parable of

the vineyard. Also in Mark 12 when the Lord Jesus Christ teaches that same parable; in verse 34 first of all, 'The desolate land shall be tilled, whereas it lay desolate in the sight of all that passed by', (of course, this is what happened, didn't it? the vine was brought out of Egypt, it was planted in the Land, the wild beasts of the field ravaged it, the wall was broken down, people were able to walk across the vineyard, and the people of that land, were taken into captivity and the land was desolate in the sight of all that passed by). Verse 35, 'And they shall say, This land that was desolate is become **like** the garden of Eden', so here is the restoration of Israel now being described as if it's the garden of Eden restored, 'and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are become **fenced** and are inhabited'. So yes, the wall had been broken down but when the true restoration takes place, then the fence will be restored as well. The protection is going to be there! 'Then the nations that are left round about you shall know that I the LORD build the ruined places, and plant that that was desolate; I the LORD have spoken it, and I will do it'.

I don't know if you've ever considered the fact that Eden had a fence, a wall around it, but that's the implication of these verses, that Eden was fenced; the LORD God planted a garden **eastward** in Eden, and just to confirm for us the fact that there must have been a fence there, remember that when Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden of Eden, the last verse of Genesis 3 says, 'And He placed **cherubim** and a flaming sword turning every way to keep the way of the tree of life'. Well, how would it have been possible for cherubim **placed only at the east of the garden of Eden**, how would it have been possible for them to prevent anyone from entering in, if there was no boundary around the rest of the garden? because all you had to do is walk around to the south, or to the north, or to the west, and you could enter the garden. So there was an entry point to the garden of Eden, and everywhere else was fenced, apparently; and the time will be that when those conditions are restored, there will be the same boundaries, so the nations will not be able to impose their ways upon the ways of God, which are there, because this is the **garden of God**.

You see, the LORD God did plant a garden eastward in Eden, and it was a place where man, first of all, was going to be situated and then where woman was going to be made as his companion. Although it was a garden for man, it was the garden of God. All the passages that we've looked at about the garden of Eden, have described it as the garden of God or the garden of the LORD. So, for anyone who is in Eden, they're being brought **close to God**. They're being related to Him, because it's His garden. Of course, that was true of Israel, and that's why Israel is described as a **vineyard** because Israel is God's people, Israel is God's land, and because they've been placed in God's land which He describes as His sanctuary, they are being brought close to Him. That's the important part!

Now I said we'd need to go back, for the picture we started back earlier in Ezekiel 31, didn't I? We looked at Pharaoh who was described as a great cedar with fair branches (there he is in verse 3 of Ezekiel 31, and what's going to happen to that great cedar? Well, verse 10, 'Because thou has lifted up thyself in height, shot up his top among the

thick boughs, and his heart is lifted up in his height; I therefore, delivered him into the hand of a mighty one of the nations; he shall surely deal with him: I have driven him out for his wickedness. And strangers, the terrible of the nations, have cut him off'. If you just go back a few chapters earlier to chapter 17, you'll see that the same sort of imagery is being used here. It's described as a **parable**, verse 2, 'Son of man, put forth a riddle, and speak a parable unto the house of Israel; And say, Thus saith the Lord GOD; A great eagle with great wings, longwinged, full of feathers, which had divers colours, came to Lebanon, and took the highest branch of the cedar. Cropped off the top of his young twigs, and carried it into a land of traffic'. This is a description as we're told later in the chapter of Nebuchadnezzar; Nebuchadnezzar is the great eagle, Lebanon is the hill country where the nation of Israel is. Also the highest branch, the top of his young twigs is the king, Jehoiakim, at this time who is taken away, taken away into captivity. As well, verse 5, 'The seed of the land is taken and planted in a fruitful field, placed by great waters', is that going to be the site, the new site for the country, 'by the waters of Babylon we sat, yea, we sat, but we remembered Zion, you remember?' we are told.

But verse 7, there was another great eagle with great wings and many feathers, not this time Nebuchadnezzar but Pharaoh, the Pharaoh of Egypt. 'The vine that was planted in captivity to bend her roots towards Him and shot forth her branches toward Him, that He might water it by the furrows of her plantation'. It was planted in good soil by great waters to bring forth branches and bear fruit so that it would be a goodly vine; shall it prosper? Well, we know the answer; it didn't prosper! Nebuchadnezzar only prospered for a time and was then cut off; Pharaoh only prospered for a time and was then cut off. Israel only prospered for a time and was then cut off! Well, what is going to happen? the prophet then looks forward, verse 22, and here we're able to pick up the hint that we found in Psalm 80,
about the One whom God would make strong for Himself.

So verse 22 of Ezekiel 17, 'Thus saith the Lord GOD, I will also take of the **highest** branch of the high cedar, and will set it; I will crop off from the top of his young twigs, a tender one, and will plant it upon a high mountain and eminent: In the mountain of the height of Israel will I plant it: it shall bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a goodly cedar: and under it shall dwell all fowl of every wing; in the shadow of the branches thereof shall they dwell'. The Lord Jesus reading this, then later turns this into another parable with His own stamp upon it, and says, 'And how shall I liken the kingdom of heaven? I shall liken it to a tree with spreading branches and under it the fowls of the heaven found their home'. He understood what this parable was speaking about, didn't He? All the trees of the field ,verse 24, shall know that I the LORD have brought down the high tree, have exalted the low tree, dried up the green tree, and made the dry tree to flourish'.

And that verse 24 is picked up in the gospel records as well, just turn if you will, to the gospel of Luke and chapter 23, and just to confirm exactly what it was that this picture which started way back in Eden, and then was used to speak about the nation of Israel

and about the nations which came upon Israel, and finally upon the prince, the Israelite prince whom God was going to choose, and through whom His purpose was going to be developed, the One to whom we are related as a result of our baptism into His Name. Then when He was going to fulfil His work for His heavenly Father, then that verse in Ezekiel is brought to our attention once again! In Luke 23 verse 27, when on the way to crucifixion, the Lord Jesus Christ is followed by a great company of people, we're told, and of women which also bewailed and lamented Him. Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, don't weep for Me, weep for yourselves and for your children. For, the days are coming in which they shall say, blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bare, and the paps that never gave suck. Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us. If they do these things in a **green tree** (when things might appear to be flourishing, when the nation is back in its land, surely now God has restored His people and all His promises are going to be fulfilled; now is the time for the kingdom; 'Lord, wilt Thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? We know how the disciples were thinking, don't we?) 'If they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the **dry?**' Just as there was in the garden, right back in the beginning, so two trees are being brought before us now, here, in the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ.

One which appears to be flourishing, the leaves they're all there! and another one which seems to have nothing to it at all! completely dry. So just go back in mind to the first garden, and it was despoiled by the sin of Adam and Eve as we know, and God in thrusting them out of the garden said to Adam, 'in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread. Thou shalt return to the ground, for out of it wast thou taken, dust thou art and to dust shalt thou return'. That same ground from which you are made, is going to bring forth thorns and thistles; it's the natural consequence, isn't it? of taking down the hedge and the wall and allowing people to trample their way through the garden, and the wild beasts which ravage it. What's going to happen? what's going to happen about those sort of conditions?

Well, there were two comments that the Lord Jesus makes. Go back, not quite to our reading for today, but to yesterday's chapter, Mark 11; you'll recall that there was this picture as well, as Jesus and the disciples, verse 12, were coming from Bethany, and Jesus saw a fig tree afar off having leaves, and He went if haply He might find any thing thereon; and when He came to it, He found **nothing but leaves**'. Every picture of a flourishing tree, but in fact, it wasn't flourishing, it was just leaves, that was all. And Jesus says, 'no man eat fruit of thee hereafter forever. And His disciples heard it'. It was the next day, verse 20, 'In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree **dried up from the roots**, and because it had not much depth of soil, it withered away'. Remember in the parable of the Sower, we are told the importance of roots that go down into deep, good soil and the foundation that each of us needs in the things of God, if when the storms of life affect us, we're going to be able to survive. All of that is tied up in this message here that the Lord Jesus Christ spoke about the fig tree.

But perhaps even more importantly than that, go back into the gospel of Matthew 7,

because what the Father and His Son looked for is **fruit!** That's what Jesus wanted from the fig tree, that's what God wanted from Israel! that's what God wants from us! that's why God sent His Son, because He knew that if anyone was going to produce fruit , it would be He! That's what Jesus says in verse 16, 'Ye shall know them by their fruits; Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?' NO, you're only going to get fruit when the ground is properly prepared, when the stones have been taken out, when the wall has been built. When some remedial attention is paid to this land, so that the plant can grow and it's tended properly. That's the only time fruits will come! Fruit doesn't come from inattention, fruit comes from **attention**. Fruit doesn't come from laziness, fruit comes from application! Fruit doesn't come from free-wheeling, fruit comes from putting in effort. Those are the things that we're taught, that's what it is that God and His Son is seeking from us. God is expecting us to apply our commitments, not just to voice it! We're taught to work out our salvation, not that salvation is a matter of works, but that is our response to the gift that God is going to give to us. We must undertake those things, we must seek to live the life which reflects the commitment that we've espoused; 'so a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that brings not forth good fruit, is hewn down and cast into the fire'.

As I said before, the picture that we had in Luke 23 was of two trees; one that was green and flourishing and one that was dry, and which one produced the fruit? Well, the natural man, the natural man says it's the green tree, it has to be! All the things that we've read would suggest that it was the green tree, but that wasn't looking at it with the eye of faith, was it? There would be many in Israel that would have seen three dry trees planted outside the walls of Jerusalem and they would have looked at them and they'd have said, 'and they can produce nothing!', and in two cases they would have been right, and in one case they couldn't have been more wrong! As the one thief said to the other, 'we are here indeed justly, we've received the due reward of our sins; but this man (the one in the middle) this man has done nothing amiss!' It was the one thief, wasn't it? who recognized that this tree in the middle was the top most branch of the cedar, it was the tender twig, and it had now been planted by God, and by all that the Lord Jesus Christ had done and said and was achieving by His death. What sort of fruit would it produce?

Well, ironically it would only produce fruit by dying! Now again, this is often true, isn't it? in nature. If you want to grow potatoes, then the seed potato has to die, and then the other potatoes will come, some twenty, some thirty, some fifty fold. It's the seed of corn going into the ground and dying so that it might bring forth much fruit, and therefore, what God and His Son are looking for is **fruit**; it's us, it's our lives that must be the fruit that they're seeking. It was written of the Lord, wasn't it? that He shall see His seed! What a wonderful thing! naturally speaking He had none; but the companionship (and God said at the beginning, 'it's not good that man should be alone'), the companionship which the rest of Adam's descendants have been able to have, was not for the Lord Jesus Christ during His earthly life. That must have been something hard for Him to give up, do you think there was no woman in Israel who could be a companion for Him?

but, there were, of course, there were women in Israel who could be a companion to the Lord. Think of Mary, and it doesn't matter which second name you put there, think of Mary and there would have been a woman for the Lord Jesus, wouldn't there? But those things as well He was able to resist, knowing that there would be a greater companionship for Him, as a result of the fruit that would come. What a privilege it is for us, my dear brethren and sisters, if that's the case! if we should be the fruit that He was seeking! So we should be thankful that the LORD God does speak to us, and illustrate His message to us in these ways. So as we go around and see the beauty of His creation, we're reminded of these great spiritual truths!

We need now to ask ourselves the question, which is implicit in these verses in Mark 12 that we read together. You see, the special line of this parable that the Lord was speaking, comes right towards the end in Mark 12, verse 9, 'What shall therefore the lord of the vineyard do?' Well, what shall, therefore, the Lord of your vineyard do? and the Lord of my vineyard do? because there's a sense in which this Preacher that we've been looking at, is an individual one; of course, it's also the community of believers, but each of us in a sense is an individual vineyard, hence, individually cared for by God and the plants that were placed there, were planted at the time of our baptism and have been growing ever since. If we've allowed it under the tending and guarding care of our heavenly Father; and He is looking for fruit! What will the Lord of this vineyard do, when He comes?

The message that's given to us is here in verse 10, 'Have ye not read this scripture; The Stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner; It was the LORD'S doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?' Have we made that rejected Stone, the cornerstone of our lives? because if we have, then the plant is growing strongly and firmly and will be bringing forth fruit. That was the message that the Lord Jesus wished to teach, and if we've strayed at all from setting out our lives from that cornerstone, aligning ourselves to it, then we've now got the opportunity to realign ourselves. As we take bread and wine we remember, the precious plant that started to grow in Israel, whose roots and branches are now spreading out into all the countries of the world, and springing forth and we pray, bringing forth fruit. This is the LORD'S doing! it's not the doing of man, it's marvellous in our eyes, but our greatest prayer is that it will be marvellous in His eyes! so that when He comes and sees His seed, He will be satisfied, and that we might share with Him in that wonderful time which He will establish, when the Word of the LORD will go forth from Zion and from Jerusalem to all nations, and all men will know that He is the Lord, as the waters currently fill the seas!