One thing about great literature is that it can help give us a framework by which to make sense of the world. If the world feels particularly unsettled someone will certainly break out a stanza or two from William Butler Yeats’ poem *The Second Coming*, if someone goes the other way and is a little too optimistic maybe you get a reference to it being the best of all possible worlds from Dr. Pangloss in Voltaire’s *Candide* and if someone is being particularly intransigent, they might be compared to the Heat Miser from the 1974 Christmas special *A Year Without a Santa*. Incidentally, I worked with a guy who looked exactly like the Heat Miser, but back to my point. Great literature speaks to something in the human soul that is universal and recognizable in the real world. But there can also be a danger to this and that is when we take a story and try to force every bit of reality into that fictional story. Like when someone whose favored political party is out of power tells you that we are literally living in Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Now, I realize this discussion might sound a little esoteric but stick with me because I think I have a point. And my point will have to do with prophesy in the Bible, which I am sure is where you thought I was going with this.

Now before I go on and get to this promised point I should say that I am not against prophesy I just believe it needs to be handled very carefully – like plutonium. Okay so let’s get to the scripture that got me thinking about all of this. It comes from Isaiah, and it concerns grapes, which warms my little Fresno heart. This protagonist of the story sets out to establish a vineyard and is very diligent in this pursuit. We are told that he cleared it of stones, planted it with choice vines and set a watchtower in the midst of it. And, after all of this, instead of yielding good grapes, it yields wild grapes. It was given everything it needed to thrive and yet it did not. At this point the mask is sort of ripped off and had we been thinking that this was some sort of agricultural story it is revealed that this is really about the people of Jerusalem and Judah – it is about God’s chosen people. Through the image of the vineyard, God is explaining everything that he has done for them and yet here we are with nothing to show for it. God then says, “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…. 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!” The story writ large is one of the rebellion of God’s people and the removal of God’s protection on those same people. And since this prophesy is left open ended, we are not sure if it has been fulfilled. It might be about the Babylonian captivity in the 6th century when Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jewish people were herded in exile or perhaps the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD or about something else entirely. And this is where the problem comes. Since we don’t know exactly if this has taken place or will take place it is open to all sorts of interpretations making the temptation to use it and whenever something goes wrong. That is if something bad happens we immediately say that it is because God has removed his protection from a disobedient people. For example, after the September 11th attacks a book came out called *The Harbinger* which asserted that those attacks happened because the hedge of God’s protection had been lifted from the United States and we were getting our just desserts. In such a mindset, we Monday morning quarterback and shoehorn whatever terrible thing has happened into some bit or prophesy we came across in the Bible. And while the Bible can certainly help explain things on earth, when done wrong it does not draw us closer to God but rather gives us a sense of moral superiority. Something bad happened and it is the fault of all the people who do not think and act like me.

Let me illustrate what I mean this misuse of scripture by means of a story. When I am deployed people come to me for counselling with various issues. One of the most difficult issues to navigate and one of most common are marital problems. The reason they are difficult is because most times you are only hearing one side of the story. Now most of the time the person coming is sincere and really looking for answers, but you occasionally get the person who wants to drag you in on his or her side of the fight. It goes like this: Someone has a fight with their spouse and they come to you with the desire of getting you to agree with them. This is so they are then able to call their spouse and say, “I talked to the chaplain, and he thinks you’re crazy too.” To my mind this is how some people want to use the Bible. To use it not as a means by which to grow closer to God but rather as a backup for whatever opinion they may have.

Going back to the protective hedge 9/11 book. My feeling in reading it was that the guy believed America had gone off track and so he brought in the Bible to back him up using the tragedies of 9/11 as an opening. He had an opinion and could then say that he consulted the Bible and all of you guys are in big trouble. And I do not like this because it starts from a place of demanding change from others rather than demanding change from ourselves. So much of secular society is predicated on the belief that all the problems of the world are someone else’s fault. We really do not need to get the church involved in this as well. And I know this is a theme I return to relatively often but I think we would all be much better off if we spent more time thinking and acting on a small or local scale. So rather than taking the removing of the protective hedge as a way to condemn vast swathes of society, take it and ask where are the times where I have squandered the goodness that God has given to me. When have I been ungrateful and been like the wild grapes that God discusses in this passage from Isaiah? And I say this not as an exercise in guilt but rather as a means by which to get ourselves right. So, we are able to delight in God’s will and to walk in his ways as we say in the confession.

Yes, there is certainly a lot wrong with the world and a lot of warped morality which tells us that right is wrong and that wrong is right. But there are not a lot of opportunities where we can fix the entire world, but there are a tremendous number of times where we can repent and return to the Lord. Where we can take time to thank God for being a loving God and for caring for us. When we read prophesy the first question to ask is not what is this telling me about others but rather what is it telling me about me. What is this helping me understand about my life? Going back to my opening about great literature we need to look at prophesy and ask not just how does this help make sense of the world but how does it draw me closer to God. If we have been going through a spiritually dry period a passage like the one we have from Isaiah today helps us to go back and ask questions about our lives; to ask if there are places where we have strayed; places where we have fled God’s protection. And then seek a return to God so that we may be his own this day and forevermore.