

ISAIAH: JUDGMENT AND HOPE

22. Isaiah 28

The Lord's Strange Language and Strange Work

INTRODUCTION

Before we dive into Isaiah 28 I wanted us to remember that a good portion of Isaiah's prophetic ministry to Judah and Jerusalem sits in the timeframe of 2 Kings 18 and 19. There we read how the Assyrian armies led by Sennacherib surrounded Jerusalem. At that point in 2 Kings the Assyrian armies have already wreaked havoc on a huge chunk of real estate in the Southern Kingdom of Judah and they are setting up a siege against the city of Jerusalem. From outside the walls of Jerusalem the Assyrians let the citizens of Jerusalem know that they were doomed.

***2 Kings 18:32–35 (NLT)** ³²Then I will arrange to take you to another land like this one—a land of grain and new wine, bread and vineyards, olive groves and honey. Choose life instead of death! “Don’t listen to Hezekiah when he tries to mislead you by saying, ‘The Lord will rescue us!’ ³³Have the gods of any other nations ever saved their people from the king of Assyria? ³⁴What happened to the gods of Hamath and Arpad? And what about the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah? Did any god rescue Samaria from my power? ³⁵What god of any nation has ever been able to save its people from my power? So what makes you think that the Lord can rescue Jerusalem from me?”*

King Hezekiah sought the Lord and sent for the prophet Isaiah

***2 Kings 19:5–8 (NLT)** ⁵After King Hezekiah’s officials delivered the king’s message to Isaiah, ⁶the prophet replied, “Say to your master, ‘This is what the Lord says: Do not be disturbed by this blasphemous speech against me from the Assyrian king’s messengers. ⁷Listen! I myself will move against him, and the king will receive a message that he is needed at home. So he will return to his land, where I will have him killed with a sword.’ ”*

Just as Isaiah said — YHWH miraculously interfered.

2 Kings 19:35 (NLT) ³⁵That night the angel of the Lord went out to the Assyrian camp and killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. When the surviving Assyrians woke up the next morning, they found corpses everywhere.

Sennacherib departed and returned to Nineveh. As he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch, his god two of his sons came in and murdered him. They fled to the land of Ararat and another of his sons, Esarhaddon, reigned in his place.

A good deal of Isaiah's ministry takes place in the years leading up to this event — including what we see in **Isaiah 28-31**.

ISAIAH 28

¹Ah, the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim, and the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of the rich valley of those overcome with wine!

The tribe of Ephraim was representative of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. So the Lord uses the His judgement of the Northern Kingdom as the object lesson.

The Lord says that the tribe of Ephraim — the flagship/the crown of the ten northern tribes was essentially a bunch of drunks! The tribe that was the glory of the northern kingdom, was a fading flower. Eugene Peterson's translation of this verse helps us get the picture of what they had become

Isaiah 28:1 (The Message) Doom to the pretentious drunks of Ephraim, shabby and washed out and seedy— Topsy, sloppy-fat, beer-bellied parodies of a proud and handsome past.

²Behold, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong; like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest, like a storm of mighty, overflowing waters, he casts down to the earth with his hand.

Isaiah wanted Judah to understand that the brutal armies of Assyria that would destroy the northern kingdom and drag its survivors away into captivity naked, strung together with hooks through their mouths was the instrument of YHWH!

Keeping the image of flowers in mind — if a beautiful flower entered a UFC octagon with a *storm of hail, a destroying tempest, a storm of mighty, overflowing waters* — we wouldn't have to guess the outcome.

Isaiah's audience in the Southern Kingdom would nod in theological agreement — verse two was the response of YHWH to the sins of the Northern Kingdom. The problem was that they somehow thought that they were different. The 10 Northern Tribes might have deserved judgement but that weren't *that* bad. God would NEVER judge the Southern Kingdom.

Isaiah continues

**³The proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim will be trodden underfoot;
⁴and the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of the rich valley, (Samaria) will be like a first-ripe fig before the summer: when someone sees it, he swallows it as soon as it is in his hand.**

As fig season approached people watched and waited waiting for that first fully ripe fig. As soon as someone saw that first ripe fig they would grab it and eat it. Isaiah said — When the Northern Kingdom was ripe for judgment Assyria was going to devour them.

⁵In that day

looks beyond the day that Assyria would devour Samaria like the first ripe fig

⁵In that day (yet future) the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people,

REMEMBER — The dual theme of the book of Isaiah: Judgment and Hope

Isaiah promises a day yet future when the crown — the object of people's faith — won't be a capitol city or a human ruler or human government — but the Lord himself. THE LORD will be their crown of glory.

DON'T MISS THIS — **the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people**

There word *remnant* implies both heaviness and hope. On the one hand it is a **heavy** word because it implies the reality of the coming judgment; there will be great loss of lives. But on the other hand, the word *remnant* is a hopeful word because it means that judgment **will not mean the end of God's people** — there will be a group of faithful men and women who are left standing.

⁵In that day **the Lord of hosts will be** a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people, ⁶**and a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment, and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.**

Isaiah 28:6 (NIV) ⁶He will be a spirit of justice to the one who sits in judgment, a source of strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.

Notice the transition in verse 7.

⁷**These also reel with wine and stagger with strong drink; the priest and the prophet reel with strong drink, they are swallowed by wine, they stagger with strong drink, they reel in vision, they stumble in giving judgment.**

What happened to Ephraim, what happened to the northern tribes of Israel, what happened to Samaria was the judgment of God — **And the same is true** concerning Judah!

The powerful word pictures make it clear that Judah was a spiritual and moral mess. It was more than just widescale abuse of alcohol. They swallowed wine and found that wine had swallowed them. Judah and Jerusalem were incapable of clarity of vision for life as individuals and as a community. The word *reel* means to wander, to go astray¹ — stagger, be unable to walk straight.² Add to that the abundance of false prophets and you end up with a culture of injustice.

Just how bad of a mess was that?

¹ Gesenius, W., & Tregelles, S. P. (2003). *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (p. 804). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

² Holladay, W. L., & Köhler, L. (2000). *A concise Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament* (p. 361). Leiden: Brill.

⁸For all tables are full of filthy vomit, with no space left.

⁹“To whom will he teach knowledge, and to whom will he explain the message? Those who are weaned from the milk, those taken from the breast? ¹⁰For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little.”

Now there’s two ways of looking at this.

1. These are the critics of Isaiah saying *What do we have to fear from Isaiah — why would we want to hear from Isaiah? His teaching is so simple it should be for toddlers.*

2. This is Isaiah’s critique of the drunken priests and prophets — one commentator said that the way the literal Hebrews reads *precept, precept, precept, precept, line, line, line, line, here, here, here* — giving the sense of a drunk trying to say something.

Notice what Isaiah says is going to happen

¹¹For by people of strange lips and with a foreign tongue the Lord will speak to this people,

This is amazing! By way of Isaiah the Lord says — *Your prophets have been speaking like drunks. I’m going to speak and I’m going to use the tongue of another nation to do it. I’m going to use the Assyrians to speak. My word through them is “judgment.”*

¹²to whom he has said, “This is rest; give rest to the weary; and this is repose”; yet they would not hear.

By way of Isaiah YHWH has been saying: *Wait! Stop! Trust YHWH to deliver you from Assyria — Don’t trust Egypt.* It’s been a message of hope, a message of strength. In a very literal way YHWH has been telling them: *I’ve got this.*

But they’re unwilling to hear it — so verse 13,

¹³And the word of the Lord will be to them precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little,

In other words — since they wouldn't listen to the Word of the Lord promising His deliverance and protection, they wouldn't be able to understand His word of judgment.

¹³And the word of the Lord will be to them precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little, that **they may go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.**

Because they trusted in the babbling of those who **didn't** speak for the Lord, they won't be able to understand those who **did** speak the word of the Lord

NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY — *make nonsense of God's sense and you will get your fill of (nonsense).*³

Wow! Sounds so much like so many church goers who are so used to listening to un-biblical non-sense week after week that they can't read and understand the Bible.

Isaiah describes the outcome — they will **go, fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.**

they would be injured — snared, and captured — taken on a forced march away from the land promised to Abraham away from the city of Jerusalem that God had chosen to be the place where He would be present

¹⁴Therefore hear the word of the Lord, you scoffers, who rule this people in Jerusalem!

This specifically speaks to the advisors of King Hezekiah who came up with the plan to save Judah by making an alliance with Egypt

³ Kidner, F. D. (1994). Isaiah. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 650). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

¹⁵Because you have said, “We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement, when the overwhelming whip passes through it will not come to us, for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter”;

They didn’t actually say, *we’ve made a covenant of death and we’ve trusted in lies* — but THAT is what it means to trust in Egypt.

They made a pact with Egypt — but Egypt would fail to save them. When Assyria flexed its muscles — devastating a massive chunk of Judah and was on its way to do the same to Jerusalem — Egypt failed to come Israel’s rescue.

By way of Isaiah the Lord said — You think you’re fine — but you’ve trusted in lies! You made a covenant with Egypt to be your savior — but in reality you made a covenant with death itself. You think you’ve made a covenant with a true friend — but in reality you made a covenant with a liar.

¹⁶therefore thus says the Lord God, “Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: ‘Whoever believes will not be in haste.’

This is so awesome! God is laying the ground work for — alluding to — the idea of how the promised Messiah will be the true cornerstone for His people. But He is laying the foundation for that future reality by talking about the foundation of His Word; His promises.

HERE’S THE PICTURE — If God says: *I will protect you* — build your life on it; live from it; stand on it — His word is solid. And those who trust won’t be rushing around looking for other solutions.

HERE’S THE DEAL — Sometimes, many times, the evidence of genuine faith in the Word of God and the promises of God is **inactivity**... **Waiting** for the Lord to be and do everything He has said about Himself; waiting for the Lord to do everything He has promised to do. THAT is why this verb — wait — is used over and over again through the Bible. Waiting is the way we worship the Lord. We exalt Him and declare His infinite worth when we wait patiently for the Lord.

Sometimes we wait — but not as long as we should. Abraham waited for 10 years for the son YHWH promise — and then he stopped waiting. And that’s when things went wrong.

Perhaps today you feel that you are in a place of having to something right now. There are times when trusting the Lord will mean promptly acting in obedience to what the Lord has clearly revealed in His Word. But on the whole, we spend the larger part of life waiting before acting.

17And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb line; and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter.”

Because you refused to make my word the cornerstone of your life there’s going to be a storm that will wash away these false covenants.

When we look back on the history of Hezekiah’s rule, Hezekiah followed the advice of those who said make an alliance with Egypt — Egypt let them down — and Judah suffered tremendous loss of life at the hands of the Assyrians and who were poised to destroy Jerusalem. The enemy was literally at the gates — but God miraculously delivered Jerusalem.

God stripped them of all other possibilities until they could see that God was their only and ultimate hope. The faithfulness of God demonstrated the unfaithfulness of Egypt.

18Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand; when the overwhelming scourge passes through, you will be beaten down by it. 19As often as it passes through it will take you; for morning by morning it will pass through, by day and by night; and it will be sheer terror to understand the message.

I think that phrase *sheer terror* is helpful because it’s hard for us to wrap our minds around a siege. We live in a country where — apart from 9/11 — there’s been no fighting on American soil for over 100 years. Watching a commercial airliner fly into the Twin Towers evoked *sheer terror*.

²⁰For the bed is too short to stretch oneself on, and the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in.

REMEMBER — What were they trying to rest in? What is the bed that they've made for themselves? It was their covenant with Egypt. God wanted them to know that Egypt was that short bed and those short sheets.

²¹For the Lord will rise up as on Mount Perazim; as in the Valley of Gibeon he will be roused; to do his deed—strange is his deed! and to work his work—alien is his work!

God's going to **do his deed** — work; final fate ⁴

His work — this final fate is something they would have never dreamed! What was this strange/alien work? **JUDGMENT!**

*Isaiah 28:21 (The Message) God will rise to full stature, raging as he did long ago on Mount Perazim And in the valley of Gibeon against the Philistines. **But this time it's against you. Hard to believe, but true. Not what you'd expect, but it's coming.***

Remember what we said at the top of the study. They saw God's work in judging the Northern Kingdom — they saw the final fate of Samaria. But they didn't for a moment think that would be the way God would work concerning themselves.

BY THE WAY — The reality of God's judgment is an alien concept to a lot of churchgoers.

²²Now therefore do not scoff, lest your bonds be made strong; for I have heard a decree of destruction from the Lord God of hosts against the whole land. ²³Give ear, and hear my voice; give attention, and hear my speech.

And so, he says, let me give you a parable. Let me make an illustration.

⁴ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000). *The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament* (electronic ed., p. 616). Leiden: E.J. Brill.

²⁴Does he who plows for sowing plow continually? Does he continually open and harrow his ground?

Farmers don't plow 365 days a year?

²⁵When he has leveled its surface, does he not scatter dill, sow cumin, and put in wheat in rows and barley in its proper place, and emmer as the border?

In other words, doesn't he stop plowing and plant stuff? Of course he does, but **notice, verse 26**

²⁶For he is rightly instructed; his God teaches him.

His God teaches him. God has instructed us how to farm, and we've learned the rules. We know the way things work, and so we follow them.

No farmer wakes up in the morning and says *I wonder if this year I can just plow all year and still have a good harvest?*

Farming can be very complex in the details — but the basic ideas are very simple. Put seed in ground. Water ground. Seed gets water. Sun shines. Seed grows — makes fruit. That's all there is to it.

God is telling Judah: *You're changing the game*

God doesn't stop there

²⁷Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is a cart wheel rolled over cumin, but dill is beaten out with a stick, and cumin with a rod

As the ultimate non-farmer I'm going to have to take Isaiah's word for it!

²⁸Does one crush grain for bread? No, he does not thresh it forever; when he drives his cart wheel over it with his horses, he does not crush it.

Verses 27-28 simply state that there's a way that you go about harvesting.

²⁹This also comes from the Lord of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom.

By way of Isaiah YHWH is pointing out the way His people have a disconnect — They are glad to comply with the ways and wisdom of the Lord in their garden — but they don't want to comply with His ways and His wisdom when it comes to how they relate to Him and live for Him. They refuse vertical dependence. They refuse to be informed, defined and directed by their Creator.

Paul picks up on this same disconnect by way of this same metaphor in the New Testament

*Galatians 6:7–8 (ESV) Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, **for** whatever one sows, that will he also reap. ⁸For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.*

God set that as law in His universe!

NEXT WEEK — Isaiah we are going to pick up in Chapter 29 where we will see Isaiah lay out the details of the siege against Jerusalem.