

Lesson 13 Isaiah 28 A Simple Message for Halls of Power

Introduction

I zoomed out to focus on the bigger picture during our consideration of chapters 13-27. We addressed the text, but in bigger sections, not verset by verset. I'm going to zoom back in on chapter 28 because I really like this passage and because Isaiah is here making a significant shift to the fourth major section of *the Book of the King*. I want to emphasize that shift. Motyer makes that shift clear in his chapter divisions. He recognizes 13-27 as the third major section in the Book of the King titled, *The Universal Kingdom*, and then for a fourth major section of the book he groups chapters 28-37 and calls it, *The Lord of History*. In *The Universal Kingdom* section, Isaiah focused our attention on all of humankind as he moved from oracles concerning specific nations, to oracles concerning symbolic nations, to the universal city of man. In that major section, Isaiah has already showed God to be the one whose plans inevitably come to pass. He is the Lord of history. In this section, which we are calling "*The Lord of History*," Isaiah digs into a real-life example from his own ministry of how God is sovereign over the nations, and in doing that he supports his vision of God's plan we have seen working with all the nations through all time, to the end of this present heaven and earth.

Considering this series of events in Isaiah's life gives support to the prophecy that he has just given us about the future. As we make this shift from the *Universal Kingdom* to a particular example of God working as the *Lord of History*, I am going to first review major themes suggested by the unusual structure of chapters 13-27. Then we will get into the specifics of chapter 28. So, first, five themes of the *Universal Kingdom*.

Five Themes of the Universal Kingdom

In our last lesson, I focused on the chiastic structure of chapters 24-27 as the best way to see the contrast between the city of man and Zion, the city of God. Once you recognize the chiastic parallels that move us from judgment to hope and back again, it becomes easier to read the text straight through in a linear fashion. Reading 24-27 straight through, we can recognize a five-part division that parallels the five-part division in the two cycles of oracles.

Remember, we divided chapters 13-27 into three cycles of five. In chapters 13-20, we had one cycle of five oracles. In chapters 21-23, we had a second cycle of five oracles. And in 24-27, even though we don't five oracles we can see a five-part division. Imagine those three cycles lined up in three columns beside each other. You have cycle 1, cycle 2, cycle 3 – three columns of five: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 going down; and then another 1, 2, 3, 4, 5; and then another 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Then imaging moving across row 1, and so you're considering the first oracle or passage in each cycle. And then we can move across row 2, considering the second oracle or passage in each cycle. Then row 3, row 4, row 5. That's what we are going to do. Following Motyer, we are going to move horizontally across each cycle to draw out one significant theme from each row.¹ So, we will have five themes.

Row 1 of the three cycles

Okay! So, moving across the first row of our three cycles, we began the first cycle with the overthrow of Babylon, that massive cultural center that represents human political strength. Then the first oracle of the second cycle again described Babylon's destruction, this time emphasizing the demise of human religion as Babylon's gods fell. In 24:1-20, the first passage of our third cycle, the destruction of all human civilization is depicted as the fall of a city, "the city of chaos is broken down."

Each case is an example of the destruction of the city of man, and in each case, there is the depicted a survival of the remnant of God's people. That provides us with our first summary principle.

(1) The Lord's people are preserved in a crashing world.

¹ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 196.

Row 2 of the three cycles

Looking across the second row, we began with the second oracle of the first cycle with advice to Philistia that during a period of judgment they should seek refuge in the city of the Lord. In the second oracle of the second cycle, we asked the night watchman how long and he told us, "Come back again." Then in 24:21-23, the second passage of our third cycle, we are told that "after many days" the spiritual and earthly powers of evil will be punished. Then the glory of the Lord will shine in Zion, so bright as to put the Sun and Moon to shame. In each case, there is a period of waiting, and that suggests to us a second summary principle.

(2) God's promises are certain even when they seem to delay.

Row 3 of the three cycles

Now moving across the third row, we began with Moab in crisis, choosing the way of self-reliance. In the third oracle of the second cycle, refugees fled into the wilderness of Kedar after the end of the empire, which had given temporary, collective, human security. In both cases, in Moab and Kedar, only a few remained (16:14, 21:17). In 25:1-12, the third passage of our third cycle, the few who remain are the remnant welcomed into Zion. And as in the first cycle, the Moabites are mentioned in the third as representatives of the folly of human self-sufficiency. They are left outside the feast hall. God's feast in Zion contrasted with the failure of human effort provides our third summary principle.

(3) Human desire for satisfaction and security can only be met by setting aside the illusion of self-sufficiency and submitting to the joy of relationship with God in Zion.

Row 4 of the three cycles

In the fourth row, we see the people of God. We began in the first cycle with unfaithful Israel who sought security with Syria. In that oracle, the city of Damascus is removed, and the strong cities of Israel are forsaken. In the fourth oracle of the second cycle, unfaithful Judah experienced the devastation of Jerusalem. Trusting in their own abilities and plans, they frantically tore down houses to repair Jerusalem's walls and redirect the water flow to create a new cistern in their crisis, all to no avail. Then, in 26:1-21, the fourth passage of the third cycle, the faithful remnant find themselves inside the strong city whose peace is guaranteed by the presence of God, the divine Rock of their salvation. And so, we get our fourth summary principle.

(4) The people of God, though caught up in the turmoil of human history, already live in the strong city, through relationship with God our Rock.

Row 5 of the three cycles

And now the final row, the oracle concerning Egypt surprised us in the first cycle with a declaration that Egypt and Assyria would share the inheritance of God equally with Israel. Then in the fifth oracle of the second cycle, a cycle almost devoid of any hope at all, the last word on Tyre is that she would provide tribute to the Lord. And finally in 27:1-13, the last passage of the third cycle ends with a threshing from the flowing stream of the Euphrates, so up there in Assyria, to the brook of Egypt, and it represents a gathering in of Israel from the nations. Our fifth summary principle is this.

(5) God plans to gather to Himself a remnant from every people, nation, tongue and tribe.

A broad overview of Isaiah's consideration of the universal human kingdom provides us with these five themes: these five principles of faith.

- (1) The Lord's people are preserved in a crashing world.
- (2) God's promises are certain even when they seem to delay.
- (3) Human desire for satisfaction and security can only be met by setting aside the illusion of self-sufficiency and submitting to the joy of relationship with God in Zion.
- (4) The people of God, though caught up in the turmoil of human history, already live in a strong city, through relationship with God our Rock.
- (5) God will gather to Himself a remnant from every people, nation, tongue and tribe.

Isaiah expects the leaders of Judah to make policy for the nation based on these principles of faith. But it is one thing to say we believe these things will happen in the far future to later generations, and another thing to actually plan our lives around these beliefs.

So, Isaiah returns to contemporary events to remind his readers of something most of them have lived through, if not them, then surely their parents. Isaiah finished putting together his masterwork after the invasion of Assyria. But he lived through it and he ministered to the nation under Hezekiah during that invasion. These things are written here to remind Judah that faith in God is not only for the future. Faith in God is for now. We have so recently experienced a major illustration in our own nation of God protecting us, God being our rock and security. So, if that has just happened, shouldn't we also live with it and expect it to be true of the future? That God is sovereign, and we can trust Him, and we can build our lives on Him.

In chapter 28, we have backed up a little bit to give context. Hezekiah will stand firm against Sennacherib when his forces surround Jerusalem. We will get to that part of the story in chapter 36. But before Hezekiah takes a stand with God as his rock, he sent emissaries to Egypt to agree upon a mutual covenant to ensure security against Assyria. And he did that without Isaiah's support. Isaiah is against that move. Isaiah sees the leaders of Judah giving lip service to God while seeking security in their own political scheming. Looking to Egypt for salvation is no different than when Ahaz looked to Assyria for protection from the Israel-Syria alliance. We know how that worked out. Now Assyria is the problem.

Chapter 28 is the first of six woes that make up the structure of this major section, *The Lord of History*. I will address the big picture structure in our next lesson. For now, I am ready to get into the text.

I'll divide the text into two halves, each of which divide into two sub-sections. Isaiah starts by revealing Ephraim's folly in 1-13, and then in 14-29 calls for the leaders of Judah to hear the word of the Lord. In the first sub-section of Ephraim's folly, the false glory of Israel fades while the faithful remnant recognizes that the Lord is their true glory. This first sub-section is in 28:1-6 and is set off at the beginning and the end by reference to the word "crown." I'm going to start with just the first 3 verses.

Ephraim's Folly Revealed (28:1-13)

Ephraim's Glory Fades While the Remnant Recognize the Lord is Their Glory (1-6)

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| ¹ Woe to the proud crown of the drunkards
of Ephraim, | And to the fading flower of its glorious beauty, |
| Which is at the head of the fertile valley of those who are overcome with wine! | |
| ² Behold, the Lord has a strong and mighty <i>agent</i> ;
Like a storm of mighty overflowing waters, | As a storm of hail, a tempest of destruction,
He has cast <i>it</i> down to the earth with <i>His</i> hand. |
| ³ Underfoot shall be trampled | The proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim. |

"Drunkards of Ephraim" wear a "proud crown." The word "crown" should probably translate here as "garland," such as worn by revelers at a party. Many wear the crown, not just one king. A garland of flowers and greenery would wilt soon after the party is over, or even during the party. So, when Isaiah writes woe "to the fading flower of its glorious beauty," the image of this quickly wilting party garlands suggests the transience of Ephraim's beauty; she is fading as a nation.

Samaria, the capital of Ephraim, sat on a hill at the end of a valley. And that may be the referent of the third verset. Isaiah writes, "Which is at the head of the fertile valley of those who are overcome with wine!" "Head of the valley" could have layered symbolism. "Head" could mean "the hill at one end." So, one end is the head of the valley, and on that hill is Samaria. Head could also refer to Samaria as the capital city, the head city, the head of Ephraim. But referring to Samaria as head is also a reference to the governing leaders of Ephraim in the same way saying Washington, or Moscow, or Beijing is the head, might not refer to the city but might refer to the people of influence who make up the government. You know, so that decision has been made by Moscow. It doesn't mean the city. It means the leaders in the city. This government is depicted as a group of drunk people at a party, and they are wearing garland crowns, and those crowns wilt before the night even ends.

whose words you do not understand. God has offered you rest. You have rejected it. And so, you will be defeated, and you will be taken captive by foreigners whose speech means nothing to you.” That’s the meaning of 11-13.

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| 11 | Indeed, through stammering lips and
a foreign tongue, | He will speak to this people |
| 12 | He who said to them, “Here is rest, give rest
to the weary,” | And, “Here is repose,” but they would not listen. |
| 13 | So the word of the LORD to them will be,
“Order on order, order on order,
A little here, a little there,” | Line on line, line on line,
be broken, snared and taken captive. |
| | That they may go and stumble backward, | |

This woe began with a judgment of doom on Ephraim that emphasized the ephemeral nature of human glory and society. Hope for humanity is found in the revelation of God’s will. But in the second sub-section of the woe, the spiritual counselors of the nation, men positioned to hear and communicate God’s word show themselves to be cynical politicians who mock God’s prophet. They deal in complex tribe strategies. They live at the level of CEO’s, and presidents, and congressmen. They don’t have time for the revealed Word of God. This is real life. We don’t have time for that.

The second half of the woe has clearly moved us to Judah. Ephraim’s folly has been revealed. Judah’s leaders are now exhorted to not make the same mistake. We will see in the first sub-section that Judah has already followed Israel in folly, making for themselves a covenant of death. In the second sub-section Isaiah will call them to trust the wisdom of God.

Hear the Word of the Lord Leaders of Jerusalem (28:14-29)

Judah’s Covenant of Death Will Lead to Destruction (14-22)

Judah’s destructive covenant of death is decried in verses 14-22. We begin with just the first 2 verses. This is Isaiah 28:14-15.

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| 14 | Therefore, hear the word of the LORD,
Who rule this people | O scoffers,
who are in Jerusalem, |
| 15 | Because you have said, “We have made a
covenant with death,
The overwhelming scourge will not reach us
when it passes by, | And with Sheol we have made a pact.

For we have made falsehood our refuge and we
have concealed ourselves with deception.” |

Whether the men taunting Isaiah earlier in verse 9 and 10 should be understood as men from Israel or Judah, that attitude is here applied to those who rule Jerusalem. Isaiah calls them scoffers. Then Isaiah puts words into their mouths. “You say I speak as to infants. I say you have heartily embraced a covenant of death.” This is not some occult practice that they are engaging in. These leaders are excited about the covenant they have made. They think their skilled diplomacy has won security. So, they are going to come back, “We made this covenant of life with Egypt!” But Isaiah puts words in their mouth. He argues, “No, no, no, no! The covenant with Egypt, against the will of God – you are bragging about the covenant of death. We have brought death to Judah! That’s what you’re really saying.”

I don’t know if Isaiah’s contemporary audience was supposed to know immediately here in chapter 28 that this treaty he was talking about was the one made with Egypt, or whether the prophet was building up to a later reveal. Egypt is not going to be named until chapter 30 and then we are all going to know it’s Egypt. I know that we as readers, we are far enough removed from the situation that you can’t pick up from the context that we are talking about Egypt, but it’s going to be made explicit. That is what has happened. Judah’s leaders have sought safety from Assyria in an alliance with Pharaoh.

The first verset of 15b accurately communicates the thoughts of Judah's leaders. They think that "The overwhelming scourge will not reach us when it passes by." But then again Isaiah puts into their mouths the reality of what they have done, though they don't admit it to themselves, this is really the outcome of what they're saying, "For we have made falsehood our refuge and we have concealed ourselves with deception."

Isaiah has taken the words of the politicians and reinterpreted them according to what they have really done and what their real outcome is. "When you tell us you made a covenant with Egypt, you claim security. But I tell you, when you announce your covenant with Egypt, the reality of your action is a rejection of God, resulting in a covenant with death." Egypt will not protect you. You are deceiving yourself and you are deceiving the people.

Isaiah then declares the word of God to the leaders of Judah.

¹⁶ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a tested stone,

A costly cornerstone *for* the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes *in it* will not be disturbed.

I know you recognize that passage. Both Peter and Paul quote this verse in reference to Jesus. Paul in Romans 9:33 and Peter in 1 Peter 2:6. The immediate context does not identify the cornerstone with the Davidic Messiah. Peter and Paul may have connected Isaiah's cornerstone to Jesus with encouragement from Psalm 118:22 and 26, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone...Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." You know, that was the phrase was shouted by the crowd during Jesus' triumphal entry before His crucifixion (John 12:13). Verse 26 in Psalm 118 is clearly the coming Messiah and Jesus embraced that identity. But in the Psalm, He is also the chief cornerstone. Isaiah may have made that link himself in Psalm 118.

Peter and Paul could have also made the connection here in Isaiah without Psalm 118 just from the broader context. The Hebrew for "laying the stone" could either be rendered, "I am laying a stone in Zion," or, "I am laying a stone, Zion." The first emphasizes a stone to be laid in Zion, so that can be someone else being laid inside of Zion. The other sees the stone as Zion. And the imagery of Zion and the Davidic ruler are intertwined so much in Isaiah's vision of God's Kingdom that it is not easy to discern which is in view here. One seems to assume the other. The language here seems to lean towards the stone as the cornerstone of a new foundation for the new city. But the language in verse 17 of justice and righteousness points to the God's character, which we expect to see exemplified in the Messiah. It is the language both from the declaration of a son who will be born in chapter 9 – his government will be just and righteous - and the root of Jesse in chapter 11. So even if the immediate context makes it sound like this stone is the cornerstone of the foundation of a new city, that cornerstone can still be the Messiah. He is the foundation. It is through the Messiah that the right and true foundation of the new city is to be laid. And then there is the word "testing" in this verse. That can be taken two ways.

The firm foundation will be laid with a cornerstone that is either a tested stone, which says something about the stone; or a stone of testing, which says something about the stone's purpose. Both ideas are true in regard to Jesus. He was tested by Satan in the wilderness. He was tested again in the Garden of Gethsemane. And He was tested by His death and shown to be true through the power of the Holy Spirit in His resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4). Jesus is a tested stone. He is the way, He is the truth, He is the life. He is the cornerstone to any real foundation of life. Jesus also proves to be a stone of testing. Will you believe in Him? Or will you stumble over Him?

Here, Isaiah challenges the leaders of Jerusalem to trust in the stone that God lays. Security is found when God is the rock, when He is the foundation. Jesus made that point when He urged His listeners to build their house on the rock of God's Word and not on sand. The covenant with Egypt is a foundation of sand.

The final verset ends with the word “disturbed”, “He who believes in it will not be disturbed.” That word is used twenty times by Isaiah, “always with the sense of ‘hurrying.’”³ So, he who believes in it will not be hurrying around. We can imagine the serious men and women in the halls of power scurrying here and there to make diplomatic deals that will ensure Judah’s security. And its not too hard to turn that on ourselves and imagine our own rushing about, hither and yon, sometimes at a frantic pace, working to ensure our own safety and the security of our family. This is Isaiah’s simple message, so difficult to truly accept and apply in day-to-day life, “Remember that God is your salvation, even though the building is not complete, even though you look ahead to a city of peace as of yet, still unrealized, trust in God. God is building His Kingdom on Jesus Christ, who is the true cornerstone. Whatever challenges you face in modern society, you can experience peace and security through faith in Him, if Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of your foundation, if you are resting yourselves on Him. Then you don’t have to scurry about hither and tither and be disturbed. You can rest in security in Christ.”

About Judah, Robert Alter comments, “In place of a city ruled by drunken idiots, God will establish a just, firm-founded city, while those who made a covenant with death will be swept away (verses 17–21).⁴ That idea of being swept away is communicated in verses 17-22. Rain and hail were mentioned earlier on in this woe, where verse 2 imagined a storm that would come on Ephraim. Isaiah’s use of the word “hail” here connects Israel and Judah together in divine judgment.

<p>17 “I will make justice the measuring line Then hail will sweep away the refuge of lies</p> <p>18 “Your covenant with death will be canceled, When the overwhelming scourge passes through,</p> <p>19 “As often as it passes through, it will seize you;</p> <p style="padding-left: 2em;">And to understand what it means.</p> <p>20 The bed is too short on which to stretch out, 21 For the LORD will rise up as <i>at</i> Mount Perazim, To do His task, His unusual task, 22 And now do not carry on as scoffers, For of decisive destruction I have heard</p>	<p>And righteousness the level; And the waters will overflow the secret place. And your pact with Sheol will not stand; Then you become its trampling <i>place</i>. For morning after morning it will pass through, <i>anytime</i> during the day or night, will be sheer terror”</p> <p>And the blanket is too small to wrap oneself in. He will be stirred up as in the valley of Gibeon, And to work His work, His extraordinary work. Or your fetters will be made stronger; from the Lord GOD of hosts</p>
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on all the earth.

The mention in verse 21 to Mount Perazim and the valley of Gibeon refers to two battles David fought against the Philistines. David describes the victory God gave him saying, “The Lord has broken through my enemies before me like the breakthrough of waters (2 Samuel 5:20).” The water of God’s wrath broke through David’s enemies. But here, the water of that wrath is going to break through Judah. Build on the rock, or the storm will wash you away.

Isaiah Calls for Trust in the Wisdom of God (23-29)

Isaiah concludes the first “woe” in 23-29 with a call to trust in God’s wisdom. He gives us two related images. The first describes wise sowing of the farmer. The second describes wise reaping of the farmer. The wise farmer sows in verses 23-26.

<p>23 Give ear and hear my voice, 24 Does the farmer plow continually to plant seed? 25 Does he not level its surface And plant wheat in rows, 26 For his God instructs</p>	<p>Listen and hear my words. Does he <i>continually</i> turn and harrow the ground? And sow dill and scatter cumin Barley in its place and rye within its area? and teaches him properly.</p>
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³ Motyer, 233.

⁴ Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019) 1830.

What point is Isaiah making? It's not precisely clear. Here are two options. First, the point could have to do with God's work of judgment about to come on Judah. The farmer must treat the earth violently. He turns it. Listen to the verbs. He turns it, plows it, levels its surface. Turning up the land allows the farmer to plant new seeds that will bear fruit. If God has taught this to the farmer, then we should not be surprised when God does the same to Judah, violently turning up the land to plant living seed that will produce true fruit.

Or the point could have to do with the faith of Judah's leaders. If God has taught these natural principles to farmers so that they might sow with a view towards harvest, should not Judah's leaders look to God for the wisdom they need to lead the nation and bring about a good harvest? As God instructs the farmer, God will also instruct the prophet, the priest, and the politician. But they must start with trust in God and His Word.

There are two options you can think about. Which of those is this image describing? Is it God's work of sowing? Or is it the leader trusting the wisdom of God so that they might sow well? Whichever point Isaiah has just made, it looks like he is pretty much restating that point with the image of reaping in verses 27-29.

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| <p>²⁷ For dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge,
But dill is beaten out with a rod,</p> <p>²⁸ <i>Grain for</i> bread is crushed,
Because the wheel of <i>his</i> cart and his horses
<i>eventually damage it,</i></p> <p>²⁹ This also comes from the LORD of hosts,</p> | <p>Nor is the cartwheel driven over cumin;
and cumin with a club.</p> <p>Indeed, he does not continue to thresh it forever.
He does not thresh it longer.</p> <p><i>Who</i> has made <i>His</i> counsel wonderful
and <i>His</i> wisdom great.</p> |
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Again, the violence done to the dill and cumin in the process of reaping could point to the result of God's judgment. The faithful must trust that God is at work, reaping the harvest He has planted, and He will use just as much pain and suffering or violence as necessary. And the different methods employed for different crops may suggest that God will act differently with Judah than He did with Israel. His wisdom is great. He will bring about a righteous end, even though the process may require pain.

Or we may wonder whether a challenge to the leadership of Judah is again in mind. The farmer knows how to go about the business of reaping a harvest. He knows how to treat different grains differently. His wisdom comes from God. The wisdom to lead a people also comes from God. As the text says, "God's counsel is wonderful and his wisdom great." Trust in the Lord.

Whether the two images describe the wise work of God who, like a farmer, knows how to bring about a fruitful harvest, or the two images call leaders to act wisely, trusting God to teach the politician as He teaches the farmer, either way Isaiah exhorts the leaders of Judah to depend on the wisdom of God as He carries out his sovereign plan. Trust in God.

That message applies equally to leaders of the nation state and to everyday believers. In whatever we do, trust that God has a plan. And that God, in His wisdom will bring about that plan. We may be at the stage of the turning of the soil. We may be in the stage of threshing out the grain. God is working for the good of you who love Him, even if the stage you are in right now is painful and you don't yet see the fruit.

The word of God is your foundation. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone. You may need to do some hurrying around to get all your chores and responsibilities done, but in the hurry-burry of life, don't become frantic. This simple message still applies, "God is your Rock. He is your security. He is your rest. He is your future. Trust God."