

Isaiah – Chapter 28

The Covenant with Death and the Sure Foundation

Isaiah 28:15-16, 29 – Because you have said, “We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have made a pact... we have made falsehood our refuge and we have concealed ourselves with deception.” 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.” ... This also comes from the LORD of hosts, who has made His counsel wonderful and His wisdom great.

Context

We have completed the Apocalypse of chapters 24 through 27. Across those four chapters, the earth has been emptied, and the city of chaos has been brought down, the banquet has been spread and death swallowed, a song of the redeemed has celebrated the strong city and the raising of the dead, and the whole vision has landed on the restoration of Israel. With chapter 28, the book turns from those cosmic judgments back to Judah’s own leaders and the crisis standing at the door.

Chapter 28 opens the greater section of woe oracles that runs through chapter 33. Six times the cry “*hoy*” is raised against the people who trusted the wrong things: the drunkards of Ephraim and the scoffers of Jerusalem (28), Ariel the city where David camped (29), the rebellious children who go down to Egypt for help (30 and 31), and the destroyer who will himself be destroyed (33). Running underneath the woes is the Assyrian crisis of Hezekiah’s day and the recurring temptation to buy security from Egypt rather than rest in the LORD.

The covenant lawsuit from the beginning of the book resumes here. The summons that opened the book, hear the word of the LORD, is issued again to Judah: “hear the word of the LORD, O scoffers, who rule this people who are in Jerusalem” (28:14). The rhetorical strategy of the chapter is seen in two ways. The woe opens on drunken Ephraim so that Judah will nod along at their expense, and then the same charge is turned on Judah’s own priests, prophets, and rulers, “and these also reel with wine” (28:7). The Northern Tribes had already fallen to Assyria, so Ephraim stands as the accomplished object lesson, the warning Judah is ignoring.

The overwhelming scourge that beats through the chapter is the Assyrian flood already met in Chapter 8, the river rising to the neck. Against that flood the rulers of Jerusalem have built a refuge of lies, and over against their lie God lays the one foundation that holds. The chapter sets a row of false securities, a fading crown, a covenant with death, a bed too short to lie on, against the single tested Stone laid in Zion.

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Structure of the Chapter

Isaiah 28 unfolds in four movements, false security answered by true:

- 1–6: The fading crown of Ephraim. The drunkards' proud crown withers before the Assyrian storm (1–4), answered by the LORD of hosts Himself, who becomes the true crown and diadem to the remnant (5–6).
- 7–13: The drunken teachers and the mocked word. Judah's priests and prophets reel with the same wine (7–8); the scoffers deride the prophet's plain teaching as baby-talk, order upon order, line upon line (9–10), and that mockery returns on them as the foreign tongue of the conqueror (11–13).
- 14–22: The covenant with death and the tested cornerstone. The scoffing rulers boast of a refuge from the coming scourge (14–15); over against their lie God lays the tested Stone in Zion (16), measures by justice and righteousness (17), and rises to His strange and extraordinary work (18–22).
- 23–29: The wisdom of the farmer. The skilled husbandman plows to sow and threshes each grain by its own measure and does not thresh forever.

One contrast runs underneath the whole: the refuge of lies that cannot cover, and the sure foundation that will not be moved.

Exposition

The Fading Crown of Ephraim (1–6)

“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” (28:1). The Northern Tribes sat like a garland, and the capital is pictured as a wilting wreath of flowers on the head of a partyer. The surface symptom is drunkenness; the deeper cause underneath is a pride that has drunk itself blind to God. The crown is proud and the flower is fading in the same breath, glory and decay held together.

“Behold, the Lord has a strong and mighty agent; as a storm of hail, a tempest of destruction, like a storm of mighty overflowing waters, He has cast it down to the earth with His hand” (28:2). The strong and mighty agent is Assyria, the storm God holds in His hand, and the fading garland is trodden underfoot: “the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim is trodden down” (28:3). The wreath is snatched and swallowed like the first ripe fig of summer; gone the moment it is seen (28:4).

Against the fading crown stands a true one. “In that day the LORD of hosts will become a beautiful crown and a glorious diadem to the remnant of His people, a spirit of justice for him who sits in judgment, a strength to those who repel the onslaught at the gate” (28:5–6). The crown Ephraim wore and lost is replaced by a crown that cannot fade, the LORD of hosts

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Himself, worn by the Remnant, who are given justice on the bench and strength at the gate, everything the drunken leaders could not supply. The wording is guarded with care. There is always a remnant, a remnant in Isaiah's day as there is now, and the preserved remnant of every generation foreshadows the final one. The crowning of that day is not discharged in installments across history; it points to the Remnant of the final generation, crowned when the LORD of hosts is at last their glory and their strength.

The Drunken Teachers and the Mocked Word (7–13)

The charge turns south. "And these also reel with wine and stagger from strong drink: the priest and the prophet reel with strong drink, they are confused by wine... they reel while having visions, they totter when rendering judgment" (28:7). The very men charged with seeing God's word and rendering His judgment are too drunk to do either, and their tables are "full of filthy vomit, without a single clean place" (28:8). The teachers who should dispense knowledge are besotted past the point of teaching anyone.

So, they sneer at the prophet who is still sober. "To whom would He teach knowledge, and to whom would He interpret the message? Those just weaned from milk?" (28:9). They mimic the prophet's plain instruction as if it were fit only for toddlers: "Order on order, order on order, line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there" (28:10). The Hebrew is a string of clipped, mocking syllables, *tsav latsav, qav laqav, zeer sham*, the drunkards' impression of a prophet reduced to baby-babble, as though the word of God were nursery prattle beneath grown men.

The mockery is turned back on their heads. "Indeed, He will speak to this people through stammering lips and a foreign tongue" (28:11). Since they will not hear God's clear word in their own language, they will hear it in the unintelligible speech of the Assyrian, whose tongue will sound to them exactly like the baby-babble they mocked. The word they would not receive as rest becomes, in earnest, "order on order... line on line... a little here, a little there, that they may go and stumble backward, be broken, snared and taken captive" (28:13). What they treated as gibberish becomes the very form of their judgment.

This is the line the Apostle Paul reaches for to explain an otherwise puzzling matter in the assembly. Arguing that unintelligible tongues are a sign aimed at unbelievers rather than believers, 1st Corinthians quotes this passage: "BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME," says the Lord (1 Corinthians 14:20-22). The point carried over from Isaiah is that a foreign tongue in the ear of God's people is a sign of judgment, the mark that the plain word has been refused and now comes wrapped in speech they cannot understand. The strange tongue is not a reward; in Isaiah, it is the sound of the conqueror, and in Corinth, it is a sign to those who, like drunken Judah, will not listen.

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The Covenant with Death and the Tested Cornerstone (14–22)

“Therefore, hear the word of the LORD, O scoffers, who rule this people who are in Jerusalem” (28:14). The summons names the defendants, the ruling class of the capital, and reads out their boast: “We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have made a pact. The overwhelming scourge will not reach us when it passes by, for we have made falsehood our refuge and we have concealed ourselves with deception” (28:15). The covenant with death is the alliance with Egypt, the refuge of lies the rulers have negotiated to escape the Assyrian flood. It is the same arm of flesh Ahaz grasped in Chapter 7, trust placed anywhere but in the Holy One of Israel. The passage does not press a pagan cult of the dead behind the phrase, and none is forced; the refuge is named by its own context, a treaty of falsehood that the scourge will expose.

“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’” (28:16).

Over against the refuge of lies God lays a foundation that holds. The Stone is tested, costly, cornered true, and set firmly in Zion, and the one who believes in it will not be disturbed. This is the sure foundation the whole chapter has been driving toward, and its identity is not left to guesswork. It is the same Stone met already in Chapter 8, where the Holy One of Israel becomes “a sanctuary” to those who trust Him and “a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over” to those who do not (8:14). There, the Stone was the thing men trip over; here, the same Stone is the foundation men build on. The New Testament gathers the two into one: the tested cornerstone laid for faith and the stone of stumbling set for unbelief are a single Stone, and He is the Messiah.

The last clause repays a moment’s care. The text reads that the believer “will not be disturbed,” the Hebrew carrying the sense of one who does not panic, does not bolt in haste, the very steadiness the rulers lacked when they ran to Egypt. When the apostles quote the verse, they render it “will not be put to shame,” the vindication of a faith that will not finally be disappointed. Both senses rest on the one line and reinforce each other: the one who trusts the Stone neither panics in the crisis nor is put to shame in the end.

The measuring resumes. “I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the level; then hail will sweep away the refuge of lies and the waters will overflow the secret place” (28:17). God builds by plumb line and level, and the false shelter is swept off by the very flood it was built to escape. “Your covenant with death will be canceled, and your pact with Sheol will not stand; when the overwhelming scourge passes through, then you become its trampling place” (28:18). The treaty with Egypt cannot annul the judgment; it only positions its makers under the flood.

The proverb that follows is bitter and exact: “The bed is too short on which to stretch out, and the blanket is too small to wrap oneself in” (28:20). Every false security is a bed a man cannot lie

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down on and a cover that will not reach; the refuge of lies leaves its maker exposed on the night the scourge passes.

“For the LORD will rise up as at Mount Perazim, He will be stirred up as in the valley of Gibeon, to do His task, His unusual task, and to work His work, His extraordinary work” (28:21). Perazim and Gibeon were battlefields where God once fought for His people against their enemies. Now, the same warring God rises against His own people, and that inversion is what makes the task unusual and the work extraordinary, strange, and alien precisely because it is turned the wrong way round. “And now do not carry on as scoffers, or your fetters will be made stronger” (28:22); a decree of destruction has been heard over the whole land.

The Wisdom of the Farmer (23–29)

The woe closes not on threat but on wisdom. “Give ear and hear my voice, listen and hear my words” (28:23). Then a parable drawn from the field. “Does the farmer plow continually to plant seed? Does he continually turn and harrow the ground?” (28:24). No farmer plows for the sake of plowing. The tearing up of the soil is not the end; it serves the sowing that follows, and once the ground is broken he plants each seed in its proper place, dill and cummin scattered, wheat in rows, barley and rye each in its own ground, “for his God instructs and teaches him properly” (28:25–26).

Nor does the farmer thresh every grain the same way. “Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is the cartwheel driven over cummin; but dill is beaten out with a rod, and cummin with a club” (28:27). The delicate seed is beaten with a light stick, never crushed under the heavy sledge. And even the bread grain, which does take the sledge, is not pounded without end: “Grain for bread is crushed, indeed, he does not continue to thresh it forever” (28:28). The instrument is fitted to the grain, and the threshing has a limit.

“This also comes from the LORD of hosts, who has made His counsel wonderful and His wisdom great” (28:29). The parable interprets the whole chapter. The plowing and the threshing are God’s dealings with His people, and they are the skilled husbandry of a wise farmer, not the blind fury of a destroyer. The strange work of judgment is measured, fitted to the need, and bounded: God does not thresh His people forever. The discipline is His corporate instrument for the nation, aimed at a harvest, never a payment that earns standing and never an end in itself. Each survivor of the threshing is still justified by faith, and the taking-away of the people’s sin rests on the New Covenant promise that He will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31:31–34). The first woe therefore ends where the farmer’s field does, in a harvest the plowing was always for. The next woe takes up Ariel, the city where David camped, and the same LORD who threshes in measure will lay siege to His own hearth (29).

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Synthesis with All of Scripture

The Prophets. The false trust in Egypt that this chapter names as a covenant with death is the sin the prophets rebuke on every side, and the woes just ahead return to it twice, “Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses... but they do not look to the Holy One of Israel” (31:1). The measured discipline of the farmer is the mercy Jeremiah hears over the same nation: “I will correct you justly, and will by no means leave you unpunished... I will not make a full end of you” (Jeremiah 30:11), threshing that chastens without consuming. And the Remnant crowned by the LORD of hosts (28:5) is the Remnant that leans on Him elsewhere in Isaiah, the survivors who “will truly rely on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel” (10:20).

Jesus. The Lord takes the stone of this chapter and sets it at the center of His own claim. Closing the parable of the tenants, He asks whether they have never read the Scripture, “The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone” (Matthew 21:42), and then presses the Stone’s double edge exactly as this chapter does: “he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust” (Matthew 21:44). The tested cornerstone that is a sure foundation to faith is the same Stone that breaks those who reject it, foundation and offense in one, and the Lord names Himself as that Stone.

Revelation. The foundation laid in Zion comes to its rest in the city whose foundations are named and numbered, the New Jerusalem resting on twelve foundation stones (Revelation 21:14). The Stone God set for faith becomes the bedrock of the city that faith inherits.

The Apostolic Letters. The loop that opened in Chapter 8 is closed here, the two stones gathered into one and named. In Romans, the stumbling of Israel is explained by the Stone: “Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed” (Romans 9:33), the stone of stumbling of 8:14 and the sure foundation of 28:16 fused in a single sentence and set on the one who believes. 1st Peter places the same stones side by side: “Behold, I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious corner stone, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed” (1 Peter 2:6), precious to those who believe, but to the disobedient “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense” (1 Peter 2:8). In Ephesians the Stone is named without figure, “Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone,” the whole building joined together and rising into a holy temple (Ephesians 2:20–21). And the foreign tongue of 28:11 returns in 1st Corinthians as the sign of judgment already seen, tongues given as “a sign... to unbelievers” (1 Corinthians 14:22). The Stone that Judah’s builders would not build on is the Stone the whole church is built on, and the one who believes in Him will not be put to shame.

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Hermeneutic Checkpoints

Start literal. Start literal. A real crisis presses on a real Jerusalem, a real Assyrian flood is rising, real leaders are really drunk, and a real alliance with Egypt is being signed. Into that history God lays a foundation the New Testament identifies as a real Person. Nothing in the chapter asks to be spiritualized, and the burden of proof sits on any reading that would empty the Stone of the Messiah the apostles find in it.

Let the text interpret itself. The identity of the cornerstone is not left to inference. The stone to stumble over in 8:14 and the tested cornerstone of 28:16 are gathered by Romans 9:33 and First Peter 2:6–8 into one Stone, and He is named the Messiah. A referent stated by later Scripture is the text interpreting itself, not a symbol forced from outside; the stone is not left an open cipher when the apostles have already closed the file.

Line upon line is mockery, not method. The phrase “line upon line, precept upon precept” is often quoted as a model of patient, piece-by-piece study. In context it is nothing of the kind. It is the sneer of drunkards mimicking the prophet’s plain word as baby-talk (28:10), and it becomes the sentence spoken over them in a tongue they cannot understand (28:13). The devotional use inverts the meaning the passage gives it, and the inversion should be corrected wherever it is met.

The Remnant is foreshadowed, not fulfilled in installments. There is always a Remnant, a Remnant in Isaiah’s day as there is now, and every preserved Remnant foreshadows the one the promise has in view. The crowning of the Remnant in that day (28:5) is not partly discharged by the survivors of Assyria or by any generation since. It points forward to the Remnant of the final generation, crowned when the LORD of hosts Himself is their glory. The historical remnant anticipates the promise; it does not pay it down.

The covenant with death, kept to its context. The refuge of lies is identified by the passage as the alliance with Egypt, the arm of flesh dressed up as a treaty (28:15). Where the text does not press a cult of the dead or a pagan death-deity behind the phrase, none is manufactured; the woe reads plainly enough as misplaced trust, and the plain reading is the one kept.

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Tying the Threads Together

The Messianic Hope. The Messianic Hope. The Hope in this chapter is a Stone. The thread that first appeared as a sanctuary and a stone of stumbling in chapter 8 is laid here as the tested cornerstone and sure foundation (28:16), and the New Testament names Him outright: the Messiah, precious to faith and an offense to unbelief. Over against every refuge of lies God sets not a better argument but a Person, and the one who believes in Him will not be disturbed in the crisis and will not be put to shame in the end.

The Motif of the City. Two crowns and two foundations divide the chapter. The proud crown of Samaria, the fading flower on the head of the rich valley, withers and is trodden down (28:1–4); the true crown is the LORD of hosts Himself, worn by the Remnant (28:5). The scoffers of Jerusalem build their security on a lie that leaves them uncovered (28:15, 20), while in the same Zion God lays the one foundation that will not be moved (28:16). The city of man crowns itself and builds on falsehood; the city of God is crowned by the LORD and founded on the Stone.

The Holy One of Israel. The title itself is quiet in this chapter, carried by “the LORD of hosts” (28:5, 22, 29) and surging back by name in the woes just ahead (29 through 31). His holiness here is a measuring line and a plumb line, justice and righteousness by which the refuge of lies is swept away (28:17). His strange work falls even on His own people (28:21), and His wisdom threshes without destroying (28:29). The same LORD of hosts who holds the Assyrian storm in His hand lays the tested Stone in Zion, and the same wisdom that plows the ground also spares the grain.