



ISAIAH 28

EPHRAIM’S FALSE HOPE ~ JUDAH’S DRUNKEN PROPHETS ~ A FALSE COVENANT WITH DEATH

Israel and Judah have scoffed at God, showing disdain by trusting man to deliver them from their enemies instead of leaning into God to rescue them. The Lord would have none of it. He refused to share this assignment with any man and was making that perfectly clear in Chapter 28.

He would do this by comparing his people to drunkards, those who knew what to do but found themselves over and over again mocking the God who loved them. It was now his turn to mock them and he does this painting a vivid picture of their “drunken,” woeful state.

Have you ever tried to reason with someone who is under the influence? Have you ever tried to speak the truth to someone who is intoxicated? Few situations are more frustrating than trying to reason with a drunk. Yet, this is where the Lord, Yahweh, would himself. You just know it won’t end well for his people...

English Standard (ESV)	Passion Notes	Passion Translation (TPT)
<p>Isaiah 28:1 Ah, 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! ² Behold, 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. ³ The proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim will be trodden underfoot; ⁴ and the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of the rich valley, 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.</p> <p>⁵ In 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.</p>	<p>a 28:1 Or “Ephraim,” a likely metonymy for the northern kingdom of Israel (Samaria). Read through this chapter to see the vivid contrast between the fading glory of mankind and the greater glory of God.</p> <p>b 28:2 There are three fulfillments to this prophecy: (1) The immediate fulfillment of this was the Assyrian army coming to invade the northern kingdom of Israel in 740 BC. (2) The distant fulfillment was the advent of Jesus, the Mighty One, whom the Father sent with the sword of truth to demolish the lies and pride of man. (3) The future fulfillment will be the appearing of the overcomers (Rev. 2–3) who follow the Lamb as dread champions and who overturn the tables of religion and the arrogance of man.</p> <p>c 28:5 God himself is to be our “crown,” not human pride. See Heb. 2:9.</p>	<p>Ephraim’s False Hope</p> <p>Isaiah 28:1 Woe to the pride of Israel’s a drunkards, worn like a garland on their heads! Their glory is but wilted flowers, worn like a crown on the heads of those bloated with rich food and overcome by wine. ² Behold! The Lord has one who is strong and mighty, and he will come like a hailstorm and like a destroying wind! With a storm of massive, flooding waters, his mighty power will knock it to the ground. b ³ That proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim will be trampled underfoot, ⁴ and the glory of these proud leaders will fade and disappear like the first figs of the season, which are picked and eaten as soon they are ripe. ⁵ In that day, Lord Yahweh, Commander of Angel Armies, will be a crown of glory c and a diadem of beauty for the remnant of his people. ⁶ He will be a Spirit of justice for judges to render right decisions. And he will be strength and bravery for those who turn back the battle at the gate.</p>

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<p>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. ⁸ For all tables are full of filthy vomit, with no space left.</p> <p>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? ¹⁰ For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little.”</p> <p>¹¹ For by people of strange lips and with a foreign tongue the LORD will speak to this people, ¹² to whom he has said, “This is rest; give rest to the weary; and this is repose”; yet they would not hear. ¹³ And 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.</p> <p>¹⁴ Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scoffers, who rule this people in Jerusalem! ¹⁵ Because 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”;</p>	<p>d 28:7 This is a play on words, for the word bala’ is a homophone for “confused” and “to swallow (wine).” It could be translated “The wine they swallow swallows them.”</p> <p>e 28:9 Or “he.”</p> <p>f 28:9 Or “babies just weaned.”</p> <p>g 28:10 The meaning of the Hebrew text of this verse is uncertain. The Septuagint reads “You expect trouble upon trouble, hope upon hope; yet a little and yet a little.”</p> <p>h 28:11 Or “he.”</p> <p>i 28:11 That is, the foreign language of the Assyrians, which was Aramaic. See also Deut. 28:49; 1 Cor. 14:21–22.</p> <p>j 28:12 See Matt. 11:28–30; Heb. 4:9.</p> <p>k 28:13 The meaning of the Hebrew text of this verse is uncertain. The Septuagint reads “You expect trouble upon trouble, hope upon hope; yet a little and yet a little.” The Tanakh is “Mutter upon mutter; murmur upon murmur. Now here, now there.”</p> <p>l 28:14 Starting with 28:14 and going through 31:9, Isaiah speaks warnings to Judah and Jerusalem.</p> <p>m 28:15 Or “Sheol.” Some scholars conclude that death and the underworld are metaphors for an alliance with Egypt and its false gods. However, it is more likely that they had made an actual pact with evil spirits, such as Death (Mot) and the Underworld (Resheph), to protect them from the plague. Christ has broken the covenant with death, for we are crucified to death in him (Gal. 2:20). Now death “belongs” to the believer, for we have been given a life that triumphs over man’s covenant with death (Rom. 8:38–39; 1 Cor. 3:21–22).</p> <p>n 28:15 Many today still hide behind lies, refusing to come to the truth in Christ.</p> <p>o 28:15 Or “false gods.”</p> <p>p 28:16 The Foundation Stone is Christ, set in place in the councils of eternity. The Hebrew word for “stone” is taken from the root word for “son” (ben). God’s Foundation Stone is his Son, Jesus Christ. See Rom. 9:33. Now the Son/Stone has become many (1 Peter “2:5–7). From these stones/sons, the Father is building us into his holy temple.”</p> <p>q 28:16 The promised one, Jesus Christ, is the Chief Cornerstone on which we rest our faith, because we are those who dwell in Zion’s realm (Heb. 12:22). Believers throughout all time have proven that he is faithful. See Ps. 118:22; Acts 4:11; Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:19–20.</p> <p>r 28:16 Or “will never run away (in fear).” Faith, firmly set upon Christ, is patient and never rushes, for faith leaves the timing of all things in God’s hands. Peter quotes this verse, saying, “Whoever believes in him will certainly not be disappointed” (1 Peter 2:6)</p>	<p>Judah’s Drunken Prophets</p> <p>⁷ Moreover, the prophets and priests are drunk. They stagger because of wine and stumble around because of strong drink. They are confused d with wine, stumbling because of strong drink. They’re too drunk to understand their prophetic visions. They’re too drunk to render right decisions in judgment. ⁸ All of their banqueting tables are covered with filthy vomit; vomit is everywhere! ⁹ They say, “Who does this prophet e think he is to try to teach us? Who really cares about his message? It’s only good for babies just learning to talk. f ¹⁰ Do , do this, and do, do that, a rule about this and a rule about that, here a little, there a little.” g</p> <p>¹¹ Since they won’t listen to me, God h will use another mouthpiece to speak to them. With stammering lips and in a foreign language, i he will speak to this people. ¹² For he has said to them, “This is your rest, so let the weary rest j this is your comfort”—but they would not listen ¹³ Therefore, the word of Yahweh will be to them “ Do, do this, and do, do that, a rule about this and a rule about that, here a little, there a little,” k in order that they will stumble backwards and be broken and captured.”</p> <p>A False Covenant with Death</p> <p>¹⁴ Therefore, listen to the word of Yahweh, you scornful jesters—rulers of Jerusalem. l ¹⁵ For you have said, “We have made a covenant with death and a pact with the underworld, m so when the overwhelming scourge sweeps over us, it will not harm us. For we have made lies our refuge n and find our shelter in falsehood.” o</p>

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<p>¹⁶ therefore 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.’ ¹⁷ And 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.” ¹⁸ Then 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. ¹⁹ As 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. ²⁰ For the bed is too short to stretch oneself on, and the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in. ²¹ For 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!</p> <p>²² Now 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.</p> <p>²³ Give ear, and hear my voice; give attention, and hear my speech. ²⁴ Does he who plows for sowing plow continually? Does he continually open and harrow his ground? ²⁵ When 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? ²⁶ For he is rightly instructed; his God teaches him.</p>	<p>s 28:17 Hail is a biblical metaphor for divine judgment. See v. 2; Ex. 9–10; Josh. 10:11; Ps. 18:12–13; 148:8; Isa. 32:19; Rev. 8:7; 11:19; 16:21.</p> <p>t 28:18 Or “It will trample you down.”</p> <p>u 28:20 The bed is a metaphor for their confidence in lies—resting in illusions, not the truth. Those who trust in lies will not be comfortable. The covering being too narrow means their nakedness (like hiding behind fig leaves) will still be exposed. They will be too cramped and too cold. Every resting place and shelter will fail them.</p> <p>v 28:21 This mountain is also called Baal-Perazim (“lord of the breakthrough”), the place where the Lord broke through, enabling David to conquer the Philistines. See 2 Sam. 5:20.</p> <p>w 28:21 In this valley, Yahweh rained down hailstones on the Amorites. See Josh. 10:8–14.</p> <p>x 28:21 The prophet describes God’s work of judgment as strange or foreign to what he delights in doing. God is love and longs to pour out his love upon his people, those he has chosen and established as his own. Yet “God is holy, and although in mercy he may delay judgment, he will judge his people. To see God’s work of judgment as strange (alien) is to understand that heaven’s default is always mercy. See also James 2:13.</p> <p>y 28:23 Or “to my speech.” Isaiah uses the parable of a farmer preparing his field to sow seed as a description of God’s ways within us. He begins by essentially saying, “If your ears are opened by my Spirit, then hear what I have to say.”</p> <p>z 28:24 The sharp teeth and cutting edge of God’s Word as it plows on the soil of our hearts will result in planting the life and glory of Jesus within us. God knows how the purpose of his painful plowing in our hearts is to prepare us for the beautiful Jesus to come forth from within. The outward shell, the hardened clods of soil, must be broken open so that Christ may be our true life. See Hos. 10:12.</p> <p>aa 28:24 The clods of the ground are an apt metaphor for human nature, for we have been taken from the dust of the ground.</p>	<p>¹⁶ Here’s what the Lord God says: “Behold, I set in place in Zion a Foundation Stone, p fully tested and proven to be faithful and secure. q And written upon this precious cornerstone is this: ‘Those who trust in him will not act in haste.’ r ¹⁷ I will set justice as the true measurement and integrity its plumb line. My hailstorm s will sweep away your refuge of lies, and my floodwaters will overwhelm your hiding place. ¹⁸ Then your covenant with death will be annulled and your pact with the underworld will not stand. And when the overwhelming scourge sweeps over you, it will sweep you away! t ¹⁹ As often as disaster passes by, it will carry you away; morning by morning, day after day, it will sweep you away!” When you fully understand this message, it will bring nothing but terror to you ²⁰ Your bed is too short to stretch yourself out on, and your covering is too narrow to wrap yourself in. u ²¹ The Lord Yahweh will suddenly arise as on Mount Perazim v and in the valley of Gibeon. w He arises to accomplish his strange work—peculiar as it is—his strange work of judgment? x ²² So do not mock, or your bonds will grow tighter. For I have heard the decree from my Lord Yahweh, Commander of Angel Armies. He spoke a decree of destruction against the whole land.</p> <p>The Wonderful Ways of God</p> <p>²³ Hear my voice, listen to my words, and pay close attention to my parable. y ²⁴ Does a farmer plow continually at planting time and never plant a crop? z Does he continually break open the clods of the ground aa and never sow his seed? ²⁵ Once he has leveled its surface, does he not sow dill and cumin, planting his wheat in rows, his barley in its proper place, and his rye in a patch? ²⁶ Yes, his God has instructed him man d taught him the right way of farming the land.</p>

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<p>²⁷ Dill 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. ²⁸ Does 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. ²⁹ This also comes from the LORD of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom.</p>	<p>ab 28:27 God knows how fragile we are as “seeds of the kingdom.” He will thresh us, but only according to what is needed to lay bare our hearts and cause the seed to grow. See 1 Cor. 10:13.</p> <p>ac 28:28 God does not crush the grain but only frees it from the chaff.</p> <p>ad 28:29 Or “He makes counsel wonderful; he makes wisdom great.” See also Rom. 11:33.</p>	<p>²⁷ Dill, a small seed, is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is a wagon wheel rolled over cumin. ab Dill is beaten with a rod and cumin with a stick ²⁸ Grain is crushed ac and milled for bread, but it is not threshed endlessly. One drives the wagon’s wheels over it, but his horses’ hooves do not pulverize it. ²⁹ This counsel also comes from Lord Yahweh, Commander of Angel Armies. For his guidance is unfathomable, and the heavenly wisdom he imparts is magnificent. ad</p>

BIBLE KNOWLEDGE COMMENTARY

JOHN A. MARTIN

WOE TO EPHRAIM AND JUDAH (CHAP. 28)

The strong pronouncements in this chapter are directed against the Northern Kingdom (vv. 1-13) and the Southern Kingdom (vv. 14-29). Before long the Northern Kingdom would fall to the Assyrians (722 B.C.). Writing to the people of the South, Isaiah was encouraging them not to be like their Northern brothers and sisters. God’s judgment was designed to bring the people to repentance before Him (vv. 23-29), not to “get even” with them.

- **Woe to Ephraim** (28:1-13)

- **The state of the Northern Kingdom** (28:1-8).

- **28:1.** In this first woe (ywøh, an interjection suggestive of impending doom or grief; cf. comments on 5:8), Ephraim, a prominent tribe representative of the Northern Kingdom, is likened to a drunkard. The area of the North was fertile at that time. Samaria, the capital city built by Omri (1 Kings 16:24), overlooked a fruitful valley (cf. Isa. 28:4). Because of Samaria’s beauty it was called a wreath (cf. v. 3). The possibility of material prosperity was great. However, the Northern Kingdom was throwing away the blessings of God as a drunkard throws away his money in the pursuit of wine. Apparently drunkenness was a problem in both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, so the figure of a drunkard is apt.
- **28:2-4.** Isaiah predicted that Assyria, like a strong hailstorm and windstorm, would go against the 10 Northern tribes. Samaria, like an ornamental wreath (cf. v. 1), would be trampled underfoot by Assyria with no regard for its worth. Samaria, the beauty of Israel overlooking a fertile valley (cf. v. 1), would become like a ripened fig, which is eaten by a stranger before it can be harvested. Early figs were considered a delicacy (cf. Hosea 9:10; Micah 7:1). The Northern Kingdom would have no safety; she would be taken into exile.
- **28:5-6.** Though Samaria, the capital of Ephraim, has twice been described as a wreath (vv. 1, 3), now the LORD Almighty is said to be like a beautiful wreath. He, not a prosperous beautiful city, should be honored. In that day, when the Lord establishes the Millennium, the remnant will be honored by the

Lord and will be under the One who sits in judgment. Even in the Assyrian siege of Samaria the Lord gave strength to the Israelite soldiers, enabling them to hold off the siege for three years.

- **28:7-8.** Returning again to the picture of the Northern Kingdom as a drunkard (cf. v. 1), Isaiah referred to the people and their leaders (priests and prophets) being drunk at a banquet where the tables are covered with vomit. They were intoxicated even when supposedly seeing visions (the false prophets) or when rendering decisions (the false priests). No wonder the nation was ripe for judgment!

- **Ephraim's Refusal to Believe (28:9-13).**

- **28:9-10.** The speakers in verse 9 are probably the priests and prophets mentioned in verses 7-8. They were angry that Isaiah was treating them as if they were young children. They felt they were adults who could think for themselves; they had no need for someone to tell them what to do or think. So they mimicked Isaiah as if he were speaking "baby talk" to them (v. 10). Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule (cf. v. 13) is a series of sounds in Hebrew. Mocking Isaiah's messages, the leaders were acting as if he were an adult "lecturing" a little child. A little here, a little there was a method used in teaching children, inculcating a little at a time. In other words they were refusing to take Isaiah's words seriously. They wanted nothing to do with his message or his ministry.
- **28:11-13.** Following up on the leaders' mimicking, Isaiah said that if they did not want to listen to his "lecturing" then they would be "lectured" by another people who had a difficult and different speech. Foreign lips would deliver the message of judgment on them. Isaiah was referring to the Assyrians who were advancing on Israel and would soon conquer it. Though God had offered Israel rest and repose they refused to listen to Him and His messenger. Therefore the LORD would turn their mocking back on them and they would be injured ... snared, and captured by a people whose language they did not understand.

- **Woe to Judah (28:14-29)**

- The message to Israel of destruction by foreign invaders was also for Judah. Though she would not be completely destroyed, because Jerusalem would not be taken, Judah would face much suffering. The people of the Southern Kingdom had much the same attitude as their Northern brothers. They too were scoffing at God's revelation through Isaiah.
- **28:14-22.** The people of Judah should not think they were guiltless before God. The leaders of Jerusalem, like their counterparts in the North, were responsible to guide and lead the people toward godliness. But they scoffed, boasting of several things. They said since they had made a covenant with death, the scourge could not touch them, and a lie and a falsehood were their hiding place (vv. 14-15). Why would the rulers of Jerusalem say such a thing? It seems that Isaiah was using imagery rich in the symbolism of Semitic mythology. For example, in the Ugaritic pantheon death was personified as the god of the underworld. The Jerusalem leaders were trusting in other gods to save them from the coming scourge, the Assyrian invasion. However, to trust in false gods was futile. The LORD sets the stone and the sure foundation, that is, only He is the basis for physical and spiritual salvation (v. 16). Whether Isaiah thought of the cornerstone as the Messiah or simply as genuine belief in the Lord is not clear. In other passages the cornerstone refers to Christ (Zech. 10:4; Eph. 2:20; 1 Peter 2:6).
- The Lord responded to each of these boasts. Their covenant with death would be annulled (Isa. 28:18), their lie would be swept away (v. 17), and they would be defeated by the scourge (v. 18) that would continue day after day (v. 19). This message of judgment would bring sheer terror (v. 19) as the

people realized its implications. To seek protection from false gods would be as inadequate as lying in a bed that is too short or trying to cover oneself with a blanket that is too small. The destruction would sweep down into Judah (Mount Perazim and the Valley of Gibeon, 1 Chron. 14:11, 16, are near Jerusalem, where David defeated the Philistines). Therefore they should stop ... mocking Isaiah's message given by the LORD Almighty.

- **28:23-29.** Isaiah then inserted a word of comfort into this message of woe and judgment. The judgment would last for only a short while as it was designed to purge the people. A farmer must crush his crops to get the desired results. For example, caraway and cummin, aromatic herbs, are beaten out with a rod or stick, not threshed, because their seeds are so small. Grain is ground by millstone, after the wheat stalks are threshed. Various crops must be treated differently so no one step (plowing, harrowing, planting, or threshing) is done continuously.
 - Similarly God would bring about judgment but not forever. He is the Master "Farmer," who knows how to handle each "crop." Therefore the Southern Kingdom should submit to Him because He is wonderful in counsel (cf. 9:6) and magnificent in wisdom (cf. 11:2).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the underlying factors that might have caused Israel and Judah to look to sources other than God for help?
2. Drunkenness was a common social ill at the time when this prophecy was being delivered. In the case of Ephraim, what was she "drunk on?" How about Judah? What might be causing their drunkenness?
3. The priests and prophets in verse 9 seem to be responding to the Lord's judgment with anger. What were they angry about? Why do we often respond to the Lord's discipline with anger? Where might the anger be coming from when we are faced with discipline at the hand of God?
4. If a true Father is only demonstrating his love when he disciplines his children, why do we seem to get so embarrassed when when we are the ones being disciplined? What is the best way to position yourself when you feel the Lord is disciplining you? How can you move this direction in a practical way? Can we actually come to the place where we "welcome" the discipline of the Lord?
5. What advice or encouragement would you give to one of your closest friends if you see them being disciplined by the Lord? What is your biblical rationale for your encouragement?