

Session 26

Isaiah 28:1-29 | Ephraim Humbled and Zion's Sure Foundation

Isaiah Oracle by Oracle / Dr. Randy White

Introduction to Isaiah 28–35

Isaiah 28–35 moves through warnings against misplaced confidence toward judgment and restoration. Chapters 28–33 present a series of woes; chapters 34–35 conclude with contrasting pictures of judgment on the nations and the redeemed returning to Zion. Chapter 28 begins with proud Ephraim and then addresses Jerusalem's rulers, setting their false refuge against the sure foundation God lays in Zion.

Isaiah 27 ended with the children of Israel gathered to worship the LORD at Jerusalem. Chapter 28 returns to the pride, unbelief, and false security that make judgment necessary. The restored future of the nation does not excuse the present conduct of its rulers. The LORD who preserves His vineyard also exposes the refuges in which His people wrongly trust.

This session begins the next major segment of our outline, “Warnings, Promises, and Calls to Righteousness” (28:1-35:10). The first woe falls upon Ephraim, the northern kingdom. The warning then reaches the scornful rulers in Jerusalem. Neither northern prosperity nor southern privilege can make lies a safe hiding place.

The chapter moves from a fading crown (vv.1-4) to the LORD as His people's true crown (vv.5-6), from rejected instruction (vv.7-13) to the sure foundation in Zion (vv.14-22), and finally to the farmer whose measured work illustrates the LORD's wisdom (vv.23-29). Its central promise is **“he that believeth shall not make haste”** (v.16). Faith rests upon what God lays; pride rests upon what men invent.

A. Ephraim's fading crown and the LORD's glory (vv.28:1-6)

- **Verse 1 - Ephraim's glorious crown is already a fading flower.** The opening **“Woe”** announces judgment, rather than admiration for the northern kingdom's prosperity.
 - **“The crown of pride”** joins political glory with moral arrogance. Ephraim represents the northern kingdom of Israel. Samaria, its capital, provides the natural historical setting for the crown standing above fertile valleys. Compare the account of Samaria's founding in 1 Kings 16:24.
- **“Whose glorious beauty is a fading flower”** exposes the temporary character of that glory. A flourishing landscape, impressive capital, and prosperous ruling class cannot preserve a people who reject the LORD.
- **“Them that are overcome with wine”** identifies actual drunkenness. The chapter later names priests and prophets who stumble through strong drink. The imagery also fits a leadership intoxicated

- with its own importance, but that observation must not erase the stated vice.
- **Verses 2-3 - The Lord overthrows the proud crown.** “**The Lord hath a mighty and strong one**” announces His instrument.
 - Hail, destroying storm, and overflowing waters describe irresistible devastation. Isaiah 8:7-8 already pictured Assyria as a river overflowing its banks. Assyrian conquest supplies the historical background here, although verse 2 does not name the conqueror.
 - Second Kings 17:3-6 records the siege and fall of Samaria and the carrying away of Israel. The northern kingdom’s collapse is a concrete warning about the failure of proud national confidence.
 - The crown that occupied the height is “**trodden under feet.**” Isaiah reverses its position. What men exalt can be brought beneath the feet of an enemy.
 - **Verse 4 - The capital’s beauty disappears like an early piece of fruit.** The “**hasty fruit before the summer**” is fruit ripe ahead of the main harvest. A passerby sees it and immediately eats it. The comparison emphasizes how quickly something desirable can be consumed; it does not provide a timetable for the siege.
 - **Verses 5-6 - The LORD becomes the remnant’s crown.** “**In that day**” turns from Ephraim’s falling ornament to the glory God supplies.
 - “**A crown of glory**” and “**a diadem of beauty**” deliberately answer the crown and beauty of verses 1 and 4. The LORD is the abiding glory that human pride cannot produce.
 - “**The residue of his people**” is the remnant. Judgment upon the nation does not cancel God’s purpose for His people. Compare Isaiah 10:20-22 and the restored Israel of 27:6,12-13.
 - “**A spirit of judgment**” supplies sound judgment to the one who administers justice. “**Strength to them that turn the battle to the gate**” supplies what the defenders need. The promise reaches both public justice and national protection.
 - The remnant promise fits Isaiah’s larger expectation of restored Israel under the LORD’s rule. It should retain that national setting rather than becoming a prediction that every present government or congregation will enjoy military victory.

B. Rejected instruction and another tongue (vv.28:7-13)

- **Verses 7-8 - Intoxication has corrupted the very men responsible for spiritual judgment.** “**But they also**” extends the indictment. Verse 14 explicitly addresses Jerusalem, so Judah cannot hear Ephraim’s woe as though the problem belongs only to its northern neighbor.
 - “**The priest and the prophet**” are named. Their offices do not protect them from error: “**they err in vision, they stumble in judgment.**” The chapter tests leadership by its response to God’s word, not merely by its title.
 - The repeated wine and strong-drink language describes loss of sound judgment. Leviticus 10:9-11 associates the priest’s restraint from intoxicating drink with distinguishing holy from unholy and teaching Israel God’s statutes.
 - Tables covered with “**vomit and filthiness**” portray the degradation plainly. Those who should offer clear instruction have made their surroundings unclean. Isaiah gives no reason to turn the description into a harmless figure of speech.

- **Verses 9-10 - The repeated elementary phrases expose the hearers' attitude toward instruction.** The questions ask who will learn knowledge and understand doctrine: newly weaned children?
 - **“Precept upon precept” and “line upon line”** are frequently quoted as a description of careful teaching. Careful teaching is valuable, but the immediate context concerns people who reject the LORD's instruction.
 - One reading hears the drunken leaders mocking Isaiah as though he were treating them like little children. Another hears the prophet exposing their childish incapacity to learn. The passage does not mark every change of speaker, so the precise assignment of these words is debated.
 - Either way, verses 12-13 settle the moral issue: the LORD offered rest, **“yet they would not hear,”** and the repeated formula ends in their being broken and taken. These verses cannot be reduced to a cheerful slogan for a study method.
- **Verse 11 - Refusal of intelligible warning is answered by speech from outside. “With stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people.”**
 - In Isaiah's historical setting, foreign speech fits the approach of an invading people. Men who reject the prophetic word in their own language will encounter a language they do not readily understand.
- Compare the foreign-tongued nation in Deuteronomy 28:49.
- Paul cites this passage in 1 Corinthians 14:21-22 in his discussion of tongues. The quotation preserves its connection with unbelief and the failure to hear. It is a judicial warning, not a statement that every believer must speak in tongues.
- **“This people”** must first be read as Isaiah's addressed people. Paul's later use should be studied within his own argument without removing Isaiah's historical audience or making every occurrence of another language the fulfillment of this prophecy.
- **Verse 12 - The rejected word had offered rest and refreshing.** The LORD's instruction was not designed to burden His people needlessly: **“This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest.”** The indictment is deliberate refusal, **“yet they would not hear.”** Compare the quietness and confidence rejected in Isaiah 30:15.
- **Verse 13 - The word they refuse becomes an occasion of judgment.** The repeated phrases now lead to **“fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.”** As in Isaiah 6:9-13, continued rejection of revelation has judicial consequences. The fall backward here is ruin and captivity; the verse offers no positive model for a religious experience.

C. Jerusalem's refuge and Zion's foundation (vv.28:14-16)

- **Verse 14 - Jerusalem's rulers must hear the very word they scorn. “Wherefore hear the word of the LORD”** draws the conclusion from the preceding refusal to hear. The audience is explicit: **“ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem.”** Ephraim's fall does not give Judah permission to presume upon its own survival.
- **Verse 15 - The rulers boast that their arrangement will shelter them from death.** Their confidence is described as **“a covenant with death”** and an agreement **“with hell.”**
 - In this setting, *hell* concerns the realm of the dead. The rulers act as though death itself has promised to leave them alone.

Isaiah exposes the fatal character of the security they claim.

- **“When the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us”** is the boast. The storm and flood language of verse 2 now tests Jerusalem’s confidence. They recognize a danger but imagine themselves exempt.
- **“We have made lies our refuge”** gives the prophetic assessment of their policy. They may have described their arrangements as prudent; Isaiah names the falsehood beneath them. The words need not mean that they publicly advertised their own dishonesty.
- The chapter does not name a particular treaty or foreign partner. Confidence in political alliances belongs to the wider setting of Isaiah 30-31, but a specific identification should remain a proposal.
- The imagery can also be considered alongside later prophecy about deceptive security. Isaiah 28:15 itself does not identify the agreement with Daniel 9:27, name the Antichrist, or specify a seven-year term. Those connections require an argument from the other passages.
- **Verse 16 - God lays His sure foundation in Zion. “Thus saith the Lord GOD”** introduces His answer to the rulers’ boast.
- **“I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone”** puts the initiative with God. The

location remains Zion. The promise stands within His dealings with Israel and Jerusalem, rather than announcing that those identities have been discarded.

- The stone is **“tried,” “precious,”** and **“a sure foundation.”** Each description answers the instability of the refuge of lies. Its reliability comes from God’s provision, not the rulers’ ability to negotiate immunity.
- Romans 9:33 and 1 Peter 2:6 apply Isaiah’s stone promise to Christ. Romans joins it with Isaiah 8:14, where the LORD is also a stone of stumbling. The same Messiah who provides security is rejected by those who refuse to believe.
- **“He that believeth shall not make haste”** describes confidence that does not flee in panic. The New Testament quotations express the assurance in terms of not being ashamed or confounded. The emphasis is the reliability of the One trusted.
- The messianic identification does not require replacing Israel with the Body of Christ. Neither does this verse alone state every detail of the gospel of grace. The promise should be understood in its prophetic setting, while receiving the additional light supplied by the New Testament.

D. The refuge of lies swept away (vv.28:17-22)

- **Verse 17 - God’s standard exposes the failure of their construction. “Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet”** extends the building imagery of the foundation stone.
- A line and plummet test whether a structure is true. God’s judgment and righteousness provide the standard; a

confident claim does not make crooked construction sound.

- **“The hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies”** and the waters overflow its hiding place. The rulers’ shelter cannot withstand the very storm they claimed would spare them.
- The connection between verses 16 and 17 matters. The LORD supplies a sure

foundation while rejecting structures built upon falsehood. The promise of the stone does not excuse unbelief in Jerusalem's leadership.

- **Verse 18 - The claimed covenant cannot stand against the LORD's sentence.** "Your covenant with death shall be disannulled" answers their boast point by point. They said the scourge would not reach them; God says "ye shall be trodden down by it." The wording recalls Ephraim's crown beneath the feet in verse 3. Judah's leaders face the same lesson in misplaced confidence.
- **Verse 19 - Repeated visitation replaces the expected immunity.** "Morning by morning" and "by day and by night" make the threat persistent. Merely receiving and understanding the report will bring terror. The verse's difficult final clause should not be used to soften its plain emphasis: the coming judgment will be dreadful to experience and dreadful to hear about.
- **Verse 20 - Their refuge is as inadequate as a bed and covering too small for the sleeper.** A man cannot stretch himself on the bed or wrap himself in the covering. The illustration is intentionally ordinary. What promises rest fails to provide it. Compare the refreshing offered and refused in verse 12.
- **Verse 21 - The LORD rises to perform His strange work.** Mount Perazim recalls the LORD's breakthrough against David's enemies (2 Sam. 5:20). Gibeon recalls

His victories, including the battle described in 1 Chronicles 14:13-16; compare Joshua 10:10-14.

- The startling feature is the present audience. Jerusalem's scornful rulers cannot assume that the God who defeated their enemies will defend their rebellion. His power also stands against sin among His own people.
- **"His strange work"** and **"his strange act"** characterize this sobering intervention. The wording does not mean that God acts unjustly, loses control, or becomes unfamiliar with His own purpose.
- **Verse 22 - The warning still calls the mockers to stop mocking.** "Lest your bands be made strong" pictures an increasingly binding captivity. Their response to warning matters.
- **"A consumption, even determined upon the whole earth"** announces a decreed devastation. *Consumption* here means destructive judgment, not an illness. Compare the determined consumption of Isaiah 10:22-23.
- The wording reaches beyond a private rebuke to individual rulers. Its breadth fits Isaiah's larger judgment prophecies, while the immediate address remains Jerusalem. It does not authorize assigning a modern nation, date, or political agreement without further textual evidence.

E. The farmer's wisdom and the LORD's purpose (vv.28:23-29)

- **Verse 23 - The prophet renews the call to listen.** "Give ye ear, and hear my voice" answers the refusal of verse 12 and the scorn of verse 14. The farming illustration explains something about the LORD whose judgment has just been announced.
- **Verses 24-25 - A farmer prepares the ground in order to sow.** "Doth the plowman plow all day to sow?" asks

whether plowing is an endless occupation. He breaks the clods, levels the surface, and then distributes the crops in their appropriate places.

- Plowing is severe treatment of the soil, but it serves a purpose beyond the breaking. Sowing follows preparation. The stages belong to a single intended harvest.

- Fitches, cummin, wheat, barley, and rie are handled with discrimination. The KJV's agricultural vocabulary should not obscure the readily observed point: one crop and one task do not require exactly the same treatment as every other.
- **Verse 26 - The farmer's discretion itself comes from God.** "His God doth instruct him to discretion, and doth teach him." The practical wisdom evident in ordinary agriculture points back to its divine source. The Creator understands the different requirements of what He has made.
- **Verse 27 - Delicate crops receive an appropriate threshing method.** Fitches and cummin are beaten with a staff or rod rather than subjected to a cart wheel. Effective treatment is not the same as the maximum possible force. The farmer aims to obtain the crop, not destroy it.
- **Verse 28 - Even grain is not threshed without limit.** The KJV begins "Bread corn is bruised" and adds "he will not ever be threshing it." *Bread corn* means grain used for bread; *corn* does not require the modern American meaning of maize. The difficult cart-and-horsemen clause belongs to the same point: processing the crop must not become its ruin.
- **Verse 29 - The LORD's counsel and work exceed the wisdom He gives the farmer.** "Wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working" is the chapter's closing estimate of the LORD of hosts.
 - The illustration supports purposeful, discerning judgment. Ephraim's pride will fall, Jerusalem's false refuge will fail, and the LORD's purpose will proceed according to His wisdom.
 - It also accords with the measured dealing and fruitful future of Jacob in Isaiah 27:6-9. God's national purpose survives necessary judgment. This does not mean that every individual escapes ruin or that every announced destruction will be mild.
 - The passage supplies its own comparison between the farmer's discretion and the LORD's wisdom. It does not assign a secret prophetic identity to each seed, wheel, staff, and animal.

F. The chapter's argument

- **The fading crown and the true crown:** Ephraim's proud glory is consumed, while the LORD becomes the glory and strength of His remnant (vv.1-6).
 - **The refused word and the foreign tongue:** the people reject offered rest and face a word that ends in judgment (vv.7-13).
 - **The false refuge and the sure foundation:** Jerusalem's rulers trust an agreement that cannot stand; God lays His reliable stone in Zion (vv.14-22).
 - **The instructed farmer and the wise LORD:** the closing illustration shows purposeful work directed toward its proper outcome (vv.23-29).
- The chapter calls its hearers to abandon proud immunity and hear the LORD.** Israel's future rests upon His faithfulness, while the security of the believing one rests upon the foundation He provides. Chapter 29 continues the warnings with a woe concerning Ariel, the city where David dwelt.
- Scripture quotations follow the King James Version. Related passages for further study: Deuteronomy 28:49; 2 Kings 17:3-6; Isaiah 8:7-8,14; 10:20-23; 27:6-13; 30:15; Romans 9:30-33; 1 Corinthians 14:20-25; 1 Peter 2:4-8.