

Isaiah Part 16: “Precept upon precept, line upon line...”

Isaiah 28 and 29

Isaiah 28 to 33 are six chapters that focus on warnings against Judah and Jerusalem...

Judgment on Ephraim and Jerusalem (Isaiah 28 v 1 to 13)

“Ah, the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim” (v 1) – Ephraim was a name for the northern nation of Israel, because Ephraim was a prominent tribe in that nation. In Ephraim, drunkenness was such a significant problem that God directed Isaiah to directly address the ‘drunkards of Ephraim’. This is one of several passages of Scripture that speaks to drunkards. Proverbs 23 v 29 to 35 speaks of the folly of drunkenness. Ephesians 5 v 18 tells us to be filled with the Spirit instead of being drunk. Romans 13 v 13; 1 Corinthians 5 v 11, 6 v 10 and 11 v 21; Galatians 5 v 21; and 1 Peter 4 v 3 each contain commands against drunkenness; Jesus specifically warned against drunkenness in the last days in Luke 21 v 34 to 36.

One might wish there was a strict prohibition against alcohol in the Bible, but there isn’t. Jesus turned water into wine (John 2 v 1 to 11), drank wine (Mark 14 v 22 to 26), and was even unjustly accused of being a drunkard (Matthew 11 v 19). Paul recommended the use of wine to Timothy, promoting its medicinal properties over those of water (1 Timothy 5 v 23). The Bible regards wine as a gift from God (Psalm 104 v 15). So, while the Bible allows appropriate use of alcohol, it strictly condemns drunkenness.

- What are the consequences of drunkenness, as spelled out in verses 1 to 4, 7 and 8? What is God’s message to ‘his people’, and what are the consequences of rejecting this message (v 9 to 13)?

“These also” (v 7) – since Isaiah mentions ‘the priest’ and ‘the prophet’, it seems that ‘these also’ refers to the people of Jerusalem and Judah. If Ephraim had a problem with drunkenness, so did Jerusalem.

“To whom will he teach knowledge?” (v 9) – these are the mocking words of the drunk, ungodly prophets and priests described in verses 7 and 8. In their minds, Isaiah’s message is fit only for children (“those who are weaned from the milk”). “Precept upon precept” (v 10) – with these words they are also mocking Isaiah’s teaching: ‘It is too simple. It is just precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, there a little. We are so smart and spiritually sophisticated that we can go on to deeper things.’ But in their mockery of Isaiah’s message, they are actually paying him a great compliment. It is wonderful for God’s truth to be presented ‘*precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, there a little.*’ When God’s word is properly taught, there is something for the simple to receive, and also something to nourish and delight mature believers.

A cornerstone in Zion (Isaiah 28 v 14 to 29)

- What do these verses teach us about the triumph of God’s purposes in human affairs, and the futility of unbelief and rebellion? How does the farming ‘parable’ in verses 23 to 29 encourage us that God foresees and arranges everything according to his will?
- How does the ultimate fulfilment of God’s plans foreshadow the work and ministry of Jesus Christ? With verse 16 compare 1 Peter 2 v 6, 7; Acts 4 v 11; Matthew 21 v 42.

Who lays the ‘foundation stone’ (v 16)? We are unable to provide the right kind of foundation for our lives, but God provides for us in Jesus a “sure foundation”, and we can build on him with confidence. “A tested stone” – Jesus was tested, and proven to be the glorious, obedient Son of God. “A precious cornerstone” – a cornerstone provides the lines and pattern for the rest of the building. “Justice the line, and righteousness the plumb line” (v 17) – it is not as if God establishes the cornerstone and then walks away. Instead, he keeps the building straight with justice and righteousness.

[MORE OVER...]

“For the LORD will rise up as on Mount Perazim; as in the Valley of Gibeon he will be roused” (v 21) – at Perazim God accomplished a great victory for Israel in the days of David (2 Samuel 5 v 20), and at Gibeon, God accomplished a great victory in the days of Joshua (Joshua 10 v 11). On those occasions God fought *for* his people, but if the leaders do not repent, they will soon find God fighting “*against* the whole land” (v 22).

“Does he who plough for sowing plough continually?” (v 24) – the end of Isaiah 28 is a ‘poem’ comparing God’s work to that of a farmer. A farmer knows when to stop ploughing, when to level the ground, and when to plant, using different tools to produce a harvest. God knows what tools to use in our lives, and when to use them. God is an expert farmer, working with ‘wonderful counsel’ and ‘excellent wisdom’ (v 29).

The siege of Jerusalem (Isaiah 29)

“Ah, Ariel” (v 1) – the name ‘Ariel’ means ‘Lion of God’, and in this passage is used as a symbolic reference to Jerusalem (“the city where David encamped”). The sense of verses 1 to 4 is that Jerusalem (Ariel) is proud, resting on its spiritual heritage instead of its present reality, and living for present pleasures without concern for God (“let the feasts run their round”). “Yet I will distress Ariel” (v 2) – Jerusalem may have a high opinion of itself, but through God’s hand of judgment it “will be brought low” (v 4).

- How does Isaiah contrast the distress of Jerusalem in verses 1 to 4 with her restoration in verses 5 to 8? How can this encourage us during times of difficulty?
- What were the reasons for the people’s spiritual blindness and lack of discernment (v 9 to 16), and in what ways did they show this? What caused the spiritual transformation described in verses 17 to 22? See verses 18 and 24.

“This people draw near with their mouth, and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me” (v 13) – the people of Jerusalem knew how to ‘talk the spiritual talk’, but their hearts were far from God. This manner of talking the talk, but not having the heart, was not confined to Isaiah’s day: Jesus quoted this passage when he rebuked the religious leaders for their hypocrisy, in Matthew 15 v 7 to 9. “The wisdom of their wise men shall perish” (v 14) – because Jerusalem’s pride had led them into spiritual blindness, sleep, drunkenness, illiteracy, and hypocrisy, God will destroy the ‘wisdom of their wise men’. Isaiah calls this “wonder upon wonder”, for God to reject the wisdom of man and to display his wisdom. Paul was also amazed at how the ‘wisdom of man’ was confounded by the ‘foolishness of God’ – see 1 Corinthians 1 v 21 to 25. “Shall the potter be regarded as the clay...?” (v 16) – the people of Jerusalem made the mistake of raising themselves up, and lowering God at the same time: for them, the clay was just as worthy as the potter. Again, Paul picks up this idea in Romans 9 v 19 to 21.

“The deaf shall hear... the eyes of the blind shall see” (v 18) – when God’s people are restored, pride no longer prevents them from hearing God’s word, or seeing God’s work. Just as much as these are miracles in the natural realm, they are miracles in the spiritual realm also. We need to humbly seek God for ears to hear and eyes to see. “The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD” (v 19) – joy is the reward for the meek. When we are ‘meek’, or humble, our lives are filled with joy.

“When he sees his children, the work of my hands, in his midst, they will sanctify my name” (v 23) – the picture is of the patriarch Jacob looking over his descendants, and no longer being ashamed of them, because they now sanctify the name of the LORD, and respect his holiness. “Those who go astray in spirit will come to understanding, and those who murmur will accept instruction” (v 24) – finally, in God’s day of restoration, the truth is taught and known and exalted. Those who strayed now have understanding, and those who murmured now know better, because they know the truth.

Prayer – O Lord, thank you for these sobering words of warning, and for these words of promise. Help us to listen to your word, precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, there a little. Help us to remember that you are an expert farmer, working with wonderful counsel and excellent wisdom. When we go astray you restore us, when we are humble we obtain ‘fresh joy in the LORD’. We praise you in Jesus’ name, Amen.