

## Cornerstone

*The Gospel According to Isaiah*

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**Bible Text:** Isaiah 28

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Our Scripture reading this morning is from Isaiah 28, beginning with verse 14 through the end of the verse 29. This is located on page 588 of your Pew Bible. Isaiah 28:14, page 588. Hear the word of the Lord,

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"; 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! 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. 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. 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.

Keep your Bibles open at that passage in Isaiah 28. Each one of us is engaged in a building project, whether we think of our own personal lives or we think about the life of the church of Jesus Christ, we're involved in a building project. Jesus uses that analogy, doesn't he, in Matthew 7 where he talks about two kinds of people: one who builds their house on the sand and another that builds their house on the rock. His point is: it matters how you build; it matters where you build; it matters with what you build. Whether you're thinking of your own life as an individual or whether you're thinking of the church of Jesus Christ. Paul writing to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 3, you remember, he asked them what foundation they're building on? He asked them what they're using to build on this foundation? What are their building materials: are they gold, silver and precious stones or are they wood, hay and stubble? Will they last through the final conflagration? Will they last in the final judgment? As you and I sit in this room today, you and I as individuals are building our lives on something and with something and both the foundation we build on and the materials we build with have eternal significance. That's true of us as individuals and it's true of us as a church.

Isaiah is addressing people. He's addressing real people. He's addressing people who could say the Apostle's Creed of their day, that is, they could affirm certain things that they believed about the God of Israel, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. They could affirm; they believed these things. But Isaiah is addressing them, he's addressing the word of God to them because he sees a disjunction between what they profess publicly and what they are privately. He sees that whatever it is they say, nonetheless, what they do takes them in a direction contrary to the things of God. He's already been talking to the people in northern Israel, based around Samaria as their capital and at the beginning of this chapter he is firing his guns at them and the audience in southern Israel liked to hear the people in northern Israel being attacked. They liked to hear the big guns being trained on them and them being bombarded with the word of God and exposed for what they're like and you can hear the audience, you can hear them almost saying their "Amens!" and "Preach it, brother!" as he meddles with what's going on in northern Israel.

Then there's a kind of subtle moment in the course of his talk where in verse 7 of this chapter he begins to look around at his audience here and he says to the audience that's in front of him, he says, "These also," and he begins to describe what's going on in Jerusalem and what he describes going on in his own congregation is far worse than what's going on up north in that other congregation there. He addresses the word of God to the people of God and when we come to verse 14, there is a shudder that goes through the crowd as they listened because when a prophet begins with this word, "therefore," they know precisely what it's there for. They know that that word is shifting the whole tenor of his talk from accusation to sentence. Therefore this is what is going to happen. "Therefore hear the word of the LORD," he says to them, "you scoffers, who rule this people in Jerusalem!" Who is in his sight lines now? It is the leaders of the people of

Jerusalem and how does he describe them? He describes them as scoffers, people who try to talk their way out of anything and everything.

We have a definition of what the scoffer does and is like in the very first Psalm where the Psalmist is describing the man who is truly blessed of God is a man who “does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor does he stand in the way of sinners, nor does he sit in the seat of scoffers.” There is a descending cycle there from walking to standing to sitting. You ask the prophets what is the lowest form of ungodly life and they would say it is the scoffer. The godly man, on the other hand, doesn't sit there, “his delight is on the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night.” In other words, those that scoff are those who are full of pride; they are those who do not take correction; they are those who are dismissive of the word of God. There are some things they will not let God speak to them about and there are some people they will not let God speak to them through, the scoffer.

And he's addressing them and he's addressing them for this reason: that these people that he's speaking to are not trusting in God. That's Isaiah's big argument with the people of his day: faith. Where does your faith lie? Here they were and the church in those days is a nation state and they're threatened by external military enemies so where do they look? In their past they would look to God and they would expect that God would intervene for them, that they could win battles without firing a gun because they didn't have guns in those days, or lifting a sword or a spear, that God would win battles for them and that's what he did over and over again in their history. But these people don't believe God anymore. Where are they looking for help? They're not looking for help to the Lord, they're looking south towards Egypt.

So here they have this combination of northern Israel and Syria bearing down upon them. Over to the east, they have a growing Assyrian presence and they feel boxed in so where do they look? Do they look upwards to God? No, they look south to Egypt. Listen to Isaiah as he describes this action that they've taken. They didn't use this language but the prophet does: they have made a covenant with death; they have made a lie their refuge. They didn't realize it but that's what they were really doing in reality. They regarded it as realpolitik, allying themselves with some of their neighbors rather than trusting in God. Isaiah says to them, “That pact is a suicide pact.” They did it because they thought this is a way to ensure their survival, to keep their influence. Isaiah says, “You are signing your death warrant. You're like the foolish man in Jesus' parable. You're building your house on the sand. You may have contracted the best architect and the best building contractors and they may have used the very finest materials available for building but it's built on sand.” It's a covenant of death.

Isaiah is confronting these people with the results of their actions and, of course, as we listen in from our New Covenant perspective and we listen to Isaiah speaking to the people who profess to follow the God of Israel in his day, we see the principles apply to the church and to us every bit as much as to them. The principles remain unchanged. They apply to God's people today, organized today as a church and not as a nation state. But you think of the things on which we pin our hopes. As individuals, perhaps we have

our own areas that we put our confidence in, a lie that we believe. We believe a lie about the contemporary church. For example, the contemporary church with its programs; we think programs will keep the church from disappearing. Or we think that modifying what the church believes to what the culture wants will keep the church in existence. A whole denomination did that this week. A whole denomination voted for an entirely new definition of what marriage means in order to fit the culture in which they're living. They did that in order to survive. Their figures are nose-diving but they're blind to see it. They're blind to see it. And we're challenged by the word of God: are we putting our confidence in something that will betray us in the end? Other churches, they put their confidence in some celebrity figure and the celebrity figure is what will keep the church going, keep the church growing, keep the money coming in, keep the fabric being attended to, keep the tribes who come amused or entertained or interested in the performance or whatever it may be.

And the challenge of Isaiah's words are, "Don't put your trust anywhere than in God." He spells it out to them, "Trust God's word," he says, "Trust God's word." You notice in verse 16, "Thus says the Lord God." This is the sovereign Lord. This is the King God. This is the one who is in control of all the universe and of your life and mine. What is the Lord God? Who is the King God? The sovereign God? What is he saying? He says, "Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion." In Zion, that doesn't mean Jerusalem where Isaiah is ministering to his congregation. This is becoming increasingly in the book of Isaiah the heavenly city of God, the heavenly Zion. He's saying, "When you think of God's place where God reigns, when you think of that exalted place from which he rules all of history and all of life and all of the universe, when you think of where God is, God has established where he is. This foundation, this stone, this tested stone." God is saying to his people, "My ultimate purpose is to provide you with a solid foundation for life and living. My ultimate purpose is to establish a solid foundation for the building not only of individual people and their lives but the building of my church in the world."

Now, this idea of a stone being laid by God is one that has already come up in the book of Isaiah in chapter 8 where the Lord is the stone and the Lord is also a stumbling stone. There are people who stumble over it because they don't see its importance; they don't see that ultimately that stone is going to be pivotal for the building, the erection, of the entire building that God has in mind and they stumble over it. From a wider biblical perspective in the New Testament, in fact, from Zechariah 3:9, the stone is the Messiah; he is the Christ who is to come. In Romans 9 and 1 Peter 2, we find the stone is described as Jesus himself. In the gospels, Jesus applies this verse to himself and wherever he uses that expression in the gospels, he does it to convey not an accusation or a threat but a testimony to his audience. Wherever he calls himself the chief cornerstone, he is saying to the people that he is God's authoritative and decisive representative. He comes with authority from God but he is decisive. In other words, absolutely everything in life hinges on how you relate to him. That's what Jesus is claiming. That's what his audience understood him to be claiming. They understood that absolutely everything in heaven and earth and hell depends on your relationship to Jesus. That's why they wanted to kill him.

When he calls himself the foundation, he is saying to the people then and to the people today: to reject him is to reject God.

Back in chapter 8 of Isaiah, Isaiah spoke about the unbelief of both houses of Israel: northern Israel and southern Israel. He talks about the intervention of God as the only hope for both of those parties and he says there in chapter 8 that the intervention of God as a Savior, the Rescuer, the Deliverer, will itself result in being a stumbling stone to Israel. Paul in 1 Corinthians when he's talking about the preaching of the gospel and the cross, says that the preaching of the cross is foolishness; it's a stumbling stone to the Jew and foolishness to the Gentile. In other words, the preaching of Jesus Christ is definitive. It is decisive for where you will spend eternity. That's what we understand by this. Isaiah is speaking ahead of time that God's saving intervention is absolutely vital for the world. I want you to notice that in Isaiah 8, the Lord himself is the stone. Here in chapter 28, it is the Lord who places the stone and we have in that distinction something of what the New Testament teaches us about the person of Jesus Christ the Son of God, that he is God, he is the Lord, he is Yahweh, but he is also placed by the Lord. "The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies my footstool." That balance with Jesus being both God and alongside God is absolutely crucial to understand who Jesus is.

How decisive is he? You notice what it goes on to say, "Whoever believes." That was the problem with the people Isaiah is talking to. They were prepared to believe anything but believe God. They were prepared to put their confidence in other things, not in God. They thought if they got the Egyptians, well the Egyptians would defeat their enemies. The Egyptians would get the glory, not God. They did not believe God. Whoever believes. It's interesting that the Apostle Paul quotes from these verses in Romans 10 as well when he's talking about Jesus as Lord and there he says, "If you believe in Jesus as Lord because God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved." You will be rescued. The rescue is contingent on believing the Lord. In New Testament terms, the Lord Yahweh is the resurrected, exalted, Lord Jesus. He is the foundation stone laid in Zion, the heavenly city of God. You build on that stone. You build your life on that stone. You build your life on Christ and you will last for eternity.

He alone will ascend the hill of the Lord and enter into that holy place and "whoever believes in him," you notice, "will not be in haste." That's a Hebrew expression. When the Greek translators 200 years before Jesus were translating the Hebrew into Greek and they put it like this, "Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." Will not be put to shame. You don't have to be agitated. You know, sometimes when you're agitated or anxious or whatever, you're kind of busy around all over the place and you really can't sit down because you're so wound up. Maybe that doesn't happen to you. It happens to me sometimes my wife says. But if you're resting in the Lord, then you don't get all agitated and worked up. You're not in haste. You are confident that you won't be disappointed. You will never be disappointed, never let down. You will not be put to shame as the Septuagint version puts it.

What he's saying is you'll never be ashamed of believing God. You'll never be ashamed of building on the foundation that is Jesus Christ. On that final day of the great

conflagration when heaven and earth pass away, when every person who has ever lived before or after us around the world stands before Almighty God, when the books are opened, when the law of God is read, when we are all exposed as sinners and undone and lost and without hope in the world. On that day, those who believe will not be put to shame. You will be vindicated on that day. On that day, you will have no need for agitation or panic because those who believe Jesus Christ is Lord are saved now and forever. That's a vital thing that is being taught by the prophet here.

He goes on to spell out the effects of this salvation in the future. What will God do for those who believe in him? This is what he will do, "I will make justice the line," the measure, "and righteousness the plumb line; and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies," everything you put your confidence in that has been "the lie, the big lie," swept away on that day, "and waters will overwhelm the shelter," everything you put your confidence in other than God, swept away on that day. Everything you trusted in, as a wind of judgment sweeps through, swept away on that day and God will establish justice and righteousness. In our opening Psalm that we read together, we read about that justice and righteousness that God accomplishes amongst us.

Well, we're to trust God's word and then he goes on to say we're to trust God's warning. We're to trust God's warning. Look at the warning here as it's spelled out, "In that day, 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. 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." He's describing what's going to happen to this particular people in Jerusalem. They'll sit and they'll observe what happens in northern Israel. Samaria annihilated. The population displaced, disappearing, never to be a nation state again. Northern Israel, the Ten Tribes, ceasing to exist as a cultural, racial, national entity. Finished. They will watch that happening and Isaiah says, "The same will happen to you nearly." Jerusalem demolished. A foreign army invading. And judgment will come and everything you put your confidence in, swept away.

Look at the picture. They did that so that they would have peace of mind. That's why they had their treaty with Egypt, so they would have peace and mind and be confident about their future but there is no confidence in the future and there is no peace of mind. Look at verse 20, it's a great picture. Here you are, you're exhausted at the end of the day, you go to bed, you get into the bed and you discover your head is hanging over one end and your legs are hanging over the other and your arms are falling down the sides. As the night goes on and you're twisting and turning and tossing around in order to find some place on that little narrow bed on which you could be comfortable as you sleep, it gets cold and so you pull the covers over you and you find that when you pull them up, they cover your belly but they don't cover your shoulders or your legs and your legs get cold, so you pull it down over your legs and then your arms get cold and you pull it up round your arms and the rest of you gets cold and this goes on all night. It's a great picture, isn't it? What is it a picture of? It's a picture of not getting rest. No relaxation. No peace. There

is no peace for the wicked. There is no place of rest outside of Christ. There is no place of rest in anything else other than in the one provided.

But it gets worse because it goes on to say that the God who worked in the past, verse 21, will do a strange work in the present. He talks about Mount Perazim and the Valley of Gibeon and in both of those places Yahweh had helped David defeat the Phillies, sorry, the Philistines. The Lord had fought with David against the Philistines but now the God who fought for them then says to Judah, "I'm going to fight against you." That's an amazing insight into the nature of God and the language that Isaiah uses here is helpful in getting our heads around the nature of God. On the one hand, the God that we deal with is a tough-minded God. You know, when we read this, we want to apply this as Christian people, we want to apply this immediately to the world, don't we? We want this to apply to the world, not the church. It would be easy to think of that, northern Israel, the world outside these walls, the world in its disbelief and in its bad behavior and so on but actually if we're going to be honest, the New Testament when it's quoting these passages in the Old Testament, the New Testament take the book of Hebrews, for example, says, "These things were written for our learning," and applies then to us, to the church. And what it's saying is that God is a tough-minded God who is able to make hard decisions, is not afraid to express anger and is not afraid to hurt people in the process. Well, that's quite scary, really.

But there's a second thing that is equally true and you notice the way in which its put the language in which it's put here: that is not his favored option. That is not his favored option. The prophet takes us inside the heart of God and he asks the question: is wrath God's preferred way of dealing with his people? Answer: no. Is God the kind of boss who is happiest when he's cost-cutting? Is he? The answer is no. Is God the kind of boss who is actually happy firing people? No, he's not. He does all of those things but he's not happiest when he's doing those things. In other words, what Isaiah says here, do you notice this, "The LORD will rise up as on Mount Perazim; as in the Valley of Gibeon," but this time he's going "to do his deed, strange is his deed and to work his work - alien is his work." Why is it alien and why is it strange? It's because the God who fought for them is now fighting against his own church. He fights against his own people because he wants his people to be characterized by justice and righteousness and when they're not, when they don't hear the word "challenge them," other ways are found to get it through to them. So at the Lord's Table, we read those words of the Apostle Paul when he's writing to this church at Corinth and he loads that letter with all kinds of Old Testament language including from this passage and he says to them, "Don't you realize this explains why some are weak and some are sickly and some have died among you? Do you not realize that you are experiencing temporal, not eternal but temporal judgment?" Earthly judgment, not eternal judgment? Not going to hell but earthly judgment on the people of God while he deals with us.

And if they want to do something about it, he says to them, "Look, don't 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." Jerusalem will fall. Israel will fall. Don't scoff anymore. Hear the word of the Lord. Hear it and trust the word of God and trust the warning of

God. Thirdly, trust the wisdom of God. "Give ear," he says verse 23, "and hear my voice; give attention, and hear my speech." Then he provides us with a little poetic parable and Jesus models his parables on the parable that Isaiah tells here in this part and it's related to everything that's gone before but it's addressing your heart and my heart. It's addressing everybody for whom life is a mystery. Everybody who is bewildered by the things life throws at them and their families and their friends and it uses the idea, the metaphor of the farmer and it says, "You know the thing about a farmer is that he knows how to prepare the ground and he knows where to plant the different kinds of seed and he knows how to harvest each one of them according to their nature and he knows how to conserve the precious fruit that he produces." If you were to listen to any one of these things, if you would listen to the ground, the ground may say to you, "I hate that big metal object being plunged into me and all those furrows. You know, I was nice and flat and smooth and then all those furrows." That's what I think whenever I look in the mirror. I think, "Where did all those furrows come from?" So they plow the field and the earth complains. Perhaps the seed complains, "Oh, you know, I quite like being out in the open and seeing the sun and what have they done to me? They've gone and made a big hole in the ground and put me in the ground and it's dark and it's damp and it's miserable in there." The seed could complain about that. And the grain when it's being harvested could complain about being threshed around so that the bits come off it and it's left on its own, "I don't like this rough treatment. This kind of Jack Bauer treatment that you give me every time. It's not fun. It's not good."

That's the way we are with life, isn't it? There are things that happen in life and we wonder why this? Why here? Why now? Why so severe? Why at all is this happening to me? Here's Isaiah's explanation, verse 26. The farmer does what he does because he is tuned into the wisdom of God. He knows what the soil should be like to produce good fruit. He knows precisely where to put the different seeds in the best place where they will get the light they need, the water they need, the soil they need to grow the best. The farmer knows that. He knows how long to thresh the grain without destroying it. He knows just how much pressure is required in order to make that grain suitable to make the flour. He knows that you can't just knead that flour and that bread too much or it will not rise in the oven. He knows every element because he's tuned to the wisdom of God and the application to us as believers is: God sometimes has to rough us up in our life. He roughs up churches. He roughs up individual believers and we think, "Why? Why this? Why now? Why so long? Why at all?" Isaiah is saying, "Think of the wisdom of God. He knows what you need. He knows how much you can take. He knows what pressure to apply and what pressure not to apply. He does precisely what is required to prepare us to be fruitful in his service."

You see that last verse because behind all of what God does for us and to us to produce fruitfulness within us is done ultimately according to his own wisdom. Do you notice that phrase, "This also comes from the LORD of hosts." That is the strongest description of God you could imagine in the whole Bible. The Lord of armies, all those heavenly ranks of angels. Terrifying. He is the Lord of those armies, "but he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom." You can trust him. You can trust him because those words are used of who? Earlier on in Isaiah, chapter 9, we sing it at Christmas time, don't we?

Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Those words are used of Jesus. Behind the hard hand, behind the tough love, lies the face of Jesus who loves you to death. Who loves you to death and back to life again.

Let's pray.

*Father, as we find ourselves as a congregation and as individuals tossed to and fro and bludgeoned by circumstances and disappointments and sins and fears, we look to you our heavenly Father and know that you know precisely what we can take, that we will not be tested above what we are able to bear but with the temptation and the testing, we will find that there is grace to match and meet all that we need. We pray that you would give us such grace now. We pray that you would deliver us from evil. We pray that you would draw us close to you in Jesus' strong name. Amen.*