

Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain fell, the rivers rose, and the winds blew and pounded that house. Yet it didn't collapse, because its foundation was on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and doesn't act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, the rivers rose, the winds blew and pounded that house, and it collapsed. It collapsed with a great crash.ⁱ

Jesus' conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount is a fitting introduction for this new section of Isaiah. The "key issue in [Isaiah 28–35] is whether Judah, and in particular its leaders, will rely on Egypt or on the Lord" in the face of the looming Assyrian invasion.ⁱⁱ On what foundation would they build their hope? Would they hear the Lord's word, repent, and believe? Or would they turn to Egypt to strike a deal for protection? Ultimately, Judah's leaders play the fool and choose Egypt over the Lord. In our passage, Isaiah chastises them for their pride and self-indulgence, urging them to receive God's wisdom. In it, we learn the difference between foolish and wise leaders.

In verses 1–4, we see that foolish leaders rest in earthly abundance. Isaiah refers to "**the majestic crown of Ephraim's drunkards...which is on the summit above the rich valley.**" Ephraim is a name for Israel related to a Hebrew word for fruitfulness. "Majestic crown" refers to Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom, which sat at the head of a fertile valley. Isaiah characterizes those living in the capital (the leaders) as "**drunkards**"—"Woe to those overcome with wine." Drunkenness is, of course, sinful in itself. But drunkenness is not the ultimate reason for coming judgment.

Their drunkenness is a symptom of a more significant problem—a false sense of safety. Valleys flood, but a city on a summit need not fear floods. Believing there's no threat of invasion—no reason to remain alert—they are free to get drunk. Having storehouses of food, they feel free to overindulge. This likely reflects the belief that their material abundance indicated that God had blessed them, that they were in his good graces. The Mosaic Covenant threatened famines if they disobeyed but promised abundance if they obeyed. We know from the opening of Isaiah that they were going to the temple, bringing offerings, calling solemn assemblies, and keeping New Moons and Sabbaths. They were doing all the external acts of worship—their leaders were praying and quoting the scriptures. So, they reasoned, since the land was so fruitful, that must mean the Lord was blessing them for their recognition of him. They could not have been more wrong.

They were so stricken by "**beautiful splendor**" that they could not see it was a "**fading flower**" that would soon be trampled underfoot. The Lord had "**a strong and mighty one**"—Assyria—which he would bring across the land like a devastating hail storm and flood. Samaria (with its leaders) "will be like a ripe fig before the summer harvest. Whoever sees it will swallow it while it is still in his hand."ⁱⁱⁱ As soon as they were ripe, they would be instantly consumed.

Wine is good, but being intoxicated with it is not. Earthly abundance is good but trusting in it for assurance that God loves you is not. **Do you hope in abundance**—in wealth, reputation, the number of children you have? Perhaps you've become intoxicated with them, finding your refuge and stamp of approval in them. That is building on sand. You will not survive the coming storm.

Verses 5-6 point to God's grace. The day of judgment is also the day of salvation. When God's wrath has passed over, a remnant of faithful believers will remain. They will not worship the "**majestic crown**" of a prosperous nation. "On that day the Lord of Armies will become a crown of beauty and a diadem of splendor to the remnant of his people."^{iv} The "**majestic crown**" they delight in is the Lord himself—the Messiah.

Being God's saved remnant means we don't trust in legislation or leaders, wealth or status, medical choices or vanloads of kids. Jesus is our beautiful place of safety and refuge. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is our sufficient and sole assurance that God is thoroughly pleased with us.

Wise leaders treasure Christ, who transforms them to lead as he does. When we are safe and satisfied in Jesus, it changes how we lead. "**The Lord of Armies will become...a spirit of justice to the one who sits in judgment, and strength to those who repel attacks at the city gate.**" Those who hope in earthly abundance find the responsibility to do justice terrifying. Doing justice may cost them the favor and friendship of the oppressors. Defending a vulnerable city gate is scary when you hope in this world—you may die! But if the Lord of Armies is your hope, you don't fear oppressors or death. By faith in his promise, the Lord empowers you to do justice and defend the vulnerable.

In **verses 7–13**, Isaiah returns to Israel's leaders. "**Even these stagger because of wine and stumble under the influence of beer: Priest and prophet stagger because of beer. They are confused by wine.**"^v Prophets called people to covenant faithfulness. The priests were to render verdicts in difficult cases.^{vi} They were Israel's supreme court. The nation depended on them for steady, clear-headed decision-making. But instead, "**They are confused by wine. They stumble because of beer. They are muddled in their visions. They stumble in their judgments.**"^{vii} Israel needed sober judges who really, really loved truth and justice. Instead, they had judges that really, really liked beer. The result? "**All their tables are covered with vomit; there is no place without a stench.**"^{viii}

Intoxication is not limited to alcohol. We can get drunk on any good thing. We can undoubtedly become intoxicated with wine, wealth, and fame. We can become drunk on productivity, sports, entertainment, and safety. We can become intoxicated with "the right way to do things" regarding matters for which God's word doesn't give us any clear commands. Have you ever been in a community that thinks it's discovered God's way to labor and deliver, raise children, or school the kids? Or a church that believes it has orthodoxy nailed down, even to the most minuscule of interpretive issues? Or a Christian who thinks he knows how exactly God wants everyone to vote?

Whether child-raising or theological debate or politics (or a host of other things), Christians can become intoxicated with these. What's the result? The mouth vomits the overflow of the stomach. They look down in judgment on people who make different choices with their kids (or choose not to have them). They elevate non-essential doctrines and practices to the highest level of orthodoxy and damn Christians who differ from them. They use pejoratives to curse divine image bearers who disagree politically and then show up in church to use the same tongue to worship Jesus. Soon the body of Christ is butchered into factions, leaving only a rotting corpse in a whitewashed tomb.

The ultimate problem, though, isn't that they delight too much in these things. It's that they are intoxicated with themselves. Underneath this drunkenness is profound pride. They think that they have everything figured out, such that no one can teach them anything—especially this young prophet Isaiah! We see this in **verses 9–10**.

“Who is he trying to teach? Who is he trying to instruct? Infants just weaned from milk? Babies removed from the breast?”^{ix} This is followed by an obscure verse with no scholarly agreement on how to translate it. **“Law after law, law after law, line after line, line after line, a little here, a little there.”**^x It's “two short expressions . . . four times each: *tsav latsav tsav latsav, qav lagav qav lagav*.”^{xi} Those aren't full Hebrew words. So, translators guess which partial words they are to make a sentence out of them. I think scholar Barry Webb has the best solution: “Most likely *tsav* and *qav* are not words at all, but artificial syllables used for teaching infants the letters of the alphabet,”^{xii} similar to how we might say, “*buh bah, buh bah*” to teach the sound of “b.” Webb concludes, “The drunken leaders mock the word of God through the prophet as infantile nonsense, childish prattle.”

In other words, when Isaiah addresses the priests and prophets, they respond, “Who does this young whippersnapper think he is, trying to correct us?! We've been priests and prophets since he was in diapers! We know the Torah and sit on Israel's highest court—and he's calling us to know the Lord like we're babies!” They're insulted by the thought that Isaiah has anything to teach them.

This is the height of arrogance—to think that you have everything figured out, that you've studied everything thoroughly, that you can see everyone's flaws (but you need no correction), that everyone should be listening to your wisdom (but you don't need any further teaching). Tremble at the thought of ever becoming this vain and arrogant.

Proverbs says that the Lord **“mocks those who mock but gives grace to the humble.”**^{xiii} What does it look like for God to mock the mocker? **Verses 11: “For he will speak to this people with stammering speech and in a foreign language.”** Since they wouldn't listen to the clear preaching of Isaiah, the Lord would speak to them through the “stammering” of foreigners who come to know the Lord. The Lord offered them peace through the prophets: **“He had said to them, ‘This is the place of rest; let the weary rest; this is the place of repose.’ But they would not listen.”**^{xiv} In **verse 13**, he repeats verse 10's babbling. Because they mocked the Lord's message as baby talk, he'll mock them by giving them his word through foreigners they can't understand. Because they can't understand them, **“they go stumbling backward, to be broken, trapped, and captured.”**^{xv} Their arrogance will lead them to their own destruction.

Foolish leaders are insulted by the idea that they need instruction and correction. Brothers and sisters, let's commit to correcting each other and being corrected by each other. When we have cause for concern, let's choose to walk toward each other and not away from each other. When we're corrected, let's listen carefully without interrupting and think seriously about the concern.

I've said many times that you have full permission to set up a meeting with me to correct me. If you're not comfortable doing so one-on-one, you're welcome to bring along someone that makes you

comfortable. All I ask is an opportunity to dialogue and understand. I'm open to being corrected and instructed by any man, woman, or child because all God's people have the Holy Spirit and God's word.

Whether selecting church leaders or teachers to read and listen to, don't pick those who are know-it-alls who specialize in criticizing others and justifying themselves. You'll become like them, and it will lead to destruction. Satan has knowledge of the Bible that could shame any bible teacher on earth—but he has no humility. Unfortunately, the American church seems to love choosing Christian leaders who look a lot like him. Instead, choose leaders and teachers that demonstrate openness to being taught and corrected by any man, woman, or child in the church.

In verses 14–22, Isaiah speaks to Judah's leaders. He likely started with Samaria in the north because it was the rival of Jerusalem. Judah's leaders would listen and shout, "Amen!" But before they do, Isaiah shrewdly points his finger at them. **"Therefore hear the word of the Lord, you scoffers who rule this people in Jerusalem."**^{xvi} *It's not just your rival who scoffs at God's word—it's you too!*

How were they scoffing? **"We have made a covenant with Death, and we have an agreement with Sheol; when the overwhelming catastrophe passes through, it will not touch us, because we have made falsehood our refuge and have hidden behind treachery."**^{xvii} Isaiah's words reveal the reality behind Judah's actions. Judah's alliance with Egypt was, in reality, a **"covenant with Death."**

They believe that **"when the overwhelming catastrophe passes through, it will not touch us."** They speak of an alliance with Egypt like the Passover—when the angel of death passed through, it did not touch those sheltering under the Lamb's blood. Now, instead of taking refuge in God's promise, they are sheltering under Egypt, their functional Lord and Savior.

But there's good news for those who will listen. The Lord says, **"Look, I have laid a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation..."**^{xviii} This stone is Isaiah's message—the promise that God would come in the Messiah to reign among his people. That message was the only foundation that could withstand the coming storm. **"The one who believes will be unshakable."** Faith alone would make the believer unshakable. Instead of building a shelter on the sands of Egypt, they should build on the rock of the King, whom we know is Jesus.

But Judah's leaders would not listen. **Foolish leaders are enamored with political solutions.** But seeking security in the government is nothing more than a covenant with Death. It disappoints and destroys. At the Gibeon, the Lord defeated their enemies with hailstones. At Perazim, the Lord gave victory that burst forth like a flood. But now, their treaty with Egypt will end, and the Lord will rise in wrath against Israel. Hail will destroy their refuge. Water will flood their hiding place. Catastrophe will not pass over; it will pass through. **"Every time it passes through, it will carry you away; it will pass through every morning—every day and every night. Only terror will cause you to understand the message."** If you refuse to be teachable and listen to God's gentle invitation, then you force his hand to get the message across through terror.

When God's people turn to the government instead of to Jesus, the Lord says, "Ok. You made your bed. Now you have to lay in it." **"Indeed, the bed is too short to stretch out on, and its cover too small to wrap up in."**^{xix} What promised coziness is cramped and cold. **"So now, do not scoff, or**

your shackles will become stronger. Indeed, I have heard from the Lord God of Armies a decree of destruction for the whole land.”^{xx}

God’s wrath is being revealed against all the world. Where are you seeking refuge? **Jesus is the only sure foundation on which to build. He is the only shelter in the storm of God’s wrath.** We hide in Christ because he bore the wrath of God on the cross. In Christ, our sins are paid for; God’s favor is guaranteed. In Christ, God sees us as spotless and righteous; he delights in us as he delights in Jesus. There is no other refuge in which to hide—not our parenting, not our wealth, not our ministry, not our politics, not our government. **God alone is our Savior—and God is our Savior in Christ alone.**

Foolish leaders rest in earthly abundance. Foolish leaders are insulted by the idea that they need instruction and correction. Foolish leaders are enamored with political solutions. But what does wisdom look like? **Wise leaders are taught by God and patiently trust him to do his work.**

In **verses 23-29**, Isaiah invites us to watch a farmer during planting season. He doesn’t plow the soil every day without end. No, after he’s broken and leveled the dirt, he stops plowing and plants. He doesn’t plant all the seeds the same; he plants different crops differently. **“His God teaches him order; he instructs him.”^{xxi}** He pays attention to the order God etched into creation and follows it.

Isaiah points us to the farmer during harvest. He doesn’t process each crop the same way—one is threshed, another rolled, another beaten. He doesn’t process endlessly. The time comes for bread. **“This also comes from the Lord of Armies. He gives wondrous advice; he gives great wisdom.” ^{xxii}**

What are we to learn from the farmer? He’s wise because he’s teachable and taught by the Lord, who **“gives great wisdom.”** The wisdom is this: Farming involves variety, according to the season and the material you’re working with. The Lord is a farmer set upon a garden and a harvest party. First, he tears down the old garden and tills the soil. Then he plants in different ways in different places. Then he waits as plants grow. Then he harvests and processes the grain.

Impatient leaders—and impatient Christians—can’t tolerate the slow pace and diverse methods. They quickly turn to politics to do work that only the gospel can do. Fearful leaders—and fearful Christians—can’t trust the Lord to keep his promises, so they hedge their bets with earthly abundance. Proud leaders—and proud Christians—believe that they can understand precisely how the Lord is and isn’t working in every situation, and they live according to themselves.

But the Lord gives us a solid foundation in Jesus. Wise leaders—and wise Christians—believe that Christ crucified for sins and raised from the dead is the power of God for salvation. The gospel is a seed so tiny the world doesn’t value it. But we know that one day soon, it will overtake the whole world. So we wait, patiently trusting in Jesus alone. Jesus gave us this meal to remind us of our refuge—his flesh and blood—to tide us over until he returns to start the party.

ⁱ Mt 7:24–27.

ⁱⁱ Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles Wings*

ⁱⁱⁱ Is 28:4.

^{iv} Is 28:5.

^v Is 28:7.

^{vi} Deut 17:8-13.

^{vii} Is 28:8

^{viii} Is 28:9

^{ix} Is 28:9.

^x Is 28:10.

^{xi} Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles' Wings*

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Pr 3:34

^{xiv} Is 28:11–12

^{xv} Is 28:13

^{xvi} Is 28:14

^{xvii} Is 28:15.

^{xviii} Is 28:16.

^{xix} Is 28:19-20.

^{xx} Is 28:22.

^{xxi} Is 28:26.

^{xxii} Is 28:29.