

Homiletics Analysis: Isaiah 28

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Isaiah 28 opens with a woe oracle against Ephraim (the northern kingdom, here represented by Samaria), whose leaders are condemned for their drunken arrogance and complacent pride in their own glory (vv. 1–4). The LORD promises that Ephraim’s proud crown will be trampled — yet in the same breath He declares that He Himself will be a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty to the remnant of His people (vv. 5–6). The oracle then pivots to Judah, whose priests and prophets are also drunk — staggering through their sacred responsibilities, vomiting on tables, unable to understand or communicate the word of God (vv. 7–8). They mock Isaiah’s simple, repetitive preaching as fit only for children freshly weaned (vv. 9–10). God responds with devastating irony: if His people will not hear clear speech in their own tongue, they will hear stammering foreigners — and still not listen (vv. 11–13). The chapter then turns to Jerusalem’s rulers directly, who have made a “covenant with death” — a presumptuous political alliance (almost certainly with Egypt) that they believe will shelter them from the coming Assyrian storm (vv. 14–15). God answers this alliance not with mere denunciation but with a foundational counterstatement: He is laying a stone in Zion — a tested, precious cornerstone — and the one who believes will not be in haste (v. 16). Against their false shelter, the LORD sets His plumb line of justice and righteousness; their refuge of lies will be swept away when the overwhelming scourge passes through (vv. 17–19). The bed is too short, the covering too narrow — their makeshift shelters cannot protect them (v. 20). The LORD will rise as He did at Perazim and Gibeon — but this time His strange and alien work is judgment against His own people (vv. 21–22). The chapter closes with a parable of the farmer (vv. 23–29): the farmer does not thresh endlessly or plow perpetually — he knows the right time and the right method for each crop, and this wisdom comes from the LORD. So too, God’s judgments are carefully calibrated, not disproportionate — this also comes from the LORD of hosts, who is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom.

This Text — Intent:

God is confronting His people’s comprehensive addiction to false security — whether in human achievement (Ephraim’s proud crown), religious formalism without true hearing (the drunk priests and prophets), or calculated political self-preservation (Judah’s covenant with death). Through this confrontation, He is pressing His people toward a single alternative: trust in the cornerstone He is laying in Zion, which alone will hold when every other refuge is swept away. The intent is not merely to pronounce judgment but to expose the futility of every substitute shelter so completely that only one refuge remains — and to call His people to believe and stand on it. The farming parable at the close is not a

retorical ornament; it is God asserting His own wisdom and proportionality against the charge of reckless destruction, inviting His people to trust that even His strange work of judgment is guided by perfect counsel.

Subject Sentence:

Every false refuge fails — God alone is the cornerstone that holds when the scourge passes through.

Primary Claim:

God is stripping away every false shelter His people have constructed — pride, religious formalism, and political alliance — to expose that He alone is the tested cornerstone on which life can be safely built; He calls His people to believe this now, before the scourge arrives and the lies are swept away.

Interpretive Evaluation

The “covenant with death” (vv. 14–15): Most commentators — Reformed, Lutheran, and evangelical broadly — agree this refers to a political alliance with Egypt against Assyria, and that the language “covenant with death and Sheol” is Isaiah’s scathing recharacterization of what the rulers themselves framed as shrewd statecraft. Some interpreters have attempted to read this as a literal occult covenant or necromantic practice, connecting it to the later prohibition on consulting the dead. While that reading captures a genuine cultural background (Canaanite death-cult treaties were real), the context strongly favors a political reading. The “overwhelming scourge” (v. 15, 18) most naturally refers to the Assyrian army. The Reformed reading is preferred: the rulers have called their political calculation a shelter, and God names it a covenant with death — the deepest irony being that the very power they trusted to preserve them will destroy them.

The cornerstone (v. 16): This verse is the most contested in the chapter because of its New Testament appropriation. Peter (1 Peter 2:6), Paul (Romans 9:33; 10:11), and Jesus Himself (Matthew 21:42) cite this verse with explicit Christological reference. Three readings are significant:

- **Dispensational:** The stone refers primarily to Israel’s messianic future; New Testament application is typological or secondary. The primary referent is a Davidic/eschatological king yet to come, with contemporary application limited to the immediate historical horizon.

- **Christological immediacy (some evangelical):** Isaiah 28:16 is a direct messianic prophecy; the cornerstone is Christ from the beginning, and the historical context is entirely subsidiary.
- **Reformed canonical-progressive reading:** The stone is genuinely both historical and typological. In its immediate context, the cornerstone is God's own faithfulness and covenant promise — the announcement that He, not Egypt, is Zion's true foundation. This statement finds its definitive, irreversible fulfillment in Christ, in whom God's faithful presence with His people becomes incarnate and permanent. The New Testament authors are not importing meaning foreign to the text but are reading Isaiah's announcement of divine faithfulness to its ultimate end. This reading is preferred because it honors both the historical argument (Judah, stop trusting Egypt — trust the God who dwells in Zion) and the canonical trajectory (that dwelling presence is ultimately Christ). It guards against a merely spiritualized application that loses the concrete political confrontation in the text, and against a merely historical reading that loses the gospel.

The parable of the farmer (vv. 23–29): Some interpreters read this section as an independent wisdom unit loosely attached to the preceding oracles. The Reformed reading recognizes it as integral to the chapter's rhetorical argument: just as a farmer uses different tools and methods for different crops — not because he is confused but because his wisdom is calibrated to the task — so God uses different instruments of judgment in different measures, and this is not arbitrary cruelty but wonderful counsel. This functions as an implicit answer to the charge that God's "strange work" (v. 21) is disproportionate or capricious. The passage itself invites this reading by closing with the attribution: "This also comes from the LORD of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom" (v. 29).

Lutheran Law/Gospel consideration: Lutheran exposition tends to read vv. 1–22 entirely as Law (crushing false security) and vv. 23–29 as a kind of Gospel punctuation (God's judgment is measured and purposeful). This is partially useful — the Law/Gospel movement is real. However, the Reformed reading resists hard-coding the farming parable as Gospel relief; it functions more precisely as a defense of divine wisdom and proportionality, inviting trust without itself constituting a promise of salvation. The cornerstone announcement (v. 16) carries the redemptive weight; vv. 23–29 carry the apologetic weight.

Key Canonical Support

- **Psalms 118:22; Matthew 21:42** — The rejected stone becomes the cornerstone; Jesus explicitly applies this to Himself, completing the trajectory Isaiah begins in v. 16.

- **Romans 9:33; 10:11** — Paul cites Isaiah 28:16 as the foundation of his argument that righteousness comes through faith in Christ, not through Israel’s works; “whoever believes in him will not be put to shame” is the gospel itself.
- **1 Peter 2:4–8** — Peter weaves Isaiah 28:16 into a full theological account of Christ as the living stone: those who believe find him precious; those who reject him stumble over him. The chapter’s two trajectories — security for the believer, judgment for the proud — are both present.
- **Jeremiah 17:5–8** — “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength... Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD.” This is the same diagnostic as Isaiah 28 in distilled form: the false refuge versus the living God as shelter.
- **Isaiah 7:9b; 30:15** — “If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all” and “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength” — Isaiah’s consistent counter-proclamation to Judah’s political maneuvering: the alternative to the covenant with death is not a better treaty but repentant trust.

Aim:

To expose the inadequacy of every false shelter the reader is trusting — pride, religious routine, political or financial calculation — and to establish the tested cornerstone as the only refuge that will hold, calling the reader to concrete, present-tense belief.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Woe to Ephraim — the proud crown of drunkards, the fading flower of its glorious beauty	Samaria/northern kingdom addressed; “crown” is both metaphor and irony — their pride is already dying
2–4	The LORD has one mighty and strong — like a hailstorm, a destroying tempest — who will trample the proud crown underfoot; the fading flower will be devoured	Assyria is the unnamed instrument; swallowing the first-ripe fig is a vivid image of quick destruction
5–6	In that day the LORD of hosts will be a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty to	Remnant promise in the midst of judgment; the TRUE crown replaces the false

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	the remnant; He will be a spirit of justice to the judge, strength to those who turn back the battle	crown
7–8	But priests and prophets of Judah also reel with wine and stagger with strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment; tables covered with vomit	The oracle pivots to Judah; religious leadership is indicted; the very people who should transmit God’s word are incapacitated
9–10	They mock: “Whom will he teach knowledge? Precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, there a little”	The mockers parody Isaiah’s repetitive teaching style as babytalk; this is willful contempt for plain revelation
11–13	God responds: through men of foreign tongues He will speak to this people — and even then they will not hear; so the word becomes a snare and they fall backward	Divine irony: reject simple speech, receive incomprehensible speech — and still fall; the judgment fits the sin
14–15	Hear the word of the LORD, you scoffers who rule Jerusalem — you have said “We have made a covenant with death; when the overwhelming scourge passes through, it will not reach us”	The rulers’ own words quoted; “covenant with death” is Isaiah’s characterization of their Egypt alliance; they believe they have found a political shelter
16	Therefore the Lord GOD says: Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; whoever believes will not be in haste	The gospel counterstatement; the real foundation announced; “will not be in haste” = will not panic, will not flee in terror
17	He will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line — hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, waters will overwhelm the shelter	God’s construction uses moral instruments; the false shelter is exposed as substandard and swept away

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
18–19	Your covenant with death will be annulled; when the scourge passes through, you will be beaten down by it; morning by morning, day and night, it will pass through	The “covenant” is not a contract God honors; the scourge will come repeatedly; terror will be the only lesson learned
20	The bed is too short to stretch out on; the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in	Proverbial: every human shelter is inadequate; you cannot make yourself comfortable in a refuge built on lies
21–22	The LORD will rise as at Perazim and Gibeon — but this is His strange, alien work: judgment against His own people; do not scoff, lest your bonds be made stronger	Perazim (2 Sam 5) and Gibeon (Josh 10) were victories for Israel — now God fights as He did then, but against Judah; this is the “strange” quality of the judgment
23–26	Listen: does the farmer plow endlessly? No — he prepares and then plants different crops in their proper places, as his God teaches him	The farming analogy begins; the farmer’s wisdom is calibrated, purposeful — not mechanical repetition
27–29	Different crops require different threshing methods — dill and cummin are beaten gently, grain is threshed with a wheel but not crushed; this wisdom comes from the LORD, who is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom	The point: God’s judgment is similarly calibrated; He does not destroy indiscriminately; the chapter closes on the assertion of divine wisdom

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–4	The Proud Crown of Ephraim and Its Coming Ruin

Division	Verses	Label
2	5–6	The True Crown: The LORD as Glory for the Remnant
3	7–13	Judah’s Religious Leaders: Drunk, Contemptuous, and Falling
4	14–15	Jerusalem’s Rulers: The Covenant with Death
5	16–19	The Cornerstone Announced and the False Shelter Swept Away
6	20–22	The Bed Too Short: No Human Shelter Will Suffice
7	23–29	The Farmer’s Wisdom: God’s Judgment Is Measured and Purposeful

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

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Primary Claim: God is stripping away every false shelter His people have constructed — pride, religious formalism, and political alliance — to expose that He alone is the tested cornerstone on which life can be safely built; He calls His people to believe this now, before the scourge arrives and the lies are swept away.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine what you have actually built your life’s security on — and name it honestly.
(*Mind/belief*)

The rulers of Jerusalem did not announce, “We are trusting Egypt rather than God.” They called it statecraft, prudence, realism. Isaiah named it a covenant with death. The distance between their self-description and God’s description is the measure of their self-deception. The application is not immediate behavioral change but honest cognitive reckoning: What is the actual foundation? What would have to collapse before your life felt truly unsafe? Name that thing by its real name. It may be financial margin, relational stability, professional reputation, or health — things not intrinsically wrong but catastrophically wrong when they become the cornerstone. The passage demands the uncomfortable diagnostic before it offers the corrective.

2. Repent of the specific form of contempt that makes you too sophisticated to receive plain, repeated instruction from God. (*Affections/worship*)

The priests and prophets of Judah were not atheists — they were religious professionals who had become bored with and contemptuous of God’s word. Their mockery of Isaiah’s “precept upon precept, line upon line” was the mockery of people who had heard it all before and had concluded that repetition meant triviality. This is a recognizable spiritual condition: the fading of genuine hearing that leaves only the form of engagement. The application targets the affective posture — not “study your Bible more” but “ask God to restore the ear that hears His word as living address rather than familiar content.” Where familiarity has bred contempt, that is precisely where the false refuge of religious routine has been substituted for the cornerstone.

3. Stop trying to construct a life in which you will not need to trust God under pressure. (*Will/behavior*)

The bed is too short and the covering too narrow. Every human shelter — financial, relational, medical, political — has this quality: it cannot fully cover you when the scourge actually arrives. The behavioral application of Isaiah 28 is not passive fatalism but the active dismantling of the project of comprehensive self-protection. Practically, this means resisting the impulse to add one more layer of security rather than trusting, recognizing when prudent planning has become anxiety-driven fortress-building, and making concrete decisions that only make sense if God is actually the cornerstone. The application is specific and volitional: identify one area where you are trying to make the bed long enough and the covering wide enough — and stop.

4. Rest your confidence in the cornerstone not because circumstances are favorable but because God has announced it as tested and sure. (*Mind/belief*)

“Whoever believes will not be in haste” — the Hebrew carries the sense of not being driven to panic, not fleeing in terror, not being forced into desperate reactive movement. This is a promise about the quality of the believer’s response under pressure, not a promise that pressure will not come. The scourge will pass through (v. 18) — the question is whether the person will be standing on the cornerstone or crouching in a shelter of lies. The mind-level application is to build a theology of stability grounded not in absence of threat but in the character of the One who laid the stone: it is tested, precious, sure. These are God’s own adjectives for His own provision. Believe them before you need them.

5. Receive God’s “strange work” of discipline or judgment in your life as the work of a Farmer who knows exactly what He is doing and will not over-thresh you. (*Affections/worship*)

The farming parable is addressed to people who are experiencing or facing God’s severe judgment and are tempted to conclude that God is disproportionate, reckless, or indifferent to their welfare. The parable’s affective target is the posture of trust toward a God whose ways feel alien and harsh. Dill is not threshed with a cart wheel — it would be

crushed. The farmer knows the difference. The application is not cognitive resolution of suffering's mystery but an affective reorientation: the God who is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom is the same God whose hand is in this season of difficulty. He is not plowing endlessly. He knows when to stop. Grieve what is real, but grieve as one standing on a cornerstone, not as one whose shelter has just collapsed.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance:

Isaiah 28 teaches that God is not one shelter among many competing shelters — He is the only shelter that will hold, and He demonstrates this by systematically dismantling every alternative. The passage reveals God as both the One who exposes false foundations and the One who provides the true one — He does not simply tear down without building up. The cornerstone announcement in verse 16 is one of the great divine self-commitments in the Old Testament: God Himself enters the construction project, laying a stone whose qualities are entirely His own — tested, precious, sure. The passage also teaches that God's judgment is calibrated and wise, not random; the farming parable is a genuine defense of divine proportionality, asserting that God's "strange work" operates by the same intelligent purposefulness as the most skilled human craftsman — except that this wisdom is ultimate, not derived. Finally, Isaiah 28 reveals that religious formalism is not neutral — the drunk priests and prophets represent a condition more dangerous than open atheism, because it occupies the space where genuine hearing should occur and crowds it out.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance:

Isaiah 28:16 is one of the canonical pivots on which Reformed soteriology explicitly rests, as Paul's citations in Romans 9 and 10 demonstrate. The verse crystallizes the Reformed insistence that salvation is by faith alone — "whoever believes will not be put to shame" — as opposed to any covenant-by-works scheme or human political calculation. More broadly, the chapter embodies the Reformed diagnostic of the human condition: the problem is not merely behavioral failure but the comprehensive project of self-justification and self-security that substitutes human achievement, religious performance, and political maneuvering for trust in God. This is Keller's idol-diagnosis made structurally visible: Ephraim's crown, Judah's Egypt alliance, and the priests' religious expertise are all functioning saviors that must be stripped away before the cornerstone can be received. The remnant promise in verses 5–6 — the LORD Himself as a crown of glory — is a compressed version of the covenant of grace: God replacing what human pride cannot sustain with what divine faithfulness secures. The farming parable then grounds this in a

Reformed understanding of providence: God's governance of history, including His severe judgments, is not arbitrary but operates according to His wonderful counsel — a counsel that is perfectly wise and perfectly purposeful even when it feels strange and alien to those experiencing it.

Main Takeaway

Every shelter you have built out of your own pride, your religious routine, or your political and financial calculation will be too short and too narrow when the pressure actually comes — and God guarantees it will. There is one tested, precious, sure cornerstone: the LORD Himself, who has committed to being the foundation no storm can dislodge. Stop negotiating with death. Build on the stone that holds, and you will not panic when everything else fails.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching the woes without the cornerstone.** Isaiah 28 is structurally weighted toward judgment — six of seven divisions are primarily diagnostic or threatening. The danger is a sermon that is thorough in its demolition of false shelters and thin in its proclamation of the true one. Verse 16 is not a brief interlude between judgment oracles — it is the theological center of the chapter, the point toward which the demolition has been driving and from which the remaining judgments derive their meaning. A sermon that gives vv. 1–15 and 17–22 their full weight and skips quickly through v. 16 has missed the architecture of the chapter entirely.
- **Treating the cornerstone as merely historical and losing the Christological fulfillment.** The temptation in Old Testament exposition is to leave Isaiah 28:16 in the eighth century BC — “God is telling Judah to trust Him, not Egypt.” This is true but incomplete. Paul and Peter read this text as the gospel announcement, and they are not wrong to do so. A sermon that does not trace the cornerstone to Christ leaves the hearer with a principle (“trust God”) rather than a Person, and loses the very concreteness that the Primary Claim demands.
- **Preaching verse 10 (“precept upon precept, line upon line”) as a positive homiletical method.** This verse is widely quoted in Sunday school and Bible study contexts as an endorsement of systematic, incremental teaching. In context, it is the mockers' contemptuous parody of Isaiah — they are mocking him, not endorsing him. Using it as a positive slogan for expository methodology inverts the passage's plain meaning and domesticates one of Isaiah's sharpest indictments of religious contempt.

- **Failing to name the contemporary “covenants with death.”** The application of vv. 14–15 is strong only if the preacher names modern equivalents with Isaiah’s own bluntness. Isaiah did not say “be careful about over-reliance on international alliances in principle” — he named their specific calculation and called it a covenant with death. The sermon must do the same: name financial independence as a false shelter, name relational security as a false shelter, name political alignment as a false shelter. Abstract application lets the listener place the diagnosis on someone else.
- **Reading the farming parable as disconnected from the judgment oracles.** As noted in the Interpretive Evaluation, some expositors treat vv. 23–29 as an independent wisdom unit. This loses the parable’s apologetic function. The parable answers the implicit charge that God is being disproportionate or cruel — He is not plowing without purpose; He is the consummate Farmer who knows exactly what each crop requires. A sermon that presents the parable as a kind of pleasant addendum misses its load-bearing role in the chapter’s argument.
- **Moralizing the remnant promise (vv. 5–6) into a reward-for-faithfulness scheme.** The statement that the LORD will be a crown of glory “to the remnant of his people” can be read as: “those who remain faithful will receive blessing.” This reading imports a works-framework. The remnant in Isaiah’s theology is not the group who performed well enough to survive — it is the group whom God preserves by grace, whose glory is not their own but the LORD Himself. The preacher should guard against turning the remnant promise into an exhortation to earn one’s place among the faithful.