

“Which Crown Do You Want?”

Isaiah 28:1-13

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

¹ *Ah, the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim,
and the fading flower of its glorious beauty,
which is on the head of the rich valley of those overcome with wine!*

² *Behold, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong;
like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest,
like a storm of mighty, overflowing waters,
he casts down to the earth with his hand.*

³ *The proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim
will be trodden underfoot;*

⁴ *and the fading flower of its glorious beauty,
which is on the head of the rich valley,
will be like a first-ripe fig^[a] before the summer:
when someone sees it, he swallows it
as soon as it is in his hand.*

⁵ *In that day the LORD of hosts will be a crown of glory,
and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people,*

⁶ *and a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment,
and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.*

⁷ *These also reel with wine
and stagger with strong drink;
the priest and the prophet reel with strong drink,
they are swallowed by wine,
they stagger with strong drink,
they reel in vision,
they stumble in giving judgment.*

⁸ *For all tables are full of filthy vomit,
with no space left.*

⁹ *“To whom will he teach knowledge,
and to whom will he explain the message?*

*Those who are weaned from the milk,
those taken from the breast?*

¹⁰ *For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept,
line upon line, line upon line,
here a little, there a little.”*

*¹¹ For by people of strange lips
and with a foreign tongue
the LORD will speak to this people,
¹² to whom he has said,
“This is rest;
give rest to the weary;
and this is repose”;
yet they would not hear.
¹³ And the word of the LORD will be to them
precept upon precept, precept upon precept,
line upon line, line upon line,
here a little, there a little,
that they may go, and fall backward,
and be broken, and snared, and taken.*

Chasing a Crown

Everyone is chasing some kind of crown in this world. In Isaiah 28, a contrast is drawn between the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim and the LORD as the crown of His holy remnant. The proud crown is a fading flower, while the LORD is a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty.

What exactly does the LORD mean here by a crown? Well, a crown is something you desire, something you value, something that defines you, and which sits on your head as a sign of authority. When a monarch is crowned, the crown placed on their head represents both honor and responsibility. It is something which both sets them apart as special and deeply obligates them to serve in a position in a way that defines and controls them. The crown sits on the head of the ruler, and the ruler sits under the crown.

But crowns are not just for rulers. Everyone is chasing a crown. Everyone has that something they desire above all else, that they want to have to mark them as special. To get it, to put a crown on your head, is to put yourself under that crown and to serve it. Absolutely everyone has one, and it's just not possible to live without one, because everyone is living for something, even if they say they have nothing to live for.

Some people's crowns are their jobs and careers. Other people's crowns are their favorite sports team. Many people in our community, including many Christians, have made their children their crown. Some people just have recreation and

relaxation as a crown. Others have a more intense desire and drive for pleasure. Some chase money. Some want power and influence. Some people just really want people to like them. Others want people to leave them alone and their crown is having “me-time,” time to themselves. We chase these crowns, and in the chasing and wearing of them, we give ourselves to them and they control us.

But here’s a secret about all of the world’s crowns: In the end, they’re all just different models of the same thing. And at the core of them all is pride.

The Proud Crown of Those Drunk on Power, vv. 1-4

¹ *Ah, the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim,
and the fading flower of its glorious beauty,
which is on the head of the rich valley of those overcome with wine!*

² *Behold, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong;
like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest,
like a storm of mighty, overflowing waters,
he casts down to the earth with his hand.*

³ *The proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim
will be trodden underfoot;*

⁴ *and the fading flower of its glorious beauty,
which is on the head of the rich valley,
will be like a first-ripe fig before the summer:
when someone sees it, he swallows it
as soon as it is in his hand.*

These people of Ephraim, which is the Northern Kingdom of Israel, are identified as drunkards, as those overcome with wine. But their crown is not identified as a drunkard’s crown but as “*the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim.*” In other words, the external manifestation of their core problem may have been excessive drinking, being overcome with wine – or, as verse 7 says, reeling and staggering with strong drink – but the core of the issue is pride.

Pride and alcohol have a lot in common. In moderation, under God’s authority, both can serve a positive purpose. People are made in the image of God, and we are dearly loved by God. It is wrong-headed and toxic to think we are utterly useless and pointless. That’s Satanic thinking. And yet, excessive pride is dangerous, a poison to the soul, just as surely as excessive alcohol is a poison to the body. Both pride and alcohol can make us seemingly brave and bold, willing to do and say things we would’ve have otherwise been willing to say or do. But both of them can then get us into some deep trouble.

Excessive pride and alcohol can both cause us to be utterly selfish, inconsiderate of others, reckless, and then self-destructive. They hurt us and those around us, and they can quickly become enslaving. Some people's pride leads them to be wildly boastful and reckless, taking dangerous risks. Other people's pride leads them to be mean, unhappy, unsatisfied. Ironically, being continually disappointed in yourself and beating yourself up for not being better or doing better is actually rooted in pride: When you set unrealistically high expectations of yourself, it is because you have an over-inflated view of yourself.

In Isaiah 28, the LORD is calling out the proud drunkards of Ephraim because they were callous, selfish, idolatrous, oppressive, and presumptuous. They craved power and pleasure, and their drunkenness was a reflection of their attitude that they thought they had achieved everything they wanted and that they deserved to enjoy themselves.

By external and worldly measures, the northern kingdom of Israel – also called Ephraim or Samaria - was richer and more powerful than the southern Kingdom of Judah. It was larger, had a larger army, had more wealth, had more powerful international alliances. I remember studying Ancient Israel in college and learning that King Ahab was considered a great king by historians, a powerful and successful king who led Israel to peak greatness. How different the world's assessment is from God's!

We cannot let external, worldly measures of success define us. Just because we are earning more money, have a nicer house, can drive better cars and afford better vacations does not mean we are doing well in the eyes of God. The crown of pride is a fading flower; it withers and blows away when the LORD blows on it.

*Behold, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong;
like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest,
like a storm of mighty, overflowing waters,
he casts down to the earth with his hand.*

We need to quit messing around with God as though He's someone to be manipulated and used in our pursuit of the worldly crowns we really treasure above Him and His ways. If you're coming to church to serve yourself and your dreams, you're missing the point. If you're chasing the Lord only for what He can do for you in the pursuit of what you want, then He's a tool in your hands and not a crown for your head. God can't and won't be used or manipulated by anyone.

The Glorious Crown for the Lord's Remnant, vv. 5-6

But there's good news, because God does offer Himself to us:

*⁵In that day the LORD of hosts will be a crown of glory,
and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people,
⁶and a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment,
and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.*

God gives Himself to His people as a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty. Every version of the pride crown pedaled by world is temporary, fading, unstable, and ultimately ruinous to those who chase and wear it. The LORD alone is the truly glorious One - the weighty, radiant, significant, eternal, beautiful One. We cannot wield God as a tool in the pursuit of our worldly crown – though so many try – but we can submit to Him and be crowned by Him. The greatest gift God gives us is Himself, but not to be slipped into our back pockets and pulled out in case of emergency but to rest on our heads as the One who defines and governs us.

And while God will not serve our selfish agenda, He will equip us with what we need to serve His calling on our lives. The rulers in Ephraim were called by God to administer justice and fight against the enemies of God's people. God said He Himself will be the spirit of justice for those who sit in judgment and strength for those who are fighting against the enemy at the gate.

What God calls you to do He Himself gives you the strength to do, strength which you draw from God Himself. And here's the essential difference between having a proud crown and having the Lord as your crown: Your proud crown is drawing on and draining your limited strength. That's why it's a fading flower. If the LORD is your crown of glory, then your crown gives you strength. Anything else that rules your life fades, fails, and drains you. The LORD alone renews, restores, and strengthens you as you draw near to Him day-by-day.

The Sad Reality of the Lord's Remnant, vv. 7-8

What is sad about the Lord remnant here in Isaiah 28 is that, even though the Lord given them Himself to be their crown, they reject Him:

*⁷These also reel with wine
and stagger with strong drink;
the priest and the prophet reel with strong drink,
they are swallowed by wine,*

*they stagger with strong drink,
they reel in vision,
they stumble in giving judgment.
8 For all tables are full of filthy vomit,
with no space left.*

These shocking and graphic verses are about the Lord's chosen remnant. Historically, this refers to the residents of Jerusalem and Judah who were spared from the Assyrian conquest and deportation. The LORD crushed the Assyrian army in a single night and spared Jerusalem and a remnant of Judeans. The LORD chooses to spare this remnant and gives Himself to them as their crown, and yet they seem to be even worse drunkards than the drunkards of Ephraim. This is a sobering warning to us that you can be a genuine chosen child of God and yet give into the false gods of the world, falling into deep and seriously crippling sin.

Being a genuine Christian doesn't make you exempt from addiction or from catastrophic sin. If you choose to run after the false gods of the world, you will suffer. The real cause of why they run after the world and why they then suffer is actually explained in the next section, although it's not really clear without some explanation.

How and Why Instruction Comes, vv. 9-13

*9 "To whom will he teach knowledge,
and to whom will he explain the message?
Those who are weaned from the milk,
those taken from the breast?
10 For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept,
line upon line, line upon line,
here a little, there a little."*

In verses 9-10, we see that the remnant is rejecting the Word of God as childish nonsense. That's the sense of this objection they raise. They're saying, "Who is Isaiah going to bring this message to, infants and little children? His words are babbling baby talk. No one of any mature mind would take them seriously."

They think they are too mature, too wise, too sophisticated to take seriously the Word of God. They reject it. If you get dismissive toward the Word of God and the ways of God – Oh, I've heard all that before, and it's so basic, so boring, so irrelevant, so outdated, so picky, so simplistic. Life is just more complex than that, and I need more than God's Word.

So, God prophesies a warning to them -

*11 For by people of strange lips
and with a foreign tongue
the LORD will speak to this people,
12 to whom he has said,
“This is rest;
give rest to the weary;
and this is repose”;
yet they would not hear.
13 And the word of the LORD will be to them
precept upon precept, precept upon precept,
line upon line, line upon line,
here a little, there a little,
that they may go, and fall backward,
and be broken, and snared, and taken.*

God says He’s going to bring a people of foreign speech to speak to His people who have refused to hear Him. Again, verse 12 tells us the real cause of their problems: God has spoken to them of how to have rest in Him, but they would not hear. Refusing to hear and heed is the core source of their problem. So, God is going to speak to them through foreign people.

What does this mean?

Well, it seems that God fulfilled this prophecy in stages over time. First of all, the remnant in Judah and Jerusalem were carried off into captivity by the Babylonians. In their Babylonian Exile, they would actually have their hearts turned back to the Lord, in part because pagan, foreign-language kings like Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, and Cyrus the Great would issue decrees and proclamations praising the LORD, and so they would hear the truth from foreigners.

But then, on the Day of Pentecost, God poured out His Holy Spirit and the disciples were empowered to testify and speak the truth in many foreign tongues, so that the Jewish people from all over the known world who gathered together at Pentecost could hear the truth about Jesus in their native languages – not Hebrews, but the languages of the nations. Thus, these people had to be sent off into exile in judgment, and they had to then hear God’s truth in a foreign language.

The people of God in Judah and Jerusalem needed to come under the Lord’s harsh discipline before they were ready to hear the Word of the LORD. For us, there’s a strong warning here not to harden our hearts to the truth of God or else, in love, God

may have to act to wake us up and get our attention. I think we can see this happening already in the American church, but it could get worse. The Lord loves us too much to let us get complacent with our idols and grow deaf to His Word.

Can You Handle the Truth?

So, where are you with God and His truth? God loves His people, and He wants to be our crown of glory and our diadem of beauty. He wants to be our most treasured possession and most passionate pursuit, that which marks us out and makes us special and that which rules and governs our lives. He calls us to this because He loves us, and He knows He is the only One who can heal, forgive, strengthen, and renew us.

God is so committed to being our crown that He sent His one and only Son who Himself was crowned with a crown of thorns so that we could be crowned with the Lord as our crown of glory and be seated in the heavenly places with Him. But we must come to Him as our crown and not as just another tool we might use to get what we really want, some power, pleasure, prestige, or comfort from this life and this world.

Have you come to Him? Is He your crown?

If you have come to Him and He is your crown, then are you hearing the Word of the Lord. Are you receiving and walking in the truth by His grace. Can you handle the truth? If God tells you, "Believe this, and stop believing that. Do this, and stop doing that. Follow me, and turn your back on the world," what is your response? Do you resent being told what to do? Do you resist being told not to trust yourself and your own desires? Or do you see His truth for what it is, the words of eternal life and the way of wisdom? Do you long to be set free to run in the way of the Lord's will? Or are you still fighting to turn and go your own way?

God loves you. No other crown compares to Him.