

What does verse 21 mean?

What is God’s *alien work*?

What is his *strange deed*?

God’s *proper work* is salvation.

His *mighty deeds* refer to his great works whereby he delivers his people and brings them to himself!

His *alien work* is when he brings judgment against his own people!

Martin Luther realized that this was a very helpful way of talking about the cross.

Isa. 28:21 calls [this] the alien work of God that he may do his work (that is, he humbles us thoroughly, making us despair, so that he may exalt us in his mercy, giving us hope)...

In this way, consequently, the unattractive works which God does in us, that is, those which are humble and devout, are really eternal, for humility and fear of God are our entire merit. (LW 31, 44)

We have come to the fourth and final section of the first part of Isaiah.

Alec Motyer calls the first 37 chapters "the Book of the King,"

because the focus is on the house of David and the city of Jerusalem.

The first section (chapters 1-6) set forth the basic problem:

the sin of Judah and Jerusalem, and the coming judgment.

The second section (chapters 7-12) spoke of the dying house of David,

and the promise of a future deliverer who would arise from Jesse's stump.

The third section (chapters 13-27) broadened the horizon,

and spoke of the judgments against the nations,

concluding with the vision of the two cities: the city of man and the city of God.

Now in the fourth section Isaiah returns to the present,

in order to demonstrate that God is truly the Lord of history.

You may trust God's promises about the future, because of what you see in the present.

Chapters 28-35 are woven together by six woes.

28:1 Woe to the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim

29:1 Woe to Ariel

29:15 Woe to those who hide from the LORD

30:1 Woe to the stubborn children

31:1 Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help

33:1 Woe to the destroyer

These six woes parallel the six woes of chapter 5 – the parable of the vineyard.

The harvest of stink fruit is revealed here as a lack of faith in the LORD's ability to save.

The theme of this entire section is Judah's proposed treaty with Egypt
in the face of the Assyrian threat.

Isaiah 28 is quoted three times in the New Testament.

Peter and Paul both thought that Isaiah 28 speaks clearly to our situation as well!
So listen to how Isaiah speaks of the alien works of God!

1. Woe Against Ephraim (the northern kingdom) (v1-13)

a. The Fading Flower of Samaria (v1-4)

*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.*

Isaiah begins with Ephraim-the northern kingdom.

When Assyria came upon Samaria,
Ephraim was like a drunkard –
stumbling around like someone who has had too much to drink.
And a drunkard has no chance against a mighty warrior!

But the Lord has one who is mighty and strong (v2).

Here Assyria is portrayed as a storm of hail, a destroying tempest,
like a storm of mighty overflowing waters--
an irresistible force overwhelming the northern kingdom.
And the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim was trodden underfoot.
And in his stupor he was easy game.

He was plucked and eaten like a first-ripe fig.

After all – you don't harvest the first fig, you eat it!
*when someone sees it, he swallows it
as soon as it is in his hand. (v4)*

But in contrast to the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim...

b. The Crown of Glory (v5-6)

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

The proud crown of the drunkards will be trodden underfoot –
but the LORD of hosts will be a crown of glory...

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

The remnant of Ephraim will see – in that day –
that Yahweh is their only hope and refuge.
The false and fading glory of verse 1 is replaced
by the true and abiding glory and beauty of Yahweh in verse 5.
And in that day the Davidic king-the Messiah-will sit in judgment over his enemies.
Someday Ephraim will again sit in the city of God-the strong city that turns back its foes.

Why does Isaiah start with Ephraim?

By the time Judah is contemplating a treaty with Egypt,
Ephraim has already been destroyed.

We hear from 2 Chronicles 30 that Hezekiah invited the remnant of Ephraim
to come to the Passover in Jerusalem.
So we know that the remnant of Ephraim was already coming to Jerusalem.

But also, the last act of rebellion against Assyria committed by Ephraim
was entering into an alliance with Egypt (2 Kings 17:4).
Ephraim, the drunken fool, thought that Egypt could save him from Assyria.

c. Prophets and Priests Alike Stagger and Stumble (v7-13)

But just as Ephraim was sashed, so also is Judah (v7):

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

The priests and prophets of Jerusalem are acting just like the drunkards of Ephraim.
Because of this, God has a message for the priests and prophets of Jerusalem.
But they don't care – in fact, they mock Isaiah:

(verses 9-10 should probably be understood as the stumbling of the drunken priests):

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?”*

Go teach the babies, Isaiah!
We don't need you!
Whenever you are around, it is:

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

The Hebrew here is like baby talk
*tsaw latsaw, tsaw latsaw,
qaw laqaw, qaw laqaw,*
Go back to your kindergarten and teach the children, Isaiah!
We don't want to hear it!

But Isaiah replies (v11):

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.*

Yes, they're right.

It was a simple message.
Simple enough for a child to understand.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.

In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths.

But because they have refused it,
yes, indeed (v13),

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.*

Think back to 1 Samuel 4 and the death of Eli and the capture of the ark of the covenant.
Eli's sons were drunkards who abused their priestly office.
They died in battle, and the ark of the covenant was captured,
and their father, Eli, fell over backward and broke his neck and died!
And so now, once again,
drunken priests who stumble in giving judgment will themselves be judged.

2. Application to Jerusalem (the southern kingdom) (v14-22)
a. The Rulers Think They Have a Bargain with Death (v14-15)

And so Isaiah turns to the house of David (v14):
¹⁴ *Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scoffers,
who rule this people in Jerusalem!*

The prophets weren't always as blunt as they could have been.
Isaiah doesn't say: "hear the word of the LORD, O king Ahaz"
or "O king Hezekiah."

You see, Isaiah is giving the king a chance.
By blaming the sin of Judah upon its "leaders,"
the king may yet prove himself faithful to the Lord.
But of course, if the Son of David fails to act,
then he too is indicted by this warning.

But now we finally hear what is the cause of the celebration of the prophets and priests in 7-8.
Why were they getting drunk like Ephraim.
Because, like Ephraim, they were celebrating the signing of a treaty with Egypt.
And now they are confident that Assyria will not succeed against them!

Now you don't need to be a prophet to realize how stupid this is.
Egypt failed to protect Israel.
Why does Judah think that they are any different?

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";*

Isaiah, with the eyes of faith, sees that this covenant with Egypt is but a covenant with death.

That's fitting.
Egypt is frequently portrayed as the land of the dead.
Egypt is like the underworld – the Yam Suph lies between Egypt and Judah.
Yam Suph is often translated "Red Sea,"
but Suph doesn't mean Red.
Sometimes it is translated, "Sea of Reeds,"
but there aren't any reeds there.
Yam Suph most likely means "Sea at the End."

The Red Sea – the Yam Suph – is the sea at the end of the world.
To go to Egypt is figuratively to go to the land of the dead-the underworld,
otherwise known as Sheol.
And so it is not surprising to hear Isaiah call a treaty with Egypt:
"A covenant with death-and with Sheol we have an agreement."

That's really smart, guys!
You make a covenant with the grave.
What? That's it's going to protect you from death?
That's why Isaiah mocks them:
"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!"

Lies and falsehoods will never be a safe refuge!
It is fascinating to watch how social media has gone from being the darling of free speech
to public enemy #1!

Everyone seems to assume that *we* can manipulate things to serve *our* purposes!
And that's true.
We can!

But so can everyone else!

In the 1950s "free speech" was the watchword of the left –
and "censorship" was the tool of conservatives to stifle the left.
Today it is quickly turning around.
Why?

Because "free speech" is not actually a principle of the left or of the right –
it is the cry of the minority – the underdog.
Those in power tend to be suspicious of free speech.
Those who lack power tend to be fearful of censorship.

If you think about it – neither free speech nor censorship actually cares about *truth*.

Free speech and censorship are both about *power*.

But if you don't care about *truth*, then you are making lies your refuge.

And...

b. But the Lord GOD Has Laid a Precious Cornerstone (v16-17)

¹⁶ *therefore thus says the Lord GOD,
"Behold, I am the one who has laid^[d] 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."*

This is the solid rock.

The one who takes refuge in Yahweh will not fear the city of man.

He will not be in haste to make alliances with the nations.

Because God's own righteousness will be the plumb line that straightens out his people.

The plumb line was used to make sure that a wall was straight and level.

In a world that is crooked –

in a world that believes in lies – and trusts in falsehoods –

the LORD has laid as a foundation in Zion a stone – a tested stone –
a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation.

This is the center of our passage – and it is quoted in Romans 9 and 1 Peter 2.

"Whoever believes will not be in haste."

Don't be in a hurry.

Wait on the LORD – and he will do it!

He will sweep away the refuge of lies.

The only problem?

You took refuge in the refuge of lies!

c. And so the Lord GOD of Hosts Will Do His Alien Work (v18-22)

(read)

¹⁸ *Then your covenant with death will be annulled,
and your agreement with Sheol will not stand;*

(sounds good, right?)

But:

*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.*

This is the language of the angel of death at the Passover.

The verb to "Pass through" in verses 15, 18, and twice in 19,
is the word used to describe the angel of death in Exodus 12.

You have entered a covenant with death.

The same angel of death who passed through the land of Egypt
will come again-this time in the hosts of Assyria.
And it will pass through your land, taking you away to Sheol.

But this time there is no sacrifice.

There is no Passover lamb.

There is nothing shielding you from the angel of death.

It will come, morning by morning, by day and by night.

And it will be sheer terror to understand the message.

There's a sense in which verse 20 is the most terrifying verse in the passage –
precisely because it is the most mundane:

²⁰*For the bed is too short to stretch oneself on,
and the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in.*

Have you ever slept in a bed that was too short to stretch out on?

Have you ever had a blanket that was too small – on a cold night?

Everyone has either experienced this –
or can imagine it so viscerally,
that it is truly terrifying!

A night when you cannot sleep – and you cannot get comfortable enough to sleep –
is the most miserable of nights!

And this is the sort of misery that Isaiah says will be the constant experience
of those who embrace the covenant with death.

God offered you rest.
He called you to trust in him!
He said for you to give rest to the weary –
but you would not rest in him.
You had to make your covenant with death.

Very well then –
try to rest!
Try to get some sleep tonight, when the angel of death passes through!
But the bed is too short to stretch oneself on,
and the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in.

That's what kind of rest you have to look forward to.
Tossing and turning all night long as you await the dreaded judgment.

*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.*

(v21)

Because God himself will rise up against you-as on Mt Perazim and the Valley of Gibeon.
"to do his deed – his strange deed!
and to work his work – his alien work." (21)

What does this mean – his “strange deed” – his “alien work”?
The Passover language should already give you a sense.
God is bringing the judgment of Egypt upon his own people.

But Perazim and Gibeon are mentioned together in one other place.
2 Samuel 5 (cf. 1 Chronicles 14:11-16).

This was David's first victory over his enemies after being crowned king of Israel.
This was the first time that God arose to give glory to his anointed king-
the man after God's own heart.
And now God is going to arise again –
as on Mt Perazim and in the Valley of Gibeon.
But this time to cast down the house of David.
A strange deed and an alien work.

And so Isaiah says, as strange as this sounds,
do not scoff – do not mock,
"Lest your bonds be made strong;
for I have heard a decree of destruction from the Lord Yahweh of hosts
against the whole land."
Don't make it worse for yourself than it already is.
Judgment is coming-darkness inescapable.

3. Therefore, Learn Wisdom from the LORD of Hosts! (v23-29)

But Isaiah concludes with a message of hope:

²³ *Give ear, and hear my voice;
give attention, and hear my speech.*

Listen up, folks, this is important!

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^[e] (a type of wheat) as the border?*

Of course. The point of plowing is to plant.

So what's your point, Isaiah?

²⁶ *For he is rightly instructed;
his God teaches him.*

This is what God is doing.
He is plowing – he is harrowing – but he will plant.
And there will yet be a harvest.

God knows what he is doing.
As a wise farmer knows what implements to use,
he will beat dill out with a stick-not thresh it with a sledge.

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;^[1]
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.*

God has not forgotten wisdom.

He is bringing all things together for his purposes in order to produce a bountiful harvest.

"This also comes from the LORD of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom."

This is not the end.

There is a future for the people of God beyond the darkness –
beyond the terror of the coming night.

Our Lord Jesus Christ recapitulates the history of Israel in his own life.

He was called out of Egypt –
rescued from the hand of a wicked Pharaoh (Herod)
who sought to destroy him.

He entered the Promised Land through the Jordan River,
and was tempted in the wilderness for forty days.

And on that Passover night, as all Israel remembered that fearful night
when the angel of death passed through the land,
our Lord trembled at the terror of judgment.

For we had entered a covenant with death.

We had listened to the voice of the serpent and taken refuge in lies.

And in order for him to annul our agreement with Sheol,

Jesus had to endure the sheer terror of understanding the message.

For Jesus, that night, the bed was too short to stretch out on,
and the covering too narrow to wrap himself in.

And the Father arose to strike down the house of David –
to do his strange deed, his alien work –
and strike down his beloved Son.

The apostle Paul uses this passage twice to talk about the Jews.

In 1 Corinthians 14:21, he explains the purpose of speaking in tongues.

(after emphasizing the importance of meaningful words in building up the church,)

²⁰ *Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.*

²¹ *In the Law it is written, "By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord."* ²² *Thus tongues are a sign*

not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign^[c] not for unbelievers but for believers. ²³ If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? ²⁴ But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵ the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

In Isaiah 28:11, the people of strange tongues were the Assyrians.

God's judgment was signified by the invasion of the Assyrians.

In 1 Cor 14, once again, it is the invasion of the nations that signifies judgment.

As all these foreign languages are spoken, as the Gentiles are brought in,
it is a sign that judgment has come upon Israel.

Paul says that speaking in tongues is a sign for unbelievers –
and particularly (given the use of Isaiah) *unbelieving Jews*

The same theme is found in Romans 9:33,
where Paul cites Isaiah 28:16.

Jesus is the stone of stumbling.

Israel did not believe that God could save them through the death of Jesus.

And so they stumble and fall.

Paul's usage of Isaiah 28 is conditioned by his role as apostle to the Gentiles.

He sees Isaiah 28 as speaking to the Jews of his own day,
through the new Assyrian invasion – namely, the ingathering of the Gentiles.

Does that sound strange?

You are part of the new Assyrian invasion!

But this time the Gentiles are flocking to the heavenly Jerusalem,
in faith! submitting to the righteousness of God!

But Paul understands that through the darkness of the storm,
there is yet a light.

God has purposed this for the salvation of his people.

The apostle Peter also uses Isaiah 28.

And while he too understands the judgment involved,
he uses it in a more positive sense.

1 Peter 2:4-8.

⁴ *As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious,*

⁵ *you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For it stands in Scripture:*

*“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”*

⁷ *So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,*

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”^[a]
8 and
“A stone of stumbling,
and a rock of offense.”
They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

Paul focuses on explaining the judgment that has come to the Jews,
Peter focuses on the blessing that has come to those who believe.
Jesus, the precious cornerstone, is the foundation for a spiritual temple.
And you, as living stones, are being built upon that foundation
as a fitting dwelling for God himself.

The covenant with death has been annulled.
Your agreement with Sheol has been destroyed –
because Jesus is risen from the dead!

Jesus endured the terror of that night –
the terror of the angel of death hovering outside his window.
The strange and alien work of God was poured out on Jesus on the cross.
Never again will God hand his people over to destruction.
That doesn’t mean – however – that his alien work is over.

Because the cornerstone has also become the stone of stumbling!

This is also Paul’s approach in Romans 9:33,
where Paul refers to verse 16 –
“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling , and a rock of offense;
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”
(Paul – like Peter – is weaving together Isaiah’s theme of the cornerstone in Isaiah 28,
with the “stone of offense and a rock of stumbling in Isaiah 8” –
because Paul realizes that Jesus is the cornerstone whom Israel stumbles over!)

But as Isaiah promises,
God’s alien work is always in the service of God’s *proper work* –
his strange deeds are always in the service of his *mighty deeds*.

Whenever you are tempted to doubt that –
whenever you are tempted to think that all this suffering and affliction is just too much –
look at the cross!

Look at the cross – where the eternal Son of God took upon himself our misery and our sin –
our guilt and our shame!