

February 1996

Frank W. Nelte

ISAIAH 28:10 EXPLAINED

God's Church has reached much of its doctrinal understanding by putting all the Scriptures from various parts of the Bible, that pertain to a given subject, together. In this process the Church has frequently referred to the statement in Isaiah 28:10, to support this approach towards a fuller understanding of the will of God. But there are also those people who have claimed that in so doing we have misapplied this Scripture.

So let's examine this verse more closely. Here is the text in the King James Version.

For precept [must be] upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, [and] there a little: (Isaiah 28:10)

The Hebrew text, transliterated into our alphabet, reads as follows:

"kiy tsav latsav tsav latsav kav lakav kav lakav ze'eyr sham ze'eyr sham."

The words "tsav" (precept) and "kav" (line) are used four times each in this verse. This is very obviously for emphasis. What is the purpose of this emphasis? Is it supposed to be MEANINGLESS, like "a drunken reply to a drunk god" ... or is it something God is very deliberately trying to draw our attention to?

THE CONTEXT OF THIS VERSE

Let's notice what this whole section of Scripture is speaking about.

Isaiah 28:1: God pronounces a punishment for "the drunkards of Ephraim".

Isaiah 28:2: God will send "a mighty and strong one" to take care of this punishing.

Isaiah 28:3-4: Thus Ephraim shall be punished.

Isaiah 28:5: "IN THAT DAY" ... this is a reference to the return of Jesus Christ. Christ will then be "the crown of glory".

Isaiah 28:6: Christ will rule and judge and give strength.

Isaiah 28:7: BUT for this present age the religious leaders (i.e. the priest and the prophet) "have erred", and they have made bad judgments. The reason given here is the excessive consumption of alcoholic drinks.

But this verse also contains a question we should ask! And that is:

EXACTLY WHAT IS IT THAT THESE RELIGIOUS LEADERS HAVE ERRED FROM?

The answer is: they don't really understand THE BIBLE, the revelation of God! They have erred in the way they interpret the instructions God has given us through His Word!

Isaiah 28:8: God now draws a vivid picture of drunkenness and debauchery. God is applying this description to the religious leaders of Ephraim ... they are no different in their conduct than the rest of the people of Ephraim.

Isaiah 28:9: NOW GOD ASKS A QUESTION AND PROVIDES THE ANSWER AT THE SAME TIME!
The question is:

"To whom shall God teach knowledge and an understanding of the true doctrines of the Bible?"

The answer is:

"To those who are SPIRITUALLY MATURE and no longer in need of milk."

It is THIS VERSE that the Apostle Paul was referring to in Hebrews 5:12-14. The Jews in the Church at Paul's time had again become as those who "have need of milk".

Isaiah 28:9 is the key to understanding the next verse, verse 10. The subject of verse 9 is very clearly that GOD can give knowledge and an understanding of doctrines to some people ... i.e. to those who are spiritually mature.

Isaiah 28:10: This verse now explains HOW God will fulfill verse 9, HOW God will "teach knowledge" and give understanding of doctrines. Verse 10 is very clearly linked to verse 9.

VERSE 10 ITSELF

Above we saw the transliterated Hebrew text. We noted the words "tsav" and "kav". But this verse actually starts with the word "kiy".

This word "kiy" is translated in the KJV as "FOR". This word is a conjunction and it appears over 4000 times in the Hebrew text, either on its own or joined to another word. Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament devotes over six full columns of small print to this word "kiy". When "kiy" is joined to a preposition, it turns the preposition into a conjunction.

This conjunction "kiy" basically means "BECAUSE", though it also has other applications. A clear passage where "kiy" is translated as "because" is Genesis 2:3.

And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: BECAUSE that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made. (Genesis 2:3)

So let's go back to Isaiah 28:10. This verse reads:

"BECAUSE precept must be upon precept ..."!

The fact that verse 10 in the Hebrew starts with the word "BECAUSE" obviously ties verse 10 to what was stated in verse 9. Verses 9 and 10 very clearly go together.

Verse 9 explains TO WHOM God will teach knowledge and doctrinal understanding. And verse 10 explains THE WAY God will teach this knowledge and doctrinal understanding.

A "precept" is "a principle intended as a general rule of action" (Webster's Dictionary). So "the way" God will teach us knowledge and doctrinal discernment is that God wants us to build one principle on another and one line (i.e. one verse) on another.

Verse 10 is NOT speaking about "the drunk religious leaders" of verses 7-8. Verse 9 clearly introduces a switch in subject matter and in focus ... the focus is NOT "the drunkards", but the focus is on "THOSE WHOM GOD SHALL TEACH"! And verse 10 is a response to the statement made in the previous verse. Also, Paul's quotation of verse 9 in Hebrews chapter 5 makes clear that verse 9 speaks about teaching in a right way.

So in plain language:

MR. HERBERT W. ARMSTRONG WAS RIGHT ALL ALONG!

This verse means exactly what Mr. Armstrong explained; that we need to put all the relevant Scriptures from various parts of the Bible together in order to get the correct picture of what it is that God wants to "TEACH" us and what doctrinal understanding it is that God is revealing to us.

AN EXAMPLE OF APPLYING THIS APPROACH

Without the understanding that God makes available to us we cannot really understand the Bible. The Apostle Paul explained that we need the help of God's Spirit in order to really understand the Bible.

For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so THE THINGS OF GOD KNOWETH NO MAN, BUT [BY] THE SPIRIT OF GOD. (1 Corinthians 2:11)

Without the help of God's Spirit even "THE LEARNED" will not really understand. As we read in the Book of Isaiah:

And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which [men] deliver to ONE THAT IS LEARNED, saying, READ THIS, I pray thee: and he saith, I CANNOT; FOR IT [IS] SEALED: (Isaiah 29:11)

The learned may know what the Hebrew and the Greek words mean, but that does not mean that their INTERPRETATIONS will be correct.

Now notice how God illustrated to us that we NEED TO put different Scriptures together correctly. Here is what the Apostle Peter did, or rather, what he said.

For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his bishoprick let another take. (Acts 1:20)

What Peter did here, under inspiration, is to correctly put two different "lines" together. Peter's statement "let his habitation be desolate" is taking a part of verse 25 of Psalm 69, which reads:

LET THEIR HABITATION BE DESOLATE; [and] let none dwell in their tents. (Psalm 69:25)

The next part of Peter's statement, joined by the word "AND" was: "and his bishoprick let another take". Here Peter took a part of verse 8 from Psalm 109, which reads:

Let his days be few; [and] LET ANOTHER TAKE HIS OFFICE [i.e. bishoprick]. (Psalm 109:8)

What the Apostle Peter here did under inspiration is a very clear New Testament example of applying Isaiah 28:10 in order to learn more knowledge and to gain further understanding. Peter put "precept with precept and line with line". That is the only way to RIGHTLY divide the Word of God, which God expects us to be able to do with the help of His Spirit.

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH. (2 Timothy 2:15)

ISAIAH 28:13

Now obviously, God COULD have inspired the Bible to be written just like an encyclopedia, with everything pertaining to one subject under one heading. But God didn't choose to do it that way. The reason God inspired His Word so that it would present "here a little and there a little" is so that the people whose minds are not open to God's truth simply will not understand the Bible, even when it is right there before their eyes. To them the Bible would be a sealed book!

Now let's continue with our overview of chapter 28 of Isaiah.

Isaiah 28:11: God would bring His truth to the attention of His people through a different language (i.e. a language other than Hebrew). The Apostle Paul quoted this verse in 1 Corinthians 14:21, which reads:

In the law it is written, With [men of] other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord. (1 Corinthians 14:21)

The point is that THE MESSAGE is inspired by God, irrespective of which language the message is translated into. The subject matter of this verse is still "GOD TEACHING" His people and speaking to them.

Isaiah 28:12: The message always comes back to teaching people about the millennium, when the kingdom of God will be established on this Earth. The millennium is that "REST" which God's people are to look forward to (see also Hebrews 4:8-10). But the people of Israel did not really want to listen to God's message of hope, of peace and of rest.

Isaiah 28:13: THEREFORE the Bible is a sealed book to them!

But the word of the LORD was unto them PRECEPT upon PRECEPT, PRECEPT upon PRECEPT; LINE upon LINE, LINE upon LINE; HERE A LITTLE, [AND] THERE A LITTLE; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken. (Isaiah 28:13)

Because they did not WANT to hear (verse 12), THEREFORE they are not able to "correctly divide" the Word of God. As a result they are CONFUSED by this "precept upon precept" and "line upon line". Thus

they "fall backwards" and are "broken and snared and taken".

This system God has devised serves a dual purpose: to those who have submitted their lives to God, God gives the ability to RIGHTLY put different precepts together (like the Apostle Peter); to those who are not really repentant God does not give this ability and to them these same precepts, scattered throughout the Bible, are a way of SEALING the truth of God.

JUST A FIGURE OF SPEECH?

The claim that Isaiah 28:10 is "a figure of speech" is not correct.

The word "tsav" (precept) is used exactly 9 times in the Old Testament; 8 times in verses 10 and 13 of Isaiah 28 and then also in Hosea 5:11, where it is translated as "commandment". Apart from the Old Testament there simply are no other Hebrew writings that go back to the 700's B.C., the time when Isaiah wrote his book. So outside of these two verses there is no evidence that "tsav latsav" was "a figure of speech" at the time of Isaiah.

The word "kav" (line) is used 21 times in 15 different verses of the Old Testament; 8 times in verses 10 and 13; 4 more times in the rest of the book of Isaiah, and 9 more times in 9 different verses in as many different books of the Old Testament. So outside of these two verses there is also no evidence that "kav lakav" was "a figure of speech" in Isaiah's time. And outside of these two verses neither "tsav" nor "kav" are ever used twice in one verse.

Whether or not figures of speech were LATER developed around these words has nothing to do with this Scripture! We have figures of speech in the English language that have their basis in something that is found in the Bible ... in many cases these figures of speech actually DISTORT what is said in the Bible (e.g. the saying "Spare the rod and spoil the child"). But these figures of speech in the English language don't prove that therefore the biblical statements, which form the basis of our figures of speech, also had to be figures of speech at the time they were written. Not at all!

Besides, it is THE CONTEXT OF VERSE 10 that proves beyond a doubt that this verse is NOT a figure of speech. Verse 9 makes very clear that teaching right knowledge and understanding of doctrines is the subject being discussed. Verse 9 simply does not allow for verse 10 to be "a figure of speech"!

A careful study of this chapter shows that Mr. Armstrong's explanation was correct. And if people cannot understand that, then the reason for this lack of understanding is explained in Isaiah 28:13.

Prove all things and hold fast to those things that are true (see 1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Frank W. Nelte