

A Bed Too Short (Part 2)

What is the True Word?

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Given 11-Oct-98; Sermon #FT98-12

Yesterday, I concluded my comments with the statement that early next week we would turn to Isaiah 28. Well, this is early next week so I guess we will turn to Isaiah 28! You may have felt that my comments were kind of abortive yesterday. That is just the way it turned out; they were just my introductory comments. We will see if we can put some kind of cap on it today.

By way of review, we looked at those scoffers in Isaiah 56 who assert that "tomorrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant." We looked at four drivers which impel people to think this way, to agree with this thinking, even though there is so much in the world which points the other way, which points to decay and destruction in America.

Finally, we noticed in Isaiah 30 how people there asked their leaders "Do not prophesy to us right things; [but] speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits" in order that they may "cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us." After all: "Out of sight; out of mind." You do not fear what you do not see.

Somehow if we can move God and if we can move His laws out of the way, we can end up living our own way, and we can think that we will not pay any consequences for our actions and for our lawlessness. Enjoying long lives in general, entertained, living well on credit, and enamored with the apparent blessings of technology, Americans have deceived themselves by thinking that they have "advanced beyond consequences" of God's law.

What does Isaiah have to say about it? We will be spending almost all of our time today in Isaiah 28.

Isaiah 28:1 Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim, whose glorious beauty is a fading flower, which is at the head of the verdant valleys to those who are overcome with wine!

Ephraim was the leading tribe (of course you all know) and it stood basically for Israel at large, just as the word "Washington" very often stands for the "United States at large" today. We understand, of course, that God is addressing national Israel. We also understand that He is addressing us. He is addressing His church, His elect today.

Isaiah draws a picture of Babylonish wealth—of haughty drunkards spreading over the fat valley in which Samaria was located. Isaiah says Israel is a flower that is already fading.

Yesterday I pointed out that the economist Jeffrey Madrick perceives America's economy as fading (we can use that metaphor again), in a state of permanent slowdown since about 1973. Having pointed out this characteristic of a fading civilization, God sounds a warning in verse 2-3. He says,

Isaiah 28:2-3 Behold, the Lord has a mighty and strong one [historically, that was Assyria], like a tempest of hail and a destroying storm, like a flood of mighty waters overflowing, who will bring them down to the earth with His hand. The crown of pride, the drunkards of Ephraim, shall be trampled under foot.

We will see later that God asks these people to repent before it is totally too late.

We will skip to verse 7. Here the prophet elaborates on the nature of the difficulty. Priests and prophets were drunkards, whether their intoxication was induced by fermented or distilled liquor, or, in our society today so often, by drugs. The effect is the same. The effect of their drunkenness was their inability to stay on the straight and narrow. They could not pass a spiritual sobriety test—not at all, brethren.

Isaiah stresses the effects of alcohol on people's relationship with God.

Isaiah 28:7-8 But they also have erred through wine, and through intoxicating drink are out of the way [the proper way of life that we heard from Mike a couple of days ago]; the priest and the prophet have erred through intoxicating drink, they are swallowed up by wine [they are consumed and overcome by it, brethren], they are out of the way through intoxicating drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment. For all tables are full of vomit and filth, no place is clean.

It is a lurid description of the condition of the leaders of national Israel, and (perhaps in some of our cases) spiritual Israel as well. Are we like this, brethren?

The next verse elaborates on the effect of alcohol on people's relationship with God.

Understand that drunkards reject God's revelation. Intoxication, as we spoke of it yesterday, renders people incapable of reliably distinguishing the holy from the unholy, or right from wrong, God's revelation from false knowledge.

What the drunken priests and prophets do is to reject God's message, and I want you to notice, they reject God's messenger at the same time. Verses 9 and 10 are pivotal to this particular chapter, where these people are actually sneering at Isaiah. They sneer at him and they ask:

Isaiah 28:9 Whom shall he [that is, Isaiah] teach knowledge? And whom shall he make to understand the message? . . .

They answer their own rhetorical question:

Isaiah 28:9-10 . . . Those that are weaned from milk? Those just drawn from the breasts? For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little.

If you have the *New American Standard Version* in your lap, some of you may, you might want to take a look at the margin that points out there the Hebrew monosyllabic words in verse 10.

The intelligentsia of Israel are saying to Isaiah, "Can you, Isaiah, teach us anything? We are the educated. We were educated in the finest schools in the land, in the arts and the sciences. We are people who won't learn from history (as we read yesterday), but who will impress on history a lesson. No, you can't teach us anything," they are saying to us.

"Preschoolers maybe can learn from you; go teach children, young children, your monosyllabic nonsense, your moral precepts. It may be of use to them, but we shan't listen. Bah bah black sheep, have you any wool? Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full—kid's stuff. It's repetitious. It's monosyllabic. And it is of no value at all in imparting moral knowledge to mature adults. That is granted."

Brethren, do you understand that the leaders of Israel here see God's message in that way, as kid's stuff, monosyllabic and of no value. They see the messenger in the same way and hold him in contempt. They tell Isaiah that he has followed the wrong calling—leave us alone and go open a day care center somewhere and teach young children.

That is not exactly what God wanted Isaiah to do. We will not have time to look at God's commission to Isaiah. It was already referred to in Isaiah 6:9-10, if you want to look at it sometime and see what God wanted Isaiah to do.

You see, these people are saying that morals are meaningless. As I said yesterday, that righteousness is only a religious buzzword that appears on religious talk shows. Let us look at an example of this way of thinking today.

Jeffrey Madrick, the author of *The End of Affluence: The Causes and Consequences of America's Economic Dilemma*, the book to which I referred yesterday at some length, displays this type of contempt for God's message. Now, Madrick perceives very well the situation in America, the decaying society—"the fading flower" of our economy, to go ahead and quote the first verse of Isaiah 28. He is like a doctor who rightly diagnoses a disease, but, brethren, his cure is all wrong for he misses altogether the root cause of that disease. He misses it because he rejects the absolute necessity of moral and ethical behavior that has to underlie as a foundation. It must underlie any successful economy.

You see, it is God who gives us the power to get wealth. We do not just kind of get it by ourselves accidentally. It does not come that way, brethren. If nationally we are not growing in wealth, then we are not obeying God.

Do you remember Mr. Armstrong's story about Roger Babson? You probably remember this. He said that when half of the people are living right, when they are moral in their business dealings with each other, the consequences will be prosperity. Conversely, he said, when more than half of the populace are unjust, unrighteous in business dealing with others, there will be economic depravation. Mr. Armstrong understood the cause and effect relationship, this connection between morals and economy. The two things are connected.

How does Madrick think we should resolve our economic problems? He pinpoints the problems very well. How are we going to solve them? First and foremost he argues: Leave morals out of the picture, as if they somehow cloud the whole issue. I quoted yesterday from his insightful first paragraph of his book, where he defines the problem. Now listen to his conclusion. This is an excerpt from the last paragraph of his book:

Until we acknowledge the fundamental change in our [economic] circumstances, [and] see that our problems are not primarily moral and ideological. . . .we cannot begin to seek workable solutions.

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In effect, Madrick is telling us that morals are meaningless to economics, that they play no serious role in our economic picture, and they will not help us resolve our economic problems. Madrick applies that kind of thinking to real-life conditions all through his book. Let me give you one example. I am quoting from an earlier part of the book:

To extol family values when many American families cannot afford a decent life permits us to scold unwed mothers and errant fathers when we should be thinking of how to increase production and family incomes.

He is saying do not waste your time educating mothers and fathers about their moral responsibilities. Do not preach morality; rather, increase production, increase income, and there will be less fornication and less abandonment. If it were not such a sad indictment of the thinking of the carnal mind—the mind separated from God—it would almost be funny! But of course it is not funny at all.

This person is absolutely serious, and he is a mover and shaker in our economic life. Madrick has fallen for the old liberal lie hook, line, and sinker. That lie is that a good environment produces good people. One writer put it this way—that perfect circumstances perfect people. (It did not work in the Garden of Eden anyway.)

Madrick says, increase productivity and, thereby, increase family incomes—fix the economic environment, and by doing that you will resolve certain matters of moral turpitude—in this particular case the matters of promiscuity, abandonment, and the like. Madrick misses a basic truth: Morals *drive* any economy, not vice versa. So Madrick's solution puts the economic cart before the moral horse—which is the driver, the engine of any successful economy.

Remember the poverty in which Mr. Armstrong and his wife, Loma, lived during the Great Depression? In one section of the autobiography he tells the story of how God had to provide a dime for some milk for the youngsters. But these people back then (and I am not saying all Americans, but the Armstrongs) were moral first. They put God first and they served Him. God provided for their needs at the time, and then later on He blessed them financially.

God did not treat them like some liberal politicians would, putting them in a program (and that is what they do, they have lots of programs), pouring money upon them in their poverty, hoping that somehow they would become moral. God did not put them in a perfect environment up there in Oregon in the belief that somehow they would become

perfect! That is what Madrick and the liberals would do.

The Armstrongs understood the cause and effect relationships implicit in God's law in the blessings and cursings chapter: the effect of obedience is blessings. Now God might delay it for a time; we understand that. The effect of disobedience is curses. And again God might mercifully defer those curses for a long time to allow repentance. That is part of the Ecclesiastes 8:11 principle we spoke of yesterday. And, we are going to be talking more about mercy later on because it is a very, very important part of this chapter.

Madrick is so very wrong. Now I should not put words in his mouth, but if he were in this room and we got him in a corner of this room and we pressed him hard enough, I believe that he would submit that God's Word is little more than a bunch of repetitious and nonsensical nursery rhymes, unable to resolve our problems, unable to enrich our lives, if obeyed.

Do you understand that Madrick's attitude is exactly like that of so many of Israel's leaders and teachers today? It is exactly the same attitude as the priests and prophets who deride Isaiah—can you, preacher, teach us anything, since morals are meaningless?

Let us continue in Isaiah 28 because Isaiah needs to answer this kind of drunken foolishness. It is the drunken foolishness of people entrapped in false knowledge.

Isaiah 28:11-12 For with stammering lips and another tongue He will speak to this people. To whom He said, "This is the rest with which you may cause the weary to rest," and "This is the refreshing"; yet they would not hear.

The leaders of Israel refused to hear God's message of rest. I will not ask you to turn to Jeremiah 6:16, but there God defines where we find that rest: walking in the paths of God.

Jeremiah 6:16 Thus says the Lord, "Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls." But they said, "We will not walk in it."

The people in Jeremiah's day answered the prophet the same way as did those people in Isaiah's day. So you see, God is saying here if they will not listen to Isaiah's speaking

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in the vernacular, then they will listen to those speaking to them in a foreign tongue, a tongue of a conqueror, speaking a foreign language.

Let us skip down to verse 14. The prophet's comments take a slightly different turn. Up to this point, he is addressing Israel at large, focusing on Samaria. Now he pinpoints Jerusalem.

Isaiah 28:14 Therefore hear the word of the Lord, you scornful men, who rule this people who are in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was still standing at the time and he is addressing the leaders of a city that was the capital of Judah in the time of King Hezekiah. Symbolically we understand that he is talking about the church. Jerusalem is a symbol for the church. Verse 15 is of pivotal importance, brethren.

Isaiah 28:15 Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we are at agreement. When the overflowing scourge passes through, it will not come unto us."

"Our knowledge allows us to predict anything, and through our systems and through our technology we are able to meet any contingency." That is what these people are saying, brethren. Though the bombs fall, we will be safe behind our technological walls of defense. In my sermonette the first day, I spoke of those walls of sand that we build and they really do not defend us at all.

They say that if we get sick through a libertine lifestyle, we will turn to our medical technology which is so capable of preserving and lengthening life. Or they will say to protect our children we will learn the genetic code. That is what we are doing today, and that way we will ensure that we gender supermen, never feeble, never diseased, no matter what.

And in a religious context, they say if we sin, God's grace will cover us; His law is abrogated; it is null and void. Even some sectors of God's church have fallen for that lie. What I am saying, brethren, is that from different sectors in our lives, secular and religious, within the church and without, all around us people are giving us this message. The message in a few words: We can disregard God's natural and moral laws and it will not matter. We have "advanced beyond consequences."

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In verse 18-19, God answers that Himself. He is speaking here Himself. He says:

Isaiah 28:18-19 Your covenant with death shall be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand; when the overflowing scourge passes through, then you will be trampled down by it. As often as it goes out it will take you; for morning by morning it will pass over, and by day and by night; it will be a vexation just to understand the report.

That last clause is very poorly translated in the *King James Version*. Let me give you a couple of other translations. One has it this way:

And it shall be such terror when He [God] shall make you to hear doctrine.

Another translation puts it this way:

And it is nothing but shuddering to hear such preaching [that is, the repetitious preaching of the overwhelming scourge of God passing over, morning by morning, day or night.]

The Hebrew word rendered "message," "preaching," "report," or "doctrine" in the various translations is the same word translated "doctrine" in verse 9, where the scoffers taunt Isaiah, "To whom shall he make to understand doctrine?"

If the leaders think that they are too sophisticated to hear Isaiah's sermons, if they think his message is too simple and too childish, God is saying that they will hear the message of God when He speaks, day and night, pounding it, hammering it, into their head.

I skipped verses 16 and 17. We do need to go back there to understand the Agency by which God will bring all this about.

Isaiah 28:16 Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation. . .

We need to pick that up because it becomes important later on because we understand that this Stone is Jesus Christ. It is He that puts aside the false knowledge of the

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intelligentsia—the intelligentsia of Israel, the intelligentsia of the Israel of God. He will set it aside.

Isaiah 28:17 Also I will make justice the measuring line, and righteousness the plummet: the hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters will overflow the hiding place.

There will be no place of safety for the deceived! When the Rockies melt, and with them our way of life, Israel will begin to hear what she has refused to hear hitherto.

Isaiah 28:20 For the bed is too short to stretch out on, and the covering so narrow that one cannot wrap himself in it.

Isaiah was probably drawing from some proverb of his day. Its lesson here is the insufficiency of the cosmos, the insufficiency of the system. No matter how advanced, no matter how technological, no matter how grounded in philosophy and reason and logic and even tradition—no matter, man's way will not be enough to meet the needs of the hour when God Himself instructs Israel.

You understand, of course, that man's economic systems, his technological systems, his political systems do have a degree of strength. They do have a measure of resiliency. For example, if a power station goes off-line because it is hit by some lightning strike, other stations in the grid will take up the slack, often instantaneously. You do not even know it has happened.

But man's systems (God is saying here through Isaiah) are simply going to be unequal to the task of answering God's preaching, the repetitious, incessant scourge, passing over "morning by morning, by day and by night." Then the difficulties will be too great, too frequent, and they will be coming too fast. Like an overwhelmed power grid, failing because it just cannot handle the needs of a day of fire, darkness will be everywhere.

Man's systems will not bear up; the bed will be too short.

God makes it plain that He is speaking in principle, not just to Israel here, but to all humanity, to anyone who scoffs at His message, His way of life, and His messenger. God has sounded the warning. Here is the plea for repentance and the plea for change. I am quoting verses 22 and 23 from the *New American Standard Version*:

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Isaiah 28:22 (NASV) And now do not carry on as scoffers, lest your fetters be made stronger. . . .

These people were already in the bonds of sin. God is saying that unless they repent, things will just get worse, not better, not more abundant every day. They are going to go downhill and get worse.

Isaiah 28:22-23 (NASV) . . . For I have heard from the Lord God of hosts, of decisive destruction on all the earth. Give ear and hear my voice, listen and hear my words.

The "overflowing scourge" is not local, it is worldwide! We all know that it is not a single blow, but an incessant, repeated attack, passing over "morning by morning, by day and by night."

No people, nowhere, at any time, have "advanced beyond consequences." They will learn that. Lawlessness will have its results. God will judge.

With all that, then, we can ask: Where is mercy? Is there any mercy in all this? Does it exist? I promised that we would be talking a little bit about mercy. God often ends His prophecies with a note of hope and a note of encouragement for those who will listen.

This particular chapter here is no exception at all. That is the import of verses 24-29, because there is an agricultural parable, one which Christ elaborated several times in His ministry.

I will not be able to elaborate on all the areas of this rich, rich parable. There are many levels. We just mine its depth. It is very wealthy. I will not elaborate on this one point. I will just go ahead and make it to you. It came to mind when John spoke earlier.

You might want to analyze this particular parable which was taken right from God's creation in terms of the stages that John mentioned the other day—the chaos, then the divine revelation, and then the judgment. The three stages run in parallel. There is the plowing, the sowing, and the reaping the harvest. I want you to understand, though, that for our purposes right now, the ultimate theme of this parallel is God's mercy in His judgment.

Isaiah 28:24 Does the plowman keep plowing all day to sow? Does he keep

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turning his soil and breaking the clods?

We can say a couple of things about plowing. It is the first stage in the agricultural cycle, but it is not the end-all-and-be-all of farming. It is a temporary activity. If the farmer did nothing more than plow, he would never get to sowing, and if he never got to sowing, he would never get to harvest, and he would go hungry! So, plowing, as necessary as it is, is still only a preparatory work (and a temporary work as well).

Secondly, plowing, in metaphor, is generally destructive. What plowing does, especially with today's round plow, is it breaks the ground and it turns under weeds and other things. It has the effect of clearing a field. But, again, the destruction is a necessary first step to the continuing agricultural cycle of growth and regeneration. So the farmer knows when to stop and go on with the next step. That is, of course, sowing.

Isaiah 28:25 (NASV) Does he not level its surface [that is going back to the plowing], and sow dill and scatter cummin, and plant wheat in rows, barley in its place, and rye within its area?

Notice the three different verbs there: sow, scatter, and plant. There are different verbs in the Hebrew as well. The farmer does not treat all seeds exactly the same way. He treats different types of seeds differently. Cummin seeds produce fairly small plants, so the farmer can just broadcast the seeds.

Wheat, on the other hand, grows to produce rather large plants, and if the farmer just broadcasts them, they could bunch together (grow in bunches) and reduce crop size. So what the farmer does is he handles them a little bit differently. He puts (I believe that the margin of the *New American Standard Version* indicates that the word "plants" there is the word "put") the wheat seeds into the ground.

I understand from a movie I saw as a child that that is how we plant seed, unless we have changed our technique. This device runs over the furrows and it plants one seed a few inches into the ground. And then it goes a bit further and plants another. This is not broadcasting in the classic sense. It is a different type of planting. Farmers even today plant in different ways. They handle seeds differently.

Isaiah 28:26 For He instructs him in right judgment, His God teaches him.

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God is the source of every good gift. He is our teacher. Compare the attitude of the lowly farmer here with that of Israel's priests and prophets. In verse 9 they refused to listen to the doctrine and to the knowledge taught by God through Isaiah. In verse 12, they would not hear God's message of rest. In verses 18 and 19, God makes it plain that they will finally listen to Him.

The people we teach later on in our cities will have gone through this plowing destruction and they will listen to us. They will be ready to listen.

Now, let us see what God teaches about the next step in the agricultural cycle, one appropriate to this time of year—the harvest.

Isaiah 28:27-28 (NASV) For dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is the cartwheel driven over cummin; but dill is beaten out with a rod, and cummin with a club. Grain for bread is crushed, indeed, he does not continue to thresh it forever. Because the wheel of his cart and his horses eventually damage it, he does not thresh it longer.

The farmer here uses three different instruments for harvesting: a rod for the dill, a club for the cummin, and a mill stone to crush the wheat. It would be counter-productive to place something as fragile as cummin under the mill stone. It would simply destroy the plants. It would not do any good at all.

I want you also to note that the farmer eventually stops harvesting because he understands that his activity itself simply destroys the plants. God is like a farmer. He is selective in the way He handles us, the way He harvests, the way He judges. He punishes appropriately. He knows when to stop so that no one be tried more than he is able to bear. You know the passage in I Corinthians. God deals with us as individuals, in His mercy.

I had to think about this in the last few days in terms of a sickness that we have had here at the Feast. Some people, like John, probably felt that he was being squished between a couple of millstones. But God knew he was able to handle it.

Most of you do not know that I was sick a couple of days back, but it was very mild, probably because God understood my weakness. God was dealing with me with the rod that He uses for dill, rather than with the club, or with the millstone. God deals with us as individuals, but deal with us He does.

A Bed Too Short (Part 2) by Charles Whitaker (<http://www.cgg.org>)

Isaiah 28:29 This also comes from the Lord of hosts, who is wonderful in counsel and excellent in guidance.

Against the cynicism and sarcasm of Israel's prideful priests and prophets, God sets a simple agricultural parable to show His wisdom. The farmer, unlike the priests and prophet, recognizes the wisdom in God's instruction and puts it into action. He is not above instruction.

Yesterday, we spoke "of an airplane flying in rolling parabolas." Remember those "careless [passengers] thinking that weightlessness will persist forever, that in a world that has advanced beyond consequences what lies ahead will conform not to the laws of history but to the shape of their dreams."

Well, in a future not too far away, that airplane is going to run out of gas. Then, no matter how aerodynamic it may be, no matter how high-tech may be its design, it will have only one direction to go. "And great will be the fall thereof." Richard actually anticipated my line, but I will use it anyway: Bye, Bye, Miss American pie! Or Canadian pie! Or whatever kind of pie!

It is going to be over by that particular time. Americans will suddenly learn that tomorrow will not be just as today, only with more abundance. And when what Churchill termed "the long night of barbarism" begins—what God calls the "time of Jacob's Trouble"—Americans will finally begin the process of learning that no one ever "advances beyond consequences."

We will conclude in Hebrews 4. It is my view that Hebrews 4 is in fact in part a commentary on Isaiah 28. We all know verse 2, which speaks of those ancients who were not profited by the "word preached," it not being "mixed with faith".

What about us today? Do we in God's Israel believe the "word preached?" Or, do we act as if we have "advanced beyond consequences?" Surely we do not say this with our lips. But, how do we act? Remember what Mark said yesterday: We are not what we say we are, but what we do.

Do we too quickly turn to man's foods and his medicines to preserve and lengthen our lives—before we turn to God? King Asa did that and died. Do we feed on the trash appearing in our entertainment systems, televisions and movie theaters, thinking that the deceitful images will not eventually impress themselves on our minds, and influence them?

Do we live unnecessarily (and I need to stress unnecessarily) on credit, use credit to feed our lusts and to feed our covetousness, thinking that somehow we will just someday flit off to a place of safety, never having to face the consequences of our debt, never having to pay our creditors? I believe, although I do not have time to go into it, that God's Word teaches otherwise.

Do we use technology, in any of its many forms, in all of its forms, thinking we will pay no price?

I submit to you that all of us, and I have to include myself, come very close to believing that we have "advanced beyond consequences," a belief exhibited not so much by what we say, but by what we do, by our lifestyle, by the way we live in this Babylonish society that simply surrounds around us.

But you see the peace and the security, the abundance, the ease that is promised by Babylon will not materialize tomorrow. It has not materialized today. It will never materialize. It has never materialized. That promise is a "promise" of Satan. It is a pipe dream. It is induced by intoxicants, and it never will be.

Brethren, do you understand that ours is not a dream, but ours is the promise of the true God and it is as rock solid as the Stone God has placed in Zion, as we read in Isaiah 28. Hebrews 4:9 speaks of one of those promises of God.

Hebrews 4:9 There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.

The rest is not for us now. Now is not the time for us to slumber and sleep as did the worthless and useless dogs that we read about yesterday in Isaiah 56—blind, dumb, lazy, greedy, without understanding. They did not have much redeeming, did they?

God is metaphorically building a bed to give us rest in the future. And, no matter how much we grow over the ages, that bed will never become too short. Unlike today's world system, the rest God will provide us will be eternally sufficient.

Hebrews 4:11 Let us therefore be diligent [note, it does not say let us rest] to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.

We have read of that unbelief. That is the unbelief of which we read in Isaiah 28, the

A Bed Too Short (Part 2) by Charles Whitaker (<http://www.cgg.org>)

contemptuous disregard for God's message as nothing more than a child's nursery rhyme. We can be sure that God will answer that contempt with judgment—that no one has truly "advanced beyond consequences."

But, we may also be sure that God's judgment will be in mercy. For our part now we need to remember the bottom line of the parable at the end of Isaiah 28, the last verse. God is:

Isaiah 28:29 . . . wonderful in counsel, and excellent in guidance.

God's teaching is as true as His Spirit is powerful. If we serve Him faithfully, He will provide us rest.