

A SHORT BED AND SCANTY COVER

"For the bed is shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it: and the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself in it." Isaiah 28:20.

For every age God has raised up a prophet. From among the masses of the people, at least one has spoken for God, and in whom the spirit of God dwelt mightily. Each, in his day, was scorned, ridiculed, even persecuted, but each uttered words the underlying truth of which was proven sooner or later. In the library of human history such men have their names written in bold type. Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and a host of others spoke to their day and generation and without regard to personal cost.

The Old Testament prophecies have a profound and fascinating interest, characterized by pungent utterance, frank declaration, keen analysis of a situation, clinched and driven home with a familiar proverbial saying, or illuminating parable, or amazing word picture, impressions of which become indelible and permanent.

This twenty-eighth chapter of Isaiah is a fine example of analysis of character and it treats of sin and judgment with real understanding of the spiritual nature of man and God. In this day when moral principles are so easily set aside, the prophetic outpourings of this chapter were never more relevant. After his opening denunciation of the leaders against the two evils of pride and drunkenness, and against their utter disregard of the teachings of God, Isaiah makes an even graver charge. He accuses these men of making secret alliances which can only end in destruction and death.

Isaiah was an alert man who sought to read the signs of the times, and to warn his people of the certain disaster which would come unless the nation became alert and righteous. At the time he wrote our text, he could see that Samaria was about to fall before the power of Assyria. Samaria was the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the armies of the Assyrians were already upon its walls. Sure disaster was at hand for Samaria. Isaiah did not sympathize with Samaria in her plight because he regarded her disaster as the just reward for the sins of the people. God is bringing a righteous judgment upon the Samaritans for their sins. God is righteous, and that which is to come upon Samaria is richly deserved.

But the prophet has another message. It is that Judah too is threatened with disaster. The same enemy will fall upon Jerusalem. That also is a judgment of God. It is the prophet's solemn duty to warn his people of the impending calamity. He repeats his message, but the people only laugh at him, and he finds it hard to rouse them into real interest. The rulers are relying upon their astuteness to carry them through the day of danger. They have made an arrangement so that when the Assyrians sweep into Zion they shall be spared. Because of their secret covenant they feel they can laugh and go on with their pleasure seeking. The Covenant with Death will not count for much when the Assyrians are actually in Jerusalem--and Isaiah knows it. Rather than make such a covenant the people should have lived righteously and cast themselves upon the care of God. But they made their bed and they must lie upon it--that is the verdict of Isaiah. The lesson which the nation had to learn, and the individual no less than the nation, is that we must lie on the bed we make. As we make our bed, so we lie upon it. Just because we have to lie upon it, wisdom dictates that it be large enough for our needs, and that adequate cover be provided.

Nothing could be more wretched or uncomfortable than to try to sleep in a bed that is too short for you to stretch yourself on it. Anyone who has tried to do that will remember what a miserable night he spent. Likewise nothing could be more uncomfortable than to try to sleep on a cold night on a bed where the blankets are not sufficient to cover the body. The individual who tries to sleep under these conditions is doomed to disappointment.

Despite the statesmanlike pleadings of the prophet, the rulers of Judah had played with fire as they tried by secret treaty to set off Assyria against Egypt. The outraged prophet

calls their clumsy politics "A covenant with death" and "An agreement with hell." And he warns them that they cannot thus stay the overflowing scourge. They have made their bed and must lie on it, but they shall find it too short, and the covering too narrow. They have rejected the rest which God offered them, and shall find none in their own godless schemes and plans. All beds of men's devising will be too short, and all the coverings too narrow.

This expression, "making a bed," is a symbol of service and toil. What we make is that which eventually we must tolerate. If discomfort is ours, and the bed shorter than we like, whose fault is it? If the protective coverings of life are insufficient, we ourselves are to blame. We deserve no better life than we shape, no easier bed than we make, no happier home than we build.

Isaiah used a number of epigrammatic sayings, but this one arrests the attention and leads one to useful reflection. He used this striking metaphor of a short bed and scanty cover to describe a plan of life, national or personal, that leaves out God. Instead of relying upon God and upon righteousness of conduct and the policies which Isaiah had outlined for them, the leaders of the people of Judah and Jerusalem had sought alliances with foreign nations. Isaiah scornfully told them that such alliances were only a refuge which would be swept away in the hail of judgment. All these measures of defense would turn out to be totally inadequate. They would prove to be like a short bed and scanty cover.

This message of Isaiah, like everything else in the Bible, is still timely. The prophet was saying a very simple thing in striking and sensational language. He wedded his thought to unforgettable words. He flung out in a figure of speech a fundamental religious principle. He charged the people of his day with crowding God out of their business, social and political life, and with limiting the influence of religion to holy days and holy places. If you leave God out of your plan of life, you will find it utterly inadequate to furnish you with the peace and satisfaction and comfort you know full well you must have to make life really worth the living and death really worth the dying. It will prove to be a bed too short to stretch yourself on the covers of which will prove too narrow to wrap yourself in.

Far too many live for this world only. Many plan to make a fortune and then retire to enjoy it. Others make provision only for the pleasures of this world. A life devoted merely to pleasure satisfies only a dwarfed, narrow and diminutive soul. At first, these pleasures please, then they disappoint, and finally they leave you miserable. No one ever died happy who lived only for the pleasures of this world. Pleasure does not equal expectation nor satisfy your desires.

Let us observe some of the narrow beds with their narrow covering, on which men are vainly striving to find security and repose.

I. Atheism.

This bed excites our pity. It almost justifies our contempt. It is short, narrow, hard and lumpy. Any man of average size, endeavoring to stretch himself on it, will find that either his head or his feet must be without due support. Atheism affirms nothing; it is purely negative. It is a gigantic fraud; an immeasurable failure. It destroys the noblest aspirations of the soul. It clips the wings of genius, stays the hand of art, and silences the voice of poetry. Atheism lacks the spirit of self-sacrifice; it has no inherent vitality; it is without any real, aggressive endeavor. It never builds a hospital, founds an asylum, or endows an institution of learning. It is doomed to defeat, and in all the years to come it will receive the contempt of the living, enterprising, achieving men of the hour.

Nothing is any plainer than the truths of revelation, which affect personal salvation, personal character, and personal duty.

II. Inconsistency.

This bed is too short and too narrow. Critics tell us that professors of religion are not any better than the men of the world. This statement is not true. Christ said of His people, "Ye are the light of the world." Thank God, that light has not gone out. "Ye are the salt of the earth." Thank God, that salt has not lost its savor.

The best men and women in any community today are church members. But, if what the critics say is true, which is not the case, could they expect to be saved because of the inconsistency of church members? Do they expect the sins of others will justify them at the judgment seat of Christ? Was there ever such folly?

III. Self-righteousness.

Men are constantly saying, "What harm have we done?" Many show that they know nothing of their own sinful nature, and nothing of God's immaculate holiness. Self-righteousness is a bed upon which a great host lie down, but it is too narrow for anybody. Men measure themselves by others and think they can get along without the righteousness of God which is in Christ. But this bed is too short. Man's own righteousness is a covering which is too narrow for him to wrap himself in. Regardless of the respectability of your life, there is yet sin in it that requires covering, and you will never be able to cover it with any righteousness of your own. The cover with which you are inclined to be content is not large enough to wrap you up from the blast of the divine wrath against sin. Those who rest in a righteousness of their own will discover in the end that they have been deceived.

IV. Procrastination.

Many lie on this bed. The whole atmosphere in the vicinity of these beds is filled with a most deadly opiate. Many have slept on this bed until life with all of its opportunities has passed. They will admit that religion is extremely important, and that they expect to give it due attention at some time; but, they will also tell you that they do not intend to do so today.

The only garment that is never too narrow is that of the perfect righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ.