

## LESSON 8

# The Ax and the Hand That Swings It

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*Does an ax exalt itself above the one who chops with it? Does a saw magnify itself above the one who saws with it?*

— Isaiah 10:15

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***Israel wouldn't listen and Assyria wouldn't bow, and the God who swings the ax against them both is keeping a remnant for Himself.***

### WHERE WE ARE

About 733–732 BC. Tiglath-pileser of Assyria has torn Galilee away from the northern kingdom and is closing in on Damascus. Pekah, Israel's king, will soon be murdered by a conspirator named Hoshea. Ahaz sits in Jerusalem as Assyria's paying servant, glad to watch his enemies punished. Isaiah turns first to proud Israel, then to proud Assyria. The question this passage answers: when an empire seems to be running the world, whose hand is actually holding it?

## Introduction

ISAIAH LOOKS NORTH FIRST. In four stanzas he describes the northern kingdom coming apart, and he always ends on the same line: *In all this, his anger has not turned away, and his hand is still raised to strike*, 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4. Then he turns to Assyria, the empire God has raised up, and lets the king of Assyria speak for himself. The king says he did it all on his own.

Isaiah answers this with a picture, an ax bragging about the work of the man who swings it, 10:15.

Left to yourself, you'll read history the way the Assyrian king did. Powerful men make plans, armies march, and the strongest side wins. Isaiah reads it from the other end. Someone is holding the ax. The question is whether you'll recognize whose hand it is before it comes down.

## His Hand Is Still Raised (9:8–10:4)

Ephraim, the leading tribe in the north, stands here for the whole northern kingdom, and Samaria is its capital. God had warned them for years through Amos and Hosea. Now the word *came against Israel*, and the warnings were coming true.

How do they take it? *They will say with pride and arrogance, "The bricks have fallen, but we will rebuild with cut stones; the sycamores have been cut down, but we will replace them with cedars,"* 9:9–10. Brick and sycamore built ordinary houses; cut stone and cedar built palaces. Israel's answer to disaster is a building program. Nobody in the verse asks what God might be saying.<sup>68</sup>

So, the trouble grows. God raises up *Rezin's adversaries*, the Assyrians, and Israel is eaten from both sides: *Aram from the east and Philistia from the west have consumed Israel with open mouths*, 9:11–12. Aram is Syria, the very ally Israel had marched with against Judah.

Then the refrain sounds for the first time. It comes four times in this passage, and once before, at 5:25. The raised hand is Exodus language. It's how God brought His people out of Egypt *by a strong hand and an outstretched arm*, Deuteronomy 4:34. The hand that redeemed them is now raised against them.<sup>69</sup>

The second stanza names the deeper problem. *The people did not turn to him who struck them; they did not seek the Lord of Armies*, 9:13. They felt every blow. They never asked who struck it.

God cuts off head and tail, *palm branch and reed in a single day*, 9:14. Isaiah explains his own picture. *The head is the elder, the honored one; the tail is the prophet, the one teaching lies*, 9:15. The men who should have been leading had become tails, wagging whichever way the crowd pulled. *The leaders of the people mislead them, and those they mislead are swallowed up*, 9:16.

That's exactly what happened. In the thirty years after Jeroboam II died around 753 BC, six kings sat on Israel's throne. Four of them were murdered. Only one passed the crown to his son.<sup>70</sup>

The third stanza is a fire. *For wickedness burns like a fire that consumes thorns and briers*, 9:18, and *the land is scorched by the wrath of the Lord of Armies*, 9:19. *No one has compassion on his brother*. People eat and stay hungry. *Manasseh eats Ephraim, and Ephraim, Manasseh; together, both are against Judah*, 9:20–21. Manasseh and Ephraim were brothers, Joseph's two sons. All they agree on now is attacking Judah.

The fourth stanza changes targets. *Woe to those enacting crooked statutes and writing oppressive laws to keep the poor from getting a fair trial*, 10:1–2. No northern city is named this time, and the pronoun turns to you. *What will you do on the day of punishment when devastation comes from far away? Who will you run to for help? Where will you leave your wealth?* 10:3.

Isaiah's listeners in Jerusalem have been nodding along while he described Samaria. Now he's asking about their own courts.<sup>71</sup> His answer to his own questions is grim: *nothing to do except crouch among the prisoners or fall among the slain*, 10:4. The refrain sounds a fourth time.

## The Rod of My Anger (10:5–15)

*Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger—the staff in their hands is my wrath*, 10:5.

In chapter 8 Assyria was a flood. Here it's a stick, and God is holding it. *I will send him against a godless nation; I will command him to go against a people destined for my rage, to take spoils, to plunder*, 10:6. Those last words echo the name Isaiah wrote on his placard, Maher-shalal-hash-baz. The boy's name is coming true.<sup>72</sup>

The godless nation is God's own people. Ahaz had sent the temple's silver and gold to Tiglath-pileser with a plea, *March up and save me*, 2 Kings 16:7–8. Now God sends Assyria against them.

And the Assyrian has no idea. *But this is not what he intends; this is not what he plans. It is his intent to destroy and to cut off many nations*, 10:7. God sends him to discipline. He goes out to conquer. So Isaiah lets him talk:

*Aren't all my commanders kings? Isn't Calno like Carchemish? Isn't Hamath like Arpad? Isn't Samaria like Damascus?* 10:8–9.

The names are a roll call of cities Assyria had taken, running from Carchemish on the Euphrates south toward Israel. The gods of those cities didn't save them, and Samaria's idols didn't save Samaria. *Will I not also do to Jerusalem and its idols?* 10:11. In his mind the God of Jerusalem is one more idol.

God answers. When He *finishes all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem*, He'll punish the king of Assyria *for his arrogant acts and the proud look in his eyes*, 10:12. *Finishes* is a tailor's word, the snip of the last thread. Assyria will do exactly the work it was given and no more.<sup>73</sup>

Listen to the king again. *I have done this by my own strength and wisdom, for I am clever*, 10:13. Taking the nations was as easy as robbing an unguarded nest: *No wing fluttered; no beak opened or chirped*, 10:14. Count the pronouns. *I* and *my*, over and over.

Then God asks His question:

*Does an ax exalt itself above the one who chops with it? Does a saw magnify itself above the one who saws with it?* 10:15.

Assyria's power was real, and all of it was given. The king never once asked by whom.

Assyria is an instrument in God's hand, and Assyria is guilty for what it does. God's purpose in the invasion was just. The king's purpose was his own, and he'll answer for it.<sup>74</sup>

## **A Remnant Will Return (10:16–27)**

*Therefore*, 10:16. Assyria's well-fed get a wasting disease, and its glory gets a fire. *Israel's Light will become a fire, and its Holy One, a flame. In one day it will burn and consume Assyria's thorns and thistles*, 10:17. It's the same God, light to His people and fire to their enemy. Assyria's great forest will be cut down until *a child could count* what's left, 10:19.

*In one day*. Isaiah tells that story himself in chapter 37. In 701 BC Sennacherib's army lay outside Jerusalem, and *that night the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians*, 2 Kings 19:35. Sennacherib went home to Nineveh, where two of his sons later murdered him, 37:38. Nineveh itself fell in 612 BC.

Then Isaiah speaks to the survivors. *On that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no longer depend on the one who struck them, but they will faithfully depend on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel*, 10:20. To depend is to lean your weight on something. Ahaz leaned on Assyria, and Assyria hit him. The remnant will lean on the Holy One.<sup>75</sup>

A remnant is what God keeps after judgment, the survivors who come through. *The remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the Mighty God*, 10:21. Two names from earlier lessons meet in that one verse. *The remnant will return* is Shear-jashub, the name of Isaiah's older son, 7:3. *Mighty God* is one of the Child's names in 9:6.

Verse 22 is the hard side of the promise. *Israel, even if your people were as numerous as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return. Destruction has been decreed; justice overflows,* 10:22. God had promised Abraham descendants like the sand, Genesis 22:17. Descent from Abraham was never enough on its own. Of all that sand, only those who turn back to the Mighty God are the remnant.<sup>76</sup>

God speaks straight to Jerusalem. *My people who dwell in Zion, do not fear Assyria, though they strike you with a rod and raise their staff over you as the Egyptians did. In just a little while my wrath will be spent and my anger will turn to their destruction,* 10:24–25. He gives them two memories: the Midianite prince Oreb, killed by Gideon's men at a rock that took his name, Judges 7:25, and Moses' staff raised over the sea, 10:26. He's broken a rod before. *His burden will fall from your shoulders, and his yoke from your neck,* 10:27.

## The Forest Comes Down (10:28–34)

The last scene moves fast. *Assyria has come to Aiath and has gone through Migron, storing their equipment at Michmash,* 10:28. Town by town the army closes in from the north. *The people of Ramah are trembling; those at Gibeah of Saul have fled,* 10:29. Anathoth, Jeremiah's hometown a century later, is miserable, 10:30. Then the last stop: *Today the Assyrians will stand at Nob, shaking their fists at the mountain of Daughter Zion, the hill of Jerusalem,* 10:32. Nob sat just north of the city, close enough to shake a fist at it.

Isaiah doesn't say which campaign this is, and no record matches the route to a particular king. When Sennacherib's spokesman came in 701, he came from Lachish, southwest of the city, 36:2. Isaiah is painting the danger as it would feel from the wall, each town a step closer.<sup>77</sup>

Then one word stops the march. *Look,* 10:33.

*The Lord God of Armies will chop off the branches with terrifying power, and the tall trees will be cut down, the high trees felled. He is clearing the thickets of the forest with an ax, and Lebanon with its majesty will fall,* 10:33–34.

Assyria, which bragged that it was doing the chopping, has become the forest.

Hold on to that picture of a forest cut to the ground. Chapter 11 opens on a stump.

## Looking to Christ

Paul reads 10:22–23 in Romans 9. He's facing a painful question: if Jesus is the Messiah, why has so much of Israel turned Him down? *It is not as though the word of God has failed, because not all who are descended from Israel are Israel,* Romans 9:6. Then he quotes Isaiah: *Though the number of Israelites is like the sand of the sea, only the remnant will be saved; since the Lord will execute his sentence completely and decisively on the earth,* Romans 9:27–28. The remnant Isaiah saw leaning on the Mighty God shows up in Paul's day as the Jews who leaned on Christ, *a remnant chosen by grace,* Romans 11:5.

The cross is the clearest case of what Isaiah 10 describes. Pilate told Jesus he had the authority to crucify Him. *"You would have no authority over me at all," Jesus answered him, "if it hadn't been given you from above,"* John 19:11. Peter later preached that Jesus was delivered up according to God's determined plan and foreknowledge, and in the same breath told his hearers, *you used lawless people to nail him to a cross and kill*

*him*, Acts 2:23. God's purpose and human guilt stand side by side. The worst thing men ever did was held in God's hand the whole time, and He used it to save the remnant.

## Applying the Text

**Ask who struck the blow.** Israel felt every loss and never asked what God was saying through it. Some hardships are punishment, and some aren't. Each one is a reason to seek the Lord before you start repairing the damage. When the bricks fall in your life, is your first plan to rebuild with cut stone, or to pray?

**Look for the sin you condemn in someone else's house.** Isaiah's listeners agreed with every word about Samaria until he asked about their own courts. Before you shake your head at the news this week, read 10:1–4 slowly and ask where it touches the way you treat people who can't push back.

**Don't confuse your strength with your source.** *I have done this by my own strength and wisdom.* You'd never say it out loud. You've thought it, though, about a career, a paycheck, good health, or a growing congregation. Paul's answer still stands: *Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord*, 1 Corinthians 1:31. Your gifts are real. They were also given.

**Don't fear the rod.** Whatever holds power over you right now- a boss, a government, or a diagnosis- is a tool in another hand. God told Zion the rod would be put away *in just a little while*. The blows still hurt, but they were numbered. Whose hand do you think is holding the thing you fear most?

## For Discussion

1. Name the four stanzas of 9:8–10:4 and the sin each one exposes. What line closes every stanza, and what does it tell you about God?
2. What did Israel plan to do after *the bricks have fallen* (9:10)? According to 9:13, what should they have done instead?
3. Compare God's purpose in sending Assyria (10:5–6) with Assyria's own purpose (10:7). How can God use a nation and still hold it guilty for what it did?

4. Read 10:20–22 alongside Romans 9:27–28 and 11:5. What makes someone part of the remnant, in Isaiah's day and in Paul's?
  
5. Isaiah's audience would have applauded his sermon on Samaria right up to 10:1. What sin do you find easy to condemn in others that you'd rather not have examined in yourself?
  
6. Where in your life are you most tempted to say, *I have done this by my own strength*? What would it look like this week to give God the credit there, out loud?

## Looking Ahead

### Lesson 9: A Shoot from the Stump (Isaiah 11–12)

Assyria's forest is down, and out of the stump of Jesse one green shoot comes up. The Spirit of the Lord rests on Him, the wolf lies down with the lamb, and a highway opens for the scattered remnant to come home. Then the first part of Isaiah ends in a song.

Before you come: read Isaiah 11–12. Then turn back to 12:2, the verse this study asked you to carry from the beginning, and read it again now that you've walked through the first twelve chapters.

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<sup>68</sup> Motyer, *Isaiah*, 104. On 9:8 he ties the *message* to the preaching of Amos and Hosea from about 760 BC onward; on 9:9–10 he observes that Ephraim held first place among the tribes by grace rather than by birth (Genesis 48:5, 13–20), so its boast shows a people who owed everything to grace turning to self-salvation. Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 246, notes that no one in 9:10 asks for God's help after the blow, and reports Clements's suggestion that the fallen bricks were the first Assyrian destruction in Israel around 733 BC.

<sup>69</sup> Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 247. On 9:12 he lays out the refrain's three parts and traces the outstretched hand both to deliverance at the exodus (Exodus 15:12; Deuteronomy 4:34) and to judgment (Jeremiah 21:5; Ezekiel 6:14); here the hand

still has more punishment to deliver. Smith, James, *Major Prophets*, 51, reads the four stanzas as assurance to Judah that it had nothing to fear from Ephraim, whose own fate was already sealed.

<sup>70</sup> Motyer, *Isaiah*, 105–6. On 9:11–12 he counts six kings in the northern kingdom's final years, four of whose reigns ended in assassination and only one of whom passed the throne to his son (2 Kings 15, 17). On 9:15 he calls the tail a sly dig: the prophets considered themselves leaders but wagged at popular demand.

<sup>71</sup> Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 250–52. He argues that Isaiah's Judean audience would have agreed with everything said against Israel in 9:8–21, and that, like Amos in Amos 1:3–2:3, the prophet first convinces his hearers of others' sin. In 10:1–4 the shift to *you*, to lament, and to the courts, with no northern place named, marks his turn to Judah's own leaders.

<sup>72</sup> Motyer, *Isaiah*, 108. On 10:5–6 he distinguishes *anger* as felt from *wrath* as expressed, and notes that *to take spoils, to plunder* uses the components of the name Maher-shalal-hash-baz (8:1–4), so the word made flesh in Isaiah's son is being fulfilled.

<sup>73</sup> Motyer, *Isaiah*, 109. On 10:12 he explains *finishes* as a tailoring or weaving term for snipping off the thread once the sewing is done. What Assyria did conformed to God's will; why it did it had to do only with its own vainglory.

<sup>74</sup> Young, *Isaiah*, 1:361. On 10:7 he holds that the Assyrian was an unconscious and unwitting instrument in God's hand and yet without excuse, since every nation ought to recognize that it acts as God's instrument. Motyer, *Isaiah*, 110, sums up 10:5–15 in a sentence, the deed was just and the doing was morally outrageous, and on 10:15 he points to the horse-and-rider picture of 37:29 and to John 19:11.

<sup>75</sup> Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 262. On 10:20 he contrasts the one who foolishly leans on someone who turns out to be an enemy (2 Chronicles 28:19–21) with the remnant who lean on God, and notes that this reverses Israel's refusal in 9:13. Young, *Isaiah*, 1:369, puts the point in a phrase: Assyria had been a smiter, not a protector.

<sup>76</sup> Motyer, *Isaiah*, 112. On 10:21 he insists that *Mighty God* refers to the Lord Himself and cannot be reduced to "Godlike Hero," given its use in 9:6. On 10:22 he sets the remnant against the promise of descendants like the sand (Genesis 22:17) and argues that the Holy One must keep His promises in a way true to His holiness, so the destruction due to sin cannot be withheld.

<sup>77</sup> Young, *Isaiah*, 1:374. On 10:28 he takes the march as an ideal picture, the prophet standing in vision on Jerusalem's wall and naming the points an invader must pass, and observes that Sennacherib in fact approached from the south (36:2). Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 266, surveys proposals ranging from Tiglath-pileser to Sennacherib and concludes that no biblical or Assyrian record allows the route to be dated.