

LESSON 2

Two Mountains

The pride of mankind will be humbled, and human loftiness will be brought low; the Lord alone will be exalted on that day.

— Isaiah 2:11

Isaiah sets one mountain God will raise beside everything Judah had raised for herself, and only one of them is still standing at the end.

WHERE WE ARE

About 740 BC, at the end of Uzziah's long reign. Judah is prosperous and safe. Uzziah has torn down the walls of the Philistine cities, built towers in Jerusalem, put an army of 307,500 in the field, and rebuilt the seaport at Elath. He also forced his way into the temple to burn incense, came out diseased, and stayed that way until he died. Isaiah preaches to a rich and confident city. The question these chapters answer: what happens to everything a people lifts up when God lifts up Himself?

Introduction

CHAPTER 1 ENDED IN FLAMES. Then, without a word of transition, Chapter 2 opens on a mountain with the nations climbing it. Verse 1 opens a new section with its own heading: *The vision that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem, 2:1*. Chapters 2 through 4 look as though they circulated by themselves before they were set here.¹²

Taken together they have a shape. A poem about Zion opens them, 2:2–5, and a poem about Zion closes them, 4:2–6. Between the two is the city Isaiah could see from where he stood: silver, horses, idols, proud men, prouder women, and a government breaking down.

One word holds the three chapters together. *High*. Mountains are high. Towers are high. Cedars are high. Noses are high. Something is going up in these three chapters, and something is coming down, and Isaiah means for his hearers to notice that nobody lands on both lists.

The Mountain Everyone Climbs (2:1–5)

Isaiah starts at the end.

In the last days the mountain of the Lord's house will be established at the top of the mountains and will be raised above the hills. All nations will stream to it, 2:2.

Every clause of that is a claim. In the ancient world the gods lived on mountains, and every nation had one to point at. Zion wasn't impressive; the Mount of Olives across the valley stands higher. Isaiah says a

day is coming when the modest hill where God keeps His house outranks all of them. He says *house* rather than temple, and that's a different building. A temple is where you go to worship; a house is where somebody lives.¹³ Then he pushes the picture past what nature allows. Water doesn't run uphill. It does here. Isaiah expects that to stop his hearers.

Notice what they come for. *Come, let's go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us about his ways so that we may walk in his paths*, 2:3. They come to be taught, and then to walk. *For instruction will go out of Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.*

Verse 4 is the result. *They will beat their swords into plows and their spears into pruning knives. Nation will not take up the sword against nation, and they will never again train for war.* Nobody disarms them. They quit, because they've got a Judge now who settles what they used to settle with iron. Micah preached this same poem almost word for word, Micah 4:1–2.

What did it mean to the men in front of Isaiah? It meant the worship they treated as one option among several would outlast every rival on every hill, and that outsiders would want it before the insiders did. And it came with a jab. The nations say *Come, let's go up*. Isaiah wheels around on Judah and says, *House of Jacob, come and let's walk in the Lord's light*, 2:5. If the world is ever going to say the first thing, the Lord's people have to be doing the second.¹⁴

What does it mean now? *The last days* is the Old Testament's way of naming the age of the Messiah, and the New Testament says that age arrived.¹⁵ Peter stood up at Pentecost and called that morning *the last days*, Acts 2:17. Hebrews says God has spoken *in these last days* by His Son, Hebrews 1:2. The mountain stands for the reign of Christ, and the climbing started a long time ago.

A Land Full of Everything (2:6–22)

Then Isaiah looks down at the city in front of him.

He says the same thing three times. *Their land is full of silver and gold, and there is no limit to their treasures; their land is full of horses, and there is no limit to their chariots*, 2:7. *Their land is full of worthless idols; they worship the work of their hands, what their fingers have made*, 2:8. Money, military, religion. Full of all three.

That wasn't a poor nation dreaming. Uzziah had done it: walls broken at Gath and Ashdod, tribute coming in, towers in Jerusalem with engines on them for shooting arrows and heaving stones, an army of 307,500, 2 Chronicles 26:6–15. Judah had earned every item on the list. And long before Israel had a king, Moses told whoever the king turned out to be not to pile up horses or pile up silver and gold, Deuteronomy 17:16–17.¹⁶ A man with enough horses quits praying. That's what Moses was guarding against.

Then comes the day. *For a day belonging to the Lord of Armies is coming against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up—it will be humbled*, 2:12. And Isaiah lists what's tall. Cedars of Lebanon. Oaks of Bashan. High mountains and lofty hills. Every high tower and every fortified wall. Every ship of Tarshish and every splendid sea vessel. It runs from the biggest things God made to the biggest things men made, and the last four are Judah's own building projects.¹⁷

There's the second mountain. Isaiah told us about a mountain God will raise. Now he tells us about the mountains God will flatten, and Judah's towers are standing in that column.

The refrain lands twice, in the same words, at 2:11 and 2:17. *The Lord alone will be exalted on that day.* God is already exalted. The day only makes it visible, and everything propped up beside Him falls over on its own.

The idols go last and go worst. *On that day people will throw their worthless idols of silver and gold, which they made to worship, to the moles and the bats,* 2:20. Nobody argues them out of it. They drop the things and run.

The chapter ends on a question. *Put no more trust in a mere human, who has only the breath in his nostrils. What is he really worth?* 2:22.

When the Props Come Out (3:1–4:1)

Chapter 3 answers the question chapter 2 raised. If a nation won't stop leaning on men, what does God do? He takes the men away. *Note this: The Lord God of Armies is about to remove from Jerusalem and from Judah every kind of security* 3:1. Behind that phrase, the Hebrew pairs the masculine and feminine forms of one word, an idiom meaning every prop of every kind.¹⁸ Then the inventory: bread and water, heroes and warriors, judges and prophets, elders and counselors, fortune-tellers and necromancers, 3:1–3. Isaiah doesn't separate the honest prophets from the crooked ones. Judah leaned on all of them, so all of them go.

What replaces them is worse than nothing. *I will make youths their leaders, and unstable rulers will govern them,* 3:4. Society tears along every seam: man against man, neighbor against neighbor, the young against the old, 3:5. And leadership becomes a job nobody wants. A man grabs his brother and says, *You have a cloak—you be our leader! This heap of rubble will be under your control,* 3:6. Owning a coat is the whole qualification.¹⁹ The brother still says no. *I'm not a healer. I don't even have food or clothing in my house,* 3:7.

Why is any of it happening? *For Jerusalem has stumbled and Judah has fallen because they have spoken and acted against the Lord, defying his glorious presence,* 3:8. And then this. *The look on their faces testifies against them, and like Sodom, they flaunt their sin; they do not conceal it,* 3:9. They had quit being embarrassed.

So God takes them to court. *The Lord brings this charge against the elders and leaders of his people: "You have devastated the vineyard. The plunder from the poor is in your houses. Why do you crush my people and grind the faces of the poor?"* 3:14–15. Twice in two chapters now, God has measured a nation's leadership by what happens to the people in it who can't pay anybody back.

Then sentence is passed, and Isaiah reads it over the women of Jerusalem. *Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, walking with heads held high and seductive eyes, prancing along, jingling their ankle bracelets,* 3:16. He lists what gets stripped off, twenty-one items in six verses, named slowly, the way a man lists what a fire took. Then five exchanges. *Instead of perfume there will be a stench; instead of a belt, a rope; instead of beautifully styled hair, baldness; instead of fine clothes, sackcloth; instead of beauty, branding,* 3:24.

This isn't a sermon about jewelry. The women of the capital were the visible form of the city's whole spirit, and Isaiah slides from the daughters to the mother without pausing. *Your men will fall by the sword, your warriors in battle. Then her gates will lament and mourn; deserted, she will sit on the ground*, 3:25–26.

The section ends at its lowest point. *On that day seven women will seize one man, saying, "We will eat our own bread and provide our own clothing. Just let us bear your name. Take away our disgrace"*, 4:1. In 3:6 the men seized a man to get a ruler. Here the women seize a man to get a name. Both times, people with nothing left are grabbing at a man.

The Branch and the Canopy (4:2–6)

Everything changes here, and nothing prepares us for it.

On that day the Branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of Israel's survivors, 4:2. *Beautiful and glorious* are what the daughters of Zion had been chasing one paragraph earlier. Now the words belong to somebody else. *Branch* becomes a standing title for the coming King. Jeremiah uses it, Zechariah uses it, Jeremiah 23:5; Zechariah 3:8, and this is the first place in the Bible it turns up.²⁰ He's the Lord's Branch and the land's fruit in one breath, which is about as close as an eighth-century prophet comes to saying the Man is from God and from us both.

The survivors come next. *Whoever remains in Zion and whoever is left in Jerusalem will be called holy—all in Jerusalem written in the book of life*, 4:3. Survivors again, the idea that carried the end of chapter 1, and here they get a name and a registry. Read the next verse to see where the name came from. When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, 4:4. The same women. He washes the ones He just sentenced.

And He moves in. *Then the Lord will create a cloud of smoke by day and a glowing flame of fire by night over the entire site of Mount Zion and over its assemblies*, 4:5. Every Israelite knew that cloud and that fire. They had gone out in front of the nation from Egypt and then settled over the tabernacle, a tent almost nobody could enter. Now they cover the whole hill and everybody on it.

The last word of the section is shelter. *For there will be a canopy over all the glory, and there will be a shelter for shade from heat by day and a refuge and shelter from storm and rain*, 4:5–6. The word behind *canopy* is the word for a wedding chamber.²¹ Four verses earlier, seven women were bargaining with one man for a name. God's answer to that is a wedding.

Looking to Christ

No New Testament writer quotes Isaiah 2:2–4. Two of them describe it happening.

Luke closes his Gospel with the risen Christ telling the disciples that *repentance for forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem*, Luke 24:47. Isaiah said instruction would go out of Zion to the nations. Jesus named the starting point and the destination, and it was the same road. Seven weeks later the nations stood in the streets of that city and heard it in their own languages.

Then Hebrews says the plainest thing of all, and says it to people who had never seen that hill and never would. *You have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God (the heavenly Jerusalem)... to the assembly of the firstborn whose names have been written in heaven*, Hebrews 12:22–23. Written down. Isaiah said that too, 4:3.

Applying the Text

Take an inventory of what your life is full of. Isaiah did it for Judah in two verses: money, security, religion. Judah had no shortage of any of the three and was ruined anyway. Write down what actually fills your calendar and your attention, then read 2:7–8 again. The sin is in the leaning.

Ask what you would still have if the props came out. Chapter 3 is God removing everything Judah rested on, one item at a time, until nothing was left but Him. Most people learn what they were resting on only when it gets taken away.

Humble yourself now, or be humbled later. Uzziah got strong, grew arrogant, walked into the sanctuary with a firepan in his hand, and lived in quarantine the rest of his life, 2 Chronicles 26:16–21. He was the most impressive man in Judah, and Isaiah preached about pride in his shadow. *The Lord alone will be exalted on that day* is either the best news you'll ever hear or a warning, depending on the list you're standing in.

Quit settling for 4:1. Seven women bargaining for a name they can live with is what people will take once they've stopped expecting better. God's answer four verses later is a canopy and a wedding. What have you settled for lately because you quit believing there was more on offer?

For Discussion

1. Isaiah 2:2–4 and Micah 4:1–2 are nearly the same poem. What does that suggest about how this material was known and used in the eighth century?
2. Follow the idea of height through chapter 2. What is God raising, and what is He bringing down? Where do Judah's own achievements land on those two lists?
3. God's judgment in 3:1–7 is the removal of leaders rather than the arrival of an army. Why might that be the more frightening of the two?

4. The charge in 3:9 is that Judah had stopped hiding her sin. Is shamelessness worse than the sin itself? What does Isaiah appear to think?

5. The women God sentences in 3:16–24 are the same women He washes in 4:4. What does that do to the way you read the judgment passages in this book?

6. Name one thing you are currently full of that would be genuinely hard to give up, 2:7. Who besides you knows it's there?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 3: The Vineyard That Failed (Isaiah 5)

Isaiah stands up and sings. It sounds like a love song about a man and the vineyard he planted, and the crowd is enjoying it right up to the moment they realize they are the vineyard and they have just agreed with the verdict.

Before you come: read Isaiah 5 straight through and find the six woes. For each one, write down the specific thing it condemns and whether you have ever heard that thing condemned anywhere else.

¹² Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 129. On 2:1 he argues that a second superscription this soon after 1:1 indicates that the material in chapters 2–12 circulated independently of chapter 1, which was written much later and set at the front as an introduction to the whole book.

¹³ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 59. On 2:2 he distinguishes *house* from temple, since a temple is primarily a place for worship while a house is where the Lord has come to live among His people, and he takes the natural impossibility of a stream flowing uphill as deliberate: a supernatural magnetism is at work.

¹⁴ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 58. On 2:2–5 he sets the nations' *Come, let us go up* in verse 3 against the call to Judah in verse 5, *Come ... let us walk*, and draws the conclusion that the first requirement in evangelism is to have a church worth joining.

¹⁵ Young, *Isaiah*, 1:99. On 2:2 he holds that "the last days" is the age of the Christian church, which began its course at the first advent of Christ, and that Isaiah is using the figures of the Old Testament economy to express the blessings of the age of grace rather than a future political arrangement in Jerusalem.

¹⁶ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 136–137. On 2:7 he ties Judah's silver, gold, horses, and chariots to the prosperity of Uzziah's reign and to the warning of Deuteronomy 17:16–17 that a king was not to multiply horses or accumulate great wealth, the point being that a nation with plenty of both quits depending on God.

¹⁷ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 62. On 2:15–16 he reads tower and wall as human achievement and the human attempt to build security apart from God, an echo of Genesis 11:1–9, and *ships of Tarshish* as the largest vessels then known, standing for human triumph over the sea and the commercial empires it created.

¹⁸ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 63. On 3:1 he notes that *supply* and *support* are the masculine and feminine forms of the same Hebrew word, an idiom for every support of every kind, and that the phrase brackets the paragraph with verse 7.

¹⁹ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 147. On 3:6–7 he catches Isaiah's mockery: the only qualification left for public office is owning a coat, and even at that price nobody will take the job.

²⁰ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 67–68. On 4:2 he holds that *Branch* is a messianic title, that Isaiah 4:2 is its earliest occurrence, and that "the Lord's Branch" set beside "the fruit of the land" points to a divine ancestry and a human origin in one figure.

²¹ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 68. On 4:5 he observes that *canopy* renders *ḥuppâ*, the marriage chamber of Psalm 19:5 and Joel 2:16, so that the travesty of marriage the women were willing to settle for in 4:1 is answered by a bridal canopy of the Lord's own making.