

Chapter 1 sets the stage for Isaiah's prophecy. He speaks for Yahweh, charging Israel with being rebellious. This is most of chapter 1, but not all: having presented the problem, he gives the solution – God will *remove all your impurities* – and the result of God's cure – *you will be called the City of Righteousness*.

Chapters 2 through 4 cover the same ground, but this time grounded in history. The rebellion is presented as trust in other nations, rather than in God, as well as Israel's pride. The cure, the elimination of pride, will also happen through other nations, as Assyria ravages them. And the City of Righteousness will guide all the nations.

2:2–5 — An Ideal Future

These verses begin with *In the last days*. Prophets sometimes use the expression “last days” to refer to a time when God will act. It need not refer to an end of history. Here, the “last days” are a time when God has responded to the rebellion seen in chapter 1.

The first change to come is that *the mountain of the LORD's temple... will be raised*. If we think of the temple as the center for the worship of God, and in particular for instruction in God's law and God's ways, this is a very simple metaphor: dispensing the knowledge of God is to given preeminence.

Who receives this teaching? The obvious answer is the people of Israel. But Isaiah is far more expansive: *all nations will stream to [the LORD's temple]*. Isaiah says this very plainly indeed: *The law will go out from Zion*. Further, there is a desire by the nations to *walk in [God's] paths*. But, what will go out from Zion is much more than instruction. *God will judge between the nations*, and there will be no more war. All this is said so clearly that interpretation is all but superfluous. What is unsaid, but seems obvious, is that the nations will submit any disputes to God's judgment, and all parties will accept that judgment. Consequently, there will be no cause for wars, and hence, no wars. It would seem that all the nations, not just Israel, are to be given a new heart.

How is this idyllic state to be reached? *Come, descendants of Jacob, Let us walk in the light of the LORD*. The *descendants of Jacob* include all tribes, hence all of Israel, both Judah and Ephraim. The implication seems to be that it is their responsibility to change their rebellious ways. Elsewhere in the book, mostly in the later chapters, this picture is clarified. Because men are incapable of reforming themselves, God must do that for them; a savior, a Messiah, will have to be provided to do for men what they could not do for themselves.

2:6–22 — The True State of God's People

Isaiah now turns from an ideal future to a distressing present, and describes in stark detail what God's people are currently like, and what will happen to them. It is not a pleasing or promising picture. To see it properly, it may help to give some historical context.

At the start of Isaiah's ministry, the people of Israel had been divided for nearly 200 years into two nations: Judah, the southern kingdom, where Isaiah lived and proclaimed God's word, and Ephraim (also called Israel and Samaria), the larger northern kingdom. Naturally, neither nation was as grand as Solomon's (united) empire had been. Moreover, the kingdoms quarreled continually. Nonetheless, both were prosperous, as were other nations in the region. Assyria and Egypt were both relatively quiet, preoccupied with internal matters. The Philistines were no longer the great enemy they had been; Israel was more or less on an equal footing with them.

This prosperity was about to change drastically, with the accession of Tiglath-Pileser to the Assyrian throne at the time of the start of Isaiah's ministry. He restored Assyria to its former glory by making war, successfully, on virtually all his neighbors. Assyria would devastate and exile Ephraim within about 25 years, and come close to doing the same to Judah. Isaiah's prophecies of humbling would be wholly fulfilled.

Verse 6a sets the stage for this section: *You, LORD, have abandoned your people, the descendants of Jacob*. Chapter 1 showed God's people abandoning him; the consequence is that he will abandon them. Two comments need to be made. First, the word translated ‘abandon’ more exactly has the meaning of leaving to one's own devices. Being without God's special protection means vulnerability to Assyria. Second, this ‘leaving alone’ is only for a time. 2:2–5 show God's glorious long range plans for his people – but only after they are humbled and changed.

Verses 6-8 give the root causes for the people abandoning their God. Adopting the religious practices of their neighbors is the largest cause. They adopted *superstitions from the East* (that would be Assyria and Babylon); *they practice divination like the Philistines* (to the west); *their land is full of idols*. But they have also adopted the secular practice of the nations: *their land is full of silver and gold* (wealth) and *full of horses* (military might). And so, they feel no particular need to rely on God, or to follow his teaching for them.

The cure for a lofty pride is straightforward: people will be brought low. The picture here is of people hiding in caves *from the fearful presence of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty*; the rest of this section will expand this picture comprehensively. And it is not only Israel that will be humbled. The phrase “*the splendor of his majesty*” is very much like the way the Assyrian kings talked of themselves. I don't think this is a coincidence. Assyria will be God's tool for humbling Israel, but it too needs to be humbled at least as much as Israel – and will be. Notice also a poetic touch here. The people first *bow down to the work of their hands* (idols), voluntarily bringing themselves low, and subsequently their pride will be *brought low* involuntarily.

The phrase “*do not forgive them*” at the end of verse 9 is, on its face, troubling. First, a grammatical note: Hebrew can use the imperative to express certainty. An idiomatic translation would read, “Surely they will not be forgiven.” Second, the context clarifies the intent here. We have just seen that God will indeed forgive Israel, and make that nation the keystone of his plans for all mankind to know and follow him. But this forgiveness will not be immediate. Israel must not continue in its rebellious ways, forgiven without being corrected. Correction must take place before forgiveness.

Verses 12–17 are an extended figure of speech, equating pride with things that are physically elevated: trees, mountains, towers, walls, and even ships (think of masts, tall as trees). Verse 17 brings the metaphor home: all of these images let one visualize the lofty *arrogance of man*. That loftiness must be brought down, so that *the LORD alone will be exalted in that day*. The phrase “*in that day*” at the end is not a throw-away. This is not an abstract statement that humbling men is appropriate. There is a definite time for it to happen, unspecified in the prophecy but part of God’s sure plan.

Verses 18–21 deal with the resolution of idolatry, just as the previous verses resolved the problem of pride. First, though, there are two things that may be helpful to say. Isaiah characteristically speaks of idols which men themselves *made to worship*, using this to ridicule the practice. Virtually everyone in the ancient world understood that the idol was not the god, but only the representation of it. Isaiah’s language is satire, and very vigorous satire. But in addition, we cannot say how many people actually thought that the physical idol, though not the god itself, still had some magical properties. The practice of such magic is detestable to God.

We can understand these verses in the light of this understanding. The day of God’s judgment, in which men hide in caves in terror, will also be a day in which *the idols will totally disappear*. Once in the caves, men will throw the idols away (not hide them away for safekeeping), abandoning them to rats and bats. Again, this is a poetic picture of men who relinquish their trust in idolatrous gods and, presumably, put their faith in Yahweh.

Verse 22 generalizes this reaction. It does not suffice to stop trusting in idols; one must also *stop trusting in mere humans*. God is the only appropriate object of faith. The day of the LORD is intended to bring, first, understanding of that point, and then, obedience to it.

3:1–4:1 — A Breakdown of Society

This section is specifically directed against *Jerusalem and Judah*. It begins, in 3:1–7, with the cure, a nation brought low by a time of complete societal collapse, after exile or, perhaps, a prolonged siege. Food and water are the first to go, followed by something much less expected, the loss of prominent people: hero, warrior, judge, prophet and so on. This is precise prediction of what is about to happen: when Ephraim, and later Judah, were sent into exile, it was the important citizens who were taken away, leaving the rest leaderless. This desperate situation will make *boys* into *officials*. (This is likely a poetic exaggeration, but could be literally true.) Out of need comes social chaos. The mere fact of owning an ordinary cloak will make someone a candidate for leadership. Moreover, that person will recognize that he cannot supply the *food* and *clothing* that are lacking, and refuse the offered role.

Verses 8–15 tell what is wrong at the time of the prophetic proclamation. People are sinful, and not ashamed of their sin. Two charges stand out, both related to the leadership of the nation: *your guides lead you astray*, and *elders and leaders are grinding the faces of the poor*.

Verses 3:16–4:1 focus on the plight of women in the coming disaster. At present, they are prosperous, laden with ornaments, and flirtatious. This finery will be taken from them. More seriously, they will live in a world severely lacking in men, who will have fallen *by the sword... in battle*. Instead of flirting, they will beg the remaining men for help. It is not clear exactly what help they seek. They offer to provide their own food and clothing, asking only for a name *to take away [their] disgrace*. It is possible that the disgrace is remaining unmarried, and that the women seek the form of marriage, foregoing the substance. Perhaps they seek physical protection. Clearly, these are desperate measures for desperate times.

4:2 – 6 — Israel Restored

Chapter 4 now returns to a picture of an ideal future. *The Branch¹ of the LORD* has been understood as Messianic since before Christ, but there is good reason to doubt that understanding: the passage speaks of *the fruit of the land* in a very literal sense, and it makes perfect sense to see the branch as a restoration of previously destroyed grapevines and olive trees. There is no mention of a king, Davidic or otherwise. The people in this restored Jerusalem *will be called holy*. They have become so because God will *wash away the filth*.² It is clear that this is at God’s initiative. We will see much later in Isaiah what is required to achieve this restoration.

The passage ends with a clear statement of God’s protection, explicitly on the Exodus model. In this restored future, God’s people will be safe from all dangers, with visible signs of his presence. This idyllic picture complements what was said at the beginning of this passage about God’s ultimate plans for his people.

¹ Naturally, there are no capitals in the original. The same phrase *is* Messianic in other prophetic passages.

² The wording might seem to suggest that only women are in need of this cleansing, a conclusion that would contradict all of Isaiah and indeed all of scripture. The wording may be only an artifact of the previous passage, which also focused on women.