

# OpenTheo

## October 20th: Isaiah 2 & Mark 4:1-34

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### Alastair Roberts

The mountain of the Lord raised above the other mountains. Jesus teaches in parables.

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## Transcript

Isaiah chapter 2. The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord. For you have rejected your people, the house of Jacob, because they are full of things from the east, and of fortune tellers like the Philistines, and they strike hands with the children of foreigners.

Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures. Their land is filled with horses, and there is no end to their chariots. Their land is filled with idols.

They bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made. So man is humbled, and each one is brought low. Do not forgive them.

Enter into the rock, and hide in the dust from before the terror of the Lord, and from the

splendour of His Majesty. The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day. For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up, and it shall be brought low, against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up, and against all the oaks of Bashan, against all the lofty mountains, and against all the uplifted hills, against every high tower, and against every fortified wall, against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft.

And the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day. And the idols shall utterly pass away, and the people shall enter the caves of the rocks, and the holes of the ground, from before the terror of the Lord, and from the splendour of His Majesty, when He rises to terrify the earth. In that day mankind will cast away their idols of silver, and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship, to the moles and to the bats, to enter the caverns of the rocks, and the clefts of the cliffs, from before the terror of the Lord, and from the splendour of His Majesty, when He rises to terrify the earth.

Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for what account is he? The unity of Isaiah chapter 2 is not clearly apparent to many commentators. It begins with a very positive vision of the future glorification of Zion, but follows that with a series of escalating prophecies concerning its corruption. Some commentators, like John Oswald, observe the recurrence of the expression, the day of the Lord, or that day within it, as a sort of unifying thread throughout the material.

While the material of this chapter might be composed of a number of different prophecies that have been joined together, it is by no means without thematic unity. We can see such unity, for instance, in the themes of being lifted up or being brought low. An interesting feature of the first few verses of this chapter is the fact that we find them also in Micah chapter 4 verses 1 to 5. This obviously provokes questions about the relationship between the two prophets, who prophesied around the same time, and this piece of shared material.

The material is near identical. The chief divergences are the absence of Micah chapter 4 verse 4 and the truncated form of the material of verse 5 in Isaiah's version. Elsewhere in scripture we see similarities between prophetic books, one prophetic book citing another, or even common sources, but such extensive common material is a unique occurrence in the prophetic literature.

There are various ways that we might understand the presence of the prophecy within two different books. We could argue that they were both independently inspired to make a largely identical prophecy. This is definitely possible, although it is not a popular or perhaps the most plausible position.

Other more popular approaches include the positions that it is later material that has

been inserted into the text of one or both of the prophets, that one of the two was quoting a prophecy of the other, or had part of the other inserted into their text, or that both were using earlier material. There are various considerations that will inform our judgement on the question. Some commentators adduce the greater prominence of Zion within the theology of Isaiah as evidence that the prophecy most likely originates with him.

On the other hand, the omission of verse 4 of Micah's version in Isaiah's version might suggest that Micah's is the original, or alternatively more fully quotes the original source. Then there are stylistic features. For instance, while Micah chapter 4 verse 4 is only found in Micah's version, the expression, For the mouth of the Lord has spoken, is Isaianic in its style.

It's found in Isaiah chapter 1 verse 20, chapter 40 verse 5, and chapter 58 verse 14, but isn't really found elsewhere. Isaiah's account begins with, The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem, which adds weight to the argument for the originality of the prophecy with Isaiah. However, one could take the introductory formula in Isaiah as referring to something that Isaiah read in Micah or elsewhere.

Just as we see Daniel reflecting upon the prophecy of Jeremiah's 70 years in Daniel chapter 9, so Isaiah might be reflecting upon the meaning of Micah's prophecy. There are of course various examples of cross fertilization among the prophets elsewhere, and as Micah and Isaiah were contemporaries who almost certainly knew each other in person, we should probably beware of thinking of their ministries as hermetically sealed off from each other. The two prophets used the same material in different ways in their respective books.

In Micah for instance, the material opens a new section in the book. Some have suggested that there is a tension between the vision of the two prophets based on the question of whether the nations would still worship false gods in the latter days or not, a question that's raised by Micah chapter 4 verse 5 and pressed by such as Marvin Sweeney. Such textual questions are challenging, not least when we bring Qumran scrolls with different forms of the text of Isaiah into the picture.

We should also consider the various hands that were involved in the reception, recording, compilation, transmission and ordering of Micah and Isaiah's prophecies during their lives and afterwards. It is not unlikely that the same group were involved in shaping both, and at points like this perhaps we're seeing tantalizing indications of various unknown fingerprints upon the text, or indications of richer interactions between the authors and editors of these two prophetic books. Perhaps Micah and Isaiah, both the men and the books, were informative interaction from the time of their initial oral ministries to the final form of their respective texts.

We should also beware of depending too much upon the question of origins and sources

and failing to pay most attention to the literary form in which they come down to us in the final completed canon. It is in that final form that they have authority in the life of the church. The chapter begins with a new superscription, the word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

Positions differ among commentators about what material this serves as the superscription for. Is it just the next few verses or does it take us into later chapters? There is a remarkable shift here from the vision of Jerusalem and its sins in chapter 1. There's a sense in these opening verses of the city and the people's destiny. Within this passage we also hear some of the words of likely earlier traditions such as the Songs of Zion in the Psalms, within which Mount Zion came to assume great significance.

Psalms 46, 48 and 76 are referenced by some commentators in this context. Psalm 46 verses 4-10 for instance. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved. God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter, he utters his voice, the earth melts.

The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress. Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth.

He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the chariots with fire. Be still and know that I am God.

I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. Mount Zion is actually a very modest elevation.

It's not even in one of the top 100 tallest mountain peaks in Israel. It is only about 2,500 feet tall. But as the site of the temple, it is the mountain of the Lord and according to this prophecy it will function as the cosmic mountain, the mountain to which the whole world will gather and the mountain that joins heaven to earth.

We see Zion set over against the other mountains in places like Psalm 68 verses 14 to 18 too. When the Almighty scatters kings there, let snow fall on Zalmon. O mountain of God, mountain of Bashan, O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan, why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked mountain, at the mount that God desired for his abode, yes, where the Lord will dwell forever? The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands.

The Lord is among them. Sinai is now in the sanctuary. You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train, and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the Lord God may dwell there.

Mount Zion becomes like Eden. It is the beating heart of the world, the place from which all life flows and to which it all comes. Elsewhere water flows out of the temple on Zion, in places like Ezekiel chapter 47 and Joel 3. But here there is a stream of nations flowing up to Zion in pilgrimage, an image that we also see at the end of Zechariah chapter 14 which brings the two images together, living waters flowing out from Jerusalem and the nations flowing up to her.

This would be a fulfilment of the Lord's purpose for his people, as a means of bringing his blessing to the nations. The nations come to Zion to learn the law and the ways of the Lord. And the law and the word of the Lord also come out from Jerusalem, as their principles start to inform life elsewhere and as the rule of God extends over the peoples.

The Lord's justice would be known on the earth, as he would judge between peoples and nations, settling disputes and establishing his judgment and rule. The outcome of the rule of the Lord among the nations would be peace, illustrated by the refashioning of weapons of war into tools of cultivation and the freedom to abandon the practice and the learning of conflict. Joel chapter 3 verse 10 presents a reverse image of this.

There is another sharp shift in the tone of the text in verse 6, however it does follow from what proceeds with the summons to walk in the light of the Lord. King Uzziah had fought successfully against the Philistines, as we see in 2 Chronicles chapter 26 verse 6. He went out and made war against the Philistines and broke through the wall of Gath and the wall of Jabnay and the wall of Ashdod. And he built cities in the territory of Ashdod and elsewhere among the Philistines.

Under the reign of Uzziah, Israel had prospered and had known military success against its neighbours. However it seems that they had taken on some of the character of these surrounding nations. Rather than the nations going up to Jerusalem to learn the ways of the Lord, as we see in the vision of the opening verses, the Lord's people had been going out to the nations to learn their proud ways.

By this point the pride and the haughtiness of the nations is greatly in evidence among the people of the Lord. They have riches and weaponry and idols, all symbols of their pride. They have assumed all sorts of idolatry and pagan practices.

If the expression at the end of verse 6 is properly understood as the striking of hands in a treaty, then it would seem that this situation is in part a result of their making treaties with other peoples. The Lord had warned the kings against multiplying wives, multiplying gold and also building a great war machine with horses and chariots. With the people's prosperity, felt wealth, the power of their war machine and also their alliances with other peoples, they seem to have developed a spiritual complacency and pride that the Lord would bring low.

Isaiah makes a startling statement at the end of verse 9, do not forgive them. He does

not want the Lord to leave his people's sin and pride unpunished, just to wink at his people's hubris and self-importance. This proud people, unless they humbled themselves quickly, would find themselves brought low by the Lord.

He would humble their pride. He alone would be exalted in the earth, and any who would exalt themselves before him would be torn down. The day of the Lord was often seen as a time of vindication and deliverance and salvation for the people, but within the prophets we see that it has a negative aspect as well.

It's the time when the Lord will come near to judge his people, and many will not be prepared. In verses 12-17 it is described as a time when the lofty pride of men would be lopped down. The imagery at the beginning here of the chopping down of a forest is something that we find elsewhere in the book of Isaiah.

Forests could represent the might of a people. It could also represent things like the temple. Here the lofty cedars and the oaks of Bashan are probably the priests and rulers of the people and the nobility.

If the mount of the glorious coming Jerusalem is going to be lifted up above the other mountains, here we see the inverse of that image, as everything else that would exalt itself before the Lord is brought down. The juxtaposition of these two images, the raising up of the mountain of Zion and the house of the Lord, and the bringing down of all these other powers and lofty things on the earth, encourages us to understand these things in relationship to each other. On the one hand, the going up to the mountain of the Lord and the lifting up of that mountain is a symbol of the humbling of man's pride, and on the other hand the lofty cedars, oaks of Bashan, lofty mountains and hills and all the high towers are symbols of the idolatry of man's pride that stands directly against the true worship and knowledge of the Lord.

In the coming day of the Lord, the idols and those who worship them would be utterly humiliated. As the Lord rises up, people would shrink away and descend down into the earth, in caves of the rocks and holes of the ground. Once again, the imagery of lifting or rising up and sinking or being brought down is extremely important in the context.

In the light of this image of the rising up of the Lord's glory and the shrinking down of man's pride, the chapter ends with a stern warning. Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he? For all of man's pride, for all of his puffing up of his importance, man is very small, but a creature whose breath will soon pass from his lips. Rather than being in the thrall of the pride of men, like the other nations, Judah and Jerusalem should learn from the initial prophecy, in which the nations speak among themselves, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob.

Isaiah presents the people with a similar summons, O house of Jacob, come, let us walk

in the light of the Lord. As Judah and Jerusalem look, not to the surrounding nations, but to the Lord in their midst, they will be raised up as the prophecy promises. A question to consider, what are some of the more particular temptations associated with the different forms of pride that Isaiah identifies among the people? Why might such forms of pride have such a strong grip upon the hearts of sinful men? Mark chapter 4 verses 1-34 Again he began to teach beside the sea, and a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.

And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them, Listen, behold, a sower went out to sow, and as he sowed some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil, and when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it and it yielded no grain.

And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. And he said, He who has ears to hear, let him hear. And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables, and he said to them, To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.

And he said to them, Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word, and these are the ones along the path where the word is sown when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes the word that is sown in them, and these are the ones sown on rocky ground, the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy, and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while, then when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones sown among thorns, they are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

And he said to them, Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand? For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest, nor is anything secret except to come to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. And he said to them, Pay attention to what you hear.

With the measure you use it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. For to the one who has more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he

has will be taken away. And he said, The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground.

He sleeps, and it rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows, he knows not how. The earth produces by itself first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.

And he said, With what can we compare the kingdom of God? What parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants, and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it.

He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything. In Mark chapter 4 we move into Jesus' use of parables. Once again he is surrounded by a large crowd as he has been in the previous chapters.

He goes out onto the sea on a boat and teaches them on the land from the boat. The fact that each of the gospels see fit to tell us where Jesus was teaching from, suggests that maybe it's an interesting and important detail to note. Each one of them think it's important enough to register within their account.

Why is that the case? Perhaps because the sea more generally is associated with the symbolism of the Gentiles. As Jesus goes out on the boat onto the sea just a bit out from the land, it's like a bit of Israel going out upon the sea of the Gentiles and addressing the Jewish crowd from that position. The parable of the sower contains four different types of soil, with different responses to the seed that is sown in them.

Seed along the path, consumed by the birds. Seed on the rocky ground, without much soil and scorched by the sun. Seed among thorns, choked by the thorns.

Seed on good ground, producing 30, 60 or 100 fold. Jesus then explains his use of parables. The kingdom of God is a secret known only by those to whom it is given.

This is to fulfil the judgement spoken of by Isaiah in a passage that is very prominent within the New Testament, Isaiah chapter 6. And this passage speaks of the catastrophic judgement of the people. They're hardening so that they will not hear, they will not perceive the message that the prophet has been given to bring to them. However there will be a remnant.

And at the very end of chapter 6, Isaiah's commission moves into a statement about how the people will be restored. Jesus' reference to Isaiah's commission, at the end of which there is that reference to the holy seed, I think provides us with some basis and



background for understanding the parable of the sower, where it is coming from. The passage speaks of the catastrophic judgement of the people, their removal from the land, but there will be a remnant and those will be the seed that will be sowed in the land.

God sows his people in the land in the return from exile. This is language that we find on several occasions within the Old Testament. In places like Isaiah chapter 61 verse 11.

In Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 27. Ezekiel chapter 36 verse 9. And Hosea chapter 2 verse 23. And I will say to not my people, you are my people.

And he shall say, you are my God. Jesus is describing what the restoration looks like. God is sowing the seed in the land.

He's restoring the people from exile. He's restoring his presence to them. He's overcoming in part the judgement spoken of by Isaiah.

But even in this situation there is that hardening of the people. And so Jesus is explaining why even as God is restoring his people, sowing the land with that seed, there are people who are not responding in the proper way. That seed that's being sown is producing different responses.

This frames Jesus' own ministry as God's sowing of the land. His word is being sown among the people and producing fruit of persons who either respond and in some cases people who reject that word. Jesus is the one who's bringing about the fulfilment of these Old Testament prophecies and the awaited Kingdom of God is happening in their midst.

But it's not happening in the way that they might have expected. Jesus teaches that a lamp is not brought in to be hidden. He has not come to the scene in order to hide his identity forever.

It will be revealed. Things secret are to be brought to light and things hidden to be made known. And people must act accordingly.

Actions right now, the measure that people use with others, has consequences in the future. Those who perceive the message of the Kingdom now will be blessed with more later, whereas those who reject it and are darkened and hardened will lose even what they currently have. The parable of the growing seed is the only parable in Mark not found in either Matthew or Luke.

And there are many questions about what is the actual focus of the parable. Is it the secrecy of the seed's growth? Is it the man who scattered the seed? Is it the harvest? Like the parables that surround it, the parable of the growing seed seems to address the question of why things are as they are if the Kingdom is present. The growth of the Kingdom occurs without human intervention.

And there seems to be an allusion in the reference to the harvest to Joel 3.13 Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full, the vats overflow, for their evil is great. The harvest is certain, but the growth is largely hidden, and it occurs apart from human involvement.

It is God's Kingdom, and God establishes its process. And the person who is waiting for the Kingdom must trust and be patient. In the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus is once again working with Old Testament background.

I think here particularly the parable of Ezekiel in Ezekiel 17 concerning the two eagles and the vine. What Jesus says about the mustard seed does not fit with the actual reality of the mustard seed. But the expectation that it should do seems to arise from the mistaken notion that Jesus is just giving an illustration from nature.

He isn't doing that. The whole point is that the mustard tree is not a grand tree, and yet it's described as becoming very grand. But we are to recognize that this isn't a natural situation.

Daniel 4 is also about a tree in which the birds take refuge, Nebuchadnezzar and his Kingdom and his Empire, and what he represents. However, this mustard seed, against all appearances, is going to be one that outgrows all the great trees of the nations. Although Israel may seem small, although the Kingdom may seem weak and insignificant, it will become more important and extensive than all of the great empires that had led to that day.

The Babylonians, the Medo-Persians, or the Greeks, or the Romans. It was going to span the whole world, and yet it would rise from the smallest seed of all, a seed altogether without natural promise. And it would be that seed from which the Kingdom would grow.

Perhaps we should also think about the stone that becomes a great mountain in Daniel 2. A question to consider, reading these parables of growth, how should we think about the growth of the church relative to the sorts of growth that the world tends to put its store in? What encouragement, what challenge can we draw from these parables for our own experience and view of the world?