

The Mountain of Joy

Isaiah 1-2 | Jonathan K. Dodson | November 30, 2014

What if there was a vision of the future that fulfilled the longing of every heart? One that brought permanent justice for the oppressed and guaranteed joyful contentment at the deepest level? Social and personal flourishing? *Today, I'd like to show you such a vision.* Then, over the next three weeks go into more detail, and explain how this vision can become a reality. We're celebrating Advent—the coming of Christ—from the perspective of a very famous prophet in the Old Testament, Isaiah. He shows us a stunning vision of the future that fulfills human longing in the image a *mountain*; confronts us with the stark reality of human limitation through a *sermon*, and then offers divine logic that *promises* a way out of limitation into longing and beyond. A mountain, a sermon, and a promise.

The Mountain of Joy

Mountains have been important to cultures throughout history. The primordial Garden of Eden was on a mountain with rivers that flowed down, littered with precious stones and botanical life (Gen 2; Ezek 28). The Sumerians and Babylonians built temples on the tops of mountains, where the gods were said to visit. Even the Egyptian pyramids were meant to symbolize hillocks, little tops of mountains from which the Sun god Re would rule the world. Olympus, the paradisaical mountain flowing with ambrosia, the food of the gods. We could add many more. What do all these mountains have in common? A sense of **transcendence**. Transcendence is an interesting word because it communicates two things at once. It refers to the *existence* of something beyond us, something holy other, and at the same time, it infers an *experience* of that thing. It's when the existence and experience of something beyond intersect. **We brush up against transcendence when we are moved by a great piece of music, effuse over succulent cuisine, or are lifted by an afternoon of laughter with friends.** These encounters pluck the chords of what sociologist Peter Berger calls "signals of transcendence." If we follow the signals, they lead us to a transcendent source. *Now, why has the signal been so strong around mountains?* Well, for one, they are high, ancient, immovable. In the words of Jane Eyre, "What are men to rocks and mountains?" They signify not just transcendence but the fixed, lofty presence of God. Isaiah says: "[It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it](#)" (2:2). Now, he's saying something very controversial with text. What's he saying? The phrase "mountain of the house of the Lord" can also be translated "mountain temple of the Lord." Later he says, "Heaven is my throne and earth is my footstool." What's the picture of? A cosmic throne where earthly mountains are just his ottoman. Now, look what happens to this mountain in the latter days. It's lifted up above all other mountains. Why? Remember all the cultures that built temples on top of their mountains? Isaiah is saying *there is one massive cosmic mountain to rule them all, and one true God to go with it, the God of Israel, the God of the Bible.* This is in your face. In effect, he's saying there are no other gods. I'm the source. I'm greater, higher, more massive than anything else. Period. You can believe in a different god, but it won't get you on the mountain. YHWH confirms our suspicions. There's something greater out there and it's the terrifying temple glory of the Lord. **As secular, modern people we replace the mountain of the Lord with the skyscrapers and stages of personal glory.** We run off

transcendence or relocate it in ourselves, an affront to God, all in the pursuit of joy. In some sense, I feel like I've been climbing a mountain *for* joy my whole life. Maybe you do too? I've climbed hills of higher education, the peaks of publishing, & the mountains of difficult ministry in Africa, Asia, and Austin only to summit each one in disappointment. I've devoted myself to doing hard things for God, but its not enough. Where has your pursuit of joy taken you? **Our pursuit of joy isn't meant to lead to self but to God.** Look at the end bit of verse 2. Nations stream to the mountain. Why? Because when *this* mountain signals the terrifying glory of the Lord, it doesn't repel; it attracts, through the frequencies of safety, peace, and joy. Cities are built into the sides of mountains, so it is with Zion. It is covered with vines and fig trees, plants and flowers, fruits and gourds, rivers that run with wine: **"On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined"** (Isa 25:6). The music, the cuisine, the laughter, the pleasure and the joy can be traced *here to the Mountain of Joy*, where terrifying temple glory and thrilling terrestrial joy intersect in the presence of God. That's the mountain...but how do we get there?

Human Limitation

How do we inherit the mountain of Joy? We've looked at the mountain, now let's look at the *sermon*. Isaiah lived in the 8th century BC, roughly the same time Homer wrote the *Iliad* and the Olympic Games were founded in Greece (Mt Olympus the center of the world). He was married and had two sons, and lived in the city of Jerusalem, the heart and soul of Jewish culture. Isaiah was a *prophet*. Prophets represented the deity, giving the people correction, instruction, warning, and oracles of hope. In 1:2 Isaiah begins his sermon with a warning, invoking heaven and earth as witnesses (you can't get a more permanent witness). He indicts God's people: **"Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the Lord has spoken: 'Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand'"** (1:1-2). Essentially, he's saying you've got everything upside-down, out of order. Even beasts get the order of things better than you. You're **disordered**. Their disorder is *social*. God reprimands them for ignoring the marginalized of society, **"learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause"** (17). God cares about social order, and people who make a big deal about God should too. He wasn't upset with them because they forgot to buy a Christmas gift for a poor child once a year. He rebukes the injustice of the oppressed. Perhaps your heart is broken over the Ferguson verdict? The deranged Austin shooter? Perhaps its not, but we should all be bothered by the deep social discord in our country. Israel was disordered economically and socially, favoring the rich and abandoning the poor. But the disorder isn't just social; it's *spiritual*. *Doing hard things doesn't get you into heaven*. In verses 11-15, God passes judgment on Israel's religious activity. Commenting on their sacrifices, offerings, festivals, Sabbaths, worship gatherings, and their prayers, "my soul hates," God says. Why? Doesn't God favor the religious? Nope. Neither religious activity nor service to the poor secures you a place on the mountain. Why not? God remarks: **"Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged."** **The fundamental disorder is that we don't know and adore our Master. We adore ourselves.** We want to rule the mountain. We traffic in sin. Sin is often misunderstood. It

doesn't *just* refer to moral infractions; it describes the state of a person who is a stranger to God. You might say, I've never abandoned God. But have you disregarded him? Have you ever put anything above him? Social justice, a relationship, your child, career success, personal glory? I have. I've had to realize that underneath my pursuit of doing hard things is, at times, a pursuit of personal glory. You have to come to grips with the fact that you can't climb the mountain of joy. I'll never reach the top. Why? Because I've been insisting on being the God *and* the mountain, the terrifying glory and the terrestrial joy. My loves have been disordered. The love of Self over the love of God. It reduces my joy. Just when I think I've summited joy, it dissipates, vanishes into the mist. Why? I'm on the wrong mountain, *the mountain of Self*. How about you?

Divine Logic – A Promise

If you can't climb the mountain of joy, how do you get there? Isaiah offers hope in a promise: "[Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness.](#)" (26). What's he saying, Zion will be redeemed by justice? He's saying the only way you can get on the mountain is by upholding God's justice. In his justice, YHWH has to punish all the God-belittlers. *All are strangers to him. He cannot admit unjust, imperfect people, into his mountain; it would ruin paradise.* The solution is repentance. A word often misunderstood. It does not mean merely to do good, though repentant people do good. It means to reorder your life. **Instead of God being a distant third or close second, he must become first, ordered on top of all things.** To repent is to reorder your loves, making God your supreme love. It is not enough to just agree with the idea of the mountain of joy, or even nod your head to repentance; we must reorder our loves and turn to God. But as we turn, what prevents his terrifying glory from consuming us? What guarantees entrance into his holy mountain? His **justice-upholding grace**. "[Come let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow, though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool, if you are willing and obedient you shall eat the good of the land](#)" (18-19). If you are *willing* you will eat of the good of the land, rejoice in rivers of wine, delight in the presence of God. If you will humble yourself before this great God, he will shower you with grace. He will remove the dark stain of sin and in its place make you white as snow. This is not a cheap spiritual wish; it is a promise from God. The only other places in Scripture where white as snow and wool appear are in descriptions of Jesus (Dan 7; Matt 28:3; Rev 1). We have to become the very glory of Christ to gain access to the mountain. How do we become white like wool and snow to ascend the mountain of joy? God has to come down the mountain, and he does in Christ. **He becomes the God who bleeds scarlet red so he can wash us white as snow.** On the cross Jesus dies for justice; our disregard for God's glory. Judgment for God-belittling sinners is passed on Christ. Jesus is born, lives, dies and rises to uphold justice *and* dispense grace, to clothe you with his own glory, to drape you in his snow-white beauty. I recently visited Vail Colorado where we stayed on a mountain for three radiant days. As I woke up on the fourth day, I asked the Lord if there was anything else he wanted to tell me that I had not heard. I walked out into the window encased living room, overwhelmed by what I saw—a mountain covered in snow. The discolored ground covered in white, trees like pipe cleaners, a winter wonderland. And he softly reminded me, "[Though your sins are scarlet, I have made them white as snow.](#)" I had to realize, again, that I can't climb the mountain; Christ climbed down the mountain for me, that it's not climbing



"a mountain *for* joy" but God giving me a "mountain *of* joy" in Christ. We are transported to the top because Christ came down to the bottom. Jesus ushers in a new season for us—a never-ending Christmas, an eternal Joy. That's what Advent is all about, the new season of joy, angels fill the sky and kings bow down, because God has come down the mountain to release us of guilt and to give us a mountain of joy. Will you reorder your loves to take in the glory of Christ? Will you exchange the mountain of Self for the mountain of the Savior? If you do, you will gain more than a mountain; you gain the glory of Christ. Will you follow the signal of joy to Jesus? That's what Advent is all about the Transcendent God coming to us uniquely, exclusively, gloriously in Jesus Christ.