

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 23, Isa. 47-48

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This is Dr. John Oswalt in his teaching on the book of Isaiah. This is session number 23, Isaiah chapters 47 and 48.

Let's begin with prayer. Our Father, we thank you for all your gifts to us. You are a generous God. You give and give and give.

We thank you for our physical lives. We thank you for all that you give to us in support of those lives, the sun, the air, the water, the food, all the things you give us, and we thank you. We thank you, Lord, that you have given us the greatest gift of all, the Lord Jesus.

We thank you, Lord Jesus, that through you, we have eternal life, a life that begins now and goes on forever and ever. Thank you. Forgive us when we take advantage of your gifts when we take them for granted, when we act as though we were somehow independent.

Forgive us, Lord. Remind us that we are utterly dependent, physically, spiritually, emotionally, in every way possible, and help us then to live in the knowledge of our dependency with joy. Thank you.

We come to you again asking you to bless our study this evening. Help us as we look at these passages of Scripture. Help us to understand, to comprehend, but most of all, to apply them to our own lives.

Help us not to be like that person that Paul talked about who looks into the mirror and sees himself or herself and then goes away and forgets. Help us to see ourselves in the mirror of your word, O Lord, and to live in the light of what we've seen. In your name, we pray, amen.

We're looking at chapters 47 and 48 tonight, which are the conclusion of this section, Grace Motive for Servanthood. Now, if you remember, I said that the section really is, or the division, is really chapters 40 through 55, with 40 as the introduction. Chapters 49 to 55 continue to reflect on grace.

But now, grace is particularly seen as the means of servanthood. So, this section is particularly talking about God's choosing of his people. He's not cast them off.

Just because they've gone into exile does not mean they're cast off. In fact, God chooses them to be his special servants, and he used them in this case against the idols as his witnesses, as his living evidence that he is God and the idols are nothing.

So that grace, the grace of chosenness, the grace that they need not fear, that grace ought to motivate them to serve.

Now in chapters 47 and 48 that we're looking at tonight, we bring these ideas to a conclusion with two focuses. Chapter 47 focuses on Babylon. What shall we say to and about Babylon in view of the fact that Yahweh alone is God? And then what shall we say to the people of God? So those are the two focuses for our study this evening.

What shall we say to Babylon? And what shall we say to the people of God in the light of what we've learned about Yahweh as the Creator, as the Redeemer, as the only God without a rival? In the light of all of that, what shall we say to these two groups? So, in 47 1 to 4, why will Babylon have to come down off her throne in the light of what's been said before? What has been said before that caused Babylon to get off the throne? All right. Babylon had a commitment to idolatry. Yes, Babylon's gods are burdensome and ineffective, well said.

Yes, her gods have failed her. She has built her position, her throne upon this idea that we have the most powerful gods in the world and those gods are going to secure Babylon's throne for her and the fact is those gods are worthless. They are helpless.

And so the throne is built on sand, even quicksand, and Babylon will have to come down off the throne. Instead of a queen, what is Babylon going to become? A slave. Yes, yes.

You'll no longer be called tender and delicate. Take the millstones and grind flour. Put off your veil, strip off your robe, uncover your legs, and pass through the rivers.

Your nakedness will be uncovered. Your disgrace will be seen. So forth.

So instead of the queen, she becomes the slave. This is a theme that we have seen throughout this book. Whenever we exalt ourselves, what is the inevitable result? Humiliation.

We in fact humiliate ourselves. We saw it all the way back in chapter 2, where it is said the nation is full of weapons, the nation is full of riches, the nation is full of idols, and in fact, the nation is empty. They will throw away all that stuff and go into the caves of the rocks and beg them to cover them.

I wonder if indeed John the Revelator had this in mind when he speaks about the kings of the earth. Calling for the mountains to fall upon them. When we see the one who is truly exalted and compare that to the tinsel with which we've been wrapping ourselves, only shame will be the result.

So here it is again. Exalt yourself and you'll be humiliated. Take the lowest place in honor of the Lord and He invites us to come up and sit on the throne with Him.

Winners lose, losers win. The Bible is full of that and here it is again. We talked a bit last week about vengeance and revenge, but let's pick up on that.

And if you look at verse 6, you see a bit more of what's going on. What is the difference between revenge and vengeance? That's a good start. Vengeance is just punishment for sins committed against another.

Revenge is a selfish attempt to pay back one who has hurt me. Why is revenge dangerous? All right. It very well may lead to a continuing downward cycle where the other person now has to pay me back.

I think I may have shared this with you before if so, forgive me. A Jewish journalist with the International Herald Tribune was located in Lebanon for eight years and he wrote a book about his experiences. He said that the cycle of revenge in particularly the Muslim world goes like this.

You break my finger, I break your wrist. You break my wrist, I break your arm. You break my arm, I break your neck. You break my neck, I break your head. You break my head, I kill your wife. You kill my wife, I kill your children. You kill my children, I destroy your nation. There it is. I don't think that's merely a Muslim thing.

If I indeed must get my own back, I have stepped into the cycle of evil. And there's no knowing when you get off that cycle. The other thing that is dangerous is anything that is done for myself always has dangerous antecedents.

It has dangerous antecedents because it comes out of my need to build up myself so if it fails then myself has been brought down and I've got to work harder some other way to build it up. And if it succeeds it puffs up myself and that's not good news. This is why in Romans chapter 13 the Lord says, vengeance is mine.

I will repay. Yes, and running through this book, vengeance, the word, occurs more than a dozen times. God says there will be payback.

They're not going to get away with this. But you leave that in my hands. And you'll be clean.

You won't have done it for selfish motives. You won't have done it to exalt yourself. You will have left it in my hands and the result will be a good result.

So, the reason for the vengeance is there in verse 6. I was angry with my people. I profaned my heritage. I gave them into your hand.

But you showed them no mercy. On the ages, you made your yoke exceedingly heavy. Elsewhere in the book, God says, yes, my hand has been heavy upon you, my people.

But that's nothing compared to what it's going to be on those who have exceeded their commission in punishing you. All right. Why verse 4? It just seems to sort of hang there.

Verses 1, 2, and 3 talk about the fact that she's going to go from queen to slave. Then you pick that up again in verse 5. And 6 and 7 as God addresses Babylon. So what's verse 4 doing? Why is it there? All right, it recalls who is acting and who is it? What is said about him? Three things.

He's what? A redeemer. The Almighty and the literal metaphor is the Lord of hosts. The Lord of heaven's armies.

The one who has all the power. And what's the third thing? The Holy One of Israel. Now why say those three things at this point? Why insert that into this speech to us? Lady Babylon.

Okay, all right. The Redeemer brings vengeance. I mean, he will do whatever he has to do to get his people out of bondage.

Repetition. He's the one. It's affirming God, yes.

All right, all right. It's reminding us who is doing this. He is going to redeem us.

He has the cosmic power to do it. And he is that one who has revealed his holy character to Israel. And he's continuing to do it in this context.

Babylon has ranged herself against the Holy One. The Holy One who's given himself to Israel. That's pretty dangerous.

All right. 47, five to nine. We've talked about verse six already.

And my question was, is God judging Babylon merely because of unjust punishment? Look at verses seven and eight. Yes, here it is again. I am the ruler of the world.

I can do whatever I want. Forever. Yes, considered themselves higher than they ought.

And how high? Look at verse eight. I am and there is none beside me. Have we seen that phrase somewhere earlier? Answer yes.

Where have we seen it? We've seen it in 45, 46. Look at verse 18 of 45. The very last statement.

I am Yahweh. I am the I am. And there is no other.

Chapter 45 verse 21. There is no other God beside me, a righteous Savior and God. There is none beside me.

Look again down at the end of verse 10 in 47, 47, 10. There it is again, isn't it? I am and there is none beside me. You can't arrogate to yourself what belongs to God alone and survive.

In fact, that is what every human being says in the deepest recesses of their soul. I am. And there is nobody else.

Now we don't say that out loud, because that's not civilized. But in terms of operation, the fallen human says, I'm the only one there is. And anything that I have to do to protect my life, to expand my life, to fill my life with comfort and pleasure, is right.

Question? So, love God and love your neighbor as yourself would be the direct opposite? Direct opposite, direct opposite. So why does she carry out this excessive punishment? Because I am and there is no one else beside me. I can do whatever I want.

And nobody can stop me. The idea is that there is a God who is going to hold me accountable for what I do to these people whom he has put into my hands. And I've told you before, I'll say it again because you'll forget, that attitude that, no, I ought not to do whatever I feel like to this that's been put into my hands because there is a God who holds me accountable for what I do.

That's the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is not walking around, I wonder where he's going to hit me next. That's not our God.

That's not our God. The fear of the Lord says, sure, my daughter's not big enough to stop me. And I feel like having sex with her.

The fear of the Lord says, John, that child was given to you in trust. She is not yours to use to aggrandize yourself or to satisfy your lusts. You are responsible for her.

And I'm going to call you to account one day as to how you handled that responsibility. Oh, that's the fear of the Lord. To conduct your life in the knowledge

that you're not God and that there is a God who holds you accountable for what he's given to you.

Oh, how desperately we need a recovery of the fear of the Lord. Okay. So, I'm in number two there under 47, five to nine.

I've given you some other references where God says he is and there's no one else. We won't take the time to look those up, but there they are. And the problem is, of course, that Babylon has said of herself what only God can say.

All right, let's look at verse nine. He says to Babylon, these two things will come to you in a moment in one day. The loss of children and the widowhood shall come upon you in full measure in spite of your many sorceries and the great power of your enchantments.

All right, let's look over now at 54 verses one through eight. Which is God's invitation. Sing, oh, barren one who did not bear.

Break forth into singing and cry aloud. You who have never been in labor for the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married, says the Lord. Enlarge the place of your tents.

Let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out. Don't hold back. Lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.

For you will spread abroad to the right and the left. Your offspring will possess the nations, the people, and will people, the desolate cities. Fear not, for you will not be ashamed.

Be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced. Here it is. For you will forget the shame of your youth, the reproach of your widowhood.

You will remember no more, for your maker is your husband. The Lord of Hosts is his name. The Holy One of Israel, your Redeemer.

The God of the whole earth, he is called. For the Lord has called you like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she's cast off. For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion, I'll gather you.

That picture of a woman who loses her children and then her husband is a picture of double desolation because she can't have more children. She's lost the children she has, and she's lost hope of anymore. And so, Israel feels that this has happened to her.

And God says, no, it's going to happen to Babylon. And you, you are going to have more children than you'll know what to do with. Why? Because your husband is Yahweh.

So just an absolute 180-degree different picture of the two. What Israel thinks has befallen it, in fact, will befall Babylon. Babylon will be extinct as it was.

But Israel, in fact, is going to expand to the stars of the heaven and the sand of the seashore. God keeps his promise. Moving on, 47, 10 to 15.

And you have to sort of pick up that last phrase from verse 9. Why are humans always tempted with magic? Because they think it's magic, yes. Power to manipulate and control, and one more thing, without any personal commitment. You learn how to do it.

And it doesn't cost you anything. You don't have to put yourself on the line. So magic is always, always a temptation for us.

And again, if you had said 75 years ago that magic, sorcery, and the occult would be increasingly fascinating to Americans, people would have laughed you out of court. No, no, we're too smart for that. We know that stuff doesn't work.

No way. But we have gotten everything we wanted, and it hasn't been enough. And so, like the ancients, we're saying, hmm, there must be a spirit world to manipulate.

We thought we could get everything we wanted just by manipulating the physical world. And we got it. But like a soap bubble, when we grabbed it, it exploded and left slime on our hands.

There must be something more. So, what led Babylon astray, according to verse 10? Wisdom and knowledge. So, is God opposed to learning? No.

No? Well then, what's going on here? We let learning control us. We let learning control us. Mm-hmm.

What else? Well, it depends on what you're learning. Depends on what you're learning. Yes.

The learning that they were engaged in was of the occult, as the next verses make clear. Uh-huh. Learning how to make explosives is not necessarily a good thing.

So, when we let learning control us, when our learning is of that which is destructive rather than a blessing, what else? Learning becomes an end in itself as a tool that we can use to exalt ourselves. Yes. Yes.

Yes. When learning is a tool whereby we may please God more fully, and serve Him more deeply, learning is a wonderful thing. And God invites us to join Him.

In that great business of learning. But it's amazing, it's amazing how easily learning can become that end in itself that puffs up. It is almost always, and I've been in the education racket all my life, it is almost always a great disillusionment when students get into the upper levels of academia and discover there are no ivory towers.

It's a dog eat dog. Learning becoming an end in itself by which I puff myself up and try to prove to you that I am and there's none beside me. And learning on that level is as deadly as anything you can imagine.

All right. Verse 14. What can learning not do by itself? It cannot save you and it cannot comfort you.

Hmm. I've mentioned to you before that one of the primary ways that the pagans tried to predict the future was with omens. An omen is a sign that something will or will not happen.

And it could be the shape of a sacrificial animal's liver. It could be the position of the stars. It could be a flight of birds.

A whole host of things. Babylon has 70 volumes of omen texts. Think of taking a PhD in Babylon.

A really, really bright person. And of course, there were bright people then. A really, really bright person could master enough of this stuff to be able to say, yes, I can take you to chapter and verse.

Your learning, and your wisdom have led you astray. You spent all your intellect on the wrong thing. How tragic.

So, verse 13. You are wearied with your many counsels. Let them stand forth and save you.

Those who divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars, who at the new moons make known what shall come to you. Behold, they're like stubble. The fire consumes them.

They cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame. No coal for warming oneself is this. No fire to sit before.

Such are those with whom you have labored. You built your life on a false premise. I am, and there's none beside me.

And you supported that premise with a knowledge and a learning which were empty and useless. And the result is, you must come down off your throne and be a slave. Now remember, Israel, they're the slaves.

They're the ones who are working at the millstones. They're the ones who have their skirts up around their waists to do laundry in the river. Think, think how this chapter must have struck those folks.

What? Babylon is the one doing this to us. And Babylon is going to have to come down here and join us? Our Redeemer, the Lord of hosts, the Holy One of Israel says so. For most of Babylon's history, Israel went into, or Judah went into captivity in 586.

Nebuchadnezzar was on the throne for another 30 years especially during that 30 years. That's when the hanging gardens of Nebuchadnezzar were built. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Especially during those 30 years, this chapter would have been a shocker. What? No. No, not Babylon.

As Daniel saw it, excuse me, the golden kingdom. But God said it. And it happened.

All right, let's look at chapter 49. Excuse me, 48. Did anybody do their homework? How many times do words for hearing occur in this chapter? How many? 10, all right.

Agree? Uh-huh. We'll take his word for it. Verse one.

Hear this. Verse six. You have heard.

Verse eight. You've never heard. Verse 12.

Listen to me, oh Jacob. Verse 16. Draw near to me.

Hear this. And so forth. Do you think God might be trying to make a point? Why this repetition? So we'll learn more, okay?

Uh. Pardon? Confidence and reassurance. Remembrance.

Pardon? Remembrance. If I say to my child, listen to me. What does that suggest? They haven't been listening.

They haven't been paying attention. Yeah. Well.

A friend of mine was talking about dealing with his son who has pretty severe ADHD. Said so, in the evening, he's about to go upstairs. I say, look at me.

Are you looking at me? Number one, repeat after me. I will brush my teeth. Repeat after me.

I will brush my teeth. All right. What's the first thing you're going to do? Now what's the second thing you're going to do? You will take off your clothes.

Somebody with attention deficit. That's what these folks had. Ha, ha, ha.

Listen to me. Listen to me. Pay attention to me.

Hear what I'm saying. Now again, remember what I've said to you about this situation. All their hopes are gone.

Everything they believed about themselves has been proven false. We're not the people of God. We're not the chosen.

We're not especially righteous. We're not God's favorites. Total, total despair.

So, God has to get their attention back. Especially for some of the amazing things he wants to say. Now look at the first issue here.

Verses one and two. What's the problem? There is no relationship with God. There is no relationship with God.

Their relationship is strictly superficial. They swear by the name of the Lord. They confess the God of Israel, but not in truth or right.

They call themselves after the holy city and stay themselves on the God of Israel. What are they depending on for their deliverance if it comes? They're depending on their superficial connection to God and their past. Now I'm a Methodist so I can talk.

But there are a whole lot of people out there who are Methodists first and Christians second. I suspect that's true for some other denominations as well. But it is a superficial kind of thing.

You go on the street and you say to somebody, are you a Christian? It's changing now and changing pretty rapidly. But up until ten years ago, almost everybody would have said, yes, I'm a Christian. Meaning I'm not a Hindu, I'm not a Buddhist, I'm not a Jew, I'm not a Mohammedan.

So, I guess I'm a Christian. Sort of the same thing here. Well, we're Jews.

We're Judean. And Isaiah says, so what? That's not going to cut any ice with God or the Babylonians. Listen to me.

So, he says, well, let me push another question here. If neither Judah's good behavior nor their obvious repentance is going to cause Yahweh to be gracious, what will? God's own character. Grace comes from his heart.

It is not produced by our repentance. He doesn't say, well, I really don't want to forgive you, but since you are so obviously repentant, I suppose I'll have to. Never.

Never. His grace is free. His grace is self-generated.

His grace does not depend on anything we do. I remember Moses telling God, don't destroy these people, or the world will laugh at you. Yep.

I think he blurted something. He did. Yes.

The Egyptians will say that you delivered those people in order to destroy them. And you sort of hear Moses saying, and I agree, they deserve destruction. But, you're not that kind of a guy.

Yep. All right. Push on.

Verses three through eight. He says I predicted these things in advance. Now, why did he do that? Hang on a minute.

Yes. Yeah. Okay, he can remind us when we stop listening.

They can hear and act upon it, what he has said to do if they choose to act. They can hear and act upon it, if they choose to. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

What does he say here, in verse five? Yes. Yes. So, he says, if I had not told you all this in advance, and it happened, you would say, hey, my idol that I manipulated did this for me.

God says, I told you before it happened, so you couldn't say that. It didn't happen because of anything you did. In verse seven, he says, and now I'm doing new things.

They are created now, not long ago. What's the significance of using the word create? Remember our discussion about the gods? Gods are created by men. Gods are created by men, and they're not created, they're made.

Gods can't create anything. To create is to make something brand new that has never existed before. Gods are part of the natural order which has always existed, it appears, and will always exist.

There's nothing brand new in this world. But Isaiah has been saying, God is the creator. He's outside of this natural system.

He made this system as a brand-new thing, and he can do brand-new things in it. One of the brand-new things is what Cyrus was going to do. The Assyrians had been practicing exile from as far back as we can go in Assyrian history, back into the 12 and 1300s BC.

It is sometimes said that Moses couldn't have predicted exile, which he did in the book of Deuteronomy, because nobody was practicing it. Well, the Assyrians were practicing it. I don't think Moses would have known about the Assyrians, but nevertheless, the idea that it's just such an outlandish idea, nobody would even ever think of it.

As far back as we can go, the Assyrians had been practicing exile. The Babylonians picked it up from the Assyrians. So, for at least 700 years, for us, since 1300 AD. Since 1300 AD, this thing has been going on.

And the Persian emperor Cyrus came in and got rid of the whole thing. Wow. Wow.

Simply took 700 years of precedent and threw it out the window. The Persians didn't practice exile. And Cyrus said that any captive nation could go home and his treasury would pay for the rebuilding of their temple.

God created a brand-new thing. Now, here it is in verse 9. Why did God defer his anger? For his own sake. They didn't deserve it.

They didn't earn it. They weren't nicer than other people. He did it for his own sake.

Now, we can sometimes think of that as kind of selfish. Well, I did it for myself. Clearly, when you put that in the context of the Bible, that's not how God was motivated.

But he is saying, I'm doing it as an expression of my own character, my own nature. Not because you've earned it. All right.

Verse 12. Here it is again. I am he.

Ani who? And the Greek version is ego am. I am. Period.

I am first. I am last. And everything in between.

I am. My hand laid the foundation of the earth. My right hand spread out the heavens.

When I call them, they stand together. Assemble all of you and listen. He's trying to make a point.

This is really summing up, then, that case against the gods. I predicted things long before they happened, and they have come true. No god can do that.

So, then, verse 17, once again, thus says Yahweh, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. Redeemer and Holy One go together all the way through here. He is able to do what he wants to do.

He wants to redeem, and as the Holy One, he's able to. He can break into time and space and change things for his own purposes. I am Yahweh, your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go.

Oh, that you had paid attention to my commandments. Yes, sounds like Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. What would have happened if they had listened? Look at the rest of verses 18 and 19.

Your peace would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea, descendants like the sand, yes. And what's the last thing? Your name would not have been cut off. In other words, none of this stuff would have happened.

Oh, that you had listened. How did the chapter start? Verse 1, listen. So, what do verses 20 and 21 say? Get ready.

Go out singing. Again, what do their hearts tell them? Their hearts tell them, settle down, become good Babylonians, give up, failed faith, and what does God say? Get ready to go home. Don't settle down.

Don't become a good Babylonian. Don't give up that supposedly failed faith. In fact, stop doing lip service stuff and get serious about your faith.

That's what he's trying to say in this chapter. In the light of the foolishness of the Babylonian idolatry, in the light of the certainty that Babylon is going to fall sooner than you can imagine, listen. You didn't listen in the past and look what happened.

Oh, listen now, listen now. 586, it's going to be 50 years. 556, it's going to be 25 years.

Never mind. Don't settle down. Don't become a good Babylonian.

Don't give up the true faith. Listen. I think God is saying that to us.

We look at North American Christianity in precipitate decline and it's very easy. God says, listen to me, listen, listen. I've got plans.

I'm going to accomplish things. I'm going to do things. Picked up a Time magazine in the doctor's office today.

It's commenting on the fact that today, I don't know that I got my numbers right, but I think I'm right. Today, 80% of Latinos in America identify themselves as Roman Catholics. At the present rate, by 2025, 20% will be Roman Catholics.

And 50% will be Protestant evangelicals. A shift is happening that fast. God has plans.

The only question is, are we going to be paying attention? Listen.

Let's pray. Thank you, Lord. Thank you that Babylon cannot stand in your face. All the Babylons of the world that shout, I am and there is none beside me. Thank you that they are all doomed to fall because you are the I am. You are the only I am. Praise you. Praise you.

Oh, God, forgive us to the extent that we're like those Israelites, priding ourselves that we belong to God. When it's all a superficial connection, lip service. Have mercy upon us, God.

And then help us. Help us to remember all of the evidence in the Bible and in church history that you are God and there is no other. And remembering that, what you have said in the past, open our ears to what you're saying now.

Help us to listen, oh Lord, and be ready for everything you have for us. In your name, we pray. Amen.

This is Dr. John Oswalt in his teaching on the book of Isaiah. This is session number 23, Isaiah chapters 47 and 48.