

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 9, Isa. 17-18

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This is Dr. John Oswalt in his teaching on the book of Isaiah. This is session number nine, Isaiah chapters 17 and 18.

Tonight we're looking at chapters 17 to 18 and I want to remind you again how this all fits together.

One of my goals for you, if you're able to persevere all the way to the end in May, is that you'll have a sense of how this big book fits together. For many people, it is such a huge thing you're working through it chapter by chapter or something like that in your reading and you just sort of get lost. And so, my goal is to give you a kind of a road map.

So, I'm going to keep repeating this stuff and repeating it and repeating it because as I've said before, repetition is the soul of education. In case you didn't get that, repetition is the soul of education. So chapters 1 to 6 are the call to servanthood, the problem, this Israel, sinful, corrupt, enamored with human greatness and power, and yet the promise that God is going to use these people pure and holy as his messengers to the nation.

How in the world could that happen? How could this present Israel ever become that Israel? And as I suggested to you, I believe that Isaiah gives us his own call as a model. If what happened to the man of unclean lips can happen to the nation of unclean lips, then indeed they can become his servants. As Isaiah was the servant of God to declare God's message to the nation, the nation can become God's servant to bear the message to the world.

That's chapters 1 to 6. Then chapters 7 to 39 are characterized by this repeated emphasis on trust. And again, in your Bible study, look for repetitions. Repetition is the soul of education.

When the author is repeating something, you can bank on it, he's trying to make a point. And so, through these chapters, we find various words for trust, various expressions of the concept of trust and I'm arguing that he is saying trust is the basis of servanthood. This is where things went wrong in the garden.

You can't trust God. God's not on your side. God's not for you.

And since you can't trust him, you've got to take care of yourself. So, the bottom line really is, can you and I trust Yahweh? Can we trust the I Am? Can we put our weight

down on Him? And the answer of Isaiah is absolutely. I've suggested to you that this section, 7 to 39, is broken into three parts.

First of all, in chapters 7 to 12, King Ahaz was challenged to trust God. His two northern neighbors, Israel and Syria, are attacking him, trying to force Judah into a coalition against the bigger enemy, Assyria. And Ahaz, challenged by Isaiah to trust God, says no.

And in fact, trusts Assyria to deliver him from Israel and Syria. As I said to you before, it's a bit like three mice having a fight and one of them hiring the cat. Not smart.

And so, Isaiah talks about the implications of this. And he goes all the way through. Assyria came to attack them, but one day Assyria herself fell because she's the arrogant instrument of God.

And when that happens, a root from the stump of Jesse, burned out stump, in a land that would not trust God, out of that burned out stump comes a little shoot. Green, helpless shoot. And that shoot is the promised one, the Messiah, for whom all the world looks.

So here, in this section, Isaiah traces the whole series through. If you won't trust, this is what will happen to you. But when you've refused to trust him, and have experienced judgment, God will come in grace.

Shouldn't you trust a God like that? Then, lessons in trust. Since you failed the exam, we're going to go back to the textbook, and we're going to try this again. And we're going to give you reasons why you shouldn't trust humanity, the nations of humanity, and why you should trust God.

We're looking now at this section, the judgment oracles against the nations, chapters 13 to 23. We saw how we started with Babylon, and I suggested to you that Babylon is sort of symbolic. Babylon is the glory of humanity personified.

And so, in chapter 14, any creature who exalts himself or herself to the place of God is doomed to fall. Then, we looked at how Isaiah sort of brings the wide angle down to a narrow focus, from talking about Babylon as symbolic of the nations, to Assyria, the current representative of Mesopotamian power, and the neighboring Philistines. And then, on the other side of the Dead Sea, from your point of view, the Philistines are here, the Dead Sea is here, and the Moabites are over here.

Now, tonight, we're ready to look at chapters 17 and 18. So, we begin with verse 1. And who is this oracle directed against? Damascus, the capital of Syria. So, we might expect, on the basis of what we've seen already, that the rest of chapter 17 would be talking about Damascus.

Wrong. It's not, as a matter of fact. Look what has happened by the time we're in verse 3. The fortress will disappear from where? Ephraim.

What's Ephraim? Israel, the northern kingdom of Israel. So, within two verses, we've stopped talking about Damascus, at least solely, and have included Israel in this thing. The fortress will disappear from Ephraim, the kingdom from Damascus, the remnant of Syria will be like the glory of the children of Israel, declares the Lord of hosts.

Now, why do you think these two are being considered together? Exactly. They were the allies back here who were against Judah, and who so terrified Ahaz that he felt he had to trust his worst enemy. So, again, in these chapters, God is saying, look, you don't have to be, on the one hand, afraid of these nations, and on the other hand, you don't have to trust them.

So, here, he seems to be including Damascus and Israel together in a single judgment oracle. And, beginning in verse 4, he switches completely to Israel. Now, why do you think he might do that? Okay, okay, the northern brother might very well be the one most likely for Judah to trust.

Yes, I think that's a real possibility. I think there is another possibility that is the flip side of that. Israel might be the one they'd be most likely to fear because they're closest.

So, I think it's both and here. You're most likely to trust your northern brother, but you're also most likely to be afraid of your northern brother. And so, he's focusing on that point.

Now, ask in regard to verses 1 to 3, the issue of God's people not trusting the nations. This is a thing that we've got to continually work our own way through. I've said to you before, that America is not the equivalent of Israel.

If there is an equivalent of Israel, it's the church. America is a secular nation that has been peopled by many, many Christians across the years. Tragically, fewer and fewer.

But the question is, how does this issue of not trusting the nations relate to us as members of the church? Spin that out a bit. Are you trusting their gods? Are you trusting their worldview? Yes. Yes.

Yeah, because we're God's favorites, therefore we can't do anything wrong and we're bound to win. How else does this, if we equate the church with Israel, what is the church not to trust? The world? Anything but God? Any alliances? I become very

anxious when I see the church beginning to use the world's methods. I'm pretty anxious about churches that use fundraisers.

And it's a business for the fundraiser. Now, he may be a vital Christian, or she may be a vital Christian. And they may say, I'm running my business on Christian principles.

And yet, now I'm just talking to you personally here, and yet I'm a little anxious about sorting out all the demographics and all of this kind of thing. Is that wrong in and of itself? No, I don't think so. But I'm just anxious that it is beginning to trust the world's methods to do God's work.

I think that's always dangerous. I'm anxious when, as a church, we begin to involve ourselves in political action groups. Now, you know, I'm a conservative.

I'm a little bit to the right of Attila the Hun. But I still am very anxious when we begin to try to take hold of the political process and somehow use it for our purposes. Is that wrong? No, I don't think it's wrong.

I just think it's dangerous. So, these are the issues, I think, that we've got to think about. We can talk about, oh yeah, those Judeans, they shouldn't have trusted the world like that.

Well, that's them, this is us, and this word talks to us. Yes? I carry that one more time. I stand for myself.

I can do it myself. That's an excellent point. An excellent point.

It's so easy to talk about individual salvation. I'm saved. What's the matter with you? Rather than this sense that we are in this together.

I'm sure I've said to you before that I've been in a lot of churches in these long years that God has given me. And it's very interesting. I've been in churches that are going to heaven together.

And I've been in churches that are going to hell together. And it's not always to do with their theology. So, yes, yes, we're in this together.

So, those are the kinds of things I want you to think about as we work our way through here. How does this relate to us as the people of God in the 21st century? Because, again, this is the presumption upon which my whole life and ministry is based and why I'm here rather than watching TV tonight. I think this is for us.

And I think that's why you're here too. Okay, let's push on. What's the point of the figure of speech, the extended figure of speech in verses 5 and 6? He's talking about Israel.

What's he saying about Israel? It shall be as when the reaper gathers standing grain and his arm harvests the ears, as when one gleanes the ears of grain in the valley of Rephaim. Gleanings will be left in it, as when an olive tree is beaten, two or three berries in the top of the highest bough, four or five on the branches of the fruit tree, declares the Lord God of Israel. What's he saying? There will be a remnant, yes, yes, but only a remnant.

When the enemy is done with Israel, they're going to be like an olive tree, with one or two olives hanging up here on the top bough that somebody couldn't reach. When God is done with Israel, they're going to be like a wheat field. And there will be a few stalks of grain that dropped out of the reaper's arm over here.

That's a kind of a favorite picture that several of the prophets like to use to talk about what's it going to be like. It's going to be like a harvested field, a harvested olive orchard when not much is left. So, you're scared of Israel, or you're tempted to trust Israel.

Let me tell you, their judgment is coming. And they're going to be left. Just an olive here, a stalk of grain there, and not much else.

All right, let's move on. I pointed out to you that verses 7 and 8 are in prose. Now, I don't know whether your Bible sets it out that way.

Most modern Bibles do. There are some arguments among biblical scholars sometimes. As I told you before, the mark of Hebrew poetry is this idea of synonymous thoughts.

You've got a line, and it says something normally in three accent units. Now, sometimes they group words together so that in English it comes out as two words, but it's really a single accent unit in Hebrew. So this line will say something.

The next line will say the same thing, but using synonyms. So 1a, 2a, and if the poet is kind of creative, he may add a new word here in the end that still reinforces that point. That's what Hebrew poetry looks like.

And if you see this happening when you're reading Hebrew, you say, oh, that's a poem. And so modern translations will set it out in the shape of an English poem. But sometimes it's not quite clear.

Is this just poetic prose, or is it prosaic poetry? And so, you'll find if you look at three or four different translations, you may find them disagreeing about how they set it out. But I'm following the English standard version here, and I think most of the versions agree on this. Seven and eight are in prose.

So probably he did not say these verses or write these verses at the same time as the previous ones. Now, we don't know that. But probably, probably the book is a collection of things he said at various times, and it's now been organized to make a point.

So, assuming that's right, and I could be wrong. I've been wrong at least once before. But assuming that's right, I can't remember.

How do verses seven and eight relate to one, two, three, four, five, six? If Isaiah has taken these perhaps from someplace else in his collection and put them here, how do they relate? What has happened in verses four, five, and six? Judgment has happened, and the result is the people are like a harvested field. Now what in seven and eight? It's going to wake them up. Yes, at least the remnant, yes.

We'll talk about in that day more next week because it occurs all over the place in next week's reading. But we've got it twice here. Verse seven and again verse nine, which I see as introducing the next section.

In that day tends to refer to the future time of judgment, the future time of solution, and just when that is, people have been killed over. But nevertheless, you're talking about sort of the conclusion to all of this. So, the conclusion is what? They're going to wake up, and what are they going to wake up to particularly? Their prosperity is gone, emptiness, and so what are they going to do with their opened eyes? They're going to look at God, and who is God described as here in verse eight? The maker, the holy one of Israel.

Now, as I've talked to you before, holiness at the bottom is God's absolute otherness. His otherness in his essence, but also his otherness in his character. So, they're going to wake up.

They're going to wake up, and they're going to say, guess what? I didn't make myself. If you ever meet a self-made man, you've met a liar. There are no such things.

They'll look at their maker, the one who stands outside this world. The concept of the transcendent, the holy creator, is one of the remarkable theological concepts in the Bible. The problem with evolution is, it does not believe in a holy creator.

I, for one, don't want to argue about how long it took God to create the world. That, to my mind, is not the issue. The issue is, are we here as a result of chance processes

from within the material creation, or are we here as a result of one who stands outside the creation and made the creation on purpose? That, to me, is the polar difference between what the Bible teaches us and the religion which is being taught in our public schools.

People say, well, we're not going to teach religion, we're going to teach evolution, to which I say, gently, hogwash. Not very gently, either. No, it's one religion or the other.

It's the religion of the transcendent creator, or it's the religion of chance from within the material creation. So, they're going to look to their maker, the holy one of Israel, and what are they going to stop looking at? Idols. And what are idols, according to this? Their own creations.

The works of their hands. Isaiah, in particular, loves to do this. You can have either the maker, or you can have what you made.

Which do you choose? Your maker, or what you made? Depends on what you want to do. You want to control your own made stuff. Yep.

If you want to have the illusion of control. Exactly. And so their world has fallen apart.

And on that day, they say, oh, oh my goodness. I've been depending on what my hands have made. What a fool I've been.

I wonder if that has happened to anyone here. Have you ever had an experience like that? A devastating experience that has called you back to realities? I suspect most of us have. Anybody want to share one? Everybody's shy.

And we're all, the rest of us, losers. Sometimes we ask, why would God let that happen to me? That bad thing. That loss.

That tragedy. Well, I think in this complex world, there are not easy answers to that. But I am confident that God allows things to happen precisely for the good of our souls.

That we come back to reality. And that's what he's saying will happen here. All right.

Let's push on. As I said, I believe that verse 9 now is a prose introduction to the next couple of verses. What's he saying? Same point, huh? In that day, their strong cities will be like the deserted places of the wood heights and the hilltops, which they deserted because of the children of Israel.

I think, as I say in the background up above, I think the “they” here refers to the Canaanites. Years ago, you Israelites saw these deserted Canaanite cities. Well, let me tell you.

In the words of that great American philosopher, it's déjà vu all over again. Yogi Berra, yes. You're going to see that happening again, but now it's going to be your cities.

Their strong cities, the Israelites' strong cities, will be like the wooded heights and hilltops that they, the Canaanites, deserted before the children of Israel. Now, what's the first word in verse 10? Because... Does anyone have four? Yeah? We've talked about repetition as something to look for. Here's another thing to look for, cause and effect.

Why are these Israelite cities now going to be deserted? That's the effect. Because, here comes the cause, because of what? They have forgotten God. And now, here's a lovely example of poetry.

They have not remembered the rock of their refuge. So, you've got this synonymous thought in a positive and a negative. They have forgotten, they have not remembered, the same point.

Now, these are important words. They are important because of the way Moses used them in Deuteronomy. We've talked a little bit about Hebrew in the past.

Hebrew doesn't believe that it's possible to separate mental activity and real activity. So, what is it to remember God? It is to obey. If you remember who God is, and you remember what He's done for you, what are you going to do? You're going to do what He wants.

And in the same way, to forget God is to disobey. Now, you see, we in English, we can say, oh yeah, I remember God, but I'm still living like hell. And Moses says you do not remember God.

Oh, I haven't forgotten who God is. I haven't forgotten what He did for me back there 20 years ago. Oh yes, you have.

Or you would not be living the way you're living. And so, Isaiah here is picking up that Deuteronomic usage. You have forgotten the God of your salvation.

You don't remember how He saved you. You have not remembered the rock of your refuge. That's a, again, a lovely figure of speech.

Out in the desert, you are being pursued by a horde of enemies. And it's a flat, gravelly, featureless surface, and you're running like mad. And you come over the top of the hill, and there in the valley is a big, big rock, about 30 feet high.

And the three or four of you do one of those team-building things, you know. Stand on one another's shoulders and pull one another up, and finally, you're up there on top of the rock, and your enemies are running around below, and you're saying, na, na, na, na, na, na. That's what we're talking about here.

The rock of your refuge. He also uses it as the rock of shadow. Again, you're out there in that hot, hot desert.

Oh my, to get in the shade of a big rock, and be protected from that merciless sun. But he says you've obviously forgotten all about that. You've forgotten how God was a place of defense for you.

You've forgotten how God was a place of protection for you. Because of the way you're living. And I say to myself, if I point one finger at you, I'm pointing three at myself.

Where do I forget who he is and what he's done for me? And how do I remember that? Yes? Is this somehow related to forgetting, like denying? Yeah. A professor continued to tell us that there was, and I listened to that for some time, as Christian as I am, I said to him, why do you keep saying that? I just don't understand why you keep trying to tell us not to believe in God. What is your background? And he said, I have been so... He's justifying his own existence.

Yeah, he did remember. Yes, he did. He knew, but he was obviously denying it and trying to get us to follow that.

Yes. Is that kind of what you're saying? Yes. Because he did remember.

He remembered, but he had forgotten. Right. But it's a conscious choice.

That's right. Yeah, yeah. So we can make that kind of distinction, to say, yes, I remember something mentally, but I refuse the consequences, the logical consequences of that memory.

Hebrew is saying, no, you can't. If you have rejected the logical consequences, then in fact, you've forgotten. I often wonder why he did.

Yeah. Because in fact, he came so openly trying to tell us that there was no God. It didn't even relate in the class, because it wasn't a philosophy class.

But I thought... The well-known New Testament writer, Bart Ehrman, is another example of this. He has written now probably 20 books, all with the purpose of tearing down the New Testament. And he grew up in a fundamentalist home, went to Moody Bible College, graduated from Wheaton, and in the process, lost his faith, and now he's on a crusade.

If I'm right to have lost my faith, then everybody else ought to lose their faith, too. Yeah. Professor Bart Ehrman, E-H-R-M-A-N.

He's widely used on the Learning Channel, Discovery, the media love him. All right. Let's push on.

Now, notice what's going on here. We've got an effect. Their cities are destroyed.

We've got a cause, and then we've got another effect. See the, therefore... Again, I've said this 300 times, and if you stick around with me, you'll hear it 300 more times. When you see a, therefore, ask what it's there for.

Because it is signaling a conclusion. Therefore, what? Versus the remainder of verse 10 and verse 11. They're trying to revive themselves by planting it.

That's right. They're trying. Now, here's that harvested field, but they're going to plant new plants, and it's going to be fine, and God says good luck.

Now, I ask you, is that an arbitrary judgment on God's part? I mean, he's just saying, okay, I'm going to punish you. You have forgotten me, and I'm going to punish you. What you're planning is not going to come up, or if it comes up, it's going to die.

That would be an arbitrary punishment. Is it arbitrary? Look at the text, and what the text is saying. Okay, bowing down to another God.

Mm-hmm. Patricia? It's a consequence. It's a consequence.

It's a consequence. This is something that we really, really need to get through our heads. We have the picture, when we read the Old Testament, of this God, who, man, you look at him cross-eyed, he's going to whack you.

But if you make a choice, you have to suffer the consequences. If you make a choice, you have to suffer the consequences. Exactly, exactly.

Now, that's not here in this text, but simply to illustrate the point, if I set out the very best plants I can get, but I'm too lazy to water them, what's going to happen to them? They're going to die. Now, God hates me, doesn't he? No, no. I did not fulfill the conditions that are necessary for that kind of life.

So, it's the same point here. If I build my life on there is no God, I ought not to be real surprised when my life falls apart, because I've left out the essential part of the equation. I don't remember much about algebra, but I do remember that the two parts on either side of the equal sign are supposed to balance.

Well, if you leave out one key component, it'll never balance. Not because God hates you, but because that's the way the world is made. And so it is here, that again and again, God is saying, these are consequences.

It's not that I'm sitting up here in heaven saying, if you do something wrong, I'm going to get you. Consequences. All right.

Now, just because our time is flying, I believe that we begin a new, as it were, chapter in verse 12. Remember, the chapter divisions were put in sometime after 500 AD. All we know is we began to get pieces of manuscripts after 500 AD that have chapter divisions in them we didn't have before then.

And by the time we get a full Bible, which is about the time of Christ, excuse me, about 1000 after Christ, 1000 AD, we've got the chapter divisions in them. So, chapter divisions were not put in when Isaiah wrote the book. So, saying all that, there's a, we've talked about repetition, we've talked about cause and effect.

Another thing to look for is contrasts. What's the contrast in verses 12, 13, and 14? You've got repeated words and concepts in 12 and 13a, what are those? Thunder. Roar.

What does thunder and roaring connote to you? Storm. Yes, although in this case, it's the nations that are doing it. The thunder of the nations.

They thunder like the thundering of the sea. The roar of the nations. They roar like the roaring of mighty waters.

The nations roar like the roaring of many waters. What's the next word? But, he will rebuke them. And what happens? What becomes of these roaring, thundering nations? Like chaff on the wind.

Not a sound, not a sound. Then look at verse 14. I like the first part of it especially.

At evening, what? Terror. And in the morning? They're gone. Reminds me of the verse, weeping endures for a night, but joy comes in the morning.

That's God's world. That's God's world. Yes, trouble, pain, sorrow.

But they're not the end of the story. And so, it is here. Yes, these nations are thundering.

They're roaring in their power. That reminds me of Psalm 2. How the nations rage. And then I like the next line.

He who sits in the heavens will laugh. Here are the nations of earth roaring around. We're going to throw off his chains.

We're going to revolt. We're going to riot. And God says, ha, ha, ha.

He's not threatened. So here is this picture. Here are these mighty nations that we are tempted to fear and to trust.

God says, get your perspective right. They are dust. They are chaff.

However loud they roar, however terrorizing their thunder, in the morning they are no more. All right, let's push on quickly now. What is missing in 18.1? The word for burden or oracle or message? All the others, we've had it, but we haven't had it here.

Many commentaries will say chapter 18 is an oracle against Ethiopia. Not on the surface of it, it isn't. All right, let's look on now.

The land of whirring wings that is beyond the rivers of Cush. The Bible pictures the southern part of Egypt and the northern part of Ethiopia as a place of bees. Now why they did that, we don't know.

But that's the idea. There are those bees buzzing around down there at the very southern edge of the universe. Cush is the very southern edge of the world.

Beyond that, here lie dragons. So, they're down there at the very far southern end of the world. Now what does Cush do? According to verse 2. They send out ambassadors, envoys, and messengers.

And they go to whom? Tall and smooth, feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering whose land the rivers divide. Well, probably that's Mesopotamia over there to the east. So, here's the idea.

Cush is sending messengers. Now, I did not say this on this background. I do for next week.

At this time, Egypt was ruled by Ethiopians, by the people of Cush. So, it may well be we're talking about, well, let's send envoys between Egypt and Assyria. Let's see if we can't come to some deal here.

Maybe we can trust in that. Verse 3. What's God going to do? Verse 3. He's going to raise a signal flag. Here's that signal again.

This word, might as well learn a little Hebrew since you came out on a Monday night. The Hebrew word is nes. N-E-S.

Nes. And it means an ensign flag. It occurs about six times in this book, not very frequently any place else in the Old Testament.

He raises a flag to call the enemies in to trample the vineyard that is full of bitter grapes. The Messiah is the flag who will be raised to call the nations to come and bring the Israelite exiles home. The Messiah is the flag that will be raised to call the nations to come to him.

Isaiah loves flags. So here it is again. God is going to run up a signal flag on the mountains and the inhabitants of the world are supposed to pay attention.

He's going to have a trumpet blown and they're supposed to listen. Well, what are they supposed to hear? Uh-huh. And what does he say? Verse 4. I will remain quiet and look on from my dwelling place like the clear heat in sunshine, like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest.

Hmm. Here are the nations thundering and roaring about what they're going to do in the world. Here are the Ethiopians buzzing around like bees with messages.

And what does God say? I will look on quietly. Again, this is a kind of theme that runs through the book. God's weakness is stronger than the strength of the world.

Later on, he's going to say to the Hebrew people, in quietness and rest is your salvation, but you would not. That's a message for me, I think, and maybe for one or two of you. Such a temptation in this day to be frantically busy.

Got to do this, got to do that, got to do the other thing. And God says, no, I'm the one who has to work. Would you rest in me? Would you allow me to do the work through you? No, no, no, I've got to get on my iPhone here.

I've got to buzz around the world with messages and texts. Before the harvest, when the blossom is over and the flower becomes a ripening grape, he cuts off the shoots with pruning hooks, the spreading branches he lops off and clears away, and they shall all of them be left to the birds of prey on the mountains, to the beasts of the earth. The birds of prey will summer on them, and the beasts of the earth will winter on them.

I think, and I have to say that I'm, I have not had a groundswell of support on this from other commentators, but nevertheless, I think that this section is a kind of a middle piece in all of this, sort of backing us off and looking at the issues again. Not a particular nation, but all the nations that we're tempted to trust and to fear. And God says, get your perspective right.

Stop looking at them. Look at me. I think, especially in this day when we see the decline of the church in North America, I think that might be what God is saying to us.

Look at me, look at me. Let me do whatever work needs to be done here. Now obviously, he expects us to cooperate, but still, the issue is one of perspective.

Verse seven then, at that time, tribute will be brought to the Lord of hosts, from whom? It's the same people, isn't it? The one that the Ethiopians were going to send messages to. Those people are going to come and they're going to bring tribute to me. This is that recurring thought that runs through here.

These two points are being made over and over again. One is, the nations are under judgment from your God, and one day, the nations will worship your God. So why in the world would you trust them? And why in the world would you fear them? Your God.

Now again, I say, it's easy for us to talk about this. We see Christianity, which in the world, is the fastest growing religion by conversion of them all. The Muslims are beating us on the birth rate, but in terms of conversion rate, Christianity is the fastest-growing religion in the world.

So, it's relatively easy for us to look at this and say, no, but Judah, as I've said to you before, is not much bigger than Jesmond County. And for someone to say, all these nations are under judgment from your God, and even more, all these nations are one day going to worship your God, whoa, that took faith. That took faith.

Now it may be that if the decline of the church continues in this country and in North America, as it has, some of you who are in your teens may see a situation a little more like this. Well, how in the world can our God, when as in Britain, 97% don't go to church? Really? Is that true? That's true. It's true.

It was true for Judea, it's true for us. And we need to build our lives there. All right.

Questions? Comments? Observations? Yes? This is off the wall. Oh, good. You can laugh me out here if you want to.

This expression that keeps recurring, 18.2, 18.7, it's also in 55 and in 65, the strong people Paul spoofs in a strange language. Is there any thought in any of the scholarship that this prophecy looks forward to Paul turning west at Troas and of the relatively ready reception of the gospel in North Central Europe and England and ultimately North America, which has been an ascending evangelizing movement? The description fits and the language, of course, is a totally different source from Hebrew.

And I have a note in Tacitus that he says something about this in his Germany and his tribes, but now I couldn't find it when I tried to get it in. Is that totally not supported by anything in this text? I think the answer is yes. The answer is what? The answer is yes, it's not supported.

I think virtually everyone agrees that it refers to the Babylonians, probably. The Assyrians, at least the kings, wore beards, but the Babylonian kings tended to be clean-shaven. And there's also, there are those who argue that this is a connection between Ethiopia and Egypt because the Egyptians were clean-shaven.

It's so strange, the Pharaohs wore a false beard. Figure that one out. Toupee, I can understand.

False beard, no, I can't. So, there's some argument that we're talking about messengers buzzing up and down the Nile rivers between the homeland of the Ethiopian dynasty and where they are now in the north. So usually, it's those two that I'm not aware of anything referring to the more distant future.

Yes? Isn't there a message in here for we evangelicals as we get involved in the culture war at this time that we're not involved in this zero-sum game? Evangelicals, I find, many of us become frightened that we're going to lose. Yes, yes. Isn't this speaking to us? I really believe it is.

I really believe it is. Number one, I think we've got to stay away from as much as possible an attempt to use the political system for our own ends. And number two, we've got to avoid this kind of, oh my goodness, we've got to do something.

The whole house is going to fall down on us. God has been here before. And so yes, I really do believe that this, I will look quietly from my dwelling and that we need to become more centered on him and the certainty of his triumph in his way through us, with us.

But rather than telling God how he needs to save his church, we need to listen to God as to how he intends to do it. I think a consequence of that, in my observation, is in order for us to feel better, we demonize. Yes, yes, yes.

We take on their particular tactics. And love is not a part of it. We no longer can express love.

No, no, no. And they know it. And they know it, yes, yes, yes.

I very much agree with you. I, again, as I say, I'm very conservative politically. And yet, I felt very badly about the kinds of email messages that were circulated during the election that just were out in the bushes in terms of the other side.

And, yes. While I was studying at home, the thought came to me about when the United States went off the gold standard. As I thought about this, when we get away from God's standard, things fall apart.

Many of these things have cracked in. When the United States went off the gold standard, and if we go off the God standard, many of the same kinds of destructive things can happen to us. Yes.

Again, this is a personal thing and observation, but it seems so wrong to politicize some of the issues that we've seen. I mean, we're questioning God. And I see where you're coming from, and very much I think that's what's happening.

Yes. We've politicized these things when, as Christians, there should be no question in our lives about it. Yes.

When we politicize things, we begin to miss God's perspective on the whole issue. Again, these are not simple questions. They're not easy answers, and I don't want to suggest to you that that is the case.

But I do believe that much of what he's saying here about where our focus ought to be is for us. Let me pray.

Father, thank you. Thank you for your word. Thank you for the truth. Thank you for its convicting power as it speaks to us in our own attitudes and behaviors. Thank you, thank you, that at the heart of the universe is rest and quiet. Thank you, Lord. Let your rest and your quietness flow deeply into our souls in these tumultuous days when we see many things around us roaring and thundering, and we're inclined to run here or there or try to solve that problem in this way.

Deliver us from mere passivity, sitting on our hands and saying, well, God, you do whatever you want to. Deliver us from that. But at the same time, oh Lord, let your quietness fill us and breathe out of us as we encounter the world around us.

In your name, we pray, amen.

This is Dr. John Oswalt in his teaching on the book of Isaiah. This is session number nine, Isaiah chapters 17 and 18.