

The Prince of Prophets: An Introduction to Isaiah

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Session: Session 1 (Isaiah Chapter 1)

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. John Oswalt serves as an introduction to the book of Isaiah, focusing on the historical and theological contexts of Isaiah chapter 1. The session explores the overarching theme of servanthood throughout the book and the historical background of the Assyrian expansion. Dr. Oswalt examines the rhetorical structure of Chapter 1, detailing God's indictment of Israel's rebellion, His rejection of hollow ritualism, and His ultimate desire for restoration through cleansing judgment. The lecture highlights Isaiah's major divine titles and warns against relying on empty religiosity instead of active righteousness.

Outline

I. Introduction and Structural Overview of Isaiah

- A. Session Opening and Course Schedule
- B. Isaiah as the "Prince of the Prophets"
 - 1. Potential connection to royal family (access to kings)
 - 2. Most complete compendium of biblical theology
- C. Overarching Structure of Isaiah (Theme of Servanthood)
 - 1. Chapters 1–5: The problem of servanthood revealed
 - 2. Chapter 6: The call to servanthood (the solution)
 - 3. Chapters 7–39: Can God be trusted? (trustworthiness)
 - 4. Chapters 40–53: Motivation to trust God (grace/servant)
 - 5. Chapters 56–66: The revelation of righteousness through grace

II. Historical and Geographical Setting

- A. Nature of Biblical Revelation (Time and Space)
 - 1. Contrast with other holy books containing bare pronouncements
 - 2. God reveals Himself through relationships in specific context
- B. Geographical Context and Dates
 - 1. Composition date: between 739 BC and 701 BC

- 2. Region: Southern Kingdom of Judah
- C. The Assyrian Crisis (Chapters 1–39 Context)
 - 1. Assyria's expansion toward Egypt
 - 2. The Canaanite strip as a trade choke-point
 - 3. Small nations caught in between (Syria vs. Assyria)
 - 4. Key dates of conquest: Israel falls (722 BC), Philistine cities (710-700 BC), Judah besieged (701 BC)
- D. The Babylonian Exile and Return (Chapters 40–66 Context)
 - 1. Fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC
 - 2. Return under Persian rule in 539 BC

III. Theological Debates: Authorship and Unity

- A. Multiple Authorship Theory
 - 1. Historical academic view of three Isaiahs
 - 2. Rejection of long-term committee authorship (camel design metaphor)
- B. The Reality of Prophecy
 - 1. Critique of modern views that deny predictive prophecy
 - 2. Oswalt's defense of single authorship via divine inspiration

IV. Introduction to Chapters 1–5 (Structure of "Interchange")

- A. Non-chronological compilation serving as an introduction
- B. Alternating patterns of Hope and Judgment
 - 1. Positive view of all nations coming to Zion
 - 2. Negative view of coming judgment
 - 3. Chapter 6 as the bridge or solution to this tension

V. Detailed Exegesis of Isaiah Chapter 1

- A. Introduction: The Vision (Verse 1)
 - 1. Meaning of "vision" (engaging and pictographic)
 - 2. Passionate involvement of the prophet
- B. The Courtroom Scene (Verses 2–3)
 - 1. Heaven and earth as obedient witnesses/jury
 - 2. Israel's rebellion contrasted with the obedience of the ox and donkey
 - 3. The nature of rebellion versus simple disobedience (intentional stubbornness)
- C. The Tragic Consequences of Rebellion (Verses 4–9)
 - 1. Complete physical and moral decay (the beaten body metaphor)
 - 2. The collapsed harvest shack in a cucumber field
 - 3. The Lord of Hosts leaving a small remnant to avoid Sodom and Gomorrah's fate
- D. Rulers of Sodom and Gomorrah (Verses 10–17)

1. Contrast and connection from Sodom and Gomorrah
2. God's rejection of hollow religious ritual (iniquity and solemn assembly)
3. Call for active justice and care for the vulnerable (fatherless, widows)

E. The Call to Reason and Contrast (Verses 18–23)

1. Crimson sins made white as snow
2. Obedience leads to eating the good; rebellion leads to being eaten by the sword
3. Faithless city (justice turned to dross and mixed wine)

F. Cleansing Judgment and Restoration (Verses 24–27)

1. The Mighty One of Israel turning His hand against His own people
2. Judgment as a process of refining (smelting dross) rather than total destruction
3. Restoration of judges and righteousness as the final goal

G. The End of the Chapter: Contrast of Rebels (Verses 28–31)

1. Warning against pagan tree and garden worship (the withered oak)
2. Return to the present reality of judgment for the unrepentant