

Title: Isaiah Session 3: Isaiah Chapters 4 and 5

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. John Oswalt focuses on Isaiah chapters 4 and 5, continuing the thematic interchange between positive divine hope and negative historical judgment. The session explores the promise of a transformed, holy remnant cleansed by the spirit of judgment and burning, contrasting it with the current corrupt state of Judah illustrated by the Song of the Vineyard. Dr. Oswalt details the six woes of social and moral decay, emphasizing how human self-exaltation leads to meaninglessness and triggers the unstoppable instrument of Assyrian judgment.

Outline

I. Introduction and Structural Concept of Interchange

- **Relationship between Isaiah 4:2–6 and 5:1–30:** The juxtaposition of divine blessing and historical judgment.
- **The Concept of Interchange:** Alternating back and forth between positive statements of hope (what is to be) and negative indictments of judgment (what currently is).
- **The Two Israels:** The contrast between the deeply corrupted Israel of the present and the restored, holy Israel of the future.

II. The Transformed Remnant (Isaiah 4:2–6)

- **The 'Branch of the Lord' (Verse 2):**
 - **Messianic interpretations in** Jeremiah 33:15 and Zechariah 6:12–13 where the 'branch' clearly denotes the Messiah.
 - **Poetic parallelism in Isaiah:** The 'branch of the Lord' is parallel to 'the fruit of the land,' promising literal or spiritual agricultural fruitfulness and abundance.
- **The Holy Remnant (Verse 3):** Contrast with the stench and corruption of Chapter 3, promising that survivors in Zion will be called holy.
- **The Bloodstains of Jerusalem (Verse 4):** Cleansing the violence permitted and sponsored by the ruling class.
- **Mission vs. Condition:**
 - **Isaiah 2:1–5** highlights Israel's mission (nations coming to Mount Zion for Torah).

- **Isaiah 4:2–6** highlights Israel's condition (inner holiness and restoration).
- **The Nature and Meaning of Holiness:**
 - **Covenant context:** Exodus 19:5–6 and Deuteronomy 28:9–10 mandate holiness as the expected condition of God's people.
 - **Pagan versus Biblical Holiness:** In paganism, holiness means mere 'otherness' without moral content. In biblical faith, holiness is defined by Yahweh's moral character, requiring total transformation into His likeness.
- **The Means of Cleansing:**
 - **Performed by** a 'spirit of judgment' and a 'spirit of fire/burning.'
 - **The Hebrew word Ruach** has multiple context-dependent meanings: wind, breath, or spirit. The imagery here represents a cleansing firestorm.
 - **Judgment as the only pathway to hope:** Cleansing the people through the refining fire of the Exile, rather than destroying them.
- **The New Exodus Imagery (Verses 5–6):**
 - **God creating** a cloud by day and a flaming fire by night over Mount Zion, directly echoing the wilderness journey.
 - **History as a 'Judges Cycle':** The downward helical pattern of blessing, pride, idolatry, oppression, crying out, and deliverance. The return from exile is treated as a new Exodus and a fresh start.
 - **Conditions for divine shelter:** Holiness and cleansing are prerequisites for expecting God's protection and guidance.
 - **The Shekinah:** Based on the Hebrew consonants SH-K-N (to tabernacle/shelter). While the term does not appear in the Hebrew Bible, it is prominent in the Aramaic paraphrases of the OT and informs NT theology.

III. The Song of the Vineyard (Isaiah 5:1–7)

- **The Beloved's Vineyard (Verses 1–2):**
 - **The pathos of God:** Isaiah enters into the passionate, loving, and jealous heart of God.
 - **Rhetorical connection:** Judah's rocky soil was primarily suited only for vineyards, making the metaphor deeply relatable to local farmers.
 - **The effort of cultivation:** A three-year process of clearing stones, building walls, planting choice vines, constructing watchtowers, and digging a winepress.
 - **The tragic outcome:** Yielding wild, bitter grapes despite the finest care.
- **The Indictment and Sentence (Verses 3–6):**
 - **The shift to the first-person 'I':** The prophet's identity merges completely with God's voice.
 - **The judgment:** Removing the hedge, breaking down the wall, abandoning the vineyard to briars, thorns, and drought.
- **The Revelation (Verse 7):**

- **A Nathan-and-David moment:** 'You are the vineyard.'
- **Hebrew wordplay:** Contrasting Mishpat (judgment/order) with Mishpach (bloodshed), and Tzedakah (righteousness) with Zaakah (a cry of distress).

IV. The Six Bitter Grapes: The Woes of Judah (Isaiah 5:8–23)

- **The Meaning of 'Woe':** A cry of grief, sorrow, and regret (equivalent to the archaic 'alas' or 'how sad'), not vindictive glee.
- **Woe 1 (Verses 8–10):** Greed and Covetousness. Accumulating land and houses at the expense of others, resulting in empty houses and failed crop yields.
- **Woe 2 (Verses 11–12):** Self-Indulgence and Revelry. Pursuing alcohol and music while completely ignoring the deeds of the Lord.
- **Woe 3 (Verses 18–19):** Mockery and Persistent Sin. Dragging sin along with 'cart ropes' and daring the Holy One of Israel to bring His judgment.
- **Woe 4 & 5 (Verses 20–21):** Moral Inversion and Arrogance. Reversing the moral order by calling evil good, good evil, darkness light, and light darkness, while being wise in their own eyes.
- **Woe 6 (Verses 22–23):** Corrupted Leadership. Leaders who are 'heroes' at drinking wine but pervert justice, accepting bribes to acquit the guilty and deprive the innocent.

V. Cause and Effect: The Certainty of Judgment (Isaiah 5:13–25)

- **Exile for Lack of Knowledge (Verse 13):** Lack of intimate, personal knowledge of God and His ways, not just intellectual information.
- **The Humiliation of Arrogance (Verses 14–15):** The underworld opening its mouth to swallow Jerusalem's pride; human self-exaltation ending in meaninglessness.
- **The Exaltation of Holiness (Verse 16):** 'The holy God shows himself holy in righteousness'—by doing the right thing under all circumstances.
- **The Desolation of the Land (Verses 17, 24):** Lambs grazing in the ruins of the rich. The roots of the rebellious rotting and their blossoms turning to dust because they rejected the Torah and despised God's word.

VI. The Instrument of Judgment: The Lordship of History (Isaiah 5:26–30)

- **Historical Setting:** The rise of Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria post-745 BC, marching toward Egypt.
- **God's Whistle (Verse 26):** God summoning the pagan empire of Assyria to execute His judgment on His own vineyard.
- **The Unstoppable Army (Verses 27–29):** Vivid details of the Assyrian force—tireless, vigilant, with sharp arrows, bent bows, horses with hooves of flint, and wheels like a whirlwind, roaring like lions.
- **The Final Darkness (Verse 30):** A total eclipse of light. Rejecting God's light results in absolute darkness and distress across the land.