

Title: Isaiah Session 4: Isaiah Chapter 6

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. John Oswalt focuses on Isaiah chapter 6, examining Isaiah's personal call and cleansing as the theological solution to the tension established in the first five chapters of the book. The session covers the historical context of King Uzziah's death in 739 BC, the rising threat of the Assyrian Empire, and the dramatic vision of God's transcendent holiness and glory filling the temple. Dr. Oswalt details Isaiah's conviction of uncleanness, his painful purification through the burning coal from the altar, and his willing response to a difficult, hardening prophetic mission. Finally, the lecture highlights the persistent theme of hope, symbolized by the 'holy seed' remaining as a stump in the midst of complete historical desolation.

Outline

I. Introduction: Isaiah Chapter 6 as a Theological Solution

A. Density of the Text: The chapter is packed with profound, highly significant wording; no word is unnecessary.

B. The Theological Placement of Isaiah's Call: Chapter 6 serves as a theological rather than chronological explanation of how the corrupt Israel of Chapters 1–5 can become the pure, holy Israel of the promised future.

C. The Remedy for Rebellion: The wind of judgment and refining fire introduced in Chapter 4 find their practical realization in the personal transformation story of the prophet himself.

II. Historical and Geographical Setting

A. The Division of the Kingdoms: Divided monarchy background (Solomon's kingdom divided circa 930 BC) between Israel (Northern ten tribes) and Judah (Southern tribes).

B. The Wealth and Power Disparity: The Northern Kingdom (Israel) possessed greater commercial wealth, arable land, military power, and controlled the main trade route to Egypt.

1. Judah as the "weak sister": Judah was physically weaker and agriculturally limited mostly to growing grapes.

2. Spiritual conditions: Israel fell first (722 BC) after 200 years of complete apostasy, whereas Judah's sporadic revivals preserved a faithful core of believers for 350 years.

C. The Assyrian Threat: Assyrian expansion under Tiglath-Pileser III (starting in 745 BC) created a highly threatening environment as the empire marched toward Egypt down local trade highways.

III. The Crisis of Human Leadership: "In the Year that King Uzziah Died"

A. Significance of the Date: The date marks a vital historical transition (739 BC), removing the illusion of security.

1. **King Uzziah's long reign:** Reigned for 52 years, bringing immense military success and administrative stability.
2. **The tragic fall of Uzziah:** Stricken with leprosy after attempting to offer priestly sacrifices (circa 750 BC), leaving Jotham as the regent front man.

B. The Illusion of Security: When the successful king dies amidst the bearing-down Assyrian juggernaut, the rug is pulled out, forcing Isaiah to look up and see the ultimate King.

C. Spiritual Principle of Sanctification: Human self-reliance ("the king") must die within our lives before true sanctification and recognition of our deep need for personal holiness can occur.

IV. The Vision of the Transcendent King

A. The Divine Throne: Sitting on a throne as the ruler in ultimate control of history.

1. **"High and lifted up":** The phrase occurs three times in Isaiah (twice for God in 6:1 and 57:15, and once for the Messiah/Servant in 52:13), uniting the themes of divinity and messianic service.
2. **The massive hem of His robe:** Only the hem of His robe is described, filling the 75-foot-high temple, symbolizing that God is completely beyond physical description and human control.

B. The Seraphim: Meaning "burning ones," depicted as twisting flames of holiness around the throne.

1. **Structure of six wings:** Covering faces and feet (symbolic of the mortal body) to express profound humility and a refusal to look directly upon the blazing, transcendent holiness of God, while using two wings to fly and serve.
2. **The cry of "Holy, holy, holy" and the filling of the earth with His glory:** Holiness denotes God's absolute, other-than character and moral purity, while glory is His heavy, solid reality put into the cosmos.

C. The Shaking and the Smoke: The threshold of the doorways shook and the house filled with smoke, representing a grand, unmanageable mystery that evokes awe and terror.

V. Deep Conviction, Purification, and Call

A. The Cry of "Woe is Me": Coming into contact with the living God immediately produces a profound recognition of uncleanness rather than simple mortality.

1. **Deep conviction:** The word "undone" or "lost" signifies being completely dissolved and losing one's self-reliance in God's presence.
2. **Cultural and personal identification:** He identifies with his people's unclean lips and the systemic national corruption of a compromised culture.

B. The Initiative of Grace and Purification by Fire: Recognizing the absolute hopelessness of his state, Isaiah does not even ask for cleansing, yet God acts in grace.

1. The burning coal: The seraph brings a seared, burning coal from the high altar to touch Isaiah's lips.

2. Significance of fire: The fire painfully purifies, consumes dross, and transforms the prophet, symbolizing the filling of the Holy Spirit.

C. The Opened Hearing and Willing Response: Only after his lips are cleansed and his ears are opened does Isaiah hear God's voice asking, "Whom shall I send?"

1. Grateful surrender: Isaiah responds immediately with "Here am I, send me!" in grateful reaction to the deep experience of grace.

VI. The Hard Prophetic Commission and Ultimate Hope

A. The Hardening Message: Isaiah is commanded to preach a message that will harden, blind, and deafen the hearts of his rebellious contemporaries.

1. The purpose of the message: A soft, superficial message would result in false conversion, whereas preaching the absolute truth drives a stubborn generation further away but preserves the true word.

2. New Testament frequency: This passage is the most frequently quoted Old Testament text in the New Testament, used by Jesus and the disciples to make sense of opposition to their own ministries.

B. The Prophet's Lament: Isaiah asks "How long, O Lord?" rather than questioning why he was chosen.

1. Desolation of the land: Preach until the cities lie waste, the houses are empty, the population is exiled, and the land is completely devastated.

2. Repeated judgment: Even if a tenth of the population remains, it will be burned again.

C. The Little Green Shoot: The ultimate outcome of his ministry is a little green shoot—the "holy seed"—sprouting out of the burned-out stump of the felled tree, representing the enduring hope of the remnant.