

Isaiah Session 9: Isaiah Chapters 17 and 18

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. John Oswalt covers Isaiah chapters 17 and 18, focusing on the geopolitical and spiritual realities of Damascus, Israel, and Cush. The session explains how Israel's impending judgment serves as a warning against Judah trusting in temporary worldly alliances instead of their Holy Creator. Dr. Oswalt emphasizes the theological contrast between the sovereign Maker of all things and the idols made by human hands, urging believers to seek divine rest. Ultimately, the lecture highlights how God remains sovereign and quiet in the face of roaring nations, drawing all peoples to eventually bring Him tribute.

Outline

I. Introduction and Structural Review

- **A. Goal of the Course:** To provide a road map and understanding of how the entire book of Isaiah fits together to prevent getting lost in its immense size.
- **B. Chapters 1–6 (The Call to Servanthood):** Demonstrates the problem of a sinful, corrupt Israel and the promise of purification modeled after Isaiah's own call as a servant of God.
- **C. Chapters 7–39 (The Theme of Trust):** Trust serves as the foundational basis of servanthood.
 - **1. Chapters 7–12:** King Ahaz's failure to trust God during the Syro-Ephraimite crisis, choosing instead to trust Assyria (analogized to three mice fighting and one hiring the cat).
 - **2. The Messianic Promise:** A helpless green shoot coming out of the burned-out stump of Jesse represents the ultimate hope after judgment.
 - **3. Chapters 13–35 ('Lessons in Trust'):** Programmed learning to prepare Judah for Hezekiah's trust exam in chapters 36–39.
 - **4. Chapters 13–23:** Judgment oracles against foreign nations (starting with Babylon as the symbol of universal pride, then narrow-focusing on Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Syria, and Israel) to warn Judah against worldly alliances.

II. The Oracle Against Damascus and Israel (Isaiah 17:1–11)

- **A. The Merging of Damascus and Israel (Verses 1–3):** Although directed against Damascus (capital of Syria), the oracle immediately includes Ephraim (the northern kingdom of Israel).

- 1. The alliance between Syria and Israel against Judah (from the Syro-Ephraimite crisis) explains why they are judged together.
- 2. The dual purpose: teaching Judah that they neither need to fear these neighboring nations nor trust them.
- **B. The Harvest Metaphor of Judgment (Verses 4–6):** Israel's judgment described as a harvested wheat field or a beaten olive tree where only a tiny, unreachable remnant is left (two or three berries on the highest bough). Reminding Judah of the futility of trusting a nation destined for imminent desolation.
- **C. The Wake-Up and Turn to the Creator (Verses 7–8):** Written in prose, likely inserted to highlight the spiritual conclusion of judgment.
 - 1. 'In that day,' the remnant will look to their 'Maker, the Holy One of Israel,' recognizing their creaturely status.
 - 2. The definition of holiness: God's absolute otherness in His essence and moral character.
 - 3. The rejection of idols: A stark choice between trusting the transcendent Creator or trusting the works of one's own hands.
- **D. The Cause of Desolation: Forgetting God (Verses 9–11):** Israel's strong cities will become deserted like those of the Canaanites before them.
 - 1. Cause-and-effect relationship: The desolation is the direct consequence of forgetting the 'God of your salvation' and the 'rock of your refuge.'
 - 2. The Hebrew concept of remembering: Mental activity is inseparable from obedience; to remember is to obey, and to forget is to live in disobedience.
 - 3. The futility of human striving (Verses 10b–11): Trying to cultivate new pagan plantings will only result in a harvest of grief and incurable pain. This is a moral consequence of leaving God out of the equation.

III. The Roaring Nations and God's Rebuke (Isaiah 17:12–14)

- **A. The Thunder and Roar of the Nations:** Vivid poetic imagery of the nations thundering like the roaring of many waters, representing the chaotic power of worldly empires.
- **B. The Sovereign Rebuke:** God's effortless control: At His rebuke, the thundering nations flee like chaff on the wind or whirling dust.
- **C. The Overnight Reversal (Verse 14):** Terror in the evening, but by morning they are gone, demonstrating that worldly trouble, though frightening, is fleeting in light of God's sovereign triumph.

IV. The Oracle Regarding Cush/Ethiopia (Isaiah 18:1–7)

- **A. The Land of Whirring Wings (Verse 1):** Refers to the southern edge of the known world (Cush/Ethiopia), pictured as a place of buzzing insects beyond the Nile.
- **B. The Envoys and Messages (Verse 2):** Cush sending ambassadors in papyrus vessels down the water to arrange political/military alliances during the Assyrian crisis, within the context of the Ethiopian (25th) Dynasty ruling over Egypt.

- **C. The Signal Flag and Trumpet (Verse 3):** God raising a 'nes' (signal flag/banner) and blowing a trumpet, calling the entire world to pay attention to His work rather than human diplomatic maneuvering.
- **D. The Sovereign Quietness of God (Verses 4–6):** God declares, 'I will remain quiet and look on from my dwelling place,' comparing His presence to the clear heat of sunshine or a cloud of dew in harvest. Contrast with the frantic buzzing of human envoys shows that His weakness is stronger than human strength.
- **E. The Bringing of Tribute (Verse 7):** At that time, these very people from the ends of the earth (Cush/Ethiopia) will bring tribute to Mount Zion, the place of the Name of the Lord of Hosts, demonstrating that the very nations under judgment will one day worship the God of Israel.

V. Contemporary Application and the Church

- **A. Defining the Modern Parallel of Israel:** Ancient Israel's direct equivalent is the global Church, not any secular nation like the United States.
- **B. Warning Against Trusting Worldly Methods:** The danger of the Church relying on secular demographics, commercial fundraising businesses, or political power groups to do God's work.
 - 1. Church activism must avoid substituting political levers for true spiritual trust in God's rest and timing.
 - 2. Cooperating with God requires an attitude of quiet confidence rather than frantic human self-reliance.
- **C. The Danger of Fear and Demonization in the Culture War:** Evangelicals often become frightened of losing, leading them to adopt the world's tactics of demonization instead of expressing Christian love. Believers must listen to how God intends to save His church rather than telling Him how to do it.