

Isaiah Session 14: Woe to Those Who Will Not Wait (Isaiah Chapters 28 and 29)

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. John Oswalt covers Isaiah chapters 28 and 29, introducing the third section of the "Lessons in Trust" division entitled "Woe to Those Who Will Not Wait." The session contrasts the proud, drunken leadership of Ephraim and Jerusalem with the secure foundation stone laid in Zion and the wisdom of the sovereign Creator. Dr. Oswalt details how human self-gratification and reliance on worldly alliances lead to spiritual blindness and empty ritualism, while emphasizing that divine judgment is never God's intended last word but a refining means to restoration.

Outline

I. Introduction and Structural Context

A. Opening Prayer and Devotion

1. Prayer emphasizing God's goodness, unchanging nature, and the desire to understand His Word.
2. Devotional illustration: Francis Havergal's hymn "All for Jesus" written on February 4th at Ardley House, England.
3. Consecration and sanctification as the power behind winning others to Christ.

B. Overarching Structure of the "Lessons in Trust" (Chapters 13–35)

1. First Section (Chapters 13–23): Theme is "Don't trust the nations," presenting oracles of judgment to demonstrate that the nations are under judgment and will ultimately turn to God.
2. Second Section (Chapters 24–27): Theme is "God is the sovereign actor in history," emphasizing that God is in absolute control rather than merely reacting to world empires.
3. Third Section (Chapters 28–33): Theme is "Woe to those who will not wait," highlighting that waiting is the practical Hebrew synonym for active trust.
4. Fourth Section (Chapters 34–35): Conclusion to the lessons in trust.

C. Historical Chronology and Context

1. Chapter 6 is dated to approximately 739 BC, while chapters 36–39 occur around 701 BC.
2. Fall of Samaria (722 BC): The capital of the Northern Kingdom falls, leaving Judah physically isolated with the Assyrian border just six miles north of Jerusalem.
3. Geopolitical threat: Assyria is marching down the coast road toward Egypt (the primary goal/pot of gold), threatening Judah and Philistia which lie caught in their rear.
4. Timeframe of chapters 28–33: Approximately 710 to 701 BC, as the terror of Assyria's brutal rule mounts steadily.
5. Realization of Isaiah's earlier 735 BC warnings: Ahaz's past failure to trust God results in Assyria flooding Judah "up to the neck."

D. The Meaning and Structure of "Woe"

1. Hebrew term "woe" (oy, translated "ah" or "woe" in ESV, or the archaic "alas") conveys deep grief and mourning over an impending tragedy or funeral rather than vindictive glee.
2. Six specific woes structure this subdivision: 28:1, 29:1, 29:15, 30:1, 31:1, and 33:1 (with no woe beginning chapter 32).
3. Two structural patterns to watch for:
 - a. Increasing specificity in the woes regarding the exact nature of Judah's political and moral failure.
 - b. Transition in proportion: starting with mostly judgment in chapter 28 and moving to mostly hope by chapter 33.

II. The Proud Crown of Ephraim and the True Crown (Isaiah 28:1–13)

A. The Judgment of Samaria's Drunkards (28:1–4)

1. Ephraim code word: Refers to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, indicating this prophecy was delivered before the fall of Samaria in 722 BC.
2. Wreath metaphor: Samaria was built on a hill at the head of a rich valley, with its crenellated city walls resembling a crown/wreath on a partygoer's head.
3. Arrogance and drunkenness: The leaders are proud and drunk. Arrogance makes them believe they can handle their self-indulgence, making them look like fools while the world laughs at them.
4. Sudden destruction: The proud crown is trodden underfoot and swallowed up as quickly as a first-ripe fig before summer, with its celebration wreath ending up trampled in the mud.

B. The True Crown of Glory (28:5–6)

1. Complete contrast: On that day, the Lord of Hosts will be a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty for the remnant.
2. Divine gifts: God as King will establish "Mishpat" (divine order, legal equity, and cosmic design) for those sitting in judgment, and strength for those turning back the battle.

C. The Drunkenness and Baby Talk of the Leadership (28:7–13)

1. Systemic corruption: The priests, prophets, and leaders reel with wine, stagger with strong drink, reel in vision, and stumble in giving judgment.
2. Tables of vomit: The imagery of total physical and moral degradation, with no clean space left.
3. Infantile instruction: Because the leaders have failed to grow, they reduce the message to baby talk—"Kav Vakav, Kav Vakav, Leiv V'leiv, Leiv V'leiv" (infantile nonsense syllables/letters used to teach basic reading rather than mature spiritual truth).
4. Strange lips (28:11): Since the leaders refuse to hear God's simple instruction for rest, God will speak to them through the strange Semitic tongue of the Assyrian conquerors.
5. Contemporary application: God still uses "strange-lipped" peoples (such as modern-day geopolitical crises) to speak to nations blinded by materialism, pride, and the passion for entertainment.

III. The Covenant with Death and the Foundation Stone (Isaiah 28:14–29)

A. The Warning to Jerusalem's Scoffers (28:14–15)

1. Editorial pull: Isaiah or his editors take the fulfilled sermon against Samaria and apply it directly to Jerusalem (~710 BC) as an urgent warning.
2. Definition of a "scoffee" or "fool": The worst biblical condemnation—someone who not only does wrong but actively mocks the right.
3. Covenant with death: Jerusalem's leaders boast of making an agreement with Sheol/death (either a sarcastic reference to Egypt, or a literal pact with the Canaanite god of death, "Mot") to escape the overflowing scourge.
4. Refuge in lies: Worldly security (military strength, money, material accumulation, gated communities) is a self-deceptive refuge that prevents facing reality.

B. The Antidote: The Precious Cornerstone (28:16–22)

1. God's response: Laying a tested, precious cornerstone as a sure foundation in Zion (pointing directly to Jesus Christ).
2. Promise of faith: "Whoever believes will not be in haste" (paraphrased by Eugene Peterson as "a trusting life won't topple").
3. Absolute trust prevents frantic rushing to worldly "Egypt" to solve spiritual problems.

C. Graphic Illustration: The Farmer's Wisdom (28:23–29)

1. Extended object lesson: One of Isaiah's signature literary devices (seen in the Chapter 3 finery catalog and the Chapter 5 vineyard).
2. Natural order: An uneducated, basic farmer is smart enough to know that the physical world operates in structured ways—one does not harrow and plant before plowing, nor plant in the hot summer.
3. Spiritual application: If a farmer can easily understand and align with the laws of nature, why can't the educated scoffers of Jerusalem recognize and align with God's moral order?

4. Conclusion: This wisdom comes from the Lord, who is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom.

IV. The Judgment and Hope of Ariel (Isaiah 29:1–14)

A. The Humiliation of Jerusalem (29:1–4)

1. Sarcastic designation: "Ariel" represents Jerusalem, meaning either the "city of God" or a temple "hearth."
2. Hollow ritualism: Letting the annual feast cycles run their round is useless, as God will bring the city low, causing their speech to whisper weakly from the dust like a ghost.
3. Eradicating the false assumption that God is dependent on Israel's temple sacrifices or physical structures for His existence.

B. The Sudden Transition to Hope (29:5–8)

1. Divine intervention: In an instant, the multitude of foreign enemies will be dispersed like small dust and passing chaff by the Lord of Hosts.
2. Vision of the night: The frantic attack of the roaring nations will vanish like a fleeting dream of an empty feast.

C. The Intended End of Judgment

1. Central theological principle: Judgment is never God's intended last word.
2. Judgment is always designed to lead to repentance, refining, cleansing, and spiritual renewal rather than absolute destruction.

D. Spiritual Blindness and Lip-Service (29:9–14)

1. Self-induced blindness: The people are drunk and stagger, but with spiritual pride rather than wine, having a spirit of deep sleep poured over them.
2. Sealed book metaphor: The vision of truth is unreadable, functioning like a sealed scroll to the literate, and dismissed as unreadable by the illiterate.
3. Heart-rebellion (29:13): "This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me."
4. Motivation of behavior: Distinguishing between outward behavior driven by mere habit, human rules, and pride, versus a godly life that flows out of deep love and relationship with the Savior.