

Title: Isaiah Session 19: Isaiah Chapters 38 and 39

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. John Oswalt covers Isaiah chapters 38 and 39, marking the transition from the Assyrian crisis to the long-term prospect of the Babylonian exile. The session examines King Hezekiah's terminal illness, his heartfelt prayer for recovery on the basis of his faithful walk, and God's merciful grant of an extra fifteen years of life confirmed by a supernatural sign on the sun-steps. Dr. Oswalt analyzes Hezekiah's subsequent spiritual failure when he pridefully displays his royal wealth to Babylonian envoys rather than testifying to God's glory. Ultimately, the lecture highlights how even the best human leaders are fallible and mortal, underscoring the necessity of looking beyond human rulers to the true divine Messiah.

Outline

I. Introduction and Structural Context

- A. Opening prayer thanking God for creation's order, rain, and the written Word.
- B. Structural positioning of chapters 36–39 within the book's architecture:
 - 1. Mirror image of chapters 7–12 (the Ahaz narratives).
 - 2. Ahaz was challenged to trust God in a crisis and refused, leading to judgment.
 - 3. Hezekiah passed the examination in chapters 36–37 by trusting God in a much larger crisis, resulting in supernatural deliverance from Assyria.
- C. Chapters 38 and 39 serve as a downer transition showing human mortality and fallibility.

II. Chronological and Historical Issues (Chapters 38–39)

- A. The Date of the Babylonian Embassy:
 - 1. Merodach-Baladan was a Babylonian rebel who led multiple uprisings over many years.
 - 2. He was likely not active or alive in 701 BC during the Sennacherib siege.
 - 3. Geopolitical events in chapters 38 and 39 most likely occurred around 710 BC, about nine to ten years before the events of chapters 36 and 37.
- B. Discrepancies in Hezekiah's Reign Dates:

1. First set: Reign began ~726 BC (before Samaria's fall) and ended ~696 BC. The 15-year extension would be granted in 710 BC.
2. Second set: Reign began ~716 BC and ended ~686 BC. The 15-year extension would be granted in 701 BC.
3. No clean way to reconcile these biblical dates; Isaiah placed them out of chronological order on purpose to serve a specific theological transition.

III. Hezekiah's Illness and Prayer of Faithfulness (Isaiah 38:1–9)

A. The Unconditional Pronouncement: "Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover" (38:1).

B. The Nature of God's Announcements:

1. Implicit qualification: announcements of doom are often pedagogically meant to get a person's attention rather than act as immutable fates (e.g., Jonah's sermon to Nineveh).
2. Interactive relationship: the walk with God is a dynamic, living relationship, not a static lockstep. God is a personal being willing to adjust His actions in response to human pleas.

C. The Elements of Hezekiah's Faithful Walk (38:2–3):

1. Walking before God: The imagery of the sheep walking before the shepherd (Genesis 17:1 parallel). Life with God is a metaphorical, long-term journey or walk.
2. Walking in Truth and Faithfulness: Relational reliability and dependability. "Truth" in Hebrew is an active verb of being reliable.
3. Serving with a Whole Heart:
 - a. The Hebrew root is shared with Shalom, representing wholeness, integration, and undividedness.
 - b. Contrast with Solomon, whose heart was divided by foreign wives in his old age, leading him astray.
 - c. The heart as the core of human personality (thinking, feeling, deciding) belonging completely to God.
 - d. "Christian perfection" as undivided belonging rather than infallible human performance.
4. Doing what is good in God's eyes: seeking divine approval over self-satisfaction.

IV. Divine Response and the Sun-Steps Sign (Isaiah 38:5–22)

A. The 15-Year Extension of Life:

1. Isaiah has to immediately turn back and announce the extension of life before even leaving the palace courtyard.
2. God promises to deliver Hezekiah and the city of Jerusalem from the Assyrian threat, indicating a pre-701 BC timeline.

B. The Sign on the Sun-Steps of Ahaz: the shadow moving backward ten steps as a supernatural confirmation of God's promise.

C. Hezekiah's Writing / Poem of Mortality (38:10–20):

1. Surprisingly somber tone, focusing extensively on human mortality rather than pure celebration.
2. Detailed reflections on the brevity and fragility of life (swallow, crane, and dove imagery).
3. Realization of God's refining purpose: "it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness" (38:17) to refocus his life on what matters.
4. Demonstrates that Hezekiah, despite his genuine goodness, is a mortal man who must eventually face death.

V. The Babylonian Embassy and Hezekiah's Failure (Isaiah 39)

A. The Pretext of the Visit (39:1):

1. Merodach-Baladan sends letters and a gift under the guise of hearing about Hezekiah's illness and recovery.
2. The physical distance: 600 miles straight across the desert, or 1,000 miles via the Euphrates road.

B. The Spiritual Failure of Self-Aggrandizement (39:2):

1. Hezekiah is flattered by the attention of a major sophisticated power (Babylon).
2. He shows the envoys all of his physical treasures, armaments, and storehouses.
3. The failure: Hezekiah seeks to impress the world with material assets (which they already had) instead of declaring the glory of Yahweh, which they did not have.
4. The contrast with the global mission in Chapter 2, where nations flow to Zion to learn God's Torah.

VI. The Prophecy of Babylonian Exile and the Fallibility of Man (39:3–8)

A. Isaiah's Interrogation and Sentence:

1. Isaiah asks what the men saw, and Hezekiah admits showing them everything with no exclusions.
2. Prophetic sentence: The days are coming when everything stored up by Hezekiah's fathers will be carried away to Babylon.
3. Specific curse: Hezekiah's own descendants will be taken away to be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon, cutting off the royal Davidic offspring.

B. Hezekiah's Complacent Reaction (39:8):

1. He calls the word "good" because he thinks: "There will be peace and security in my days".
2. Revealing that Hezekiah is not the ultimate Messiah; he is fallible, self-interested, and short-sighted.

C. Theological Transition to Chapters 40–66:

1. Establishing that trust must be a lifelong way of living, not just a one-time response to a crisis.
2. Setting the stage for Chapters 40–66, which are addressed to the future exiles in Babylon.

3. The search for a Messiah must look beyond human perfectibility to the divine Servant.