

Isaiah Session 23: Isaiah Chapters 47 and 48

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. John Oswalt focuses on Isaiah chapters 47 and 48, marking the conclusion of the "Grace Motive for Servanthood" section. Dr. Oswalt contrasts the prideful downfall of Babylon into enslavement with the gracious restoration of Israel from exile. The session examines the futility of Babylonian sorcery, the danger of academic self-exaltation, and the necessity of cultivating a true "fear of the Lord" rather than a superficial covenant relationship. Ultimately, the lecture highlights predictive prophecy as the ultimate proof of God's sovereign divinity and issues a persistent call for His distracted people to listen and prepare for His "new thing."

Outline

I. Introduction and Structural Context

- A. Opening Prayer and Devotion: Thanksgiving for physical life, the ultimate gift of Jesus Christ, and a plea to avoid looking in the mirror of the Word only to forget our spiritual reality.
- B. Placement in the Book: Bounded by the division of "Grace, Motive, and Means for Servanthood" (Chapters 40–55).
 - 1. Chapters 40–48 focus on Grace as the motive for servanthood.
 - 2. Chapters 49–55 focus on Grace as the means of servanthood.
- C. The Dual Focus of Session 23: Chapter 47 addresses the fall of Babylon, while Chapter 48 speaks directly to the complacent exiles of Israel.

II. Chapter 47: The Humiliation of Lady Babylon

- A. From Queen to Slave (47:1-4):
 - 1. Babylon's throne is built on the quicksand of helpless, ineffective idols that have failed her.
 - 2. Self-exaltation inevitably leads to deep humiliation, reversing her tender and delicate royal status into the nakedness and hard labor of a slave.
 - 3. Re-affirming the Actor (47:4): God is named as Israel's Redeemer, the Lord of Hosts (heaven's armies), and the Holy One of Israel.
- B. Divine Vengeance versus Human Revenge (47:6):

1. Defining Revenge: A selfish, escalatory attempt to pay back someone who hurt me, creating a downward cycle of violence.
2. Defining Vengeance: Just punishment administered by an objective third party on behalf of the helpless.
3. Romans 12/13 connection: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." Leaving payback in God's hands keeps the believer's motives clean and halts the cycle of evil.
4. Babylon's excess: Although God handed Israel over for discipline, Babylon exceeded her commission by showing no mercy and making the yoke heavy.

C. The Arrogance of "I Am" (47:7-9):

1. Babylon claims "I am, and there is none beside me" (47:8, 10)—arrogating the very phrase that belongs to Yahweh alone (found in 45:18, 21).
2. The core of fallen human operation is the silent, uncivilized claim to be the god of our own universe to satisfy our lusts and comfort.
3. Defining the "fear of the Lord" as the relational knowledge that we are not God, and that we will be held accountable to a higher Creator for how we handle our responsibilities.
4. The 180-Degree Reversal: Lady Babylon will experience the sudden double desolation of losing her children and her husband (widowhood), while the barren daughter of Zion (Isaiah 54) will expand to the stars because her husband is Yahweh.

D. The Deception of Magic and Self-Serving Wisdom (47:10-15):

1. The temptation of magic and the occult: a desire to manipulate and control spiritual forces without any personal moral commitment.
2. Learning and wisdom as a tool of self-aggrandizement: when academic achievements become a dog-eat-dog race to puff oneself up rather than a tool to serve God.
3. The helplessness of omen texts: Babylon possessed 70 volumes of omen texts (sacrificial livers, astrology, monthly forecasts), yet these counsels cannot save them from the consuming fire.

III. Chapter 48: The Complacency and Refinement of Israel

A. The Diagnostic Clue: "Listen to Me" (48:1, 6, 8, 12, 16):

1. Words for hearing occur 10 times in this chapter, signifying an attention deficit among the exiles.
2. Israel's deep despair: assuming they are cast off and no longer God's favorites because of the trauma of exile.

B. Superficial Covenant Belonging (48:1-2):

1. Swearing by Yahweh's name and staying themselves on the Holy City, but "not in truth or right."
2. Relying on past connections, national heritage, and denominational labels (such as nominal Methodism) instead of a true relational reality.

3. Grace as self-generated: God's mercy is an expression of His own character, not produced or forced by human repentance or deserving behavior.

C. The Purpose of Predictive Prophecy (48:3-8):

1. God declared things long in advance to prevent Israel from attributing their deliverance to their own manipulated idols.
2. Naming Cyrus and creating a "new thing" (48:7): Cyrus completely discarded 700 years of Assyrian and Babylonian exile precedents, sending captives home and paying for their temples.
3. Creating vs. Making: Only God can create a brand-new historical reality out of nothing, whereas pagan idols are part of a closed, natural order.

D. The Sovereign "I Am" and His Weeping (48:12-19):

1. Repeating Anihu ("I am He" / ego eimi), establishing Yahweh as first, last, and everything in between.
2. Divine weeping: God laments "Oh, that you had paid attention to my commandments!" which would have brought peace like a river and righteousness like the waves of the sea.

E. The Call to Exit Babylon (48:20-21):

1. Refusing to settle down: God commands the exiles not to become "good Babylonians" or abandon their seemingly failed faith, but to go out with songs of redemption.

IV. Contemporary Application and Conclusion

A. The Decline of North American Christianity: Mirroring the spiritual crisis of Israel, reminding the modern church to stop offering superficial lip service and get serious about true faith.

B. Unpredictable Divine Shifts: Highlighting rapid modern movements (e.g., the massive shift of Latino populations from Catholic to Protestant evangelical in a short time frame) as evidence that God still has plans and is actively working in history.