

Title: Isaiah Session 24: Isaiah Chapters 49 through 51

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. John Oswalt covers Isaiah chapters 49 through 51, introducing the "Grace as the Means of Servanthood" division of the book spanning chapters 49 to 55. Dr. Oswalt contrasts the national, disobedient servant of Israel with the promised ideal, suffering Servant who represents the Messiah and accomplishes global salvation. The session explores how God encourages His doubting people by promising that they will not be forgotten or dissolved in exile, culminating in a dramatic look at the "cup of staggering" that Jesus Christ ultimately drank on behalf of humanity.

Outline

I. Introduction and Structural Review

A. Review of Book Structure

1. Chapters 40–55 division: "Grace, Motive, and Means for Servanthood."
2. Chapters 41–48 focus specifically on Grace as the motive for servanthood.
3. Chapters 49–55 shift focus to Grace as the means of servanthood.

B. Shift in Deliverance Language

1. Chapters 41–48 explicitly address physical deliverance from Babylon, referencing the city and its idols.
2. Chapters 49–55 shift focus away from Babylon (which is never mentioned) to spiritual deliverance from sin and alienation.
3. The transition to a deeper level of deliverance to restore true fellowship with God.

II. The Servant with a Mission (Isaiah Chapter 49)

A. The Ideal Servant vs. the National Servant (49:1–6)

1. Re-examining the national servant of Chapters 41–48, who was described as deaf, blind, disobedient, plundered, and trapped in holes.
2. The transition to the Ideal Servant: called from the womb, mouth like a sharp sword, and hidden as a polished arrow in God's hand.
3. Messianic parallels: the sharp sword of the mouth matches the Messianic description in Chapter 11.

4. The mission: too small a thing to raise up only the tribes of Jacob; He is made a light to the nations so that salvation reaches the ends of the earth.
5. The Ideal Servant is the Messiah, representing the ideal Israel who does for Israel what Israel could never do for itself.

B. The Covenant of Restoration and the Highway (49:7–13)

1. The Servant is despised and abhorred by the world but kept by God.
2. Appointed as a covenant to the people, commanding prisoners to come out and releasing those in darkness.
3. Raising the mountains as a road and highway, reflecting the highway of holiness in Chapter 35.
4. Universal rejoicing of nature: the heavens, earth, and mountains break forth into song because the Lord has comforted and had compassion on His people.
5. Biblical courtroom connection: nature as the original jury of sin in Chapter 1 now rejoices in salvation.

C. Reaffirming the Covenant to the Doubting Exiles (49:14–26)

1. Israel's complaint: "The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me," expressing deep, experiential alienation.
2. The promise of maternal devotion: even if a nursing mother could forget her baby, God will not forget His people.
3. Engraved on the palms of God's hands as a permanent, unerasable sign.
4. The return of the children: Jerusalem will be too narrow for the abundance of children returning from exile, assuring the community they will not dissolve or disappear.
5. Historical fulfillment: Judah remained in Babylon for only 45 years (586–539 BC) and was preserved as a coherent people.
6. God's purpose: That all flesh may know that Yahweh is the Savior, Redeemer, and Mighty One of Jacob.
7. Paul's Philippians connection: the ultimate goal of knowing Christ personally as Savior and Friend, including sharing in the fellowship of His suffering.

III. Divorce, Creditors, and the Suffering Servant (Isaiah Chapter 50)

A. The Charge of Divorce and Debt (50:1–3)

1. Confronting the exiles' accusation that Yahweh divorced Judah and sold her to pay off His creditors.
2. God's refutation: there is no certificate of divorce, and there are no creditors to whom He sold them; they were sold for their own iniquities and transgressions.
3. Reasserting God's power: His hand is not shortened; He has absolute sovereign power to deliver, dry up seas, and clothe the heavens.

B. The Third Servant Song: Obedience and Suffering (50:4–9)

1. The Servant receives the tongue of those who are taught to sustain the weary with a word.

2. The Servant's ear is opened morning by morning to listen without rebellion or turning backward.
3. Voluntary, unjust suffering: giving his back to those who strike, cheeks to those who pull out the beard, and facing disgrace and spitting.
4. Unshakeable trust: setting his face like a flint, knowing he will not be disgraced or put to shame because the Lord God helps and vindicates him.
5. The fading of his adversaries: like a moth-eaten garment wearing out.

C. Trusting God in Darkness vs. Self-Made Sparks (50:10–11)

1. Synonymous parallelism: fearing the Lord is equated with obeying the voice of His servant.
2. The danger of self-made fire: attempting to light one's own path with human wisdom, accomplishments, and education, which leads to lying down in torment.
3. The call to trust: those walking in darkness must trust in the name of the Lord and rely on God.

IV. Listen to Me: Encouragement and the Gethsemane Connection (Isaiah Chapter 51)

A. Encouraging the Seekers of Righteousness (51:1–8)

1. Threefold division of listeners: those pursuing righteousness, God's people/nation, and those who know righteousness.
2. Remember your roots: looking back to the rock of Abraham and Sarah, who were called as one but blessed and multiplied.
3. Turning the wilderness of Zion into Eden and her desert into the garden of the Lord.
4. The permanence of salvation: while the heavens vanish like smoke and the earth wears out like a garment, God's salvation and righteousness last forever.
5. Comfort in the face of human reproach: do not fear the revilings of mortal men who will be eaten up by moths like a wool garment.

B. The Plea to the Arm of the Lord (51:9–16)

1. The exiles' prayer: "Wake up, wake up, put on strength, O arm of the Lord!" appealing to the Red Sea deliverance and ancient creation/chaos conquest.
2. The promise of singing: the ransomed of the Lord returning to Zion with everlasting joy, with sorrow and sighing fleeing away.
3. The divine correction: "I, I am He who comforts [encourages] you; who are you that you are afraid of a man who dies?"
4. Rebuke for forgetting the Maker who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth.

C. The Wake-Up Call for Jerusalem and the Cup of Wrath (51:17–23)

1. God reverses the call: it is Jerusalem, not the arm of the Lord, that needs to wake up and stand up.
2. The figure of the cup: Jerusalem has drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of His wrath, drinking the dregs of the cup of staggering.

3. The promise of relief: God has taken the cup of staggering and the bowl of His wrath out of Jerusalem's hand, promising they will drink no more.
4. The New Covenant / Gethsemane Connection: the only way God can justly take the cup of wrath from the hands of sinful humanity is if He drinks it Himself.
5. Christ in Gethsemane: pleading "let this cup pass from me" but drinking the dregs of human sin to the very bottom, making our servanthood possible.