

Isaiah Session 25: Isaiah Chapters 52 and 53

Author: Dr. John Oswalt

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. John Oswalt covers Isaiah chapters 52 and 53, analyzing the transition from Jerusalem's physical captivity to a deep spiritual deliverance from sin. Dr. Oswalt outlines the structural perfection of the five-stanza Servant Song, emphasizing the stark contrast between the Servant's horrific physical suffering and His ultimate divine exaltation. The session explores key theological concepts such as the substitutionary atonement, the meaning of peace (shalom), and the necessity of human response to God's initiated grace. Ultimately, the lecture highlights how God's sovereign power is revealed not in physical dominance but in His willingness to absorb the world's evil and return redeeming love.

Outline

I. Introduction and Structural Context

A. Welcome and Opening Prayer

1. Dr. Oswalt welcomes the class and commends the 'righteous remnant' for braving the heavy downpours.
2. Opening prayer focuses on recognizing and thanking God for His richly undeserved blessings, given purely out of the goodness of His heart.
3. Petition for those facing deep waters—spiritually, emotionally, and financially—praying they will stand firm when the enemy tries to knock them down.

B. Review of Prior Context (Chapters 49–51)

1. Deliverance language is used in Chapters 49–51, but Babylon is conspicuously never mentioned.
2. The core issue being addressed is Judah's deep alienation from God and how to restore their relationship back to Him.
3. Returning to their physical homeland is minor compared to the question of how to become the righteous servant of the Lord.
4. A growing note of anticipation builds toward Chapter 52.

II. The Contrast of the Two Cities (Isaiah 52:1–6)

A. The Command to Wake Up (52:1–2)

1. Contrast with 51:9: In 51:9, the people tell the 'arm of the Lord' to wake up; in 52:1, God reverses the call and commands Jerusalem to wake up, put on beautiful wedding garments, and shake off the dust.
2. The physical reversal: Jerusalem is commanded to rise from the dust and sit on a throne.
3. Symmetrical contrast with Chapter 47: Babylon is told to get off the throne and go sit in the dust.

B. Symmetrical Theme of Pride and Humility

1. Pride and self-exaltation inevitably shoot oneself in the foot, resulting in humiliation (symbolized by sitting in the dust).
2. Voluntarily accepting sitting in the dust for God's sake leads to divine exaltation.
3. This counterbalanced relationship runs throughout the entire Book of Isaiah: pride humiliates, while trust in God exalts.

C. The Ransom of Nothing (52:3–6)

1. God sold His people for nothing, meaning He was not forced to do so by any external creditor or power.
2. Because He did not get anything for selling them, He does not have to pay anyone off to buy them back.
3. The ultimate goal of this grace: His people will know His 'name' (character and identity) by experience, recognizing Him as the sovereign 'I Am' (Anihu) who is unconstrained by creation.

III. Walled Siege Waved Away: The Walled City Metaphor (Isaiah 52:7–12)

A. Geopolitical Siege Dynamics

1. Before gunpowder, capturing walled cities required a long, brutal military siege to starve out the inhabitants.
2. The only hope was for a besieging general to be forced to withdraw due to a crisis or defeat elsewhere in his domain.
3. A runner would race to the besieged city to announce that an ally had won the far-off battle.

B. The Joy of the Beautiful Feet (52:7–9)

1. A watchman stands on the wall and spots a messenger waving a palm branch: 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news (evangel)... who publishes shalom... who says to Zion, "Your God reigns!"'
2. The Athenian runner story: The historical origin of running 26 miles from Marathon to Athens to declare victory, demonstrating the context of the messenger.
3. Why salvation is described in terms of God's coming: Because the people are helpless and cannot save themselves. God must come to us in our absolute helplessness.

C. The Bared Arm and Co-Operative Movement (52:10–12)

1. The Lord bares His holy arm (rolls up His 27-inch bicep) to display His strength before all the nations.
2. Human response: Although salvation is entirely initiated from God's side, humans must respond by actively leaving their sins ('Go out, go out, touch no unclean thing').
3. Vanguard and Rear Guard: The Lord goes before to lead, and follows behind to protect, mirroring the pillar of cloud and fire in the Exodus.

IV. The Five Stanzas of the Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13–53:12)

A. Structural Overview of the Poem

1. Evidence that chapter divisions are not inspired: The Suffering Servant song begins at 52:13, not 53:1.
2. The text is a highly designed masterpiece composed of five stanzas containing exactly three verses each.
3. Sequential breakdown of stanzas: Stanza 1 (52:13-15) is the intro; Stanza 2 (53:1-3) explains why He was despised; Stanza 3 (53:4-6) explains His burden; Stanza 4 (53:7-9) explains His unjust treatment; Stanza 5 (53:10-12) explains His ultimate success.

B. Stanza 1: Exaltation and Startle (52:13–15)

1. Prosper and Succeed: The Hebrew word in 52:13 means the Servant will succeed at the thing He is sent to do.
2. High and Lifted Up: These exact adjectives occur only three times in Isaiah (Chapter 6, Chapter 57, and here), with the other two referring directly to God. The Servant's identity is inextricably linked with God's essence.
3. Startle vs. Sprinkle: While most translations use 'sprinkle,' the Arabic root suggests 'startle' is the correct poetic parallel to 'kings will shut their mouths because of him.' The kings of the earth are shocked that the Savior of the world possesses a marred, crucified face.

C. Stanza 2: The Despised Root in Dry Ground (53:1–3)

1. Small Beginnings: He grew up like a young plant or a root in dry ground—a spindly, unnoticeable plant that does not grow an inch.
2. No Form or Majesty: The Servant had no outward beauty or royal trappings that would attract people.
3. Despised and Rejected: Despising in Hebrew means to consider worthless. The Servant was a man of illness and pain whom people paid no attention to.
4. Overcoming Gnosticism: We prefer a glamorous 'costume drum major' to lead a parade; the Servant's unearthly, transparent goodness is quiet and vulnerable.

D. Stanza 3: The Scapegoat and Astray Sheep (53:4–6)

1. Stricken by God: The crowd mistakenly assumed He was punished by God because He had it coming to Him for His own foolish decisions.
2. Double Exchange: He was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities; He got beaten, and we got well (with His stripes we are healed).

3. Meaning of Shalom: Peace represents overall physical and spiritual well-being, wholeness, and moral integration.

4. Sheep Astray: Humans are compared to sheep not because they are dumb, but because they are single-minded—focused entirely on immediate self-advantage and wanting what they want. This twisted nature (iniquity) is laid entirely on the Servant.

E. Stanza 4: Silent Submission and Unjust Burial (53:7–9)

1. Defenseless Silence: The Servant gave up His way and His right to His way, remaining as silent as a sheep before its shearers.

2. Cut Off Childless: Dying without children in antiquity meant being completely forgotten; Jesus rejected the temptation to settle down and raise a family to submit to the cross.

3. Burial with the Rich: Though He did no violence and spoke no deceit, His grave was made with the wicked and with a rich man in His death, adding insult to injury.

F. Stanza 5: Sovereign Crushing and Redeemed Offspring (53:10–12)

1. It Pleased God to Crush Him: Explaining the divine willingness to sacrifice His Son. The railroad bridge-tender analogy: the father lets the heavy steel gear crush his own son to save a train full of passengers.

2. Offering for Sin: The Hebrew text suggests the people make His soul an offering for sin, presenting His broken body to the Father in their place.

3. The Miracle of Offspring: Because He laid down His life, He lives forever and sees millions of spiritual offspring across the globe.

4. The Delivery Room Analogy: The Father looks at the immense anguish of the Servant's soul and, like a mother holding a newborn, declares that the suffering was entirely worth the outcome.

V. Practical Application and Conclusion

A. The Power of Weakness

1. God's mighty arm is revealed not in an Incredible Hulk figure, but in a 90-pound weakling.
2. True divine power is the ability to absorb all the concentrated evil the world can produce and return pure, redeeming love.

B. Walking in the Servant's Footsteps

1. Believers are called to lay aside their own royal robes of pride, their rights, and their need to self-defend.
2. Leaving the outcomes of our servanthood entirely in God's hands, trusting He will make it good.