

Title: Isaiah Session 27: Isaiah Chapters 56 and 57

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. John Oswalt covers Isaiah chapters 56 and 57, initiating the final division of the book spanning chapters 56 to 66. Dr. Oswalt explains the overarching chiastic structure of this section, emphasizing that the coming Messiah empowers His people to live righteous lives. The session explores how God welcomes marginalized groups like foreigners and eunuchs based on their covenant faithfulness rather than national birthright, while sternly indicting corrupt, self-serving leaders. Ultimately, the lecture highlights how human self-exaltation leads to deep humiliation, whereas the high and lofty Creator chooses to dwell within the humble and contrite heart, offering eternal healing and peace.

Outline

- **I. Introduction and Overarching Structure of Chapters 56–66**
 - A. Opening Anecdote and Prayer
 - 1. Dr. Oswalt shares an amusing story about a former student's six-year-old son listening to his Hebrew exegesis lectures with rapt attention.
 - 2. Prayer of thanksgiving for health, energy, direction, and motivation, inviting the Holy Spirit to teach divine truth.
 - B. Review of the Book's Sovereign Progress
 - 1. Chapters 1–5: The problem and promise of servanthood (rebellious Israel called to be a clean vessel).
 - 2. Chapter 6: The call and cleansing of Isaiah as a model of national cleansing.
 - 3. Chapters 7–39: Trust as the absolute basis for servanthood.
 - 4. Chapters 40–48: Grace as the motivation for servanthood (God's deliverance from captivity).
 - 5. Chapters 49–55: Grace as the means of servanthood (revealing the ideal, suffering Servant).
 - C. The Chiastic Structure of Chapters 56–66
 - 1. Addressing the anticlimactic feeling after Chapter 62 and identifying a clear 'chiasm' (symmetrical nesting of themes).
 - 2. Symmetrical structure of E-D-C-B-A:
 - a. A & A' (Chapters 56:1–8 & 66:18–23): Welcoming of righteous foreigners/Gentiles into God's household.

- b. B & B' (Chapters 56:9–57:21 & 63:7–66:17): The people's persistent inability to do righteousness apart from grace.
- c. C & C' (Chapter 59:15b–21 & 63:1–6): The revelation of the Divine Warrior conquering enemies.
- d. D & D' (Chapters 58–59 & 60 & 62): The glorious light dawning on Mount Zion.
- e. E (Chapter 61:1–3): The apex center presenting the spirit-anointed Messiah preaching good news.
- 3. The theological purpose of the chiasm: keeping the climactic focus on the Messiah's arrival while stressing that His coming enables righteous living so that the nations can be won.

• II. Historical Context and False Complacency

- A. Post-Exilic Audience
 - 1. Addressed generally to the Judeans in the post-exilic period returning to the land.
 - 2. Rebuking a division of the population who assumed God's free deliverance from Babylon meant behavior did not matter.
 - 3. Encouraging a sincere remnant who were deeply troubled that the return had not produced real righteousness in their lives.
- B. Inspiration vs. Concrete Details
 - 1. Absence of specific, microscopic historical details in chapters 40–66 (except for Cyrus).
 - 2. Explaining that the prophet spoke to future theological and behavioral situations by the inspiration of the Spirit without knowing every local detail.

• III. Welcoming Foreigners and Eunuchs (Isaiah 56:1–8)

- A. The Command for Righteous Living (56:1)
 - 1. The logical connection: 'Keep justice and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come.'
 - 2. Response to grace: Salvation is entirely a free gift of grace, which logically demands living God's life of justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness.
 - 3. The Pauline parallel: Being delivered from self-justifying legalism demands dying to the old sinful life and putting on the new clothes of righteousness.
- B. The Redemptive Inclusion of Marginalized Groups (56:2–5)
 - 1. Addressing the foreigner and the eunuch, who were historically forbidden from full worship in Deuteronomy 23.
 - 2. The approved behaviors: keeping the Sabbath, maintaining justice, choosing what pleases God, and holding fast His covenant.
 - 3. Reconciling Deuteronomy and Isaiah: early spiritual education uses stark, concrete physical restrictions to teach physical/spiritual wholeness before progressive revelation opens the way to the heart.
- C. The Temple as a House of Prayer (56:6–8)
 - 1. Foreigners who love the name of Yahweh will be brought to His holy mountain and made joyful.

- 2. The house is destined to be called a 'house of prayer for all nations' rather than a place of mechanical, manipulative sacrifice.
- 3. Symmetrical match in Chapter 66: Gentiles will see His glory, and some will even be taken as priests and Levites.
- 4. Modern Application: The danger of assuming that membership in the elect or an altar call makes holy behavior irrelevant.

- **IV. Blind Leaders and the Death of the Righteous (Isaiah 56:9–57:2)**

- A. Indictment of Self-Serving Leaders (56:9–12)
 - 1. Condemning the political and religious leaders as blind watchmen, silent dogs with big appetites, and stupid shepherds.
 - 2. Rebuking their self-absorbed complacency: living only for their own gain, pleasure, and wine.
- B. The Mystery of Perishing Goodness (57:1–2)
 - 1. The righteous perish and devout men are taken away, prompting accusations of divine injustice.
 - 2. The divine perspective: God takes the righteous away to spare them from coming calamity and evil.
 - 3. Human short-sightedness versus God's loving protection of His own.

- **V. The Prostituted Heritage and Pagan Manipulation (Isaiah 57:3–13)**

- A. Demolishing False Birthright Pride (57:3–4)
 - 1. Rejection of their boast of being Abraham's biological children.
 - 2. God labels them 'sons of an adulteress' and offspring of a prostitute, emphasizing their spiritual betrayal.
- B. The Character of Paganism (57:5–10)
 - 1. Performing intense religious rituals under oaks and slaughtering children in valleys to manipulate local deities.
 - 2. The definition of paganism: doing religious activities mechanically to coerce God into supplying personal needs.
 - 3. Symmetrical contrast in modern evangelicalism: praying, fasting, or tithing mechanically as a spiritual treadmill to force blessings.
- C. Loving Devotion vs. Mechanical Transaction (57:11–13)
 - 1. True biblical devotion is motivated by relational love and trust, desiring to please God rather than get something from Him.
 - 2. Self-made spark systems and idols cannot deliver in the day of trouble; only the one who takes refuge in Yahweh inherits the land.

- **VI. The High God and the Lowly Heart (Isaiah 57:14–21)**

- A. Preparing the Way of Holiness (57:14)
 - 1. The call to build up, prepare the way, and remove every stumbling block from the people's path, echoing chapter 40.

- B. The Transcendent and Immanent Creator (57:15)
 - 1. God is the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity and whose name is holy.
 - 2. Symmetrical paradox: This majestic Creator simultaneously dwells with him who has a contrite and lowly spirit to revive them.
 - 3. The law of self-exaltation: Exalting oneself leads to humiliation, while admitting absolute helplessness invites God's presence.
- C. Healing as God's Intended Last Word (57:16–19)
 - 1. God will not contend forever, knowing that human spirits would grow faint before Him.
 - 2. Re-asserting that God's ultimate purpose is never permanent destruction, but healing, guidance, and comfort.
 - 3. Creating the 'fruit of the lips'—moving from inward gratefulness to outward, spoken praise and testimonies.
- D. The Unquiet Sea of the Wicked (57:20–21)
 - 1. Rejection of universalism: 'There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked.'
 - 2. The wicked (godless) are like a tossing, dirty sea that cannot be quieted.
 - 3. Peace (*shalom*) is impossible without submitting to God's Lordship and admitting He is in control.