

## **Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 4, 6-min. Video Overview**

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

All right, welcome back to the explainer. Today, we're diving straight into the vision of Isaiah. Specifically, we're looking at the crisis, the catharsis, and the commission.

We'll be leaning heavily on the insights of Dr. John Oswalt to unpack what is honestly an incredible story of a nation right on the brink, a completely paradigm-shifting vision, and a wildly unpredictable calling. So to really set the stage here, ask yourself this: what actually happens when the earthly king you've been relying on suddenly dies, and the true king of the universe just appears? I mean, imagine the sheer absolute panic. The greatest human leader your nation has ever known drops dead right at the exact moment a hostile juggernaut of an empire is bearing down on your borders.

You are left completely exposed. Let's look at the timeline to understand the real stakes here. Back in 930 BC, the kingdom split in two.

Then, jump forward a bit to 745 BC, and you've got the terrifying Assyrian empire waking up and aggressively marching down the highways. And then comes the absolute crushing blow. In 739 BC, Judah's anchor, King Uzziah, dies.

To really grasp the panic that was setting in, we have to look at the contrast between the two kingdoms at the time. Up north, you have the kingdom of Israel. They were wealthy, they were powerful, but they were deeply apostate and rebellious.

Down south, you have the much weaker kingdom of Judah. And honestly, Judah's only real claim to stability was King Uzziah's massive 52-year reign. He was literally their rock.

But here's the kicker. What felt like a golden age to the people was actually a total illusion. I mean, while everyone living under these long-reigning kings thought everything was just wonderful, you had old curmudgeonly prophets like Amos and Hosea standing on the sidelines, warning everyone.

They were saying, look, this isn't a golden age at all. It's actually just the last flush of color in the cheeks of someone with a terminal illness before they completely collapse. And that brings us to the ultimate turning point for our prophet.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord. It's such a brilliant illustration. It wasn't until the human leadership they depended on was suddenly violently ripped up by the roots, like a giant oak tree in a storm, that Isaiah finally looked up to the heavens.

And when he did, he saw the true king still sitting right there on the throne. You know, Dr. Oswalt actually compares this sudden, devastating loss of security to a terrifying car crash his own father survived back in 1950. In a fraction of a second, this violent collision stripped away all his illusions of being in control.

His father later prayed and actually thanked God for showing him what things truly matter and what things just don't. And honestly, that is exactly what Judah was experiencing in this moment. The entire illusion of control was just gone.

Okay. So let's get into the vision itself. 75 feet.

The sheer scale of what Isaiah is seeing is just staggering. Think about this. The only physical description Isaiah gives of God is that the hem of his robe was 75 feet high and it entirely filled the massive temple.

It's like human words can only reach so high before they become completely useless in describing the divine. And surrounding this massive, unimaginable presence are the seraphim. These burning ones are basically twisting, flaming servants.

And look at how they're using their six wings. They use two to completely shield their faces, acknowledging God's unapproachable holiness. They use two to cover their mortal feet or bodies, and they use the last two to fly.

They are just completely, utterly overwhelmed by God's blazing presence. As they fly, the seraphim are crying out that God is holy. Now, the absolutely crucial point here is the actual definition of that word, holy.

Fundamentally at its core, it just means other. It points to the breathtaking reality that Yahweh is the only absolutely transcendent, entirely other being in the entire universe. There is literally no one and nothing else like him.

But here's the wild paradox. This completely other God doesn't just hide away in the mysterious clouds of his own transcendence. The seraphim also cry out, the whole earth is full of his glory.

So he's actively sharing his glory, his reality, his significance, his absolute solidity with the entire cosmos. We aren't just talking about some sort of evanescent mystical glow here. We're talking about the ultimate reality of the universe.

In man, the physical reaction to all of this is intense. The sheer deafening volume of the seraphim's voices literally shook the heavy foundations of the temple doorways. Then the entire house just fills with thick smoke.

It creates this atmosphere of terrifying awe, immense wonder, and this visceral mystery that you simply could not ignore if you tried, which really brings us to a super compelling question. Why does Isaiah immediately feel an overwhelming sense of uncleanness? When he's confronted with this overwhelming divine reality, Isaiah doesn't just feel physical smallness or human frailty. No, instead he feels this profound melting sense of absolute uncleanness.

He feels deep moral guilt, just standing before pure perfection. So in sheer panic, he cries out, " Woe is me, for I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips. He feels completely undone or dissolved.

Dr. Oswalt says it's literally like a pat of butter left out in the blazing sun, just melting away. Isaiah instantly recognizes that his filthy life, which he says is most actively expressed through his unclean lips, simply cannot exist in God's perfect blazing presence. But notice the broader context here, because it's fascinating.

Isaiah actually includes his own people in his confession. He realizes right then and there that this isn't just his own individual flaw that needs correcting. It's a massive cultural infection of sin.

He recognizes that he is part of a completely messed up society that is in desperate need of a profound intervention. What's truly staggering about this moment is the total hopelessness Isaiah feels about human uncleanness. He is so utterly overwhelmed by the complete unworthiness that he doesn't even bother to ask for cleansing.

He doesn't beg for forgiveness. He just assumes the situation is utterly hopeless and that he is, for all intents and purposes, already a dead man. But then God initiates the solution when Isaiah can't even find the words to ask for it.

One of the seraphim flies over to him using tongs to carry a searing hot coal. Now, Dr. Oswalt points out something really interesting here. This likely wasn't just a piece of burning wood.

It was probably a chunk of burning seared lamb flesh taken directly from the great high altar of sacrifice out in the temple courtyard. And let's be clear, this process was not some gentle sprinkling of holy water. Fire burns.

It consumes. It cleanses. The searing, downright painful heat of that fiery cold touching his lips represents a violent, deeply transforming purification.

Becoming God's messenger isn't just a walk through a field of clover, you know. It involves a very real, very painful burning away of the dross. If you step back, this actually maps out a complete theological progression for all true calling.

It perfectly follows Isaiah's experience step by step. First, you have a massive vision of the true God. Second, a completely honest, brutal vision of our deeply flawed self.

Third, a painful but necessary cleansing by fire. And then only then, finally, a commission to serve. And notice the timing.

It's only after his ears are opened by this intense, fiery purification that Isaiah actually hears God's voice. And the way God approaches this is so fascinating. Instead of issuing a predictable, direct command, assigning a specific task, God simply asks for a volunteer out loud.

He says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Well, Isaiah is just absolutely overflowing with gratitude for this completely unpredictable, shocking experience of grace. Think about it. He went from thinking he was a dead man melting on the floor to being totally clean and alive.

So he eagerly jumps right in and volunteers. He cries out, here am I, send me. And he does this without even knowing what the actual task is going to be.

But here is the massive twist. God's commission is shockingly brutal. Isaiah isn't being sent out to build a mega church or lead some wildly popular revival.

No way. He is told to preach a hard, unflinching message that will actually blind the people's eyes and harden their hearts. His ministry is literally going to drive his own stubborn generation even further away from God.

So Isaiah understandably asks, okay, how long? And God gives him a crushing, devastating answer. He tells him he has to faithfully preach until the cities lie completely waste without a single inhabitant. He has to preach until the entire nation is chopped down and burned to the ground, leaving behind nothing more than a massive charred field of dead oak stumps.

But wait, because hidden right there within that terrifying pronouncement of judgment is a tiny, almost microscopic glimmer of hope. God says the holy seed is its stump. Out of the charred ruins of that dead stump, a small unseen green shoot of faithful believers is eventually going to emerge to carry the truth forward to the next generation.

So this really leaves us with a provocative final thought for this explainer. Has our own personal experience of God's grace been deep enough that we'd instantly accept his call, even if the mission requires preaching to a field of burned-out stumps? Would we go? Even if the absolute only visible outcome of our lifelong labor was a tiny unseen green shoot? It is a heavy, heavy question to ponder. Thanks for joining me today, and keep looking for that true King.