

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 5, 6-min. Video Overview

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Alright, let's jump right into this explainer. Today, we're unpacking what is essentially an ancient geopolitical thriller, all based on Dr. John Oswalt's truly fascinating analysis of Isaiah chapters 7 and 8. We're going straight to the heart of a massive crisis of trust. So picture this.

What happens when a desperate king tries to literally buy his way out of an apocalypse? Because that's the exact dilemma facing King Ahaz of Judah right around 735 BC. I mean, the guy is looking down the barrel of total annihilation. He's facing this existential threat from multiple sides, and his entire country is absolutely terrified.

The text actually says the heart of his people shook like the trees of the forest. You know, just total palpable panic. Ahaz really only has two choices here.

Does he trust the transcendent god of his ancestors for protection, or does he trust his own cunning, his own bank account, and his own shady political maneuvers? And as we're going to see, the choice he makes sets off this wild chain reaction that echoes all the way through history. To really grasp Ahaz's panic, we kind of have to look at the terrifying Assyrian Empire. They were the dominant superpower of the day, and they were making a massive military push toward Egypt.

Now, about a hundred years prior, a coalition of smaller nations had actually managed to stall Assyria. So in 735 BC, Israel and Syria decide, hey, let's try that again. They form this new defensive coalition and basically demand that Judah, ruled by King Ahaz, join their fight.

But Ahaz knows something crucial. He knows that if they fail, the Assyrians, who are absolute masters of psychological terror, will just wipe them off the map. So he flat out refuses to join.

In response, Israel and Syria decide they're just going to attack Judah, rip Ahaz right off his throne, and install their own puppet king, this guy named Tabil. So suddenly, Ahaz isn't just sweating the Assyrian Empire; he's facing an immediate aggressive invasion from his own neighbors. So what is Ahaz's grand disastrous solution to all this? Dr. Oswalt captures it brilliantly with this punchy metaphor.

He says it's like three mice having a fight, and one of them decides to hire the cat. Ahaz literally empties out a huge chunk of the royal treasury and sends a message to the brutal Assyrian king, essentially begging, please just take all my money and attack my neighbors so they leave me alone. As Dr. Oswalt jokes, you can almost hear the Assyrian king saying, "Cash the check quickly before this guy comes to his senses."

Ahaz is literally paying his absolute worst nightmare to move closer to his own borders. But right before this completely disastrous plan can unfold, God actually sends the prophet

Isaiah to intercept Ahaz with four very specific imperatives. Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart faint.

It's fascinating because God refers to the two kings threatening Ahaz as smoldering stumps. Just think about that imagery, like chunks of wood pulled from a fire that have burned completely out and are just sitting there smoking. They're all smoke and absolutely no fire.

They're leftovers. But Ahaz can't see that because he's entirely consumed by fear. And fear, as this text brilliantly reveals, is often the exact opposite of trust.

Fear is the deep root of Ahaz's panic. Now here's where it gets really, really interesting. Isaiah doesn't show up alone.

God actually tells Isaiah to take his son with him to meet King Ahaz. And his son's name is Sher Yashuv, which translates directly to, only a remnant will return. I mean, imagine being Ahaz.

You meet the prophet, you casually ask his kid's name, and you hear, only a remnant will return. It's a living, breathing warning sign. But it also introduces this incredibly profound biblical tension between divine foreknowledge and human free will.

Ahaz still has a choice. If he chooses to trust God, he can be part of that surviving remnant. If he doesn't, well, only a tiny remnant is going to survive the disaster he's currently inviting in.

God knows exactly what's going to happen. But the responsibility to make that choice? That rests 100% on Ahaz's shoulders. So God tells Ahaz to literally ask for a sign, as high as heaven, as deep as hell, just to prove that God can be trusted.

But Ahaz refuses. So God says, fine, I'm going to give you a sign anyway and delivers the famous Immanuel prophecy. Let's put on our linguist hats for just a second here to decode this.

The prophecy states, an Alma will conceive and bear a son. Now, why did Isaiah use that specific Hebrew word, Alma? If he simply meant any young woman, he probably would have used the word Naara. If he strictly meant a virgin, he could have used Betula.

But instead, he uses Alma, which specifically means a maiden of marriageable age who is presumably a virgin. Dr. Oswalt points out that Isaiah intentionally picked this ambiguous word because this prophecy carries a profound dual meaning. There's a short-term fulfillment meant specifically for Ahaz's day and a long-term ultimate fulfillment that comes much later in history.

Let's look at that short-term fulfillment first, because it's anchored by a really critical number, 13. Isaiah tells Ahaz that before this promised child even knows how to refuse evil and choose good, which is the traditional age of moral accountability, right around 13, the lands of those two kings Ahaz is so terrified of will be completely deserted. And history backs this up flawlessly.

In 732 BC, Damascus was destroyed. Ten years later, in 722 BC, Samaria was destroyed. God is basically saying, look, before a child conceived today even becomes a teenager, your enemies are going to be completely gone.

I am with us, Emmanuel. But let's pivot back for a minute and dig into the psychology of Ahaz himself. Why on earth would he refuse to ask God for a sign when God offered him something as massive as the universe? Ahaz's excuse actually sounded incredibly religious.

He says, I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test. But honestly, this raises a deeply profound question. Does piety sometimes function as a cover for a lack of trust? Ahaz wasn't being respectful here at all.

He was just being evasive. Yeah, Ahaz is using all this incredibly pious language to just completely mask his deep anxiety. And why? Because he had already shelled out millions to the Assyrians.

He had already made these secret, totally faithless backroom deals. If God were to give him a miraculous sign of deliverance right then and there, Ahaz would actually have to cancel his deal and rely completely on God. It's just human nature, isn't it? Sometimes we don't ask the big questions because we really don't want the answers.

We put up this outward impression of having it all together just to avoid the genuine risk of trusting God when the chips are finally down. And this brings us right to the absolute core of Isaiah's message to the people in chapter 8. How do we actually view God? Isaiah uses the title Lord of hosts, which literally translates to the Lord of heaven's armies. God tells Isaiah, him you shall regard as holy.

Now, this doesn't mean we magically bestow holiness onto God. It means we have to treat him as what he truly is, the completely transcendent ruler of all history. If we treat God like some minor deity who just lives under our bed to grant our wishes or instantly fix our geopolitical messes, we completely strip him of his majesty.

Treating him with the proper reverence basically eliminates the need to fear any earthly superpower. Which leads into this super fascinating comparison. The people in Isaiah's time were on edge.

I mean, they were terrified. They were looking at Israel conspiring with Syria and Assyria basically conspiring against everyone. And they genuinely thought history was just spiraling totally out of control.

But God tells Isaiah, do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy. Think about how incredibly relevant that is today. We have this huge contrast between trusting God's overarching plan and falling into the exhausting trap of believing history is just controlled by chaotic backroom conspiracies.

When you believe history is just a series of dark plots, you're constantly living on the edge of panic. But when you trust that the Lord of hosts is ultimately in control, you actually find a sense of serenity. Ultimately, the message here presents a stark duality.

God's presence is really a double-edged sword. If you go his way and you choose to trust him, he is a sanctuary, a totally safe place. But if you fly in his face and refuse to trust him, he becomes a snare.

And because Ahaz chose the snare, the Emmanuel prophecy ended up meaning heavy judgment for Judah. God tells Ahaz that Assyria, that hired razor Ahaz paid to shave his enemies, wasn't going to politely stop at the border. Assyria would keep marching right into Judah, bringing absolute devastation to the very king who originally hired them.

And that brings us to this incredibly profound, timeless takeaway from Dr. Oswalt's analysis. Whatever you trust in place of God will one day turn on you and destroy you. Ahaz trusted the brutal Assyrian empire instead of his creator, right? Well, just 34 years later, the Assyrian army was standing at the exact same spot in Jerusalem, demanding Judah's total surrender.

Whether it's political power, human achievement, or, you know, hiring a cat to fight your mice, misplaced faith almost always turns into a snare. So as we wrap up this explainer, I really want to leave you with this lingering question. What are you placing your ultimate trust in? Ahaz's whole crisis is really just a mirror for our own lives today.

Are we constantly trying to buy our way out of our fears? Are we actually willing to take the risk of trusting the Lord of heaven's armies? Thanks so much for joining me on this explainer. Keep learning, keep analyzing, and I'll catch you next time as we continue to break down the complexities of history and truth.