

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

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to this explainer. Today, we're diving into how a brilliant ancient text tackles a very real, honestly terrifying problem facing down a massive, unstoppable empire. We're unpacking some profound analysis of Isaiah chapters 9 through 12, guided by Dr. John Oswalt's incredible lecture.

We're going to look at how a people completely surrounded by geopolitical darkness are handed a very, very unexpected source of light. To kick things off, I want you to imagine literal geopolitical darkness closing in. You're living in the ancient nation of Judah, and overwhelming military threats are bearing down on you from all sides.

So ask yourself, how do you survive when the threat is that massive? Do you form an alliance with your worst enemy? Do you just stockpile weapons? Well, the answer this historical crisis provides is completely counterintuitive, and honestly, it challenges the way we think about power even today. Okay, here's our quick roadmap for this explainer. We'll start with the threat of darkness, then look at a very surprising hero.

Third is the axe in the forest, followed by the stump of Jesse, and finally, a highway of hope. It's quite a journey, taking us all the way from a grim historical crisis right to a vision of impossible peace. Alright, let's jump right into section one, the threat of darkness, and the crisis of ancient Judah.

We are setting the stage in a time when humans essentially just flat out refused God's revelation, plunging themselves into some incredibly thick, deep darkness. Now take a look at this list of societal failures that brought on all this darkness. The text points right to arrogance.

You know, people basically saying, so what if the bricks have fallen down? We'll just rebuild with fancier dressed stone. But I really want you to pay attention to that second point. There's this timeless, almost hardwired human tendency to exalt political leaders and just expect them to solve all our problems.

Dr. Oswalt points out that this is just as common today as it was in ancient Judah. And here's the kicker. When those human leaders inevitably fail us, it leads straight into the next two sins: violence and a society built on oppression and a total lack of justice.

And this right here really hits the nail on the head regarding the heart of the crisis. Judah actually thought their problem was strictly military. They thought, oh, the issue is Israel and Syria trying to force us into a coalition, or it's the looming threat of the Assyrian war machine.

But the real issue wasn't about fighting Assyria with better weapons. It came down to a fundamental choice. Do you rely on earthly military coalitions, or do you actually come to

grips with God and trust his instructions, his Torah? Which brings us right to section two, a very surprising hero and the counterintuitive solution.

The narrative is about to take a massive, totally unexpected twist regarding who actually ends up saving the day. When you're staring down an imperial war machine, you'd naturally expect the Savior to be some powerful warrior who's going to crush the enemies. You know, like some sort of incredible Hulk or monster man who just swoops in and beats up the bad guys.

But no, God's incredibly counterintuitive solution to the world's biggest problems isn't military might at all. It's a vulnerable, absolutely helpless baby, a child. The weakness of God is presented as so much stronger than human strength, completely turning the tables on the wise and the powerful.

So the absolutely crucial takeaway here is that this child isn't just your run-of-the-mill good king, like Hezekiah, for instance. A normal human king simply can't pull off what this child is going to do. We're talking about a ruler who is literally called Mighty God and Everlasting Father.

His government will have no end, and he's going to completely do away with warfare itself just by using the power of divine weakness. It's a profound reminder that the ultimate hope of the world is not placed in any human politician. Let's move on to section three, the axe and the forest, where we visualize the Assyrian empire.

Here, we're looking at a terrifying, world-dominating force and the rather surprising role they actually play in this whole story. Now, Assyria views itself as this unstoppable, permanent force that's just dominated the globe for 200 years. They're absolutely convinced they're the ones calling the shots.

But God entirely redefines them. He says, actually, Assyria is simply a rod in His hand, just an axe He's using. So despite all of Assyria's incredible arrogance, they're ultimately just a tool completely under God's control.

God can and does use a more wicked group to discipline a less wicked group. But make no mistake, that doesn't mean the tool escapes ultimate justice in the end. To show you just how genuinely frightening this tool is, the text builds up this immense, dramatic tension by listing out the very towns the Assyrian army marches through.

It's a seemingly unstoppable advance down the central ridge toward Jerusalem. They move from north to south, Migron, then Geba, until they finally halt right next door at Nob. And from the hill of Nob, they literally stand there shaking their fists at Jerusalem.

In that moment, it feels entirely, utterly hopeless. But wait, just when the mighty forest of Assyria seems unstoppable, and they're literally right at the gates, God steps in. He lops off the boughs with terrifying power and just chops those thickets right down.

Boom. It shows that the awe-inspiring power of the enemy army is actually not the ultimate reality here. God is the ultimate reality.

And because of that, those who trust Him absolutely do not need to be afraid. That brings us beautifully into section 4, The Stump of Jesse and a Fragile New Beginning. Let's explore this really profound metaphor of a brand-new kingdom rising straight out of absolute destruction.

Looking at Dr. Oswalt's analysis here, we are presented with a pretty bleak image. The nation is envisioned as this devastated field of burned-out stumps. But out of one specific stump, the Stump of Jesse, pops a tiny, super-fragile green shoot.

And notice, it explicitly says Jesse, not the mighty King David. Jesse was kind of a nobody, you know, just a local farmer. This beautifully represents God's power working through the least expected, most fragile things imaginable.

I mean, you could step on this little shoot and kill it, yet it is somehow God's massive solution to the problem of cosmic evil. So this new shoot, this Messiah, is definitely not going to rule by the standard playbook of human kingship, and he won't rely on physical power. He is entirely empowered by the Spirit of the Lord.

He is not going to be guided by mere surface appearances, but rather from within, with true, deep equity. And what's really fascinating is that instead of striking the earth with a physical sword or a heavy scepter like normal human kings do, he strikes the earth with the rod of his mouth, which is the sheer power of the divine word. And finally, we arrive at section 5, a highway of hope and the ultimate restoration.

This beautifully reveals God's ultimate end goal for a broken world. To really illustrate the complete end of human violence, the text uses these incredibly rich graphic metaphors of an almost unnatural peace. You've got the wolf dwelling with the lamb, the leopard lying down with the goat.

As C.S. Lewis once humorously pointed out, if we take this purely literally, a lion would need a pretty serious dental job to start eating grass. But of course, the profound point of the illustration is peace. It's the total, complete removal of conflict and cruelty, all because the earth will finally be totally full of the knowledge of the Lord.

And in this perfectly restored world, the Messiah acts as a banner. Now, earlier in the book of Isaiah, a flag was run up the flagpole to summon enemy armies to come and judge Israel. But here, that image gets beautifully flipped on its head.

The Messiah himself actually becomes this glorious signal flag. But this time around, he is drawing all the nations of the earth together to learn God's ways in perfect peace. Furthermore, a literal highway is formed.

There's going to be a highway from Assyria specifically for the remnant of the people to return. They are coming back from the very nations that oppressed them in the first place. And honestly, this just brilliantly proves one of the central themes of this whole explainer.

God's intended last word is never, ever judgment. His intended last word is always, always hope. We conclude with this truly powerful promise from the final chapter of this section.

When humanity finally chooses to trust God instead of just frantically relying on the fragile temporary powers of worldly empires, they find genuine, lasting encouragement. They won't just barely survive. They will, with absolute joy, draw life-giving water right out of the wells of salvation.

So, I want to leave you with this final thought to really ponder as we wrap up this explainer. When the thick darkness of crisis inevitably closes in around you, and the future feels deeply uncertain, where are you choosing to place your trust? Are you relying on fragile human strength and political leaders? Or are you resting in the ultimate reality of God's surprising, completely unstoppable light?