

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 7,

6-min. Video Overview

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

\$7.38, That is literally it. Let's kick off this explainer with a pretty provocative question from Dr. John Oswalt. How much are you actually worth? Well, if we were to break your body down into just its raw chemical elements, the going rate on the open market is a grand total of about \$7.38. It's a fun piece of trivia, right? But obviously, you know you're worth far more than the loose change you dig out of your sofa cushions.

So where does your real value actually come from? Do you have to exhaust yourself manufacturing it from scratch? Or is it something that's given to you? Keep that tension right in the back of your mind as we dive in. Today, we are unpacking the illusion of earthly glory by looking closely at chapters 13 and 14 of the book of Isaiah. Now, to understand the massive stakes here, we really have to look at the geopolitical pressure cooker of ancient Judah.

Imagine being a tiny nation completely sandwiched between these terrifying, massive empires. Right around 735 BC, King Ahaz was so paralyzed by the fear of his immediate neighbors that he made a catastrophic mistake. He allied with the absolutely ruthless Assyrian Empire for protection instead of trusting God.

And that single fear-driven misstep set off a chain reaction that put Judah on a direct collision course with an even greater threat down the road: Babylon, the empire that would eventually conquer Jerusalem in 586 BC. Dr. Oswalt has this fascinating modern analogy to help us grasp the dynamics between these two empires. You might be wondering, why does Isaiah focus his ultimate judgment on Babylon when Assyria was the guys with the swords right at their doorstep? Well, think of Babylon as the New York City of the ancient world.

It was incredibly wealthy, sophisticated, and utterly cosmopolitan. Assyria, on the other hand, was a lot like Washington, D.C. They had the raw military muscles, sure, but the Babylonians basically viewed them as country bumpkins who didn't know how to truly wield that power with any class. Babylon wasn't just an army.

It was the ultimate, intoxicating symbol of human achievement, staggering wealth, and frankly, terrifying human arrogance. Before we go any further, to really get what Isaiah is saying about all this arrogance, we actually need to redefine a word we throw around all the time: glory. In the ancient Hebrew text, glory isn't just a shiny exterior.

It's not a passing fade, like a really beautiful sunset that turns gray the second you look away. True glory means absolute substance. It means weight.

It means eternal significance. And what God is declaring through Isaiah is that the so-called glory of these mighty, intimidating, earthly nations actually equals absolute zero when compared to the eternal, unshakable substance of the Creator. So Babylon isn't just a physical place in this text.

It represents something much darker. It's the absolute root of all human sin. It's that terrifying, arrogant urge to stand on top of the world, look at everything around you, and declare, I am God, and I answer to absolutely no one.

It's the ultimate delusion, this idea that we can manufacture our own eternal significance and build a tower to the heavens all by ourselves, completely ignoring the very Creator who gave us life in the first place. Isaiah captures this sheer arrogance perfectly in chapter 14, with what is basically a brilliant, highly structured, poetic taunt. He essentially writes a sarcastic funeral song for a fallen, prideful tyrant.

And it's fascinating how he structures this. It plays out in three distinct acts. First, the earth itself reacts to the king's fall, then hell greets the tyrant as he descends, and finally, the heavens reflect on his ultimate, ridiculous hubris.

Let's walk through these, because it's pretty incredible. Okay, act one. The earth itself breathes a massive sigh of relief.

You see, these ancient kings had a brutal, destructive habit of clear-cutting the towering cedars of Lebanon just to build massive wooden monuments to their own egos. They literally stripped the earth bare just to feed their pride. So Isaiah paints this deeply ironic picture where nature itself, the very trees they used to chop down, actually sing for joy at the demise of the tyrant.

When the oppressor finally falls, the whole earth is, at long last, allowed to be at rest. Then, bam, the poem shifts abruptly downward. Act two is a dark, mocking funeral procession descending into Sheol, which is the ancient concept of the grave.

And the imagery here is absolutely haunting. The former kings, the very ones this tyrant had crushed and killed during his reign, actually rise from their shadowy thrones to greet him. They mock him, saying, oh, you have become as weak as we are.

They pull back his fancy royal shroud, and instead of pomp and glory, it's just maggots and worms. The great, untouchable conqueror is reduced to absolute nothingness. And this brings us to Act Three, which shoots us all the way up to the heavens.

We get inside the fallen king's head to see what drove him to this point. I will ascend above the clouds. I will make myself like the Most High.

What's so fascinating here is that Isaiah's actually borrowing ancient Canaanite mythic language. It's like the myth of a lesser god trying to physically sit on the throne of Baal. He uses this super familiar cultural trope to highlight the ultimate, absurd hubris of a tiny human being trying to usurp the throne of the Creator.

Now, quick timeout here, because we really need to bust a massive historical misconception about this specific passage. Thanks to John Milton's famous epic poem *Paradise Lost*, a lot of people read this talk of falling from heaven and ascending above the stars and immediately assume, oh, this is the origin story of Satan. But actually, scratch that.

If we look at its actual historical context, it's not. It is a profound, incredibly sarcastic warning about human pride. It's about an earthly king who tried to play God and the

inevitable, crushing humiliation that always follows when we elevate ourselves way above our station.

We see the inevitable result of this pride in the literal historical outcome of Babylon itself. Isaiah prophesied that this glorious, cosmopolitan epicenter would be left utterly desolate, inhabited only by scavenging hyenas. And history? History totally proves him right.

Babylon was so completely destroyed that its very location was lost to human history for over 1,500 years. Just think about that for a second. It would be like New York City simply vanishing from the map.

There's an old Latin phrase that sums up this inevitable collapse perfectly. *Sic semper gloria*, thus always to earthly glory. So what does all this ancient history mean for us today? Well, it highlights a vital, everyday contrast between empty human pride and true self-respect.

Pride is this frantic, exhausting attempt to build yourself up from the inside out, manufacturing your own worth, and refusing to bow to anyone. It's like building a skyscraper on quicksand. True self-respect, however, isn't manufactured at all.

It's derived. It comes from an external relationship. It is the quiet, unshakable confidence of knowing you are created in the image of a loving God.

Which brings us right back full circle to our opening question. You are not just a walking pile of chemicals worth \$7.38. You don't have to exhaust yourself building some arrogant inner Babylon to prove to the world that you matter. You can step right off that treadmill.

True self-respect comes from knowing you are so deeply valued by the Creator that you are worth the very life of the Son of God. Now that is an eternal weight and substance that no earthly empire could ever offer and no historical collapse could ever take away. As we wrap up this explainer, I want to leave you with this final, somewhat uncomfortable thought.

Take a hard look at your own life. Where are you relying on the fragile illusion of earthly glory? Where are you exhausting yourself trying to build your own personal Babylon, rather than just resting in the eternal worth you've already been given? Think on that for a bit. Thanks so much for joining me, and I'll catch you next time.