

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 9, 6-min. Video Overview

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to the explainer! So glad you're here, because today we are diving headfirst into antiquity. And honestly, it holds a surprisingly accurate mirror up to our modern world. We're enthusiastically kicking off our breakdown of Dr. John Oswalt's deep dive analysis of Isaiah, specifically chapters 17 and 18.

We're going to be exploring ancient geopolitics, major spiritual crossroads, and, well, that incredibly enduring human temptation to just put our faith in all the wrong things. Okay, let's jump right in. Right out of the gate, we've got to establish our thematic approach to this ancient text.

It's perfectly summarized by Dr. Oswalt's core mantra here: repetition is the soul of education. You see, the author of Isaiah didn't just write things down once and move on. He intentionally wove these recurring themes throughout the text to make absolutely sure the message landed.

And in that same spirit, we're going to be tracing these repeating patterns of trust, consequence, and divine quietness that thread their way through these chapters. And, you know, all that repetition, it brings us to the ultimate foundational question that frames this entire massive section of Isaiah. I'm talking chapter 7 all the way through 39.

The question is incredibly simple, but the stakes are sky-high. Can you and I really trust God? Like, can we put our full weight down on him? When the whole world is shaking, do we actually rely on the divine, or do we just panic and try to fix the whole shebang entirely on our own? This is what sets the stakes for our entire explainer today. To answer that, we've got a really clear roadmap for today.

We'll be looking at the roadmap of trust, the harvested field, the maker versus the maid, roaring nations and a quiet God, and finally, ancient words with modern warnings. So let's start with part one, the roadmap of trust. We really need to set the stage here, looking at the ancient geopolitical chessboard that the Southern Kingdom of Judah suddenly found itself on.

Talk about a terrifying time to be a small nation. Here's how this political crisis actually played out. First off, Judah's northern neighbors, Israel and Syria, team up.

They form a coalition and attack Judah just to force them into an alliance against the big bully on the block, the massive superpower of Assyria. Second, Judah is absolutely terrified of this new coalition. I mean, who wouldn't be? So third, what does Judah's King Ahaz do? Instead of trusting God, which is exactly what the prophet Isaiah is urging him to do, he pivots and turns to that very superpower, Assyria, for help.

And this brilliantly illustrates Dr. Oswalt's unforgettable metaphor. It's kind of like three mice getting into a huge brawl and one of them disastrously deciding to hire the cat. It's just

a fatal miscalculation born completely out of fear rather than trust, which leads us perfectly into our second section, the harvested field.

So what actually happens when a nation puts its ultimate trust in worldly powers instead of its creator? Well, in verses four through six, we get these incredibly vivid metaphors describing the inescapable consequences falling on the northern kingdom of Israel for doing exactly that. Now, the judgment on Israel isn't pictured as some instant total obliteration. Instead, it's compared to a heavily harvested field.

The prophet compares the entire nation to an olive tree that's just been beaten by harvesters. All the good fruit is totally gone, leaving nothing but a tiny, unreachable remnant, like literally just two or three olives clinging to the highest branch, or maybe a few scattered stalks of grain dropped by the reaper. It's a really stark warning.

If you're ever tempted to trust in the sheer power of this northern neighbor, just look at what their own choices have reduced them to. And that devastation brings us right to section three, the maker versus the maid. You see, that harvested field, it isn't just a punishment.

It actually serves as this profound spiritual wake-up call for the tiny remnant that survives. It forces them to examine the absolute core philosophical conflict of humanity. And it's fascinating how Dr. Oswalt frames this stark contrast for us.

On one side, you have the maker, the transcendent, holy creator who stands completely outside the material world. On the flip side, you have the maid. We're talking idols, the works of human hands, and our desperate, almost comical illusion of control.

Oswalt impartially points out how this ancient dynamic perfectly mirrors modern ideological debates. For example, he notes a specific critique of secular evolutionary worldviews, arguing that if you view humanity purely as a product of chance, from within the material creation, you completely remove the transcendent creator. And when the creator is removed, well, we invariably turn around and start worshiping what we make ourselves.

Basically, we are either depending entirely on our maker, or we're depending on the things our own hands have built, just to give us a false sense of security. But how do we actually stay focused on the maker? Well, we really have to grasp the ancient Hebrew concept of remembering. Now, in modern English, we can remember something in our heads, but not actually do anything about it, right? But not in ancient Hebrew.

To remember literally means to obey. Your mental understanding and your physical actions are completely inseparable. Think about it like this.

If you're being chased by enemies through a scorching, featureless desert, and God provides this massive rock of refuge for you to hide under and find shade, to forget that rock doesn't mean you suddenly have amnesia. It means you are actively disobeying and literally walking away from the safety provided. Even if you mentally believe the rock is right there, if your actions don't back it up, you've forgotten it.

So the crucial point here is mapped out perfectly by simple cause and effect. Forgetting God leads directly to deserted, strong cities. Trying to revive yourself by planting the absolute best plants, but completely leaving out the essential component of God's life-giving provision? That just results in a dead harvest.

Dr. Oswald is quick to point out that this isn't some angry God handing down arbitrary, vindictive punishments just because someone looked at him wrong. No, these are simply the inescapable natural consequences of misplaced trust. It's like leaving a key variable out of an algebraic equation.

It's just never going to balance. It is simply the way the world is structured. Which brings us right to section four, roaring nations, quiet God.

So we transition into verses 12 through 14, and wow, we get this dramatic, almost cinematic contrast between worldly chaos and absolute divine peace. First, the lens focuses on the worldly chaos. We hear about thundering, roaring nations raging like mighty waters.

It's a scene of incredibly loud, terrifying geopolitical movements. Chapter 18 even talks about the land of whirring wings beyond the rivers of Kush. These buzzing envoys are urgently sprinting up and down the Nile, desperately seeking political alliances and trying to make backroom deals to save themselves from the impending Assyrian threat.

It's a world completely gripped by frantic anxiety and really loud posturing. But then, right on the heels of that, we immediately contrast all that worldly chaos with the profound, totally unthreatened quietness of God. While the nations are out there roaring, God simply says, I will remain quiet and look on from my dwelling place.

I mean, he is completely unthreatened by the riots and the rebellion of earth. In fact, we learn that he rebukes the raging nations and they're instantly scattered, just like chaff on the wind. At evening, there's absolute terror, and by morning, the threat is completely gone.

And how exactly does God communicate this supreme confidence? Through a *ness*. That's a Hebrew word meaning a signal flag or an end sign. God raises this flag high up on the mountains to call the entire world to attention.

He's signaling that his profound rest and what the frantic world might mistakenly perceive as passivity or weakness is actually infinitely stronger than all the buzzing anxious strength of humanity combined. The world relies heavily on noise and frantic action. God relies on quiet sovereignty.

Let's move on to our fifth and final section. Ancient words, modern warnings. Now we get to take this ancient text and bridge it directly into Dr. Oswald's extremely poignant 21st-century applications for modern believers and the modern church.

And Oswald draws some really stark parallels here. He warns against modern institutions relying heavily on worldly systems, like using secular demographic methods just to accomplish divine work. He cautions us against putting our ultimate trust in political action groups.

He specifically calls out the danger of embracing a zero-sum culture war where fear drives people to completely demonize their opponents simply because they're terrified of losing ground. And finally, he warns against substituting frantic busyness, you know, constantly running around, glued to our phones, firing off texts and emails, for true divine rest. We are just impartially reporting his analysis here, but his point is clear.

These are basically the modern equivalents of hiring the Assyrian cat to fight the Assyrian mouse. To really drive this home, let's consider a very personal observation from Dr. Oswald himself. Speaking quite openly as a political conservative, he notes the great, profound danger of politicizing faith.

When people start acting out of a blind panic, when they start believing that the whole house is going to fall down, they tend to abandon love, adopt the absolutely ruthless tactics of the world, and completely forget that God has been here before. Attempting to use the political system for ultimate spiritual ends is the exact same trap that Judah fell into. It just completely misses God's perspective of quiet sovereignty.

And that brings us to the ultimate takeaway of this explainer. I really want to leave you with a direct challenge that summarizes everything we've unpacked today from Isaiah 17 and 18. In our incredibly modern world, a world totally filled with thundering nations, buzzing political envoys, nonstop culture wars, and frantic daily business, what are you putting your weight down on? Are you trusting the works of your own hands, or are you resting quietly in the maker? Take some time to really reflect on your own ultimate source of trust today.

Thank you so much for joining me for this explainer, and as always, keep learning.