

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 11,

6-min. Video Overview

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to the Explainer. Today, we're diving into something really fascinating. We're looking at Dr. John Oswalt's analysis of ancient geopolitical crises to uncover some timeless – and I mean absolutely timeless – lessons about human nature and the real pitfalls of self-reliance.

We're zeroing in on chapters 22 and 23 of the book of Isaiah. Now, you might be thinking, this text is nearly 30 centuries old. But trust me, the psychology of power, fear, and leadership it describes is incredibly relevant to us right now.

So, let's break down the anatomy of exactly where we put our trust when the world feels like it's completely falling apart. Here's our roadmap for today's explainer. We'll start with the necessity of trust, then look at the valley of vision, followed by Hezekiah's missing element.

From there, we'll cover the limits of human leaders, the fall of wealthy Tyre, and finally wrap up with the sovereign plan. Okay, let's jump right into section 1, the necessity of trust, building the foundation. So, before we even get to chapter 22, Isaiah has been systematically proving a massive point.

He looks at Babylon, which back then was the ancient world's ultimate symbol of military power and architectural glory. He looks at the pride of Moab. He looks at the frantic, desperate political schemes of Syria and Israel.

He takes in the vast natural resources and the ancient wisdom of Egypt and even the super lucrative commerce crossing the desert. And what does he conclude after surveying all of this human achievement literally? Well, without a foundational trust in the creator, it all amounts to absolute zero. The military glory? Zero.

The immense wealth? Zero. The cleverest political schemes? Zero. As Dr. Oswalt points out, it really doesn't matter how many times you multiply zero, right? The answer is always, inescapably, zero.

Moving right along to section 2, the valley of vision, a surprising target. Now, this is where things take a turn. Isaiah shockingly pivots his prophetic critique away from all those foreign enemies and points it directly at his own nation, Judah.

He actually calls his own people the valley of vision. I want you to think about that deliberate oxymoron for a second. Visions belong on mountaintops, right? Up there, you've got absolute clarity, this beautiful, sweeping, panoramic view of the horizon.

You can literally see what's coming miles away. But down in a valley, your view is completely obstructed. You're just seeing the trees right in front of your face, completely missing the forest.

Isaiah uses this biting, sarcastic phrase to point out his nation's severe tunnel vision. They genuinely thought they understood global politics and their place in the world, but man, they were entirely blind to the bigger picture. And we see this profound lack of vision actually play out during a massive national crisis in 701 BC.

The ruthless Assyrian Empire had just devastated the surrounding region, but Jerusalem narrowly, like almost miraculously, escaped destruction. But instead of sober reflection or gratitude, how did the citizens react? They threw a giddy, self-forgetful party on their rooftops. They were out there celebrating this short-term, incredibly costly victory.

It was a Pyrrhic victory where the overwhelming threat was literally still just outside their borders. But Isaiah? He absolutely refused to join the jubilation. Why? Because he wasn't just looking at the immediate relief.

From this prophetic mountaintop, he could already see inevitable Babylonian destruction looming, even though it was 150 years in the future. He was just deeply grieved by a people who were desperately numbing themselves to reality. That brings us to section 3: Hezekiah's missing element, the illusion of control.

Let's take a closer look at King Hezekiah to see how this illusion of control really takes hold. From a purely human perspective, he did absolutely everything right to prepare for a devastating siege. He was a brilliant military architect.

Anticipating the Assyrian attack, he dug this winding tunnel straight through solid bedrock just to bring fresh water safely from a spring outside into a secure pool inside the city walls. He even seized private property, basically using the ancient equivalent of eminent domain to tear down citizens' houses and pack that rubble between the double city walls to reinforce them against enemy battering rams. He was incredibly effective at physical defense.

But Isaiah points out a glaring, fatal omission. Despite all this brilliant preparation, Hezekiah entirely failed to consult his maker. He looked to the weapons, he looked to the water, and he looked to the walls, but he never actually looked to God.

So this severe spiritual oversight leads directly to an attitude famously captured in Isaiah 22.13. It goes, Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. Wow. I mean, this perfectly captures the timeless human coping mechanism of just numbing yourself to avoid looking at a grim reality or making those hard, long-term choices.

It is the ultimate, tragic expression of living in that valley of vision. It's basically the ancient equivalent of saying, you know what, I don't want to look ahead. I just want to feel good today.

I'm going to distract myself right now because life is just terrifyingly uncertain and totally out of my control. Now, you might be wondering, why is having a party during a crisis condemned so harshly by Isaiah? In fact, the ancient text says this specific iniquity will not be atoned for until they die. So why on earth is this kind of avoidance considered a sin unto death? Well, Dr. Oswald provides an absolutely unforgettable analogy to explain this severe judgment.

He likens this deliberate, arrogant rejection to smashing your own radio receiver. Just imagine the room you're sitting in right now is completely filled with music and talk radio waves. You can't hear them, but not because they aren't there, simply because you don't have a receiver.

God never stops loving, and He never stops broadcasting His truth. But when we consistently choose numbing pleasure over actually seeking Him, when we fully adopt that eat, drink, and be merry attitude just to shut out reality, we are essentially taking a sledgehammer to our own spiritual receiver. The true sin here isn't just throwing a rooftop party.

It's permanently destroying your own ability to ever hear God's voice again. Let that sink in. Alright, let's look at section 4, the limits of human leaders, Shebna vs.

Eliakim. So Isaiah then brings this massive geopolitical crisis down to a very, very personal level. He draws a really sharp contrast between two specific government officials.

First, take the proud Prime Minister Shebna. In the absolute middle of a national crisis, literally with the enemy at the gates, what is this guy doing? He is out there arrogantly overseeing the construction of a massive, fancy tomb for himself high up in the rock. He is the ultimate poster child for misplaced trust and empty self-glorification.

And Isaiah bluntly prophesies, nope, Shebna will never even get to use that tomb. Instead, he's going to be taken away in captivity to die as a hostage in a foreign land. Then, in stark contrast, we have Eliakim.

He's a humble, faithful servant whom God raises up to replace Shebna's totally failed leadership. Eliakim is described beautifully as a peg in a secure place upon which his whole family and the entire nation can safely hang their hopes and their burdens. Sounds great, right? However, the text issues a very sobering warning just a few verses later.

It says that eventually, even that secure peg will give way under the immense load. This is such a profound, historical, and theological truth. Even the absolute best, most reliable, most faithful human leaders in the world will eventually fail, falter, or pass away.

They're just humans after all. We can never, ever look to an ordinary human being, no matter how competent they are as our ultimate savior. This brings us to Section 5. The Fall of Wealthy Tyre.

The Last Zero. Shifting our map slightly over to Chapter 23, we encounter the final, stunning case study. The immense, seemingly untouchable wealth of the northern coastal cities, Tyre and Sidon.

These twin Phoenician cities were absolute economic juggernauts of the ancient world. Tucked safely along the coast of the Lebanon mountains, they held a total, extremely lucrative monopoly on seaborne trade across the entire eastern Mediterranean. They traded their famous cedar timber for vast amounts of Egyptian grain.

They were so incredibly powerful they actually later birthed the mighty colony of Carthage, an empire which would one day rival Rome itself. So when Isaiah suddenly prophesied the total destruction of Tyre, it would have been an unthinkable, paralyzing shock to the people hearing it. To put that into perspective, it would literally be like waking up tomorrow morning to find Wall Street, London, and the world's largest financial capitals simply wiped off the map overnight.

No way, right? But that's exactly what happens. The utter collapse of these economic giants represents the final zero in Isaiah's long list. Remember our math from earlier? We had the military might of Babylon, the pride of Moab, the ancient resources of Egypt, and now the limitless wealth of Tyre.

God is systematically dismantling the persistent human illusion that wealth, commerce, and human ingenuity can ever provide true security. The ancient text says the Lord purposed this to, "...defile the pompous pride of all glory." Ultimately, God alone is the one to be honored. All humans striving without him equals zero.

Finally, let's wrap up with section 6. The Sovereign Plan, Finding True Success. Throughout all these chapters, the ancient text repeatedly invokes a very specific, incredibly powerful title, the Lord of Hosts, or in Hebrew, Yahweh Sabaoth. Now, in the ancient world, the hosts of heaven were the stars, which pagans worshipped as literal, controlling gods. But Isaiah boldly steps in and claims that all those celestial powers, and all the terrifying earthly armies of Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt combined, are simply tools resting in the hands of Yahweh.

It's this vital, overarching reminder that global events, sudden economic crashes, and shifting political borders do not just happen by blind chance. They unfold entirely under the ultimate authority of a sovereign ruler. So where does that leave all of us? Well, Dr. Oswald shares a really poignant, vulnerable, personal anecdote about his own time serving as the president of Asbury College.

He notes that up to that point in his life, he had succeeded at essentially everything he'd tried. He poured his absolute heart and soul into being a great, effective president, and he failed. He ultimately had to step down.

And he uses this deeply personal moment to remind us of a very hard truth. We are called to be faithful; we are called to look to our maker, and we are absolutely called to do the hard work. But, and this is a big but, faithful action does not guarantee a pleasant, comfortable, or traditionally successful outcome.

We've got to do our part, for sure, but we must leave the final results completely in his sovereign hands. Looking back at Hezekiah's fortified walls, Shebna's arrogant, rock-hewn tomb, and those unimaginably wealthy ports of Tyre, we see how incredibly easy it is to trust the tangible, physical things we think we can control. But the valley of vision proves that having tunnel vision for our immediate circumstances ultimately just leads to despair.

So I want to leave you with this question. How are you defining true success in your own life right now? Are you frantically measuring your worth by short-term human guarantees and seeking immediate relief? Or are you measuring it by long-term faithfulness to a sovereign

plan you might not be able to entirely see yet? Think about that and keep that long view in mind. Thank you so much for joining me for this explainer.

Keep learning, keep questioning, and I'll catch you next time.