

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 12, 6-min. Video Overview

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to this explainer. Today we're diving straight into the fascinating conundrum of divine sovereignty versus human freedom right out of the ancient texts of Isaiah chapters 24 and 25. Relying on the teachings of Dr. John Oswalt, we're going to unpack exactly how the creator of the universe interacts with human history and how we are meant to respond.

So let's kick things off by asking the ultimate, seemingly unanswerable question: who is actually pulling the strings of history? You know, when you look around at the rise and fall of nations, it's incredibly easy to get the impression that humans, empires, and political powers are the main actors on the stage. It almost feels like God is just sort of sitting back, watching and reacting to whatever we decide to do next. When trying to answer this, we usually get stuck in two ditches, right? On one side, you have strict determinism, this idea that God causes every tiny motion, literally willing your arm to move to pick up a pencil.

On the flip side, you have total human freedom, where God merely reacts to our choices, kind of saying, oh my, I wonder if they're going to do next. Well, the text we're looking at today argues that reality lies somewhere in the middle. Nothing happens apart from the hand of God, yet everything is an expression of God giving us the actual freedom to choose.

To see exactly how Isaiah navigates this tension between the creator and the creature, we're going to follow a quick roadmap. We'll look at who controls history, the logic of cause and effect, the nature of transgression, two very different cities, an incredible promise, and finally, the art of weighing. Okay, section one.

Who controls human history? Let's take a look at who the text claims is the great, sovereign actor setting the stage. Isaiah chapter 24 paints this incredibly bleak, apocalyptic picture of a world that is completely broken. The text explicitly states that the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate.

But here's the really fascinating part. Absolutely no socioeconomic class escapes this judgment. The text lists them right out: the people and the priest, the slave and the master, the maid and her mistress.

It's a universal leveling. Everyone, from top to bottom, is impacted. Moving right along to section two, the logic of cause and effect and why this destruction is even happening.

The Bible is actually deeply concerned with predictable results stemming from predictable behavior. It frames this cause and effect in two distinct ways. First, you have causation, where the cause is stated straight away.

Because you sinned, you'll go into exile. But then there's substantiation. This is where it hits you with the effect first, just to grab your attention.

Like, you will go into captivity because you have sinned. Isaiah uses both of these structures to tell us exactly why the earth is withering away. Which brings us perfectly to section three, transgression and the fence.

Why exactly is the earth defiled? Isaiah tells us it's because people transgressed the laws. Now, the crucial thing is understanding what that word actually means. Transgress comes from a Latin root meaning to go over or to go across.

It literally means looking at a fence, a limit set by God, and deliberately jumping right over it. It's just human nature, isn't it? The second someone tells us not to, we suddenly have a burning desire to do it. So what are we jumping over? We're jumping over the laws, or in Hebrew, the Torah.

Now listen, we really shouldn't view the Torah as some set of oppressive restrictions from a grumpy magistrate. It literally just means instruction. Think of it as your loving creator's instruction manual for how life was meant to be lived.

God designed the world to work in a specific way, with immense freedoms as long as we stay within a few basic parameters. When we ignore the manual, the whole machine just breaks down. And by tossing out those instructions, we're violating an unspoken, everlasting covenant with our creator, a deal we essentially opt into just by being born.

And the consequence? The earth itself lies defiled. Nature actually falls under a heavy curse simply because of our choices. All right, let's shift gears to section four, two cities, two songs.

Isaiah uses some amazing contrasts here. Isaiah shows us this stark duality. On one hand, you've got this temporary, alcohol-fueled joy of forgetfulness happening in a totally ruined, desolate city.

It's a fake joy that eventually just gets silenced by sorrow when the vineyards run dry. But then, boom, the curtain pulls back to reveal a completely different kind of singing. It's a lasting joy found in exalting God's majesty and righteousness, a joy coming from something real and weighty outside of ourselves.

But Isaiah is a realist, for sure. Before that true, majestic joy fully arrives, he reminds us of the painful, present judgment using this vivid, kind of sad agricultural image, a gleaned olive tree. The impending judgment leaves the earth looking like an orchard picked clean, where only a few withered olives remain stuck on the highest, totally out-of-reach branches.

But do not lose hope, which brings us to chapter 25 and our fifth section, a promise to swallow death. This is absolutely the emotional peak of the text. The prophet declares that on his mountain, God is going to prepare a feast for all people.

If the apocalyptic judgment touched the whole world, the salvation being offered here touches the whole world, too. It's universal. God promises to physically swallow up death forever and to wipe away tears from every single face.

It is just an astounding, sweeping promise of redemption. And that brings us to our sixth and final section, the art of waiting, and how we're supposed to respond today. How do we receive this promise? We respond by waiting.

But hold up. This is not the English concept of just sitting around killing time. The ancient Hebrew words for waiting mean living in confident anticipation.

It's this absolute assurance that God will act, paired with a deliberate refusal to run ahead of him and try to fix problems using our own time and our own limited wisdom. It's a posture of intense trust. On the flip side, what about those who refuse to wait? The ones who say, I don't need God.

I've got this. Isaiah points to the nation of Moab as the ultimate poster child for pompous human pride. And their fate is pretty visceral.

They end up totally humiliated, face down, practically swimming in the muck of a barnyard. It's really not a dignified look for what happens when we try to exalt ourselves. Because honestly, attempting to make ourselves equal to the creator isn't just punished because God's arrogant.

It's just the nature of reality. It's literally like unfolding a paperclip and jamming it straight into an electrical outlet. You weren't designed to do that.

It defies the laws of physics, the laws of reality. And trust me, it always ends in an electrifying disaster. So as we wrap up this explainer, we see that God's grace is incredibly real, but so is his justice.

He's the sovereign actor preparing a feast that defeats death itself. But we have to choose to live within his parameters rather than constantly jumping the fence. So I want to leave you with this final provocative thought regarding your own trust.

In a world moving a million miles an hour, are you trying to force the future with your own wisdom? Or are you practicing the confident anticipation of waiting on the Creator? Seriously, what are you waiting for?