

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 19,

6-min. Video Overview

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to this explainer. Today, we're diving into Dr. John Oswalt's fascinating academic lecture on Isaiah chapters 38 and 39. We're going to explore the complex and honestly, deeply messy reality of a human being walking with God.

You know, we're looking at a biblical narrative that absolutely does not tie everything up in a neat little bow. Instead, it shows us the raw, unfiltered relationship between the divine and a very mortal, fallible King. So let's jump right in by asking the core question that shadows this whole story of King Hezekiah.

Here is a guy who famously negotiates with God for his own life and actually wins, yet eventually makes a catastrophic blunder that seals the fate of his descendants. How in the world is a hero of the faith to fall so hard? Section one, a chronological mystery: the timeline of King Hezekiah, to really understand the story. We first have to crack a bit of a historical cold case regarding when these events actually took place because there are some conflicting dates for Hezekiah's lifespan in the biblical text.

Dr. Oswalt points out that while the Bible places the story of Hezekiah's illness in chapters 38 and 39, after the great deliverance from the Assyrians, the historical timeline suggests something entirely different. Based on the lifespan of the Babylonian envoy mentioned later on, the events of his illness likely happened in 710 BC. That is up to a full decade before the Assyrian crisis of 701 BC.

So what's the big takeaway here? The author Isaiah placed these events out of chronological order entirely on purpose. He wasn't just writing a dry history textbook. He was making a profound theological point about who we should actually put our trust in.

See, Hezekiah passes the ultimate test of trusting God against the Assyrians in chapter 37. But as we're about to see, passing one massive test doesn't mean you're completely, perfectly reliable forever. Dr. Oswalt outlines his vexing chronological problem perfectly.

You literally just have to look at the historical evidence and make a choice on these dates. But realizing this chronological shift, it's a total game changer. It completely reframes how we view Hezekiah's impending death sentence.

It shows us a man who is still growing, still vulnerable, and still very much right in the messy middle of his journey. Section two, negotiating with God, the 15-year reprieve. This brings us to a really stunning moment.

The prophet Isaiah comes to a sick King Hezekiah and delivers a crushing prophecy with absolutely zero qualification. He says, set your house in order, for you shall die. But then Hezekiah prays, and God immediately sends Isaiah right back to give him 15 more years to live.

Now, this begs a massive question, doesn't it? Are God's promises not reliable? Does God just change his mind? Well, the dynamic here is absolutely fascinating. Notice that Hezekiah doesn't necessarily repent of a specific sin. Instead, God responds favorably because Hezekiah makes a claim based on his previous behaviors, his faithfulness, and his whole heart.

This proves that a relationship with God isn't some rigid, unbending lockstep. It's a dynamic, responsive interplay. Dr. Oswald emphasizes that relationships with God are messy and complicated, but beautifully so, because God actually listens and responds to us.

Now, Dr. Oswald brings up a fantastic core metaphor here. Hezekiah describes his relationship with God as a continuous walk. Think of the imagery of a sheep walking before a shepherd.

It completely pushes back against the idea that salvation or faithfulness is just sitting static in a saved position. No way. It's a marathon.

It's a daily ongoing journey where you are constantly proving your dependability. Section three, the undivided heart. Unpacking a perfect heart.

So let's look deeper at what Hezekiah meant when he claimed to have a whole heart. Older translations actually call it a perfect heart, which, let's be honest, makes us all a bit nervous because none of us are perfect. But Dr. Oswald unpacks the Hebrew root word used here, which is shalom.

We so often just translate shalom simply as peace, but it actually means to be put together, to be united or undivided. It means having a totally undivided loyalty. Dr. Oswald points out something brilliant about the Hebrew verb root of shalom.

Having a shalom heart doesn't mean you understand everything perfectly, and it for sure doesn't mean your daily performance is without error. What it actually means is that your core personality belongs completely to God with zero rival loyalties. You can be entirely God's even if you're incredibly fallible.

Section four, confronting human mortality. A somber reflection. And fallible is exactly what Hezekiah is because, despite receiving a miraculous 15-year extension on his life, his immediate poetic reaction to being healed is incredibly somber.

He literally writes, I must depart in the middle of my days. My dwelling is plucked up. I mean, you'd expect the guy to be jumping up and down with absolute joy, but instead he dwells heavily on the harsh reality of his own mortality.

He feels the crushing weight of being a temporary creature. This stark contrast really shows us exactly where his head is at. In his poem, we get nine full verses of mourning his mortality and only two verses of thanksgiving.

Chapter 38 is fundamentally about Hezekiah realizing that despite being a genuinely good King who literally just experienced a miracle, he's still just a mortal man whose days are ultimately numbered. He can't save himself forever, and he certainly can't save his nation forever. Section five, the Babylonian blunder.

Trying to impress the world. And that human frailty becomes painfully obvious when envoys from Babylon hear about Hezekiah's miraculous recovery and travel nearly a thousand miles to congratulate him. Now you really have to understand the dynamic here.

Babylon was the culturally elite, highly sophisticated center of the world at the time. Dr. Oswald points out that Hezekiah was so blown away by their attention that he basically acted like a country Claude, just desperately trying to impress the big city elites. Just notice the painful irony here.

When Hezekiah was sick, he showed silent humility, weeping and praying to God. But the absolute second the sophisticated Babylonians show up, he completely forgets God. Instead of declaring the glory of Yahweh who just healed him, he goes into this frenzy of self-aggrandizing bragging, showing off all his earthly wealth, his armaments, and his storehouses to these foreign envoys.

The consequences of this are devastating. The prophet Isaiah immediately confronts Hezekiah. He asks him, what did they see? And then delivers a shocking prophecy.

He tells the King that because you showed them everything, the days are coming when these very people you just tried to impress will conquer Jerusalem. They're going to carry away all that wealth and even worse, they will take your own descendants away to be eunuchs in the court of Babylon. Section six, the fallible leader, a shocking response.

Now you really have to let his response to this news sink in. Upon hearing that his nation will fall, his wealth will be stolen, and his own sons will be taken away, Hezekiah literally says the word of the Lord is good simply because there will be peace in his own days. There will be peace and security in my days, he says.

It is a stunning, breathtaking failure of leadership and empathy. And this right here brilliantly illustrates Dr. Oswald's overarching point in his lecture. Hezekiah served God with a whole heart.

Yes, he passed the crisis test, but he is still a fallible mortal man. He is definitely not the perfect Messiah that humanity needs. It shows us that a human leader, even a really great one, will eventually let down their guard.

Hezekiah's sudden pride and selfishness remind us of something absolutely crucial. Passing a spiritual test in a moment of intense crisis doesn't guarantee you won't let your guard down in times of peace and success. The real challenge is what will motivate us to a life of continuous trust? How do we stay faithful when the immediate threat is gone, and the world comes knocking to flatter us? So we'll leave you with this final thought to ponder from Dr. Oswald's deep dive into Isaiah.

If a great devoted King like Hezekiah, a man who walked with God and negotiated for his very life, can fail so profoundly at the end, it completely shifts our focus. It forces us to look past human perfectibility. It turns our eyes toward the horizon, eagerly looking for a true Messiah.

We are waiting for a perfect leader who will never falter, never brag, and never, ever trade the future of his people for temporary peace in his own days. Thank you so much for joining us for this explainer. Keep learning, keep questioning, and we'll see you next time.