

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 20,

6-min. Video Overview

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to this explainer. Today, we're diving straight into Dr. John Oswalt's incredible breakdown of Isaiah 40 and 41. It is basically a masterclass in resilience, exploring how an ancient audience who had been completely stripped of their hope and identity was guided back to a place of profound strength.

Here is our roadmap for today. We're going to look at the great literary shift, a prophet's time jump, putting steel in the backbone, three questions of deliverance, and finally, the drop in the bucket. Let's get right into it.

All right, kicking things off with part one, the great literary shift. So if you look at the text, there is this massive, almost jarring pivot right in the middle. The first 39 chapters, they're all about human failure.

The text establishes trust as a basis, sure, but it uses historical figures like King Hezekiah to show us that human perfectibility, yeah, it's just not possible. We are totally helpless. So if there's any hope, it has to come from somewhere else.

But then starting in chapter 40, it completely flips the script. It moves entirely toward God's undeserved grace. It essentially answers the question, what is actually going to motivate us to trust on a regular, settled basis? And the answer is free, unlimited grace, which brings us to part two, a prophet's time jump.

Okay. This is actually pretty wild. The narrative literally jumps through time.

We start in Isaiah's early reality around 739 BC, but then bam, we're suddenly thrust 150 years into the future to 560 BC, right smack in the middle of the Babylonian exile. Why? Well, if God delivered the earlier generations from Assyria, but seemingly left this future generation stuck in Babylon, you can bet it would completely shatter their trust in him. So this prophetic time jump is intentionally designed to speak directly to those future heartbroken captives.

Moving on to part three, steel in the backbone. To really get what's happening here, you have to put yourself in their shoes. Imagine the absolute crushing psychological weight of this.

For a thousand years, their entire self-identity was the chosen people. And now they're sitting in Babylonian exile thinking they're the forgotten people. Their holy house is completely destroyed.

They're living in this era of absolute hopelessness, discouragement, and defeat. Basically assuming their sins have pushed God to just walk away forever. Because of that deep despair, the text gives a command: comfort, comfort my people.

Now, wait, this isn't offering them a polite, warm, fuzzy hug. This is such a cool linguistic insight. Back when the King James Bible was translated in 1611, the word comfort didn't mean warm fuzzies.

It actually meant to fortify, literally to put steel in someone's backbone. It meant coming alongside someone whose life has been completely knocked down, called worthless, and called a fool, and giving them the strength to stand back up. God is speaking to Jerusalem in her darkest hour, offering true spine-stiffening fortification.

That perfectly sets up part four, three questions of deliverance. When people are this profoundly disillusioned, the very first thing they ask is, have we been cast off for good? They're essentially wondering, does God even want to deliver us anymore? Or has he completely washed his hands of this whole operation? And the text gives a massive, emphatic yes. It proves he doesn't just sit back and wait for them to figure it out.

The punishment is over. Dr. Oswalt uses this amazing analogy here of R.G. Letourneau, the guy who invented massive earth-moving equipment. The text says every valley will be filled in, every mountain cut down.

It's exactly like God is bringing in heavy-duty divine earth-moving equipment to pave a straight, flat highway right through the desert to reach them. He's actively coming to rescue them in their helplessness. But of course, human nature kicks in.

Even if he wants to, the exiles wonder, will he actually do it? They're sitting there thinking, my way is hidden from the Lord. He isn't paying any attention to me. I mean, if he was going to save us, he would have done it yesterday when I told him to.

And this is where we get a brilliant resolution. He absolutely will deliver. But there's a catch.

They have to replace all that disillusioned discouragement with trusting expectation. Look, God is the everlasting creator, right? He doesn't get tired or grow weary, but we sure do. The absolute hardest part is that God requires us to wait.

The central issue is how we wait. Will we wait in despair or will we wait in trusting expectation? He promises that if we just trust him, he'll give power to the faint. And that brings us to our final section today: the drop. So we've covered does he want to and will he, but here's the most imposing, terrifying doubt of all.

Can God deliver? The exiles are looking up at this towering, monstrous, unstoppable empire of Babylon and they're terrified. To them, the Babylonian gods look supreme. So it's a completely fair question.

Can our God actually take on this massive machine? To answer that, the text just fires off these rhetorical questions to build up a sense of massive scale. Who measured the waters in the hollow of his hand? Whom did he consult? In the ancient polytheistic world, gods were thought of like royal courts, always having to take counsel with each other before making a move. But Yahweh? Who taught him? Who did he consult? The answer is absolutely no one.

The entire cosmos literally fits within the span of God's hand. From there, it transitions into this incredibly vivid, almost satirical contrast. It basically mocks the absolute absurdity of comparing the everlasting creator to some man-made statue.

It's asking, are you seriously going to compare the God of the universe to a piece of wood overlaid with gold, chained to a wall just so it won't tip over? Like Dr. Oswald points out, if the prophet were around today, he'd probably just roll his eyes and say, give me a break. Here's where we get a really famous phrase. C.S. Lewis actually pointed out that this exact idiom entered the English language straight from the 1611 King James translation of this text.

It declares that to God, these terrifying world-conquering nations aren't a threat at all. They are quite literally just a drop in a bucket. Babylon might look like a terrifying monster right now, but in the grand cosmic timeline, they're just a fading blade of grass.

Yes, you and I are grass, but guess what? So is Babylon. All flesh withers and the flower fades, but the word of the Lord stands forever. And the incredible thing is, if we take that eternal word into ourselves, it actually infuses our temporary fading lives with the very flavor of eternity.

So, what's the ultimate takeaway? It's this famous progression. And notice the descending order here. It starts with mounting up with wings like eagles, then running, and it ends with walking.

Dr. Oswald highlights a great quote for this. It's easy to soar with the eagles. It's easy to run with the champions.

But it's walking with the turkeys that is so hard. We are always asking the Holy Spirit for help with massive, high-flying tasks. But what we desperately need strength for is just getting through today, maintaining that steady, daily walk of faithfulness without giving up.

Which leaves us with this final thought to wrap up our explainer. If the absolute hardest part of faith isn't flying, but simply the daily walking, how are you going to choose to step forward tomorrow? Remember to keep that steel in your backbone.