

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 21,

6-min. Video Overview

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Hey there and welcome to this explainer. Today we're jumping right into an ancient text that honestly reads a lot like a modern-day courtroom thriller. We're looking at Dr. John Alsvold's deep dive into the biblical book of Isaiah, specifically chapters 42 and 43.

This is a story packed with cosmic courtrooms, a literal trial of false gods, and a profound literary mystery centered around a massive plot twist. If you've ever wondered how ancient texts grapple with huge concepts like human suffering, divine justice, and just the sheer unpredictability of history, well, you're absolutely in the right place. Okay, let's dive into this.

Here is our roadmap through this pretty dense theological text. We're looking at 1. Refining the Chosen Servant, 2. The Trial of Idols, 3. The Second Servant's Mission, 4. The Blind and Deaf Servant, 5. An Unpredictable New Thing, and we'll wrap up with 6. Salvation by Grace Alone. Starting right off with Section 1, Refining the Chosen Servant and the Purpose Behind the Pain of Exile.

To really grasp what's going on here, we have to ground ourselves in the historical context. Picture this. The nation of Israel has been totally conquered.

Their city is destroyed, and the people have been dragged off into exile in Babylon. So the massive looming question for these folks was simply, did God cast us off? I mean, had they finally crossed the line so far that they were permanently abandoned? Well, Dr. Oswalt answers this with a brilliant observation right from the text. Judgment is never God's intended last word.

You know, to the people living through it, the exile felt like absolute annihilation. But the text insists over and over that this was never going to be the end of the story. God actually tells them explicitly, you are my servant; I have chosen you and not cast you off.

Notice the really profound difference between destruction and refinement here. You might remember that famous scene earlier in Isaiah, where a heavenly being touches a burning coal right to the prophet's lips. Obviously incredibly painful.

But that fire wasn't there to destroy him. It was there to purify him. The pain of the Babylonian exile was meant to act exactly like that burning coal, just for the entire nation.

It was a severe refinement, not a final destruction. Which leads us perfectly into Section 2, the trial of idols. And this is where the text transforms into a literal cosmic courtroom battle.

So the people assume that because Babylon conquered them, Babylon's gods must just be stronger than their god, right? Makes sense. Well, Yahweh essentially calls the pagan idols of Babylon up to the witness stand for the ultimate test. Who can predict the future? God challenges these idols to bring their proofs.

He's basically saying, hey, tell us a time in the past when you made a specific prediction that actually came true. Prove it. To understand why this challenge is so utterly devastating, we really have to look at the ancient worldview.

See, pagan gods were viewed as just personified forces inside the cosmos. You know, the sun, the moon, the storms. And because they're trapped inside the system, their worldview just expects endless repeating cycles.

They can't tell you where the universe came from, and they definitely can't tell you where it's going. But the biblical concept of the creator? Completely different. The creator exists completely outside the cosmos.

Only a being who stands totally outside the circle of time and space knows the true origin and the ultimate goal. And therefore, only that outside creator can actually declare the future. And notice how the text specifically challenges the idols to declare the things to come.

God hangs his entire case on this unique ability. He's not throwing out vague horoscopes here. He specifically predicted the exile to Babylon long before Babylon was even on the map as a world power.

And he even predicted the eventual return from that exile. Meanwhile, the idols remain utterly silent because they are, as the text bluntly puts it, empty wind. They're locked inside nature, but God is totally sovereign over it.

All right, moving on to section three, the second servant's mission. And this is where we see a really fascinating shift in the text. Right at the start of chapter 42, there's this sudden, very sharp literary shift.

Up until now, the servant in the text has almost exclusively referred to the nation of Israel. But suddenly, out of nowhere, a new individual is introduced. And we're told this new servant is going to bring forth Mishpat.

Now, English translations usually render Mishpat as justice. But honestly, that word is just not big enough. Justice in English usually just implies, you know, legal equity.

But Mishpat, that means God's divine, perfect order for all of life. It means balancing the cosmic books and restoring the world to how it was originally meant to be. So this new servant, his mission is on an absolutely massive global scale.

And just look at the methodology of this new servant. The text says, a bruised reed he will not break, a faintly burning wick he will not quench. He's not going to cry aloud or make some massive scene in the streets.

He operates with this profound gentleness. Yet, and this is key, he will not grow faint until Mishpat is established on the earth. He is stepping up to be a covenant to the people and a literal light to the nations, which perfectly sets up section four, the blind and deaf servant.

We are now dealing with a tale of two very different servants. And this brilliantly illustrates the contrast. We have this newly introduced, quiet, highly effective servant, and then we have the original servant, the nation of Israel.

Let's compare them side by side because the difference is just staggering. Servant one, Israel, is described by God as blind, deaf, and trapped in prisons. They receive immense benefits.

I mean, God promises to protect them, help them, be with them, but they completely failed their mission. On the flip side, Servant Two, the new deliverer, doesn't receive any listed benefits. He's driven entirely by the mission itself.

He's empowered by God's Spirit to actually be the covenant and the light that Israel failed to be. Essentially, because servant one is blind and trapped, servant two has to step in to get the job done. But wait, why is servant one trapped in the first place? As the text points out, they were plundered and looted.

But who actually did it? The people thought Babylon was just too strong, but God steps in and corrects them. Babylon didn't take you into exile. I sent you into exile.

So the absolutely crucial point here is this. If Yahweh orchestrated the captivity for their refinement, then Yahweh and Yahweh alone holds the absolute power of release. He can get them out whenever he is good and ready.

Which brings us right into chapter 43 in section 5, an unpredictable new thing. This is all about forgetting the past so you can actually see the future. So once we establish that God can and will release them, the big question becomes how? And right here, God does something incredibly shocking regarding Israel's most cherished historical memory.

Notice the stunning contrast on the page. First, God explicitly brings up the exodus. He talks about making a path in the mighty waters, extinguishing the Egyptian chariots.

He's bringing up their greatest historical triumph. But then, immediately, he issues this stunning command: remember not the former things. Behold, I am doing a new thing.

Guys, he literally brings up the Exodus specifically to tell them to forget about it. Let's track this conceptually because it's fascinating. In the ancient past, God used a Hebrew baby in a basket, raised him up, and parted the Red Sea.

We love our formulas, right? We get stuck on exactly how God worked in the past. But God commands them to let go of the old methods because in the near future, he is going to completely bypass their expectations. And here is the massive twist that totally offends human expectations.

God is going to deliver them using Cyrus the Great, a foreign pagan Persian emperor who doesn't even know Yahweh's name. They wanted another Moses. God gave them a Persian king.

Remember, God is not bound by nature or history. He is the creator outside the cosmos. As Dr. Oswald kind of jokes, he has a very low threshold for boredom, and he can absolutely do things that have never happened before.

Dr. Oswald highlights a profound takeaway here, saying God is always consistent, but he is never predictable. We constantly try to put his methods into a neat little box so we can control things. We really don't like surprises.

But the creator of the formulas, his character never changes. He will always deliver his people, but his methods, those are entirely his own. All right, that brings us to our final section, salvation by grace alone, and the ultimate resolution of this text.

The text moves to resolve the entire narrative here. God tells Israel that their religious sacrifices and rituals during this whole time have been completely useless. So if their works have failed, how are they ultimately saved? Well, the text lists exactly why their sacrifices failed.

They were just going through the motions, offering sheep and incense, but their hearts just weren't in it. They were continuing to live in sin while performing these religious duties. Basically, they were treating God like a magical transaction.

You know, if I just say the right words or burn the right offering, God has to forgive me. They were attempting to manipulate the creator, and God flat out says, you haven't honored me. You've only burdened me with your sins.

But then we arrive at the ultimate theological mic drop. God says, I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake. Notice what is glaringly missing there.

He doesn't say because of your great sacrifices or because you finally earned it. No, forgiveness isn't earned by human manipulation. It is given freely, purely by grace for God's own sake.

And this perfectly summarizes the core lesson of these two incredibly dense chapters, whether it's the Old Testament or the New Testament: salvation is by grace. Obedience is supposed to be a loving response to that grace. It is never, ever a tool for manipulating God to do what we want.

When you truly realize that the creator of the cosmos, the one who literally calls the future, has chosen to blot out your failure simply because of who he is, man, it changes everything about how you live. So I want to leave you with this final provocative thought today. If grace is given purely for God's own sake and not based on your performance, how does that change the way you respond to the unpredictable things in your own life? Can you stop trying to manipulate your circumstances with formulas and instead trust a God who is entirely consistent, deeply loving, and yet wildly unpredictable? Thank you so much for joining me on this explainer.

Keep learning, keep seeking, and I'll see you next time.