

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 22, 6-min. Video Overview

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Welcome to The Explainer. Today, we are jumping headfirst into Dr. John Oswalt's absolutely fascinating breakdown of Isaiah chapters 44 through 46. Look, whether you're a total ancient text nerd or you're just curious about the philosophical ideas that built the biblical worldview, these chapters are seriously rich.

We're talking deep dives into creation, the nature of time, and the core of the human condition. So let's just get right to the massive, underlying tension in this text. It's the ultimate clash of worldviews.

Isaiah basically looks at his audience and gives them a stark choice. Are you going to worship your maker or are you going to literally make a God in your own image to worship? It all comes down to who you're actually relying on. And man, it sets up a brilliant and honestly a pretty sarcastic critique of human nature.

All right, kicking things off with section one, the folly of drawn from Isaiah 44. Isaiah paints this wildly absurd picture for us. Picture this: a guy chops down a tree.

He uses half the wood to build a fire and bake some bread, and then uses the leftover stump to carve a little statue, and then begs that statue to save his life. To the biblical mind, this isn't just silly. It's what they call an abomination.

Why? Because it completely flips reality on its head. Creation was given to us to use, to cultivate, right? Not to worship. Whenever we put our trust in things we made with our own hands to somehow control our destiny, we are completely denying the natural order of things.

There's this brilliant quote from Augustine that just hits the nail on the head. He said, idolatry is the use of that which should be worshiped and the worship of that which should be used. That perfectly captures the tragedy here.

Human nature has this weird tendency to try and shrink reality down to something manageable. We create these little gods to give ourselves the illusion of control instead of just submitting to the actual creator. Which brings us to section two, proving God through prophecy.

So unlike these pagan gods who are thought to be trapped inside the natural weather systems, you know, needing the rain and harvest just like we do, Yahweh claims to stand totally outside of nature, and he literally drops his divine resume to prove it. He's the king of Israel, meaning he's the sole ruler with a relational obligation to his people. He is the redeemer, fully committed to saving them, and he's the lord of hosts, the lord almighty.

He actually has the omnipotent muscle to pull that salvation off. You know, Winston Churchill once quipped that democracy is the finest of all human governments, but the government of heaven is a monarchy. And that perfectly illustrates Oswalt's point here.

God isn't taking a vote. He's the sole ruler standing outside of time. Humanity doesn't get to form a committee to decide how the universe should be run.

So why does God predict the future in these texts? Well, because he is outside the system, he actually can. But, and this is absolutely crucial, he's not doing it to give us some secret mathematical timeline to decode. People try that all the time and almost always get it wrong.

No, the whole point of declaring the end from the beginning is to prove his absolute sovereignty so that when the world goes crazy, his people don't have to live in fear. He's got it. Let's move on to section three, the unexpected deliverer from Isaiah 45.

Okay, so the Israelites are facing the absolutely devastating reality of the Babylonian exile, and they fully expected God to rescue them using what we might call the classic Moses model. They figured they knew exactly how God worked. You get a Hebrew baby, hide him in a river basket, have him spend a few decades in the desert, and boom, there's your deliverer.

They had God perfectly packaged in a comfortable, traditional little box. But God completely pulls the rug out from under them. Instead of a Hebrew deliverer, he names a totally unknown pagan king named Cyrus as his anointed deliverer.

Seriously, in Isaiah 45, God actually calls this Persian king his Messiah. God equips Cyrus, a guy who has zero idea who Yahweh even is, to conquer nations and set the Israelites free. It's God's way of proving, hey, I don't just work through insiders.

As the ultimate creator, he can use literally anyone he wants to get the job done. And that leads right into section four, rejecting the pagan worldview. Using a pagan king was a massive scandal back then.

It forced a head-on collision with how ancient cultures fundamentally saw the universe. Isaiah is radically rejecting pagan dualism. In the pagan mindset, it's like yin and yang.

Good and evil are these equal forces constantly battling for control. But the biblical text hammers home pure monotheism. There is only one eternal entity.

God is the ultimate primary cause of all reality. No secondary rival gods allowed. Naturally, the people start complaining, you can't use a pagan king, God, you're doing it wrong.

And God's response is basically, you are the clay, I am the potter. It's a wildly powerful metaphor. He asks, does the clay say to him who forms it, what are you making? It's completely absurd to think the clay gets to critique the potter's technique.

Now for section five, who carries whom? This comes from Isaiah 46, and it's fantastic. After addressing the whole how are we getting delivered question, the prophet paints this vivid, almost laugh-out-loud picture of the Babylonian gods. You have these supposedly grand gods, Bel and Nebo, and what are they doing? They're completely powerless.

They literally have to be strapped onto the backs of exhausted, weary beasts of burden to be carted off into captivity. They can't save anyone. They're literally just dead weight.

Now contrast those heavy, burdensome idols with Yahweh. God says, I have made, I will bear it, I will carry, and we'll save. While the pagans are out there sweating, breaking their backs under the physical and spiritual weight of gods they manufactured themselves, the true God looks at his people and says, I formed you, I've carried you since the day you were born, and even when you're old and gray, I'm still going to be the one carrying you.

There's a piercing psychological truth here, something Dietrich Bonhoeffer once pointed out. He essentially said, if you have to constantly carry, protect, and maintain your gods, or your stuff, they actually own you. Sure, we might not be bowing down to wooden statues today, but we absolutely build our own idols, right? Careers, status, bank accounts.

If we're constantly exhausted trying to carry all that around just to feel secure, we've basically become slaves to our own creations. Which brings us to our final point, section six, the true nature of grace. All of this- God acting outside of time, God carrying his people- it all forces us to one inescapable question.

If God holds all the cards, and we really are just clay on the spinning wheel, what exactly is our role here? What can we possibly do to cause God to redeem us? The answer, nothing, absolutely nothing. Our redemption isn't based on how perfectly we repent or how strong our faith is. It is 100% based on God's unmerited, initiated grace.

The Israelites didn't do a single thing to deserve the rescue Cyrus brought them. In fact, the text calls them stubborn and far from righteousness, but God just steps in and says, I am bringing my righteousness near. It's a completely one-way street started by the Creator.

Because true grace isn't God standing up in heaven, arms crossed, waiting for us to finally clean up our act. Think about the prodigal son. If that was a pure picture of the grace Isaiah is talking about, the father wouldn't have just been waiting on the porch.

He would have marched all the way to the distant country, waded right into the mud and the pig pen, and literally picked his son up to carry him home. That is the true depth of unmerited grace. So I want to leave you to ponder this one final thought.

Are you totally exhausted from carrying the heavy weight of your own creations? Are you going to keep dragging around those idols you've made to feel secure? Or will you finally let the creator carry you? These chapters challenge us to really look at the burdens we're hauling around. Why strive so hard to control our destinies when the creator of the universe is offering to bear the weight for us simply out of his own grace? It's a massive shift in perspective. Thank you so much for joining me for this explainer, and I really hope this deep dive into Isaiah gives you a fresh, liberating lens on reality.