

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 25, Audio Overview Podcast

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

All right, so buckle up, everyone, because we are diving deep into Isaiah, chapters 52 and 53. Oh, yeah. This is a section of the Bible a lot of folks know for that mysterious figure, the Suffering Servant.

Right, right. And as you can imagine, for centuries, people have been going back and forth trying to unpack what it all means. Absolutely.

We're going to be looking at a lecture by Dr. John Oswalt, who's an Old Testament scholar. Okay. And one of the first things that really struck me is that even though these chapters talk about deliverance, it's not just talking about being freed from exile and back to the... It goes way deeper than that.

Yeah. It's really about something that we all experience, that feeling of being far away from God. Right.

And how do we bridge that gap? Yeah. How do we return? Exactly. And that's where Dr. Oswalt brings up this really interesting point.

Okay. He says, to truly get this passage, we need to understand what it means to know God, not just in our heads, but in our lives. Yeah.

That lived experience, as you said, is experience. And he even uses this analogy to illustrate God's love. Oh, I like analogies.

He says it's like the Israelites are thinking, did God sell us off? Is he going to have to pay someone to get us back? But God is saying, no, no, no, hold on. I didn't sell you, and I don't buy love back. I love that.

It's freely given. That's the radical grace that Dr. Oswalt is highlighting. Yes.

God's not limited by some kind of earthly transaction or business deal. Right. He can take his people back freely because his love just doesn't work that way.

So the stakes are high, right? We're talking about a deep, deep need. Cube stakes. Yeah.

And then to really drive home our helplessness, Dr. Oswalt throws in this imagery of a city under siege. Oh, I remember this part. Yeah.

So imagine you're that watchman desperate for any sign of hope. You've been waiting forever. Then suddenly a messenger arrives and announces victory.

Oh, the release. That overwhelming relief. That's how Isaiah describes God's coming salvation.

Powerful. So powerful. And it really shows that we need rescuing.

Yeah. We're stuck until he comes to us. We can't do it on our own.

But then things get really interesting. Oh, here we go. In Isaiah 52.13-15, the suffering servant is described with terms that are usually reserved for God: high and lifted up.

Right. Exalted. But at the same time, his appearance is marred beyond human semblance.

It's completely unexpected. It flips the script. It does.

It really changes how we think a triumphant savior should look like. Right. Dr. Oswalt had this great line about it.

He said, everybody wants the balm of servanthood, but nobody can stand its twisted, marred face. Ouch. That's good.

We love the idea of someone sacrificing for us, but the reality, not so much. Yeah. That hits close to home.

It does. It does. And then Isaiah 53 takes us even deeper.

Okay. It paints this picture of this servant being despised, rejected, considered completely worthless. Yeah.

Like the lowest of the low. And Dr. Oswalt even suggests that maybe Jesus was physically unattractive. Hmm.

Interesting thought. It's challenging, right? Yeah. It makes you think.

It forces us to confront our own expectations. For sure. Are we drawn to what's superficial or to what's truly good? It's a question we all have to ask ourselves.

Yeah. And the text keeps hammering this point home. Okay.

Isaiah 53.4-6 says it flat out: the servant is bearing our stuff. Yeah. Our burdens.

The griefs, the sorrows, the twistedness, it's all on him. And you know, it's easy to miss how much we need that. Oh, absolutely.

Like Dr. Oswalt talks about raising sheep, how they're constantly wandering off chasing whatever catches their eye. Yeah. They get distracted so easily.

He says it's like us. We're so easily distracted. Always getting herself into trouble.

Exactly. So we're those sheep needing to be brought back constantly. Needing that good shepherd.

But the servant, like a good shepherd, goes after us anyway. Even when it means danger and hardship. And the passage doesn't shy away from the injustice of it all.

Oh no. It's right there in your face. The servant is depicted as silent, defenseless.

Like a lamb being led to slaughter. He doesn't even get a proper burial. Wow.

Seemingly facing total defeat. Yeah. It's hard to read.

Which makes the next verse even harder to grasp. Okay. Which one is that? It says it made God glad to crush him.

Whoa. Hold on. Wait.

How can a loving God find joy in that? Yeah. How do we make sense of that? It feels impossible to reconcile. That's one of the most challenging verses, no doubt about it.

Yeah. But to help us wrap our heads around it. Okay.

Yeah. Dr. Oswald uses this really intense illustration. Okay.

I'm listening. Imagine a bridge tender.

Forced to choose between his son and hundreds of people on a train heading for disaster. Oh, wow. I know.

It's heavy. Yeah. Really heavy.

It's a horrific choice. But in that moment, the bridge tender finds a kind of joy. Mm-hmm.

Knowing he's saving those people, even if it could cost him everything. Mm-hmm. And Dr. Oswald suggests that in a similar way, God's joy isn't in the suffering itself.

Right. But in the ultimate good that comes from it, the redemption of humanity. Okay.

I think I'm starting to see what he's getting at. Yeah. It's a hard concept.

But even if God sees the bigger picture, the servant still seems utterly defeated in that moment. Right. From our limited perspective.

Yeah. That's where the last section of Isaiah 53 comes in. Okay.

Despite the apparent defeat. Uh-huh. We see the servant's ultimate triumph.

Okay. He's given offspring. Mm-hmm.

His life is extended. Oh, wow. He receives the spoils of victory.

So it's like a complete reversal. A causal turnaround. But Dr. Oswald emphasizes that this reversal hinges on us.

On us. It's about our willingness to offer the servant to God in our place. So we have a part to play in this.

Yeah, that's what he's saying. This is crazy. It's like this crazy paradox.

Suffering leads to triumph. Weakness becomes strength. Death brings life.

My blank. It goes against everything we think we know. And it highlights a theme that runs through the whole Bible.

What's that? That God's power is often revealed in his willingness to embrace weakness and suffering. This is blowing my mind wide open. I know, right? The depth of the sacrifice, the immensity of God's love.

It's a lot to process. It is. It really is.

And it raises a huge question for all of us. What's that? If the servant's triumph depends on our offering him to God, what does that say about our role in this whole plan of salvation? That's a deep one. What does it even look like to offer the servant in our own lives? Oh, we're going to need some time to unpack that one.

Definitely. But first, we need to go back and dig into some of the other fascinating details that Dr. Oswald pointed out. All right.

So stay with us, deep divers. We're going even deeper. So we're wrestling with this whole idea of offering the servant to God.

Yeah, it's a powerful image. But what does it actually mean for us? Right. How do we apply that to our lives? In the lecture, someone asked Dr. Oswald about God allowing his people to be sold into exile in the first place.

Oh, yeah. I remember that. Is it more like God didn't actually sell them, but allowed them to be put on the market, so to speak? Yeah.

And Dr. Oswald agreed that we're dealing with metaphors here. Yeah. It's like those parables Jesus told, using everyday situations to explain spiritual truths.

Right. So the imagery of being sold isn't meant to be taken literally. But it points to something we've all experienced: drifting away from God.

And the consequences that come with it. And then Dr. Oswald brings up another fascinating point. Okay.

What's that? When God says, my people will know my name, it's not just about knowing Yahweh, the name itself, but about truly understanding God's character through experience. He even ties it back to the meaning of I am, which speaks to God's unlimited power to act on our behalf. That's powerful.

But it's not just about power, is it? No, it's about something deeper. It's about intimacy. Knowing God isn't just mental assent.

It's about encountering him in a way that changes us from the inside out. Yeah, like a transformation. Exactly.

It's about experiencing his grace and power firsthand. So Dr. Oswald is weaving together all these threads: the Israelites' exile, God's grace, and this invitation to know God in a life-changing way. Beautiful.

And then he brings it all together with this image of what it looks like to receive God's salvation. Okay. I like where this is going.

He points out that while God takes the initiative, coming to us in our helplessness. We can't do it on our own. Right.

But we also have a responsibility to respond. So there's something we need to do. We have to go out and meet him.

What does that look like? It's about turning away from our sin and embracing his forgiveness. It's like a dance where God leads, but we have to choose to join in. I love that analogy.

And then Dr. Oswald uses this incredible image of God as our protector. Oh yeah, I remember this. Our vanguard and rear guard guiding us every step of the way.

It reminds me of the Israelites in the wilderness with the pillar of cloud and fire leading and protecting them. It's a powerful reminder that we're never alone on this journey of faith. Never alone.

That's so comforting. Speaking of journeys, remember that jarring contrast we talked about? Which one? The servant being high and lifted up, but also marred beyond human semblance. Oh yeah.

That was a tough one. Well, Dr. Oswald suggests that maybe, just maybe, Jesus wasn't physically attractive. Wow, that's a challenging thought.

It is, isn't it? It makes you confront your own expectations. For sure. Are we looking for a savior who fits our cultural standards of beauty and success? Right.

Or are we open to someone who might look radically different? And Dr. Oswald even jokes that Jesus probably only had one suit. He did. And it was shiny in the seat.

He said that. But he's making a serious point. What's that? True greatness isn't about outward appearances, but inner character.

It's what's on the inside that counts. And he backs this up by pointing to how Isaiah describes Jesus elsewhere as a tender shoot growing from a seemingly dead stump. Oh, I like that image.

It's not about outward strength or power, but a quiet, unassuming authority. Powerful in a different way. He even connects it to how some artists have depicted Jesus throughout history.

Oh, interesting. Often making him look different from the people he lived among. Like he stood out.

It makes you realize how much our image of Jesus is shaped by our own culture. That's a good point. And then we get to the heart of Isaiah 53, where the servant's suffering is described in such vivid detail.

Yeah, it's hard to read. He's despised, rejected, considered worthless. Lowest of the low.

People literally hide their faces from him because his suffering is too painful to look at. That's intense. And here, Dr. Oswalt brings in a personal story about how uncomfortable we often feel around people who are genuinely good.

Like their goodness exposes our own selfishness. I could see that. He says we tend to be suspicious of people who don't have ulterior motives, who are just kind and compassionate.

We wonder what their angle is. Exactly. But with the servant, there's no angle, right? It's pure, selfless love.

And that makes people uncomfortable. It's like they had to justify his suffering because they couldn't accept that someone would willingly choose to suffer for them. That's a hard truth to swallow.

And then Dr. Oswalt unpacks the meaning of iniquity, the burden that the servant takes on. It's not just about breaking rules, but this deep-seated twistedness inside us, this constant self-serving that gets us into trouble. Yeah, we all have that.

He even uses that sheep analogy again. The one about them being easily distracted. He says sheep aren't dumb.

They're just single-minded. Single-minded. They see a clump of grass, and it's all over.

Gotta have it. Oh no. Off they go, following their desires, oblivious to the danger.

That's us. He says that's us. Chasing after what we think we want.

Even when it leads us astray. But the servant, like a good shepherd, seeks us out. Even when it means facing rejection and suffering.

It's incredible. And then Isaiah 53 describes the servant's experience in even more heartbreaking detail. Oppressed, afflicted, yet he doesn't even defend himself.

Silent and defenseless, like a lamb led to slaughter. So sad. Dr. Oswalt highlights how Jesus not only gave up his own way, but his right to have his own way.

He could have fought back. Complete surrender to the Father's will, even in the face of unimaginable suffering. It's hard to even fathom.

And what's even more heartbreaking is that, from a human perspective, he gets nothing in return. Nothing. No recognition.

No reward. Just condemnation and a humiliating death. That's just wrong.

Dr. Oswalt even imagines the devil tempting Jesus in those final months. Oh, I can see that. Saying, you don't have to do this.

You can have a family, a comfortable life. Why throw it all away? Yeah. Why go through all that? But Jesus chooses the path of suffering because he knows it's the only way to bring true redemption.

It's a heavy choice. And then we're back to that gut-wrenching verse: it made God glad to crush him. Oof.

That one again. How do we even begin to reconcile this with a loving God? Yeah. It's a tough one.

This is where I really struggle. Me too. I get what Dr. Oswalt is saying about the Bridgetender finding a kind of joy in the midst of horrific sacrifice.

But how does that apply to God? Right. It's hard to connect the dots. Isn't there a better way to explain this? Well, it's definitely a tough one.

No doubt about it. Yeah. I think what Dr. Oswalt is trying to get at is that God doesn't delight in suffering itself, but in the ultimate outcome.

Okay. It's like if you could zoom out and see the whole tapestry of history, you'd see how the servant suffering is woven into this incredible story of redemption. Okay.

Yeah. That helps a bit. Yeah.

But it still feels heavy. Yeah. Especially when you think about how the verse actually says, we're the ones offering the servant to God.

Right. It's not something forced on us, but an invitation to participate. It's like Jesus is holding out his brokenness and saying, will you offer this to the Father in your place? Will you accept this sacrifice as your own? Wow.

Yeah. That's powerful. Yeah.

And then right after that, we see the reversal. Oh, yeah. The servant, despite seeming defeated, ends up victorious.

He's given descendants. His life is extended. He even receives the spoils of victory.

So everything taken from him is given back, but multiplied. Everything's multiplied. Yeah.

And Dr. Oswalt is clear that this victory only happens because we offer the servant to God. So it hinges on us: that act of surrender, acknowledging our need for redemption. That's what unlocks the power of his sacrifice.

So we're not just passive bystanders. We're active participants in this whole redemption story. That's incredible.

It really is mind-blowing. It is. And to illustrate the servant's satisfaction, Dr. Oswalt talks about his wife giving birth.

Oh, wow. That moment of excruciating pain, but also incredible joy in bringing new life into the world. It's like the servant endures unimaginable suffering, but it's worth it because he sees the fruit: countless souls redeemed through his sacrifice.

And Dr. Oswalt also emphasizes that the servant's knowledge, the source of his power, isn't just head knowledge. It's that deep, intimate relationship with the Father. That connection, that love is what sustains him through suffering.

So it's not just about knowing the right things. Exactly. It's about knowing the right person and letting that relationship shape us.

That's what it's all about. Which brings us to the final verse of Isaiah 53, where it says, The servant made intercession for the transgressors. So even while suffering, he's praying for those who condemned him.

Offering forgiveness to those who least deserve it. Talk about unconditional love. I know.

It's incredible. It's like he's saying, even in my pain, I choose to love you. Even when you reject me, I offer forgiveness.

Yeah. It's like the ultimate example of not letting bitterness take root. Powerful stuff.

It's incredibly challenging and incredibly inspiring. So after this deep dive into Isaiah 52 and 53, I'm left with this feeling of awe, but also a sense of responsibility. Yeah.

It makes you think. What does it look like for us to walk in the servant's footsteps? To embrace humility and sacrifice, even when it's hard? Those are questions worth pondering, for sure. They are.

And as we go about our day, maybe we can ask ourselves, where am I tempted to cling to my own rights, my own comfort, instead of following the servant's example? It's a lifelong journey, but this passage gives us a powerful roadmap. It really does. It really does.

Yeah. So as we wrap up, I want to thank you for joining us on this deep dive. It's been a pleasure.

We've explored some challenging concepts, but hopefully we've come away with a deeper appreciation for the incredible message of Isaiah 52 and 53. I think we have. And maybe, just maybe, we've been challenged to live a little more like the servant ourselves.

That's the goal. That's the goal.