

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 25, 6-min. Video Overview

Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Okay, let's jump right into this explainer. We're looking at the ancient text of Isaiah, specifically chapters 52 and 53, which honestly contains some of the most profound and, frankly, shocking contrasts in all of literature. Through the lens of Dr. John Oswalt's analysis, we're going to unpack this incredible paradox of the suffering servant.

It's a concept that completely flips the script on how we typically think about power, victory, and salvation. To really get the setting of Isaiah 52, you have to imagine a besieged city. Think about it.

The inhabitants are literally trapped inside their own walls. They're utterly helpless. They're starving, completely cut off from the outside world, and there's no way they can break out using their own strength.

Their only hope? Waiting desperately for a watchman on the wall to spot a runner coming from miles away, bringing news over the mountains of a distant victory by an ally. So the watchman finally sees that runner approaching, and this messenger is bringing news of shalom. Now, we often translate shalom simply as peace, but in this ancient context, it's so much bigger than that.

It's not just the absence of conflict or some temporary ceasefire. It actually means absolute, complete well-being and wholeness. The ally hasn't just won a battle.

They've secured total restoration for these besieged people. Dr. Oswalt points out that this vivid imagery actually represents a spiritual siege for humanity. The text makes the case that humanity is completely helpless.

There is absolutely nothing we can do, no amount of our own strength, energy, or intelligence to save ourselves. That siege? It just cannot be broken from the inside. Divine intervention is absolutely crucial here.

God has to come on his own into the world because humanity simply cannot reach him. Now, what's really brilliant about this passage is its architectural design. The poem that kicks off in Isaiah 52:13 wasn't just, you know, scribbled down randomly on the back of a napkin.

Dr. Oswalt shows us that it's a highly intentional, carefully crafted piece of literature, specifically designed to drive home a massive theological point. You can clearly see exactly how it's structured into five distinct, purposeful stanzas, each with exactly three verses. It moves systematically from the introduction and exultation in stanza one to why the servant was despised in stanza two.

Then stanza three lays out his heavy burden, stanza four covers the unjust outcome, and finally stanza five reveals the true nature and ultimate reward of his servanthood. And looking at this layout beautifully illustrates a glaring paradox. The poem begins in stanza one and ends in stanza five with this magnificent triumph, exultation, and reward.

The servant is going to be high and lifted up. But the middle section, stanzas two, three, and four, well, it's an absolute disaster of horror, tragedy, and profound suffering. So you have to ask yourself, how on earth does someone go from the highest heights, plunge down to the lowest depths, and then climb all the way back up again? That steep drop into tragedy really starts with his appearance.

When we think of a victorious savior, our expectations practically demand a majestic, powerful, handsome king, right? A kind of grand, costumed drum major leading a triumphant parade. But Isaiah presents a completely different, almost shocking reality. The servant is described as a spindly young plant growing out of dry ground.

He's totally ordinary. He's marred. He's physically unimpressive.

The text explicitly says he had no form or majesty that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him. The reality of this unexpected savior was incredibly jarring to the people. There was absolutely nothing physically appealing about him.

No glowing halo, no royal aura to draw anyone's attention or admiration. Just a profoundly ordinary suffering figure. Because he completely lacked that expected majesty, humanity's natural reaction was to despise him.

And the ancient Hebrew concept of despise used here is incredibly powerful. It doesn't just mean to actively hate someone or be angry at them. It means to consider them completely, utterly worthless.

It means looking at this person and deciding they aren't even worth a single second of your time. People literally just hid their faces and walked right on by. To explain why the Savior had to arrive in such a lowly, miserable manner, the text pivots to this brilliant analogy about humanity.

Famously stating, all we like sheep have gone astray. It speaks directly to our inherent sheepiness. This relentless, stubborn tendency we have to just wander completely off the path.

What's fascinating here is that sheep aren't necessarily just dumb. As Dr. Oswald points out from his own personal experience raising them, they are dangerously single-minded. They get easily distracted by the very next clump of grass.

Because obviously, in their minds, that specific clump is the most important thing in the universe right then. It perfectly illustrates humanity's twisted nature. We constantly prioritize our selfish, short-term desires over everything else.

Wandering blindly into immense danger just because we want what we want exactly when we want it. Which brings us to a really heavy question. If this servant was completely innocent, why did he get beaten up? And maybe more importantly, why did the crowd watching him suffer automatically assume that God was striking him down for his own mistakes? They looked at him and thought, well, he must have had it coming.

You lead with your chin, you're going to get hit. But here is the staggering truth of the text. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us health.

And with his stripes, we are healed. He wasn't paying for his own mistakes at all. He was acting as a deliberate substitute.

Absorbing the horrific punishment that was actually meant for humanity's collective sheepliness. That relentless wandering we just talked about. So that people could finally experience that shalom, that complete, perfect well-being.

To truly grasp the immense emotional weight of this substitution, consider the agonizing story of the bridge tender. This man operated a massive railroad bridge. One afternoon, a passenger train is barreling toward the open bridge.

He throws the heavy gears to lower it, only to suddenly hear his own little boy scream. His son's sleeve is caught in those massive crushing gears. The tender is faced with an impossible split-second choice.

Reverse the gears to save his son, letting hundreds of passengers plunge to their deaths, or sacrifice his own child to save the train. Just as that bridge tender had to painfully shut his ears to his son's cries to save a train full of strangers, the text tells us that God chose to engage the gears of judgment upon this innocent servant to save humanity. It's a profound, heartbreaking sacrifice that perfectly illustrates the terrifying cost of this rescue.

Which leads us to what is arguably the most shocking verse in all of Isaiah. The text literally translates to, it made God glad to crush him. Let that sink in.

We have to stop and ask, what kind of God is this? How on earth could it make a loving God glad to see his servant and completely innocent person crushed in such a brutal manner? While Dr. Oswalt beautifully explains that the gladness wasn't in the pain itself, but in the certain knowledge of the incredible result it would produce. It's a lot like child birth. The process is agonizing, it's painful, it's messy, but that immense suffering ultimately gives way to the sheer overwhelming joy of new life.

God looked past the crushing pain to see the incredible salvation that was being birthed for all of humanity. And this is exactly how the massive paradox of our five-stanza poem is finally resolved. Because he was willing to be that offering, the servant emerges from the suffering completely victorious.

His reward is absolute. He sees millions of spiritual offspring globally, his days are prolonged into an eternal life, and the very pleasure and will of the Lord fully succeeds right through his hands. This explainer completely flips our modern understanding of strength and victory right on its head.

Divine power, as shown here in Isaiah, isn't some macho display of flexing muscle. It isn't a 90-pound weakling magically turning into the Incredible Hulk to smash his enemies. It is something so much deeper.

It is the willingness to embrace profound vulnerable weakness for the sake of others. True universe-altering power is exactly this. It's the ability to absorb all the ultimate evil the world can ever produce and to give back absolutely nothing but love.

So looking at the world today, how would our modern definitions of leadership change if we actually viewed power through the lens of the suffering servant?