

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 26

6-min. Video Overview

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Welcome to The Explainer. Today, we're jumping right into Dr. John Oswalt's brilliant look at Isaiah chapters 54 and 55. We all know the context, right? The Israelites are drowning in the absolute despair of exile, but right here, the whole narrative pivots in just this profoundly beautiful way.

So what's fascinating is what Dr. Oswalt points out about the shift in tone here. If you look at the previous chapters, 49 through 52, it's all about anticipation. God's basically saying, hold on, deliverance is coming.

But then bam, chapters 54 and 55 hit, and it's no longer just anticipation. It's a direct invitation. The message is you have been delivered, which really makes you wonder, right? How does that shift happen so fast? How do we go from just hoping for a rescue to actually being invited to step right into it? Well, the answer- the bridge between it's coming and it's here rests entirely on the redemptive work of the servant that we just saw in chapter 53.

Because of what the servant has actually done, the sin that caused the exile in the first place is dealt with, finished, so God can extend this free, totally undeserved grace. The heavy lifting is done, and the door is just thrown wide open. Okay, let's look at the roadmap for this explainer.

We're going to cover 1. Anticipation becomes an invitation. 2. The barren widow multiplies. 3. Temporary anger, eternal compassion.

4. The covenant of peace. 5. Established as precious stones. And finally, 6. The free feast.

All right. Section 1. Anticipation becomes an invitation. When you look right at the text, the language is just incredibly active.

In chapter 54, the barren one is commanded to sing and break forth into singing. And then chapter 55 kicks off with, come everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. You see, the time for waiting around is officially over.

It's time to actively participate. Moving on to section 2. The barren widow multiplies. Now this perfectly captures the paradox the Israelites were stuck in.

On one hand, you've got their absolute worst nightmare, being completely wiped out as a culture while stuck in exile. Zion sees herself as this desolate, barren widow with no children left. But then on the other hand, you have God's staggering promise: offspring that will spread out and possess the nations.

Think about that. God is literally telling a barren widow that she's going to have more children than a married woman. It completely flips their fear of cultural extinction on its head.

It's such a powerful reminder that when a situation looks impossible to us, God's promises are still absolute. And you know, with this promise comes this incredible release from their past. Dr. Oswald unpacks this fascinating idea about what shame actually means in the old Testament.

Picture this. Imagine the most sturdy, reliable-looking chair you've ever seen. You trust it completely.

You go to sit down. Drop all your weight into it. And it just instantly shatters into a million pieces underneath you.

That awful dropping feeling. That is ultimate shame. It's trusting a God who completely fails you.

Israel trusted other gods. They trusted their political alliances, and the result was exile. The chair broke.

But here God promises they will no longer remember the shame of their youth or their widowhood. Which brings us to section three, temporary anger, eternal compassion. Before we even get to what God does, chapter 54, verse five lays out who he is with these five distinct titles.

He's the maker. He knows exactly how we're wired. He's the Lord of heaven's armies, meaning he is absolutely undefeated.

He is the husband, which signifies this ultimate fierce protector and incredibly close bond. He's the redeemer, the closest relative who is obligated to step in and rescue the destitute. And he is the Holy One of Israel, the transcendent God worthy of all worship.

When you put all those together, you get this picture of the transcendent creator of the universe who unbelievably chooses to be intimately present and responsible for his people. So the real question is how a God like that exercises his emotions toward us. Now, the Israelites definitely experienced his anger, right? That's how they ended up in exile.

But Dr. Oswald points out a really vital distinction here. Yes. God gets angry, but he loves his anger at their corruption.

That was temporary, but his *hesed*, his steadfast, unchanging love is eternal. In fact, think of it like a loving parent. He actually only gets angry precisely because he loves them so much and simply cannot stand to watch them destroy their own lives.

And it goes even deeper when the text talks about God's compassion. The Hebrew word is based on the consonants R H M. Now this is actually derived from the Hebrew word for womb. So it conveys this profound, deep-seated tenderness and softness.

It's painting a picture of a God who doesn't just watch us struggle from afar. He actually enters into our feelings. He feels what we feel, and he cares so deeply about seeing us completely restored.

That leads us right into section four, the covenant of peace. God is offering them a covenant of peace. But you know, when we hear the word peace today, we usually just think of a ceasefire, right? Like an armistice where two sides put down their guns, but still kind of hate each other.

That is absolutely not the Hebrew word being used here. The word is shalom, and shalom means total, absolute well-being. We're talking complete wholeness and a joyful reconciliation with God.

He isn't just saying, all right, you're out of time out. He is bringing them fully, completely back into the family. All right.

Section five is established as precious stones. Dr. Oswald highlights a massive theological distinction here, and honestly, it's super easy to miss. Verse 14 says they will be established in righteousness, almost like a flawless diamond locked into a beautiful setting.

Oswald uses this imagery to contrast Martin Luther's intense relief of being simply counted righteous by God with John Wesley's really crucial addition. See, Wesley understood that we aren't just legally pardoned or counted righteous. We are actually enabled to be righteous through Christ.

And Dr. Oswald notes that a lot of our modern thinking gets so hyper-focused on the legal pardon that we forget God's grace is actually meant to transform how we live every single day. He makes the point that if we just translate the Hebrew word as vindication, we're missing half the picture because God just legally vindicates us. Well, we might just think we can go right back to living however we want, but it's actually a two-sided coin.

Yes. God does right by delivering us from our enemies, but he also fully expects that righteous deliverance to result in a radically transformed lifestyle for us right here, right now. Which brings us to our final part, section six, the free feast.

God says, come everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come buy and eat. He is literally offering the absolute basics of life: water, wine, milk, fresh bread, and he's offering the whole shebang completely free of charge, no price tag at all. This establishes an everlasting covenant that's actually modeled right on his eternal promise to David.

And you have to remember, for a people who had been living in the absolute poverty of slavery and exile, getting an invitation to a rich, totally free banquet was completely mind-blowing. And what's the end goal of this feast? By accepting it, the people are actually endowed with God's glory. Now in the Old Testament, glory isn't just some shiny fading light or a pretty sunset.

Glory implies solidity. It means heavy significance and actual reality. God wants to take his people and us, for that matter, and transform us from superficial play actors into solid, real witnesses in the world, because when a group of people lives with that kind of authentic, grounded reality, it just naturally draws the rest of the world to them.

But Isaiah 55 also carries this really heavy warning: seek the Lord while he may be found. There's a serious urgency here. Dr. Oswalt illustrates this with a pretty chilling story about Aaron Burr, the former US vice president.

The story goes that when Burr was 17, he experienced a massive spiritual revival at his school. He felt the intense, overwhelming conviction of God, but instead of giving in, Burr specifically asked God to just leave him alone so he wouldn't have to yield control of his life. And tragically, it's said he never felt spiritual conviction ever again.

He essentially ripped out his own spiritual receiver. The warning is stark, right? When God is near, you absolutely cannot miss the moment. Now, in total contrast to that, look at the incredible true story of Olympian Louis Zamperini.

You might know him from the book *Unbroken*. This guy goes from being an elite athlete to surviving 47 days lost at sea, only to end up being brutally tortured in a POW camp. He comes home completely shattered, dealing with just horrific nightmares.

But then in 1949, at a Billy Graham tent meeting, he finally yields to God and is instantly completely transformed. It is the perfect real-life visual of God's promise in Isaiah 55 that his redemptive word will never return empty. It will always succeed in the purpose he sent it for.

God's word can literally rebuild the most shattered life imaginable. And that leads right into one of the most gorgeous images in the entire book of Isaiah. God says, instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress, instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle.

It's this picture where the painful, completely useless thorns of our broken lives are miraculously swapped out for these fragrant towering trees. This newly transformed righteous life becomes an everlasting monument, a sign of God's sheer power. It literally makes a name for the Lord.

And that leaves us with one final staggering thought to ponder. If our personal transformation is the ultimate sign of his power, that means God is perfectly willing to hang his entire eternal reputation on the transformed lives of everyday people. Just like you and me.

Think about that. Our redeemed lives are the absolute proof to a watching world that he is truly God. The invitation is open.

The feast is completely free, and the transformation is real. So the only question left is, are we actually ready to accept it?