

Dr. John Oswalt, Isaiah, Session 29

6-min. Video Overview

Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to this explainer. Today, we're diving into some of the most dramatic, intense, and, let's be honest, notoriously difficult passages in the entire biblical text. We're breaking down Dr. John Oswalt's absolutely fascinating lecture on the final chapters of the book of Isaiah, specifically chapters 63 through 66.

Now, scholars and everyday readers alike usually find this section to be a total theological rollercoaster. It's packed with vivid imagery, deep human conflict, and staggering cosmic resolutions. And we're going to unpack all of it together.

So here is our roadmap for today. We'll start with the goal of servanthood, then enter the divine warrior. After that, we'll look at blaming God for rebellion, the illusion of holiness, why heaven is necessary, and we'll wrap up with the final choice.

All right, let's get right into it. Section one, the goal of servanthood. Okay, before we jump into the really intense, visceral stuff in the later chapters, we kind of need to establish the architectural layout of this entire final section, right, from chapter 56 through 66.

Dr. Oswalt points out that Isaiah intentionally repeats certain themes to remind his readers of their ultimate purpose. He calls this a stair-step structure. You see, Israel's calling was actually never just about their own exclusive privilege.

Step one is simply their role as a priesthood. Step two builds directly on that. They're meant to act as go-betweens, mediators for the rest of the world, which ultimately leads to step three, the absolute apex, that all the world might come to worship God.

Just think about that for a second. In the ancient world, where religions were intensely tribal and super territorial, this grand outward-facing mission was completely revolutionary. Now, Dr. Oswalt highlights a massive theological shift taking place as we cross into this final section.

If you look back at chapters 40 to 55, the focus was firmly on salvation by grace, accomplished by the meek, quiet, suffering servant who willingly takes the penalty of sin. But as we move into chapters 56 through 66, the focus shifts to the character of righteousness. Like, how do the people actually live righteously? Well, since they still can't seem to do it on their own, they need a completely different figure.

Enter the divine warrior. He doesn't just come to take the penalty. He comes to violently defeat the very power of sin itself.

Section two, enter the divine warrior. As we open chapter 63, the tone changes so dramatically it genuinely gives you whiplash. The imagery is no longer of a quiet lamb being led to the slaughter.

Instead, we are plunged into a shocking, deeply visceral confrontation. The text literally says he's been stomping on them like grapes in a wine vat. Their blood is squirting out all over his garments.

It describes a warrior returning from battle, his robes stained red all the way to the knee. It's grim. It's aggressive.

It's incredibly intense. But the burning question we have to ask here is, who exactly is this warrior fighting? Well, the text explicitly mentions the warrior is returning from Basra, the capital of Edom. But here's the really fascinating historical reality.

At this point in time, during the Judeans' return from exile, Edom had already been destroyed. It literally didn't exist anymore. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau.

These were longstanding, bitter, historical enemies of Israel who notoriously cheered when Jerusalem was destroyed. Because of that deep-seated history, Edom is being used as a profound literary symbol. The warrior isn't fighting a literal neighboring nation.

He's fighting the ultimate enemies of God's people. And as Dr. Oswald points out, those enemies are their very own sins that have utterly defeated them. And this brings us to a major, mind-bending, theological aha moment.

Think about this carefully. If this warrior is fighting the sins of his own people, and he is taking those sins onto himself, whose blood is actually splattering his garments? Well, it's his own. He who knew no sin became sin.

This is literally the cross, just seen from an entirely different angle. It's not just about passively forgiving past rebellion. It's about violently, actively defeating the power of sin in the present.

Section 3. Blaming God for Rebellion. Now, even with this incredible, bloody divine intervention, chapters 63 and 64 reveal a deeply flawed human response. Instead of taking responsibility for their lack of righteousness, the people engage in the ultimate blame game. They actually lob some completely audacious complaints at God.

They say he has no zeal or passion for them anymore. They accuse him of hardening their hearts, abandoning his holy place, and essentially losing his credibility. Honestly, it's exactly like human nature today, isn't it? They're treating God as if he owes them an intervention simply because they have the right pedigree.

They want him to do all the heavy lifting while they take absolutely zero personal responsibility. Which leads Dr. Oswald to ask a brilliant rhetorical question here. Do they genuinely want God's will, or do they just want to blame him for their mess? They're basically standing there with folded arms saying, move me, God, and then I'll move.

Make me righteous by magic. But truth-seeking requires stopping the blame game altogether. It requires genuine, vulnerable humility.

Submission in this context means letting go of your demands and acknowledging your own failure, rather than expecting God to be some cosmic vending machine who fixes everything

without requiring your heart in return. Section 4. The Illusion of Holiness In chapter 65, God finally responds to these complaints, and there is another incredibly sharp tonal shift. God completely calls out the hypocrisy of their outward religious actions.

He actually quotes their own arrogant, self-serving attitude right back to them, saying, keep to yourself, don't come near me, I'm too holy for you. I mean, wow. They claim they want God, but their lives say the exact opposite.

They are people who provoke God to his face continually while strutting around pretending to be pure. They're utilizing their religious rituals as a shield against true accountability, keeping their hearts focused entirely on themselves. Dr. Oswald uses a fantastic modern parallel to drive this point home.

Imagine someone today proudly declaring, oh, I'm one of the most holy men you'll ever meet. I have devotions every day. I go to church every Sunday.

Twice. I don't lie. I don't steal.

Now, doing the right things is obviously good. But if you're doing those things purely to build up your own self-image, just to pat yourself on the back, and to somehow manipulate God into owing you a favor, it is utterly worthless. It's a false holiness that completely misses the point of a true relationship, and chapter 66 brutally illustrates exactly how God views that kind of hypocrisy.

To the person who lacks a contrite spirit, beautifully slaughtering an ox on the altar is viewed by God as no different than murdering a man in cold blood. Presenting a pristine grain offering is viewed as violently as offering a pig's blood. Now remember, to an ancient Israelite, a pig was an unclean animal.

Offering its blood was the ultimate horrifying defilement. That is the severity of God's disgust here. Ritualistic manipulation without a broken, humble heart isn't just neutral, it is a literal, offensive stench in God's nostrils.

Amidst all this staggering human failure and hypocrisy, Isaiah chapter 65 introduces a completely new philosophical concept, elevating the whole text to an incredible climax. Dr. Oswalt poses this deep question to his students, and I'll pose it to you. Why is heaven necessary? Up until this point in biblical history, God's promises were almost entirely focused on land, crops, and earthly descendants.

So why, suddenly, does the text pivot to a new heaven and a new earth? Why is an eternal realm logically necessitated by the promises of God? The core thesis here is profoundly simple, yet absolutely staggering. We live in a severely damaged creation. Just look around.

In this earthly life, righteous people often suffer terribly, and wicked people often prosper immensely. It's a brutal reality. Therefore, if God is going to perfectly keep his promises of ultimate justice, blessing, and righteousness, a new realm is logically required.

This broken, finite world simply cannot hold the weight of perfect divine justice. A new heaven and a new earth aren't just an afterthought; they are literally the only way the equation finally balances. And grasping this cosmic resolution really changes everything.

It frees believers from the crushing pressure of needing everything to be perfect right now. If you're looking around at the world today and feeling like justice is failing, or if you don't get a massive payback for your faithfulness in this earthly life, that's actually okay. You can be entirely confident and live faithfully today because God's unshakable character guarantees ultimate justice in the next.

Section six, the final choice. As we wrap up, Dr. Oswalt notes that the concluding chapter of Isaiah, chapter 66, violently swings back and forth between incredible hope and terrifying judgment. On one side, you have a truly glorious vision, all nations and tongues gathering together, Gentiles even being taken as priests and Levites, universally declaring God's glory.

It is a breathtaking, beautiful promise. But right next to it is a severe, chilling reality. The text drops to a stark warning: the righteous looking upon the dead bodies of the rebellious, whose fire shall not be quenched.

It's a terrifying picture for those who stubbornly refuse to submit. The entire massive book of Isaiah distills down to this one stark split at the very end. It's all a matter of attitude and submission.

Will you reap the dreadful consequences of relying on your own rebellious, self-serving ways? Or will you accept the grace of the divine warrior and step into the new heavens? Make no mistake, this isn't just some ancient historical choice. This is a universal human crossroads. As Dr. Oswalt simply puts it, choice.

Make the right choice. So I'll leave you with this provocative thought. Will you humbly submit to the divine warrior to break the power of sin in your life? Or will you proudly cling to the fragile illusion of your own righteousness? The choice is entirely yours.

Thanks so much for joining me for this explainer. Keep learning, and I'll catch you next time.