

Prayer

When we have wandered and lost ourselves on the way, return us to Your heart, Lord Jesus. Rebuke our waywardness, receive our repentance, and revive our souls with the healing and the blessing of Your love. Strengthen us to stand before Your righteousness so that we may receive the perfect salvation You alone can give. All praise to You, Lord Jesus: Alleluia!

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Obtain a song or hymn book and sing some songs in praise to God

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who do not know the Gospel.** *Pray for those who are part of campaigns to discredit Christian organisations (they are different in each country). Remember that all such people are loved by God, and He wants them to know Him.*
- *Pray for the people of Syria, and for all those involved in forming and governing the future of that nation, either for good or for ill*
- *Give thanks to God for the blessing of eternal life and the assurance of sins forgiven*

Meditation

Show us Your glorious power O Lord!

Come to the help of those in real need.

Come to the aid of the poor and disadvantaged,

Raise them up and show them Your love!

Come to the aid of Your downtrodden people,

Renew Your church and rekindle its zeal!

Come to the aid of the sick and distressed,

Restore them; touch, heal and deliver!

Come to the aid of those who do not know You,

Rescue them, love them, and lead them to faith!

Come to the aid of Your people who wait for You,

Revive their hope and prepare them for glory!

When You act in Your glorious power, O Lord

All things become possible, here and in heaven.

Bible passage - Isaiah 55:1-5

¹ Hear this, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy grain and eat!
Come, buy grain without money,
wine and milk without price.

² Why do you offer money and get no bread,
or give your labour, and not get enough?
Listen carefully to me, and eat well!

- and your soul will take delight in rich food.
- ³ Turn your ear, and come to me;
listen, so your soul might live.
I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
Confirming my kindnesses to David.
- ⁴ Look! I made him a witness to people,
a leader and commander of everyone.
- ⁵ Look! you will summon a nation you do not know,
and nations you do not know will run to you,
because of the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel,
for He has made you glorious!
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Bible Study

Review

This is a wonderfully expressive passage of scripture, and on the surface, it represents a powerful and poetic call from the Lord to return to Him and be completely satisfied. After all that has happened to God's people as described within Isaiah's prophecies, the renewed people of God which we have just read about as the new city (54:1f.) are called to freely partake of God's blessings! However, it does not take much for us to find within these words the free invitation of the Gospel. Isaiah has already explained how the Servant has paid the price of our vindication before God (52:13-53:12), and this explains the joyous sense of freedom and liberty which runs through the whole passage. In addition, Isaiah speaks about an 'everlasting covenant' and the restoration of David as a leader and 'witness' to all nations, and the glorious authority of those who have been liberated! This all looks like a prophecy of God's people, the church.

For this reason, it may seem possible to use these great themes immediately as the starting point for an explanation of the eternal plan of God for the salvation of the world. Undoubtedly, this passage connects with these themes and leads us in this direction, but if we will let ourselves dwell longer with the text and its meaning, here in this critical part of Isaiah, we will discover other treasures. These will eventually hone our understanding of God's eternal plan and help us speak about His salvation with greater scriptural power and integrity. Chapter 55 forms the end of what are traditionally known as Isaiah's 'Servant' songs, and from chapter 56 onwards Isaiah's vision stretches even further than the work of the Servant towards the fulfilment of all things; or as we might say, the End Times. In the light of this, chapter 55 is therefore a conclusion to Isaiah's highly significant prophecies about the work of the Servant (the Messiah), and we will do best to wait for what he says about future times. This passage consists of condensed prophecies and teaching; Isaiah 40 to 55 is one of the most intense of Old Testament scriptures, and its conclusion is a powerful reminder to us of the Lord's objective in sending His Servant for the liberation of His people. It says loud and clear that God wants a permanent individual relationship with us all.

From the point of view of those who live in this world, nothing can happen unless people collaborate and trade, and engage in the economic processes which generate wealth; this is what secular historians, economists and political commentators will tell us has made 'civilisation', from the earliest of times. In Isaiah's prophecy the Lord reveals to us the spiritual truth about humanity which is in total contrast to the material reality of existence. There is no trade with God; it is only when we accept His free offer of salvation that our souls are satisfied with life (55:2,3) and only then can the Lord God establish a truly everlasting covenant with us which will fulfil everything, as previously promised to David (55:3).

However, the new covenant is made with us and not with David. One thing we all too easily forget is that Isaiah's prophecies describe the failure of the Davidic covenant (see 2 Samuel 7:12f.) not because of any failure on God's part, but on the part of the people of Israel and the physical descendants of David. This is the reason why Isaiah prophesied about the Assyrian Invasion (10:5f.) and looked ahead to the Babylonian invasion (13:1f., 39). We will find out later in the study that there is a strong connection between our passage and Psalm 89 which declares the Davidic covenant as all but dead (Psalm 89:38-48) and awaiting God's renewal.

Isaiah's prophecies indicate that God will renew this covenant; that He will do it through His Servant's suffering and His death, and that it is free for all who will accept it! This new covenant with the Lord God is open to all nations, and many will want it (55:5). The Lord, and He alone, has made His people glorious!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The offer (55:1)
- The question (55:2,3)
- The Covenant (55:3)
- The vision (55:4,5)

Notes on the text and translation

V1 'Hear this ...'

The first Hebrew word of this verse is a word which is often translated 'Ho'. It is a summons to listen which is not found in English and therefore presents a difficulty to translators. I have chosen to translate the word as 'hear this', which is as close as I can get to a summons to listen.

V1 'Come, buy grain without money, wine and milk without price.'

These last two lines are a little different from most versions which have 'come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.' The reason for the difference is that the Hebrew verb 'shabar' does not just mean 'buy' in an abstract sense, but usually refers to the buying of grain for food. This translation includes this aspect of the verb's meaning, and follows the Hebrew carefully to create two different poetic lines in which the 'wine and milk' come last (as in the Hebrew). Most would say that this does not make much difference to the meaning of the passage; I would suggest that it adds meaning to know that the prophecy here is about buying grain (in particular) as well as 'wine and milk' (see study notes).

V2 'why do you offer money and get no bread, or give your labour and not get enough?'

Just as the previous verse, this is subtly different from the usual translations, and it is not easy to see that it makes a difference; but it does. The natural sense of the Hebrew is that both lines are 'parallel' to each other, and literally translated read 'why do you weigh money without bread and your labour with nothing to satisfy?' The weighing of money implies an offer to pay, which is not met with the receipt of grain, and the second line is the offer of labour with inadequate recompense; hence my translation (see study notes).

V2 'and your souls will delight in rich food.'

The Hebrew for 'rich food' comes from an ancient word meaning 'fatness' or 'abundance', and you will find this reflected in some translations. In the context, Isaiah is clearly referring to food. For the whole notion of the 'soul' eating food, see study notes.

V3 'I will make an everlasting covenant with you.'

The Hebrew says 'I will cut an everlasting covenant with you.' This refers to the ancient method of creating a covenant by the sacrificing of animals, and reminds us of the second half of Genesis 15, in which Abraham cuts a sacrifice in two so that God could make a covenant with him.

V3 'confirming my kindnesses to David.'

The word for 'kindnesses' here is the plural of 'cheseth', the Hebrew word that strongly relates to the Covenant and indicates God's permanent and unchanging covenant love. The word used here is however plural. It is relatively rare in the O.T. and refers to 'acts of kindness or faithfulness', possibly best translated as 'kindnesses'

V4 '... witness to people, ... commander of everyone'

At the end of each line Isaiah uses a poetic version of the word 'am' and it is written slightly differently in the last line. The term means 'people' in general, though it can mean 'peoples' as in 'nations'. It seems to me that it means people in general, and the second usage can legitimately be translated 'everyone', for that is the sense of Isaiah's prophecy here.

Going Deeper

The famous thrice repeated call of the Lord to 'come' (55:1) is followed by a thrice repeated call to 'listen' (55:2,3), and this sets up the context for the fulfilment of the Davidic covenant. As we study this passage further, we will find that the range and extent of God's call is far greater than we think. The passage is quite complex, and it may be of help to you to read some of the translation notes so that you get a feel of the issues involved.

The offer (55:1)

All kinds of mistakes can be easily made when trying to understand this powerful and enigmatic verse of scripture. It is in fact an open call to anyone, hence the strange Hebrew word at the beginning (see notes above), which is traditionally translated 'Ho!' When Moses summoned His people to hear the commands of God, He said 'hear this ...' (Deuteronomy 6:4f.), and in the same way, the call at the beginning of this verse goes out to all people with the same force; it is God's Word!

From the time of Abraham, God spoke firstly to His own people, intending to address the world through them. Now that the old covenant had failed, the kingdoms were destroyed and the Davidic line no longer ruled in Jerusalem, Isaiah prophesied the coming of the Servant to make God's voice heard in the whole world. The divine paradox at the heart of this 'good news' is that the Servant gave everything, even His life, for God's people (53); but God has never called for anything in exchange. Our passage today expresses this complete redemption; 'come and receive freely from the Lord and feed spiritually on Him!'

Our passage recognises that people have nothing that God wants or needs, and they therefore cannot pay God anything nor do anything for Him that will ingratiate themselves to Him. The normal rules of commerce which are so exact for those who want to use it, but so humanly corrupt for those who set the rules (in every age) do not apply to God; 'you who have no money, come, buy grain and eat ...'. The translation notes point out that the word 'buy' does not mean 'purchase' in a general sense, as we might use the word today. It is a word used specifically for the purchase of food necessary for people to live; but in addition, we are talking here about spiritual food, not earthly food.

The verse presents us with a contrast between the normal commercial activity of the earth and the greater spiritual economy of heaven, and it is a contrast between worldly means of meeting our deepest spiritual needs and God's means. In addition, the Lord says 'come to the waters ...', which means that His gifts are not found on earth, but in heaven (the 'waters'). So we are not only told that the spiritual blessings of God are free, but we are told where to get them, and Isaiah's prophecies have already told us that all this has gloriously become available to us because of the Servant!

The question (55:2,3)

In verse 2 the contrast between worldly and godly means of meeting spiritual needs becomes clear. The picture painted by the question 'why do you offer money and get no bread, or give your labour, and not get enough' (see notes above), describes the frustration of the breakdown of worldly economy, when money is offered, but bread cannot be purchased, or when labour is done, but people are not paid enough to make ends meet. Whilst we all know what it is like to feel that the economy of the world does not help us, there is absolutely no need for us to feel the same about God. In fact, we do not have to engage in any bartering because all His gifts are free. The analogy is stunningly clear, for every religious system devised by humanity requires all manner of commitment and effort, but has no clear spiritual benefit; whereas listening and responding to the Lord is all that is required for all our spiritual needs to be met by the Lord, the Creator of the world.

The Lord's appeal to us is that we should listen, which is repeated three times in verses 2 and 3. Firstly; 'listen carefully to me and eat well ...', secondly, 'turn your ear (listen), and come to me', and thirdly, 'listen to me so that your soul might live'. The three steps are therefore to receive God's Word, to 'come' to the Lord and then to receive salvation. This is an interesting sequence, set against the use of the word 'soul', which does not mean some part of us that is different from the body (as people think today), but the Old Testament meaning specified in Genesis 2:7, which is 'a complete living being'.

To begin with, we hear the Word of God and must be prepared to receive it and accept it, for in this way we will 'eat well', and therefore be fed spiritually and grow. We will not be fed, however, if we listen but do not accept the Word, as it is possible to do! Next, having been enlightened by the Word of God, we are then drawn to its source. Classically, the Word of God convicts of sin, and this leads us to repent, and it is interesting to see that verse 3 begins with the word 'turn' (55:2) which essentially means the same. So the second step is to come to the Lord in repentance. Lastly, if we respond in this way and continue to listen to Him, He will forgive us our sins through the work of the Servant. Then salvation is ours, and it meets all our spiritual needs.

It is fascinating to discover that we can find this spiritual route to personal faith in God and salvation through the work of God's Servant by using words and references straight from Isaiah, without using the New Testament except to connect the words 'turn' and 'repentance'. The fact that this is so makes this prophecy extraordinary, and suggests that we do not have to look exclusively in the New Testament for our theology of salvation.

The Covenant (55:3)

Classically, the Old Testament describes our relationship with God as a 'covenant', and as we have already seen, Isaiah is in agreement with Psalm 89 that the old covenant has failed. Psalm 89 however has more to tell us. Firstly, the phrase used by Isaiah in verse 3 which means 'acts of kindness or faithfulness' is the

plural (see notes above) and whilst this plural is rare, this same word is used also in Psalm 89, where it frames the whole Psalm (see verses 1,33 and 49). 'Kindnesses' implies repeated acts of kindness which give confidence that a relationship is ongoing, so when our text says 'confirming my kindnesses ...' it emphasises that what was once promised to David will become available again, repeatedly.

Psalm 89 itself describes what happened to God's 'kindnesses' to David. It begins by describing them as promised to David (verses 3,4) as the monarch of Israel (verse 5), and then tells us that Israel receives heavenly blessing (verses 6 to 15) as long as it exists under the Lord's King (David), as David has a special place in God's divine plan (verses 19-22). David will ultimately have dominion over the world (verses 22-27,29), however, if Israel is disobedient to her King (David) and her God she will be punished (verses 30-33), but God will find a way to restore His covenant (verses 33-37). The Psalm concludes with a painful plea written at a time when God's people had rebelled against the Lord and been punished (verses 38-45), but the Psalmist could not yet see how God's promise to continue the covenant would be kept (verses 46-52). This makes an unsatisfactory end to what is an otherwise very readable Psalm, but it is interesting because it follows the same path as Isaiah's prophecies, from the beginning to this point. Isaiah, of course, proclaims what the Psalm does not, that through the Servant, the Lord has planned and put into effect a way for the covenant to be restored, with all those who respond to Him!

It is not often that people recognise the considerable input Isaiah makes to the theology of the 'covenant' in the Old testament, but it is a crucial link with the New Testament.

The vision (55:4,5)

Finally, the prophecy concludes with a vision, but it is uncertain to whom it is addressed. If we read verse 4, then coming immediately after verse 3 we assume that the person being spoken to is David; 'I made him a witness to people, a leader and a commander of everyone.' But is this really the case? It is just as likely, if not more so, that after declaring that the covenant deeds of faithfulness would be restored, the Lord is speaking about the Servant! A close examination of the verbs of the text, of their tenses and the way they are used, convinces me that this is the case. The point is this. God is not interested in restoring David as David, but in restoring what He promised to David through the work of the Servant. We know that by the time of Jesus, the Messiah (Isaiah's Servant) was anticipated as the 'Son of David', not David returned.

In the end, it is indeed Jesus who is the real historical Servant and Son of David, and these two verses (55:4,5) speak of Him. He is now a 'witness to people' and a 'leader ... of everyone' because of what He has done (Is. 53). The whole picture which then follows of the Servant summoning a nation 'you do not know' and discovering that other nations 'will run to you' sounds like a prophecy of the growth of God's church into the world of the Roman Empire after Jesus' death in the first half of the first century AD.

For us, the glorious promise of God is that through our response to His magnanimous call, 'the Holy one of Israel' has made us 'glorious', and the message of God's Word (see verses 2,3) becomes attractive to the world through the work of the Servant (Jesus)!

Application

We should be aware however, that the glorious nature of the church does not reside in its buildings, its earthly wealth or magnificence, or its pomp and circumstance. It lies in the power and attractiveness of the Word, as preached and according to the response of real people who are 'saved'. There is a great deal for the evangelist to learn from this text, though this is only possible if you pick your way carefully through the grammar of what sounds a wonderful text, but is in fact quite a complex piece of Hebrew scripture.

We cannot overestimate the importance of Isaiah's unique prophecy that the work of the Servant is a 'free gift' of God which satisfies the human hunger for a relationship with God. There are many religions which attempt to construct ways to satisfy human forms of 'spirituality', and there is a veritable supermarket of choice available in our world, from which people can pick and mix almost any kind of religious system imaginable, whether public or private. The church of God, however, stands alive with its single unique message from the only God, the Maker of the World, proclaiming this one 'good news'. Isaiah did not have the same vocabulary as the New Testament, to speak about 'good news' and 'evangelism', but what he says is so close to this, the gaps between the Old and the New Testament seem to disappear before our eyes!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do people who go to church really believe that what they benefit from is something that is entirely free? If not, why not?
2. Discuss whether this passage (together with Isaiah 53) really does reflect your understanding of the 'Gospel'. Again, if not, why not, and what is missing?
3. How can this passage of scripture best help God's people today? Which part of this would make a good text from which to preach?

Personal comments by author

As previously (see yesterday's study), the blurring of lines between the Old and the New Testament may well be viewed as improper by some. However, when people read a text, they do not read it to find the author's intent or perspective; largely, they allow the text to speak from a time in the past to the present; that is the very nature of literature, and God's Word. There is no such things as God's Word isolated back in time as some entity which can be completely understood in its original context. The Bible, as God's Word, is a living thing. It is unique and complete in itself, but it now speaks to every person in every age and time.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Read through Psalm 89 and try to follow through the patterns of thought about the covenant that I have identified above. Write down your own understanding of what the 'covenant' is, and how it relates to your own faith.*
- *Pray for those who find it hard to accept the free offer of God's grace. Pray for specific people known to you, and pray that God will move them in their hearts to 'turn' to Him and receive His messages of love.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, stand amongst Your people with power and authority. Dispel the powers of darkness that attempt to disrupt the light You would shed on the lives of your servants, and save us from every work of the enemy. This we ask through our Saviour Jesus, who by His death and Resurrection, overcame death and hell. Alleluia! AMEN
