

# A Great Invitation

*Isaiah: Strength for the Weary*

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**Bible Text:** Isaiah 55:1-13  
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*Gracious God and ever blessed Father, as we come now to the Scriptures, holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit, we ask for your blessing to pour out your Spirit upon the reading and exposition and understanding of the word of God and all for your praise and eternal glory. For Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Please be seated.

Now, turn with me, if you would, to the prophecy of Isaiah 55 and you'll find that on page 615 in your Pew Bible. Isaiah 55.

1 Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. 3 Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. 4 Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. 5 Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. 6 Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; 7 let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. 8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. 10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. 12 For you shall go out in joy and be led forth

in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. 13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."

Thus far God's holy and inerrant word and may he bless it to us.

In 1969, Peggy Lee recorded a song called "Is that all there is?" That was based on an 1896 novella by a man called Thomas Mann, called "Disillusionment." The song spoke about a 12-year-old girl who was taken to the circus, the Greatest Show on Earth, and when the circus was done, she said to herself, "Is that all there is?" Then she meets a young boy and falls in love and then he leaves her, as these things happen, and broke her heart and she said, "Is that all there is to love?" And so the song goes on and there is a refrain,

"Is that all there is, is that all there is?  
If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing,  
Let's break out the booze and have a ball,  
If that's all there is."

It's not a great song but it says something important because it's the way so many people feel about life. The preacher in Ecclesiastes 2 talks about acquiring vineyards and amassing gold and silver and male and female singers and the delight of a man's heart. He says, "I denied myself nothing. Whatever my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure." Then he goes on to say, "And I hated life."

It's what the prophet Isaiah is contemplating here in the opening verses of chapter 55. He talks about those who are thirsty and those who are hungry and those who are spending their money on that which is not bread and that which cannot satisfy. He's actually talking about two kinds of people. One is destitute. They have no money. They have no bread. They are thirsty and they are hungry. They are down and out. Then he seems to talk about a different group of people, those who actually have a lot of money and are spending it as if it's going out of fashion, but it's not satisfying. It's not fulfilling.

Andrew Delbanco, Harvard University, wrote a book 10-15 years ago, sociologically analyzing modern American culture and Andrew Delbanco's thesis was less: that there has to be, people feel there has to be some kind of narrative, some kind of story that links our lives together and gives us hope, peace. He says, "We must imagine some end to life that transcends our own tiny allotment of days and hours if we are to keep at bay the dim back of the mind suspicion that we are adrift in an absurd world."

Well, that's what some people have concluded, that the world is absurd, that life is without meaning and purpose. Some are still holding on to the dream, they are chasing their dreams and they are saying, "Well, so long as I can get more of this and more of that and more of the other, then maybe at the end there will come this sense of peace and

satisfaction." Then there are others and they have long since given up on the dream and they are just trying to survive; and life has been hard and difficult and they have adopted a motto for their life that life is tough and then we die; and it's all about just trying to get through a day at a time and break out the booze at night and obliterate as much of the memory of that day as you possibly can and get up in the morning and do it all over again.

What do you say when somebody says to you, "How are you?" And we say, "Okay." And most of the time we are lying through the back of our teeth. Who really wants to know the answer to that question? How many hours have you got? How many days have you got?

Isaiah is addressing those who have lost hope, for whom life is meaningless. It's just an endless treadmill that's leading nowhere and satisfying nothing. So he describes, first of all, a life, a covenant life, a full life. You'll see in verse 3, "I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David." Now, we have to go back a little. We have to go back to Isaiah's time 700+ years before Jesus and he is saying, "There's a life out there and it's a covenant life. It's a covenant that God makes with his people and that covenant has a relationship." That's what a covenant is, it's a relationship, it's a bond. It's a bond with promises and assurances and pledges and God is saying, as he said to David, "I'm going to make a covenant with you."

At the end of David's life in 2 Samuel 23, he reflects on this covenant, that covenant you read of in 2 Samuel 7, but at the end of his life, he's reflecting on that covenant that God made with him. David's life is a mess. It's an unmitigated mess. You want to see a political life that's a mess, just look at King David. And what does he say at the end of his life? "God has made with me a covenant that is ordered in all things and sure." It was the source of his confidence. It was the source of his assurance. It was the source of his motivation. It's what got him up in the morning. It's what reassured him every single day, that God's covenant cannot change. Everything around us may change, life may change, circumstances may change, but God's covenant is the same yesterday, today and forever.

And Isaiah is ministering. He's ministering, of course, in a certain context and he's predicting the return of God's people from captivity in Babylon and emerging into a new society, but he's looking beyond that. He's thinking about what this covenant eventually will bring about, this life that he is talking about. And he has talked about a servant figure. You are familiar with him. Four times he has sung a little song and at the end of chapter 52 and 53, he has talked about "he who was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was laid upon him, by his stripes we are healed, all we like sheep have gone astray, but the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all," and he was talking, of course, about a servant figure, a king figure, a conqueror figure, and he's talking, of course, about Jesus. Way down in the future, he's talking about the coming of the Lord Jesus as the suffering servant and he's saying to the peoples of the world, to everyone, verse 1, to everyone, "I'm going to make with you a covenant. A promise of covenant life."

What is pictured here and you notice at the end of the chapter, Isaiah begins to talk about trees and fields and clapping hands and the thorn becoming a cypress and the brier becoming a myrtle and so on, and he's envisaging a kingdom that's going to grow and spread and be magnificent like a restored Eden; and later in the prophecy, he'll talk about it in terms of a new heavens and a new earth. He's talking about what Jesus is going to accomplish and he's saying here, "Let me tell you about this covenant life and it is something beautiful. It's something extraordinary. It is something fulfilling. It is something satisfying. It's something that integrates you, that makes you whole, that helps you see the purpose of life, why you are here, why God made you." To those who are spending their money on bread that does not satisfy, the prophet holds out the prospect of a life that is full and overflowing with the richest of food. It's a banquet that he is describing, a feast that he is describing.

Then in the second place, you see here not just a covenant life that is offered and described but an invitation that is given. An invitation that is given. Look at the verbs: come, buy, listen, incline your ear and hear that your soul, verse 3, may live. That your soul may live. Let me ask you this morning: are you alive? I mean spiritually alive? I mean alive in your heart? I mean alive in your soul? Alive unto God? Alive unto what it means to have sins forgiven? Alive to the fact that you're a child of God? Alive to the fact that you're in covenant with God and surrounded by the promises of God? That your soul is alive?

Jesus spoke about this, didn't he, in John 6. He talked about those who labor for the bread that does not satisfy, for the bread that perishes, and he said to them, "I am the bread of life and if you eat of this bread, you will never go hungry ever again." Well, that's what Isaiah is talking about right here. He's talking about a banquet. He's talking about a covenant life. He's talking about fullness of life that is to be found. He's talking about a life that somehow or other is associated with King David. And King David, of course, is just a type and a shadow of David's greater son, the Lord Jesus, who is described in Romans 1:3 as descended according to the flesh from David.

Come as you are. You notice this wine and this milk and this food are to those who have no money and it is offered without money and without price. You cannot buy this covenant life. It is for those who are destitute. It is for those who are without. How can that possibly be? Because the covenant mediator, because the Lord Jesus, because the suffering servant that he has talked about in chapter 53, has paid the price. Jesus paid it all. "All to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain, he washed it white as snow."

Come as you are. Yes, but look at verses 6 and 7. Come as you are but you cannot stay as you are. Come as you are with empty hands. "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." But when you come to him, you have to change because he will change you. "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts." Yes, when you come to this one, you come in faith and repentance equally, forsaking your sin and laying hold of the Lord Jesus, laying hold of the covenant mediator. That's what faith means. "Forsaking all, I take him." Faith. Like two wings of a bird whereby we fly to heaven.

While he is near. You say to me this morning, "Isn't God always near? Isn't he everywhere? Isn't there a Psalm somewhere that says that if I take the wings of the morning and fly to the uttermost parts of the earth, behold you are there?" Yes, God is everywhere but he isn't always everywhere with this promise because sometimes you don't have ears to hear it. Sometimes you don't want to see it. Sometimes you are so engrossed in the things of this world that you cannot hear his voice or see him when he draws near and he's saying, "When I am near." Do you feel him near this morning?

I wonder. I've been wondering all week why did God suggest that I should take this particular passage today. Perhaps because there is someone who needs to hear this very message today and your life is a mess, your life is torn apart. You have spent your money on bread which doesn't satisfy, on work and labor that doesn't satisfy. You have tried therapy and it doesn't help. You look for advice but it doesn't help. You find yourself exactly where the prophet imagines: hungry, thirsty, looking for meaning and purpose. And he's saying to you this morning, if you can hear that, listen to him in his word. You don't need extra revelations of God. You don't need to see visions. Just listen to him in his word and he's saying to you, "Come. Come. Incline your ear. Hear. Listen. Eat and drink." It's an invitation. It's an invitation to a party where you don't have to pay. There is an open table and the feast is spread and all you have to do is turn up. That's all. Just come while he is near. There may come a day, you see, when you won't hear that anymore. Your heart will grow hardened, clouds will descend and you won't be able to hear his voice. You won't be able to discern his word of Gospel reassurance that he's offering here. So while he is near, while he is near, listen to his invitation.

There is a life that is offered here and there is an invitation that is given here and there is a promise here too that is appended. You notice he says in verse 9, "as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways." You say, "How can I possibly come? How can God awaken dead souls to life whose wills are in bondage to their natures and cannot but will that which pleases them rather than pleases God? How can this possibly be?" And the answer, my friend, is by the power of Almighty God.

This promise of the word of God, actually he says three things about it, that this word of God, first of all, is superior. It is superior. "My thoughts are not your thoughts. My ways are not your ways." Now, that has a wide application but here in this particular passage, I think the prophet is saying this: that salvation and restoration and the offer of mercy in the covenant mercies of God is possible because God is far greater than you and he has devised a plan, a plan of redemption from before the foundation of the world to send his Son, to send this suffering servant, king, conqueror figure that Isaiah could see in the distance and that we know to be the Lord Jesus. And this word is powerful. He uses the image of rainwater that comes down and it waters a seed that otherwise would be dead and as the moisture enters into that seed, that seed comes to life and it begins to grow and it begins to burst forth with fruit so that the one who sows is also the one who reaps and eats bread. And this word is effective. "It won't return to me void," he says. "It shall not return to me empty. It shall accomplish that for which I purpose and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

In December 1971, I came across a word, a Bible word, a Bible verse. I had not seen it before. I had never read it before. "Come unto me all ye that are weary and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me. My yoke is easy, my burden is light. Come unto me all ye that are weary and are heavy laden." I read that verse and it was like an earthquake. Everything changed. Something awakened within me. I was like the one described in the opening verses of this chapter. My life was unfulfilling and miserable. I could find no lasting joy and could not see a trajectory that made sense of my life and everything else. And that verse, that powerful superior, powerful effective word awakened in my heart and soul. God made me a new creation in Jesus Christ. I laid hold of Jesus as he was offered in the Gospel and trusted in him and him alone. I heard the voice of Jesus say,

"Come unto me and rest;  
Lay down, thou weary one, lay down,  
Thy head upon my breast."  
I came to Jesus as I was,  
Weary and worn and sad;  
I found in him a resting-place,  
And he has made me glad.

"I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
'Behold, I freely give  
The living water, thirsty one,  
Stoop down and drink and live.'  
I came to Jesus, and I drank  
Of that life-giving stream;  
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,  
And now I live in him."

Those are the words of Horatius Bonar. The choir just sung it for us a few minutes ago. It's what this text is about. Across the centuries from 2,700 years ago, it comes to you this morning: to you who have no sense of purpose, lost, dead in trespasses and sins, close to despair perhaps, given up on life, no longer chasing dreams because you don't believe the dream is true. You're not sure what the "it" is when you say, "Is that all there is to life? What is that?" And so God comes to you in his word, his Gospel word, "Come, buy without money and without price and eat and drink that your soul might live."

*Father, we pray this morning, pray for anyone here within the sound of this voice, within the sound of your word, who might just be exactly where the prophet imagines, lost and destitute and undone. And here's a word not just of hope, not just for a better tomorrow, not full of the empty promises of earthly politicians, but a word of covenant life bounded and sealed by the blood of the Lord Jesus, and it offers life and fullness and vitality and hope and integration and blessing and joy. So, Father, we pray by your powerful word, draw that one, whoever that one may be, draw that one to the foot of the cross and impart to them life. For Jesus' sake. Amen.*