

Isaiah 55: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 55. 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. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. 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. Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. 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.

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. Let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. 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, 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. 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. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress, instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle, and it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. Like chapter 54, Isaiah chapter 55 describes the blessings that flow from the purpose of the Lord achieved through the work of the servant, closing this section of the book. Chapter 54 described the restored city of Zion, and in this chapter we have summons to receive the blessings of restoration, to enter into the full enjoyment of God's bounty. John Goldengaze sees two corresponding panels to this chapter. In verse 1 and verses 6 and 7 there is a summons. In verses 2 and the first half of verse 3, and verses 8 and 9 there are reasons why the people ought to listen to the Lord. And then in the second half of verse 3 and verses 10 and 11 there is an accompanying promise. In verse 4 and the first half of verse 5, and verse 12 and the first half of verse 13, there is the consequence of the response to the summons. And then in the second half of verse 5 and the second half of verse 13, there is the Lord's purpose achieved through it all. The chapter begins with a scene that we might imagine as a voice crying out in the marketplace, yet the offer of this vendor is a most peculiar one. He is offering drink and food to the thirsty and hungry, yet without any requirement of payment. The offer of water and food might suggest a situation of water shortage and famine conditions, perhaps as a result of war or siege. Both the drink and the food are offered openly, generally and freely, with no cost or restriction. Elsewhere the gift of water to a parched land and a thirsty people is connected with the Spirit. We might think of Jesus' offers of water in the Gospel of John, whether to the woman at the well or in the temple speech in chapter 7. Here it is specifically those who have no money who are invited to come. It's not merely the bare essentials that they are offered. Wine and milk are also offered freely to any who will receive them. This rich fare is contrasted to what the people might otherwise spend their money upon and devote their labour to, food and drink, that is not satisfying. This offer of food is so that the people can have life and have it to the full. It's not merely an offer of physical sustenance, it's an offer of spiritual blessings.

[4 : 1 0] Through the work of the servant there is great blessing and plenty for the people, and now the imperatives are calling people to enjoy what the Lord has brought about for them. In particular,

the promise here is an everlasting covenant, a covenant that will endure, that will not be at risk of being broken like the Mosaic covenant. The covenant in view here is the Davidic covenant, a covenant grounded upon the Lord's unilateral promises to the house of David.

This implicitly grounds the blessings that the people will enjoy in this restored Zion upon the work of the Messiah, whom we might reasonably identify with the suffering servant. Under the Davidic covenant, the fate of the nation is very strongly correlated with the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of their king. This is not merely on account of the way in which the king provides an example, either good or bad, but also because the Lord deals with his people through the person of the king. In the troubled history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, we can see the failure of king after king. However, one of the effects of the Davidic covenant is to direct people's hopes towards a king that will be enduringly faithful, a king who will secure the nation's standing and destiny. People's eyes would thereby be raised to the awaited figure of the Messiah. David is here described as a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. David and his house were not just leaders of the nation, but also witnesses to other nations round about. We might think about the influence of Solomon upon the region as people came to hear from him and to learn from his wisdom, the queen of Sheba coming from far off, for instance. One of the messianic hopes was that people from distant lands would learn about the Lord through the faithful king. John Oswalt suggests that against many commentators, the you that is in view in verse 5 is the Messiah or the servant, rather than the nation more generally. Other nations would come to the faithful servant, and this would all be because the Lord, here again described as the Holy One of Israel, had glorified him. The Lord's vindication of his faithful servant leads to the extension of the servant's reign. In verses 6 to 13, we have a parallel section with verses 1 to 5. As in verse 1, it begins with an imperative and an invitation. The invitation here is to seek the Lord and to call upon him. The Lord is near and he can be found by any who will seek him. The seeking in view here is not just asking for counsel of the Lord or seeking his answer to a particular prayer, rather it is a matter of seeking his presence in their lives. It is a matter of rejecting the ways of wickedness and seeking the ways of the Lord. Any who will return to the Lord in such a fashion are assured of the

Lord's compassion and pardon. All of the blessings described in this chapter are freely offered. The Lord is not withholding them from anyone. He requests only people's recognition of their need, that they come without money, and the blessings that they are promised in response are bountiful. The Lord is not parsimonious. He eagerly desires to give his good gifts to people. How, people might wonder, could this be, considering all the ways in which Israel had rejected the Lord? How could the Lord offer such a free pardon and such bountiful gifts? The Lord assures his people that his ways are above their ways, and his thoughts above their thoughts. He will not deal with them as their sins deserve, treating them as they might treat their neighbour. The contrast between the heavens and the earth, in verse 9, provides, as Oswalt notes, a motif that continues in verse 10.

Precipitation in rain and snow comes from the heavens and gives life to the earth. In much the same way, the word of the Lord is that which gives life to the land. As the Lord pours out his spirit upon a once parched earth, it will blossom with new life. The Lord's word is the source of this life. The prophetic promise, for instance, that waters hopes in eager hearts. Much as in verse 10 and 11, heaven and earth are united in rain and answering fruitfulness, in verses 12 and 13, the people and the land are united. The land itself is described as rejoicing and breaking forth and clapping and singing as the people are restored to it. The thorns and the briars that were described as taking over the land in the earlier parts of the book of Isaiah are now replaced by cypress and myrtle. As in verse 5, in verse 13 we see that the end of all of this is the glorification of the Lord and his name. While an initial fulfilment of this could be seen in the people's return from Babylon, it seems to have a broader reference. In such a passage we see the crystallisation of the greater hope of Israel, of which there are partial realisations and glimpses in various times and places, but which still awaits its full realisation. This is a word of hope and assurance to the heroes of the prophet, who even in dark days can, as they live by the word of the Lord, know something of this chapter's promise of sustenance and fruitfulness and the presence of the Lord.

[9 : 04] A question to consider, how do Davidic themes within this chapter pick up some threads from the earlier chapters of the book of Isaiah?