

An Amazing Invitation

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[0 : 0 0] Please turn back to Isaiah chapter 55 as we come towards the end of a series on the book of the servant and some of the things that follow on the great servant songs.

I've been asked tonight to preach in Isaiah 55, I'm going to try and go through the whole chapter but the key thing is to see that in verse 1 and then in 6 there are great invitations in verse 1 come and that's repeated then in verse 6 seek. We're going to focus on these invitations, what they are and what follows them. Now this is a chapter that's full of the Gospel, it's full of good news for now and for always and it's a chapter that's full of pictures of the Gospel, what it is and what it can mean for us. And as we work through it I want you also to see that it's a Gospel chapter for those who do not yet know Jesus, who had invited to come, but it's also a chapter I think for those who have fallen away to some extent, who have wondered off and are called to come back and to return to the Lord. Now in the context here it's important to see how this follows on from chapter 52, 13 through chapter 53, that great song of the suffering servant, the one who gives himself for our sins, the one who succeeds in that mission, he gives his life, he is raised to life and he changes lives and we saw that that chapter Isaiah 53 is fulfilled in the sufferings of Jesus. Then following that in chapter 54 good news of a future for those who trust in the servant. We saw last week in the first half of that chapter in the symbolism of marriage and home, what he means. And then in the second half of that chapter from verse 11 it's the symbolism of a city with its beauty and security that people of the servant live in that city. I just want to highlight one little detail that ties a lot of this together for us.

The servant of Isaiah 53 and the sections before calls people to know him and the people who come to know him become the servants of the Lord themselves. The servant of the Lord brings servants to the Lord. That's one of the themes of the last sections of Isaiah. So for example Isaiah 52 and 13, behold my servant, that's who he is, the suffering servant, the servant of the Lord. The end of chapter 54, the second half verse 17, this is the heritage of the servants of the Lord. Because of what the servant has done we can become servants of the Lord and walk in the footsteps of the servant and in perfect service to God with him we find our freedom. But how do we become servants of the servant? Well that's what this chapter is about. Let's in the first half for time together look at verses 1 to 5 and see this first amazing invitation and what it offers to us.

Now essentially in this first part of the chapter we're being invited to come to a feast. In my young days preaching often spoke about the gospel table. That was a favorite image. They didn't mean the Lord's table specifically but they just meant the gospel itself. That you're invited to come to the table of Jesus, to a banqueting table. It's full of great food and drink and it's available to anybody who wants to come. That's the picture here. Invited to a gospel table that's open to all, where everything on the table is equally available to every single person who comes. Let me contrast that with something I read the other day. The Grand Oak dining table in the Great Hall at Colodon

House was crowded with crystal glasses, silver cutlery, white porcelain crockery emblazoned with and so it goes on. This very fancy table. This is just before the Battle of Colodon. Teams of servants supplied the Prince and the leaders of his army with a magnificent feast. It began with a course of mussels. Well, they're welcome. Followed by a rack of lamb dished up with pepper turnip, potato and cabbage cakes and various other things. Then they had another course of cheese and then that was followed by a fourth course, a compote of berries macerated in whisky with toasted oatmeal, heather honey and whipped cream. This banquet was washed down with copious servings of champagne and French claret from the many casks in the absent Lord President's abundant cellar downstairs.

[6 : 21] Toast after toast, feasting and drinking on into the wee small hours with evermore extravagant boasts about coming victory. This banquet contrasted sharply with the fair dished out to the Prince's soldiers. There was plenty oatmeal, it says, in Inverness, but it wasn't brought, that was the most they were ever going to get, but it had been brought to them because of incompetence. Only one biscuit per man could be distributed to the army and none of these men had eaten anything for 24 hours. That is the opposite of what the gospel is about. We offer the same feast to anyone and everyone who wants to come to the one table that is set with the gospel of Jesus, open to all and everyone is equal at that table. You can see how warm the welcome is at the beginning of the chapter.

Come, notice that's repeated in the original, it's said three times, come, come, come, as if it's on three billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri. The first one says, come, and the second one says, please come, and the third one says, you must come. And the invitation you can see comes from God, 2nd half of verse 2 into verse 3, listen to me, give ear to me, come to me, hear me, that your soul may live. That's God language, God inviting us into a personal living relationship with him. And it's an invitation, as I said, to a feast. There's a lot to drink according to verse 1, an invitation to the spiritually thirsty. Corey didn't have time today for an illustration from

C. S. Lewis. I'm not sure I have time today for an illustration from C. S. Lewis, but if you want to go back and read chapter 2 of the silver chair, the very famous section where Jill is desperately thirsty, she's dying of thirst, but there's a liar, and she's afraid to come any nearer.

But he says, you have to come. Eventually she does come. At one point she says, I'll have to go and find some other water. And the lion says, there is no other water. She comes and she drinks, and her thirst is quenched immediately, this amazing, clear, cold, sparkling water. And here is an invitation to the thirsty to come to the waters. Notice in the drink that's offered here, it's often said three classes of drink that do three different things. There's water to quench your thirst. There's milk as a drink that nourishes, that feeds. And there's wine, which according to the Bible is meant to gladden the heart of man and woman. So the gospel of Jesus spiritually slakes your thirst, and it feeds your soul, and it gladdens your heart. So the first application is to pray for spiritual thirst for myself if I don't have it, to pray for spiritual thirst for others if they don't have it, and to pray as a Christian to be led to people who are spiritually thirsty, that I might bring the gospel to them. There's also lots to eat as well as to drink, the second half of verse 2, the best of food, rich food, it's a banquet. We're not given details of exactly what's on offer in terms of the food here, but clearly it is a rich feast, a banquet for the soul.

I don't know what the imagery in your mind might be, but we learned last week that for Derrick, it would be steak pie, and we know from a little while ago for Corey, it would be bacon and maple syrup, cronuts, I think. If that doesn't do it for you, mushrooms and lashings of Alpro, if you're so inclined, we have to be politically correct here. But whatever your thing is, you're meant to picture a feast where it's on offer to you, and it's on offer for nothing. This is the stress here, nothing to pay, no money. He who has no money come, and you can drink, and you can eat, because this meal is absolutely free. It's free grace. We cannot buy or merit or earn the favor of God. Jesus has provided his gospel of forgiveness. Jesus offers to feed my soul and slake my thirst. Jesus simply asks me to come and receive what is there free, gratis. Now, of course, as we've learned in the servant songs, what's free to us wasn't free to him. Isaiah 53 is Jesus paying the price so that we might have all of this for nothing. So, someone has paid, someone has paid the full cost in his life and death for us. And that, now, living Savior invites us to come and receive what he has bought for us at the cost of his own blood. And we can have that forgiveness and freedom for absolutely nothing. Isaiah 55 is not possible only because of Isaiah 53. Now, think of the claims of Jesus when we hear this kind of language of come and drink and eat. Wasn't he referring to this kind of passage in his own preaching so often? Matthew 11, 28, come to me, all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Or in John 4, the famous story of the Samaritan woman, he offers her water that means she will never thirst again. Or John 6, I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. John 7, if anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink, whoever believes in me. Jesus saw himself in Old Testament passages like this and he picks up on that language and he still uses that language today. As he, through people like me and others, he preaches the gospel and he says, come and he says, drink and he says, eat and he says, it's all free, just come to me, that cost you nothing. Just another detail in the passing, we also notice here beginning of verse 2, the question, why spend your money for that's not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy. So often when I have conversations with people outside the church, they have the idea that it's Christians who have difficult questions to answer. That's why in St. Andrew's a few years ago, the CU would often put on grill a Christian

[15:07] event as an evangelistic thing and you could come and ask a Christian, maybe somebody let's say who taught science at the university was a Christian, if you were interested in science you could come and ask them your questions. So you grilled a Christian and you put them in the spot because Christians have difficult questions to answer. But what the Bible often says is it's the non-Christian who has really difficult questions to answer. Scripture is full of questions of the sinner like here and it's saying why do you spend your money on what really isn't going to nourish your soul? Why do you work so hard for that which is never going to satisfy you? Early in Isaiah 44, Isaiah has talked about idolatry, where people seek idols to worship and eventually he says the deluded idolater feeds on ashes. He cannot save himself and he's simply feeding on ashes. So the question for the unbeliever is why all the effort, spending time and money chasing after what will never ever meet your deepest needs. I saw it illustrated recently in terms of drinking salt water. Chasing after these things, chasing after idols is like drinking salt water to deal with your thirst. You might say well it's water, it's going to hydrate you, but it just makes you more thirsty. And the irony is that drinking salt water eventually leads to dehydration and to death. God offers water that will slake my thirst and bread that will feed my soul and that bread has been paid for by Jesus. I can tell already we're not going to get through much of Isaiah 55, but just on that note of bread being paid for, apologies if you've heard this story before, become a very famous story many years ago. When somebody who had been a little boy during the

Second World War, grown up used to tell this story. The one day he was one of the children who hadn't been evacuated certainly at this stage and he's wandering around and he got lost and he got very very hungry and he smelt bread being baked in a baker's and he was looking through the window and he was feeling very very hungry and a soldier in uniform came up and decided of course he would take him to a place of safety, but first he said, are you hungry? The boy said, yeah I'm starving. Would you like something? What would you like? And the boy said, oh I'd love one of the rolls. So the soldier went in, came out with a bag of freshly baked rolls for the boy. He handed it to him and the boy said, I've got no money and the soldier said, but I've paid, they're yours.

And as the boy hugged the warm bag to his chest he just looked up and he said, Mr. are you God? He was so overcome by what he thought was a miracle that he wondered if God had come to offer him bread for his hunger. God has come to offer us bread for our hunger and he's come to give it to us free of charge. I've paid, it's yours, all you have to do is come and eat. As this section continues from the middle of verse 3 to verse 5, just let me touch on a couple of things. It's saying that as we respond to this invitation of Jesus to come to him and let him satisfy our souls, what's happening here is number one of eternal significance and number two it's of universal relevance. Second half of verse 3 it's of eternal significance. See the language I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast sure love for David. A covenant is a binding commitment, an absolute promise, a bond. And God is saying literally, I will make for you, referring back to the people who will respond to the invitation, I will make for you in favor of you an everlasting covenant and bring you into the eternal blessings of that covenant. And how is that possible? Well, it's because of this person here called David, but it's not the same David of the earlier story in the Old Testament. It's a coming David. And who is this? Well, of course, it's the promised Messiah. It's not so long ago that we were all hearing Isaiah 9, 6 to 7 about a child being born and a son being given. And who would that be? That's the one who will have the throne of David with the government on his shoulders, and he'll have a reign of peace. So that

David, that coming messianic king, is the one through whom we can have an everlasting committed relationship with God. So God is saying, come to something that is a forever commitment, because of that king who will live the life that we could never live, die the death we deserve to die, and offer us his salvation forever. So it's everlasting. And it's also of universal relevance, verses 4 and 5, verses about international mission. As people are drawn, you shall call, you in verse 5 is singular, so it may be a reference to the king calling, or it may be a reference to the people of the king calling. But I wonder if it could be both. But what it's saying is, the king calls people from all over the world, all peoples and nations, he will call them to come to him, to his feast. But he will call them through his people. He will call non-believers to come, but he'll call them through his own people. You see, in verse 5, for he has glorified you, or he has endowed you with splendor. And what's happening is, I think, that people see something of the king in the king's people. So they come to hear about the king and see something of the king through the splendor of the king's people. And so they come to the king, who is himself endowed with splendor. Now, that would take ten minutes to explain what I mean by that, but I'm just throwing it out there, that here I think is something about universal mission, where people are ultimately being attracted to the king, but it comes through the people of the king, who live lives that honor the king, that attract people to the gospel, that has changed them. So that's the first invitation.

Let's come secondly to another amazing invitation in verses 6 to the end of the chapter. The invitation itself is in verses 6 and 7, really. I'll look at 8 and 9 as well and connection with it.

[24 : 09] Seek the Lord, while he may be found. If you want another three billboards outside Ebing, Missouri, they would be seek and call and return. Seek the Lord, call upon him, return to him.

Now, this is reminding us that there's always a note of repentance at the heart of Christian experience, the experience of coming to know Jesus, or the experience of living the Christian life in relationship with Jesus. There's always a note of repentance. Now, there's a challenge here you can see to repentance. A challenge in verse 7 to a person's life, let him forsake his way. It's a lifestyle shift, leaving a certain way of living behind. And it's also a challenge to the mind, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, to give up thoughts that are wrong. In the New Testament, repentance is a change of mind. So, it's a change of lifestyle that results from an inner change of mind. And positively then, it shows itself in turning or returning to the Lord, turning to him and asking for mercy, and a turnaround of life as well, life going in a new direction, always looking to God. So, repentance is saying to me and to you that we need, first of all, decisively, if we've never done it before, to see that we have been going in the wrong direction, to see that our thinking is wrong and our living has not been for the glory of God, and to ask God to change our thinking and to change our living and to point us in the right direction. And very often that's also true in the Christian life, that we wander away in the wrong direction and we need to say to God, sort out the way I'm thinking and feeling. Sort out my life and my lifestyle and help me to come back to you as a prodigal returning home, confident that the

Father will embrace me as I come back to you. And there's encouragement to repentance here, encouragement because he says, while he may be found, while he is near, he may be found, for example, in this day of grace in which we live. We live in an age where we are free to come to Jesus, where the gospel is preached, where the Bible is available to us, and we could come to Jesus.

While he may be found, while he may be found in this life as well, there's no second chance beyond death. We only have one shot at life, and we need to come to know Jesus in this life before it's too late. So while he may be found means here and now in this life. And while he is near, is that seeing something even more? I think it is. When does Jesus come near? Well, he comes near when somebody hears the gospel. He comes near when a friend is witnessing to you about Jesus. He comes near when you're reading the Bible. He also thinks he comes near at particular times of life.

Perhaps at particular stages of life, most people who become Christians are converted when they are young or in young adulthood, a time when people are thinking and rethinking, making decisions for the whole of life. And often then, that's when Jesus comes near. Or he comes near during various providences in life, sometimes tough times, sometimes very good times, opportunities to reflect and think about the big issues of life. I know somebody who became a Christian because he and his wife had a baby, their first baby, completely changed his view of everything. He thought, I've got this little child in my care, in our care, this child who is going to live in this world who knows for how long, and will this child live in another world beyond, began thinking about all these sorts of issues. And he became a Christian because they had a baby. I know somebody else who became a Christian because they lost a baby. They lost a child very, very early. And the opposite of the previous providence, a tough one, and they began to look for help and for comfort and for answers. And they came to Christ through that most difficult of circumstances. So Jesus came near in both of these situations in what would be a pleasant providence and in what would be the most difficult of all providences. So Jesus comes near at all kinds of times and stages and ages in all kinds of ways. But the important thing is when he comes near that we respond, that we don't let that opportunity go. But whoever we are, unbeliever or believer, if Jesus is speaking, if Jesus is coming near, if Jesus is touching your heart, if his hand is on your shoulder, then take advantage of that moment in the best possible way and respond to the Jesus who has come near in his grace to you. There's also the encouragement to repent when it says he will abundantly, freely, part of it. Notice it says that he will, he really will. It's not he may forgive, he may pardon, but he absolutely will. The penitent are forgiven. And in the theology of Isaiah, it's also important to see that this idea of pardon means complete and utter forgiveness. So, for example, early on in Isaiah, he has this image in chapter 1 of your sins being a scarlet, they'll be white as snow, red as crimson, they'll be like wool. The point is that people would say it's very easy to dye something that's white and make it red. But if something is crimson, they found it very difficult to make it white again. And God is saying, even though your sins are like scarlet or crimson, they'll be as white as the snow we've seen over the last couple of days. They'll be as white as the whitest, purest wool. Or in 43 and 25, he says that he blots out our sins and remembers them

[32 : 29] no more. He just wipes it clean. He deletes them forever. And he deletes them in a way that is irrecoverable. He does it forever and he forgets them forever. Or in 44 and 22, says your sins are like the morning mist. You get a mist, we'd talk, in the morning, and you thought for an hour or so it would never go. And then a little while later, the sun is shining and it's as clear as could be.

Where does that heart gone? The mist. It's gone. It's gone. And God uses that image for sins. They're like a cold cloud. But he says, I can deal with them. I can make them disappear. And I will forget them forever. And when it says he will abundantly pardon, it says literally that he will multiply pardon. God is into multiplication. He will multiply pardon. He will forgive and forget all of your sins. Whatever you have ever thought or said or done, he will forgive and forget the whole thing forever. And he will never recover them again, because they have been dealt with by the servant. And what the servant did is sufficient once and for all and forever to deal with all of our sins for all eternity. And when he goes on to say in verses 8 and 9, my thoughts are not your thoughts, your ways are not my ways. Of course, he's referring back to verse 7, where the wicked are called to forsake their way and forsake their thoughts. And then it's contrasting their thoughts and their ways with God's thoughts and God's ways.

God is different. God is holy. But I think especially what is contrasting is that God is a God of grace. And God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. And when God says he will forgive, he will forgive. We are often very reluctant to forgive. Or if God is into multiplication, we're into division. And I've said to people—I don't know if you have, I shouldn't say you've done this, but I've done it—I'll say, well, I'll forgive that part of it, but it's very hard to forgive that. Or I'll forgive that and that, but it's very hard to forget what you said or what you did. But God says, I'm not like you. My thoughts are not your thoughts.

My ways are not your ways. I don't hold grudges. When I say I will forgive your sins 100% and forever and never recall them, I will. I am different from you. In God, we have a forgiveness that is guaranteed and that God will never go back on. He will never renege on his commitment to forgive us forever and forever. The verses following these from verse 10, I was going to say something about trusting God's word in verses 10 and 11. Very important to Isaiah, the section of Isaiah. If you read the first few verses of chapter 40 and then these verses towards the end of 55, that's a section of Isaiah. And you'll notice how important the word is in the first half of chapter 40 and the second half of chapter 55, is if he's bracketing all that he's saying with the power of God's word that comes down from above, like the rain and the snow, and makes a difference to the earth. And he's using that image. And he's saying, you see the snow come down, you see the rain come down, and eventually irrigation makes things fruitful in the spring.

God's word comes down from above, and he makes things fruitful in his own time and by his own power. And the other thing in verses 12 and 13 was trust God's future for those who repent and those who want to see God at work. They will see God at work in the language here from verse 12, is the language of return from exile and poetic language about creation, rejoicing, and the hills being alive with a sound of music, it's saying, a singing planet and the disappearance of thornbush and briars throughout Isaiah have been symbols of God's judgment and curse. And it's saying, God can change your situation. And to us it's saying spiritually, God can change a spiritual wilderness like Edinburgh or Scotland or Nepal. He can change it into a place that's fruitful.

[37 : 55] He could do it by his power, because he's the God of revival who sends his word from above and can change the situation. And of course at last it's looking to the ultimate change of the environment and the whole situation in the new heavens and the new earth, when everything sings and everything is harmonious and heaven and earth have come together and there's nothing but beauty and security wherever you look, and this is for an everlasting sign, Isaiah says. Everything in that world will be a sign that God has succeeded in grace. Every person, everything, everything you will ever see or hear in that new world is a sign of the grace and the glory of God having reached its fruition. Now, I had a great illustration to finish with, as Cody said this morning, but there's just not time to do it, so you'll just have to accept that it really was.

Everybody's good. I mean, both me and Cody today have two absolutely scintillating illustrations, and you haven't heard either of them, but you just have to trust us that they were really good.

The last thing I will say, because I really want to say this as I finish, is that all of this we should hear today coming to us from Jesus, the divine servant who is saying to me and to you tonight, come, come, come, and he was saying seek and call and turn. This is coming from Jesus in heaven, the divine voice of Jesus. That's why it's so important, because he is God, and he gave his life for you, and as the one who gave his life for you and who is divine, he calls you to himself.

Now, why, as I finish, do I highlight that particularly in this section of Isaiah? Because Isaiah 52, 13, which begins that last great servant song, says, my servant shall be high and lifted up. That's where he is. How does that say he's divine?

Because in Isaiah's great vision in chapter 6, he saw the Lord Yahweh high and lifted up. So God is high and lifted up, and the servant is now high and lifted up. Jesus has received the answer to his prayer in John 17. Glorify me with the glory I had with you before the world was.

[40 : 51] The servant incarnate God, who came so very low from heaven above, has now been invested as incarnate God with the glory he had as the eternal Son before the world was. So that glorified majestic, splendid, victorious Jesus in heaven, the King who died as the servant for you, is calling you with his divine voice to come to his table and to seek his face and to give your life to him, and he is saying, if you do that, that will change your history and it will change your eternity. If you trust in Jesus now, you are guaranteed the joy of the new heavens and the new earth forever. Isn't that an amazing thing? A decision made so simply in this world, responding to the voice of the divine Jesus, guarantees that you will enjoy his blessing forever and forever and forever. Why would somebody not come and not seek when so much is on offer from God himself, and it's there free for any one of us. Amen. I'll leave it there.