

ISAIAH – LESSON TWENTY ONE

ISAIAH 55 - 56

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

The Great Invitation and Mercy for All

Many titles have been chosen for this chapter: ESV – The Compassion of the Lord; NAS95 – The Free Offer of Mercy; NIV – Invitation to the Thirsty; HCS – Come to the Lord; NKJV, NRSV – An invitation to Abundant Life; NLT – Invitation to the Lord’s Salvation. Haley’s pretty well covers the waterfront. In 52:13-53:12 we learned that the Servant came providing salvation for all. We have seen the glory of Zion enhanced, the tent enlarged to accommodate a large influx of children, and Jehovah has taken Judah back as his wife (ch. 54). Now Jehovah invites the cast-off nations to come and partake of the spiritual life that he has provided through the Servant. To limit this chapter to exiled Judah in Babylon, or even to give the Babylonian exiles major prominence, is to restrict the call to confines entirely too narrow. Chapter 55 foreshadows the invitation of Jesus to come unto him and find rest (Matt. 11:28-30), the invitation to the marriage feast (Matt. 22:1-14), and the abundance of God’s grace to Jews and Gentiles (Acts 15:11). The invitation is both urgent and universal.

Vv. 1-5 – Come and Partake Without Price

Jehovah earlier promised that he would provide abundant water for the thirsty (41:17-18) and that in the purified Zion “with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation “ (12:3). He has now provided that water and invites, “**Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters**” (the plural speaks of abundance). The purpose is to quench the soul’s thirst for God (cf. Psa. 42:2; 63:1). The invitation is universal (every one); the water is free (he that hath no money); the banquet is ready (come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.) But how does one buy without money?

The emphasis here is on the free grace of God who abundantly provides and graciously invites all to come and eat and drink freely (1).

But there is a problem. They spend what money they have on things that are of no value and that perish. They spend their money on that which is not bread and work for that which does not satisfy. This practice they are to leave and to hearken unto God from whom they will receive that which is good and make their soul delight itself in fatness, “that ye may be filled unto all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19) (2).

If they hear and respond by coming to God, their soul will live. By this process they will also enter into an everlasting covenant with God, even the sure mercies of David. Everything promised to David will be fulfilled. Like earlier covenants¹, this one will have a sign: “¹²For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing; and all the trees of the fields shall clap their hands. ¹³Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir-tree; and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle-tree: and it shall be to Jehovah for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off” (12-13). The final covenant between God and his people will not cancel out the earlier covenants, but fulfill them, perfectly and completely (Matt. 5:17). The final outcome of the work of the Servant will be the full realization of all that God has promised from the beginning. “For all the promises of God in him *are* yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us” (2 Cor. 1:20). In Christ the throne and kingdom of David have now been permanently established, and the sure mercies of an everlasting covenant of peace provided (3).

Jehovah has given Christ for a witness to the peoples, and as a leader and commander. Christ can bear firsthand testimony to the truth. John describes him as “the faithful witness” (Rev. 1:5). A leader is one who shows the way; a commander is one who gives commands. Jesus is both, the former in his humanity and the latter in his divinity (4).

1. The covenant with Noah had the rainbow; the covenant with Abraham had circumcision; the covenant at Sinai had sprinkled blood.

Apparently speaking to the witness, he is told that he will call a nation that he had not known, that the nation that had not known him would come to him “because of Jehovah thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel; for he hath glorified thee.” By means of the gospel this nation will be called from among the nations (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16). It will be a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9). All this will be because of Jehovah his God, the Holy One of Israel, who will have glorified the Messiah with his own self (cf. John 17:4-5; Acts 3:13-15), having received him “up in glory” (1 Tim. 3:16) (5).

Vv. 6-13 – “Seek Ye Jehovah While He May Be Found”

These verses are among the better-known verses in Isaiah. It would be impossible to number the sermons for which they have served as the text. This familiarity is not bred by the fact that they appeal to preachers, but by the fact that preachers believe that they contain needed lessons for their hearers.

In light of what Jehovah has done for the salvation of the Jews and Gentiles, Isaiah now urgently calls upon both to **“Seek ye Jehovah while he may be found.”** This call certainly includes the exiles in Babylon, but it goes far beyond that. To seek Jehovah is to inquire after him and his will with care and concern (cf. Amos 5:4, 6, 14). However, the clause, **while he may be found**, indicates a time limit. Today the door is open; tomorrow it may be closed (Hos. 5:6; Luke 13:25). Today is the day of salvation (2 Cor. 6:2; Heb. 4:7) (6).

The wicked and the unrighteous are not different levels of evil. It is repetition for the sake of emphasis. Each acts contrary to God’s character and will. Each is a rebel against the legal and moral law of God. Each is to forsake his mode of life. A general promise of forgiveness of sin upon repentance and amendment of life was first given to Israel through Solomon (2 Chron. 7:14). The doctrine is largely preached by the prophets, but is nowhere more distinctly and emphatically laid down than in this place. God’s will is to “multiply pardon (abundantly pardon),” if man will only turn to him (7).

The word “for” occurs four times in the following verses giving four reasons to seek Jehovah and changes one’s ways. **“1) For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither**

are your ways my ways, saith Jehovah. 2) For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thought than your thoughts.”

Though man is made in God’s image (Gen. 1:27), yet the nature of God in every way infinitely transcends that of man. Both the thoughts and the acts of God surpass man’s understanding. Men find it hard to pardon those who have offended them; God can pardon, and “pardon abundantly.” Men cannot conceive of coming changes, when they pass certain limits. God knows assuredly what changes are approaching, since they are his doing. Man makes an egregious mistake when he “[thinks] that [God is] altogether such a one as [he]” (Psa. 50:21). We need to turn, seek God, and walk in his ways (8-9).

3) (For) the rain and the snow are God’s ministers (Ps. 148:8), and go forth from him, just as his word does. They have an appointed work to do, and do not return to him until they have accomplished it. Delitzsch translates, “As the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, except it hath watered the earth,” etc. The writer is apparently aware, as is the writer of Ecclesiastes, that the water that falls from heaven in the shape of rain returns in the shape of vapor (see Eccles. 1:7). **So shall my word be. God’s word is creative. With the utterance the result is achieved. “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). “By the Word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth” (Ps. 33:6; comp. Ps. 148:5). **But it shall accomplish;** rather, *unless it has accomplished.* There is a mixture of two constructions, “It shall not return void,” and “It shall not return unless it has accomplished,” etc. **It shall prosper.** Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God has a prosperous course. It is endued with life from God. The special “word” which the prophet has here in mind is the promise, so frequently given, of deliverance from Babylon and return in peace and joy to Palestine. But he carries his teaching beyond the immediate occasion, for the benefit of the people of God in all ages (10-11).**

4) For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace (comp. ch. 35:10; 40:9–11; 43:3–6, 19–21, etc.). A strong contrast is frequently drawn between the exodus from Babylon and that from Egypt. On the former occasion all was hurry, alarm, disquiet, danger. The later exodus will be accompanied with “peace” and “joy” (see ch. 51:9–16,

etc.). (For the fulfillment, see Ezra 1, 2, and 7, 8.) **The mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing.** All nature shall rejoice at their deliverance, especially the noblest and the grandest parts of nature—"the mountains and the hills." Isaiah's admiration of mountains continually reveals itself throughout the work (ch. 5:25; 13:2, 4; 14:25; 22:5; 30:17, 25; 34:3; 40:4, 9, 12; 42:11, 15, etc.). It is quite in his manner to speak of nature as bursting forth into singing (ch. 35:2; 44:23, 49:13). **All the trees of the field shall clap their hands.** The metaphor is not found elsewhere in Isaiah, but appears in Ps. 98:8 (12).

Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree. "Briars and thorns" were to overgrow the unfruitful vineyard, according to ch. 5:6; and to cover the land of God's people, according to ch. 32:13. This would be literally the case to a large extent, while the land was allowed to lie waste. The literal meaning is not, however, the whole meaning, or even the main meaning, here. "Briars and thorns" represent a general state of wretchedness and sin. The "fir" and "myrtle" represent a happy external condition of life, in which men "do righteously." **It shall be to the Lord for a name.** This "regenerated creation" will show forth the glory of God to mankind at large, and "get him a name" among them (comp. ch. 63:12; Jer. 13:11). **For an everlasting sign.** It will also be to God himself an enduring sign of the covenant of peace which he has made with his people, not to hide his face from them any more, but to have mercy on them "with everlasting kindness" (ch. 54:7-10). Other signs may be cut off or fail, but the deliverance of the Jews from Babylon and the Servant's deliverance of the redeemed from among all nations stands, and will ever stand, as testimonies to Jehovah's being and power (13).

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

Consolation for the Rejected; A Rebuke of the Blind Watchmen

Vv. 1-8 – Consolation for Foreigners and Eunuchs

Although we have followed Haley's headings and subheadings, I am inclined to depart from this one. This section is not so much pointed at special groups as much as it emphasizes the opening of the kingdom to all nations and peoples. Isaiah's announcement that foreigners would join God's family must have rattled the Jewish cage. More than likely it angered many of them who were exceedingly ethnocentric. It was one thing to suggest that the nations would one day obtain blessing from their relationship with God's people, but it was quite another to assert that they would stand before God on equal spiritual footing. However, this was not the first time and would not be the last time that Isaiah advanced such an idea. Isaiah first called his people to righteous living in light of their relationship with God. He then reassured foreigners and eunuchs that God had not forgotten them and in fact would bless them beyond their hopes.

God's salvation was coming and his people needed to live in keeping with it. Even as his righteousness would be revealed they needed to live justly and do righteousness. Isaiah's words parallel the challenge of John the Baptizer and of Jesus to prepare for the imminent arrival of God's kingdom (Matt. 3:2; 4:7). Blessing was pronounced upon those who so lived and held fast to that path. The representative action was keeping the Sabbath and his hand from doing any evil. He would single out the Sabbath again in 56:4, 6; 58:13-14). Why would Isaiah single out the Sabbath? Scripture does not tell us the reason, but it could be that the Sabbath clearly identifies the covenant lifestyle.² Keep in mind that while in captivity the people could not keep many of

2. The Sabbath was sacred to Jehovah; as Creator he rested on the seventh day following the six days of creation. To the Jew the Sabbath was a reminder of the power by which Jehovah had delivered the nation from Egyptian bondage (Deut. 5:15). The Sabbath day was a sign between Jehovah and the children of Israel that he had sanctified them unto himself as his special possession (Exod.

God's laws. For example, they could not offer proper sacrifices because they were separated from the temple and the altar in Jerusalem. It was this absence from the temple that gave rise to the synagogue. There they could observe the Sabbath to the extent possible and to the extent permitted. After all, they were slaves in Babylon and their masters might not be inclined to permit them to take off every seventh day (1-2).

Isaiah now singles out two groups – eunuchs and foreigners. First, Isaiah urges the eunuchs not to be discouraged; God would reward their faithfulness. God was looking for those who would keep the Sabbath, choose that in which God delighted, and hold fast his covenant. While the eunuch believed that he would not enjoy God's lasting blessing to the same extent others would, Isaiah assures them that as faithful followers they would receive an everlasting name that would not disappear.³ Eunuchs would produce no earthly families, but they would enjoy all the blessings of God's heavenly family. A name given to sons and daughters can be cut off, but a name that Jehovah gives to a member of his spiritual family cannot be cut off. Only God can blot it out of his book. The account of the Ethiopian nobleman in Acts 8 indicates that it was not uncommon for a eunuch to respond to Jehovah's invitation to worship in Jerusalem (3-5).

Having addressed the eunuchs, Isaiah turns to the foreigners. The faithful foreigners are those who minister unto Jehovah, love his name, are his servants, keep the Sabbath day without profaning it, and hold fast his covenant. These he will bring to his holy

31:12-17; Ezek. 20:12). Thus observance of the Sabbath signified recognition of Jehovah's power in creation, in the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, and in their special relationship to him.

3. There were restrictions regarding physically defective priests (Lev. 21:16-23). Physically defective or deformed priests were not allowed to function as priests by offering sacrifices. The abnormalities listed are probably examples rather than a complete list (cf. a comparable list of animal defects in 22:20-25). The ceremonial wholeness of the Levitical system found physical expression in wholeness and normality.

But handicapped priests were assured of their share not only of the holy food (the priests' portions of the fellowship offerings), but also from the most holy food (the priests' portions of all standard offerings) (Lev. 21:22).

mountain, make them joyful in his house of prayer, and accept their burnt offerings and sacrifices. Clearly faithfulness is more important than bloodlines.

Jehovah has a special interest in the outcasts of Israel, but his love extends beyond them to include the outcasts of the Gentiles as well. "Other sheep I have that are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and they shall become one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16), Gentiles responded in great numbers to his invitation (6-8).

Vv. 9-12 – A Rebuke of the Blind Watchmen

Commentators hold two different views on the text from 56:9 to 57:21. The issue is the time factor. Is Isaiah addressing Judah after the exile or is he looking back to his own generation before the Babylonian captivity? The text is difficult to harmonize with the former view. The strongest argument for the former view is the character and conduct of the nobles and rulers who were the leaders during the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its walls. Nehemiah records that they had money but that they were given to greed and usury (Neh. 5:7. In addition to that, they failed to pay their tithes, forsook the house of God, and desecrated the Sabbath (Neh. 13:10-18). However, they were never spoken of as watchmen or shepherds.

The evidence in Isaiah is far stronger for the view that Isaiah has turned from prophesying of the captivity, the return under Cyrus, and the coming of the Messiah, to speak to the people of his own day, summarizing the causes that will lead to the captivity. The portrayal of watchmen and shepherds who fail in their responsibility, giving themselves to drink (56:9-12), fits the period before the captivity, as does the charge that the people are children of sorcery, adultery, and harlotry. Finally, there is no record of a general idolatry (57:3-8) or the sending of ambassadors (57:9) after the return.

The people and land are ripe for invasion. The wild beasts of field and forest are invited to come and devour. Jeremiah adds information of that which is to be devoured. He declares that God has given his dearly beloved into the hand of the enemies because they had become a lion against him, a condition for which their

shepherds were responsible (Jer. 12:7-10; Ezek. 34:5). Thus it is God's people who are to be devoured, *i.e.*, taken captive.

Isaiah, as God's spokesman, also places responsibility on the watchmen or shepherds. How dire is the situation when those whose responsibility it is to watch are blind! They cannot see the dangers; they are without knowledge of Jehovah and their responsibilities to him. They are all dumb⁴ dogs. They cannot "speak" – cannot bark to warn of danger even if they recognized it. One reason for their silence is that they are given to dreaming, lying down, and sleeping. Even when they are awake they are too busy being greedy, attending to and concerned only with their own gain. They are at ease in Zion, putting the evil day far away and living in a fool's paradise of revelry (Amos 6:1-7). Sadly, these are the shepherds (9-11).

Isaiah has already pronounced a woe upon those who give themselves to drink (5:11), to the men in high places (5:22-23), to the rulers, prophets, and priests who, staggering under its influence, err in judgment (28:7-8; cf. Mic. 2:11). He now points at those who cover their woes and stimulate false hopes through drink, living only from day to day, with no concern for the future.

4. "Dumb" is not used in the sense of intelligence, but of the inability to speak. The ESV translates "silent dogs."