

Lesson 35 Isaiah 54:1-55:13 Respond to the Servant's Triumph

Introduction

The fourth Servant Song of Isaiah 53 is an incredible prophetic vision of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The two chapters that come after Isaiah 53 – Isaiah 54 and Isaiah 55 – feel just as at home in the New Covenant as Isaiah 53 does. The fourth Servant Song is our climax of the entire Book of the Servant. Even from the beginning of Isaiah we have been asking, “How will God make things right with His sinful people? How does He fulfill the offer in chapter 1 to wash away Judah’s blood stained hands? How does the burning coal of chapter 6 actually cleanse Isaiah’s unclean lips?”

Chapter 40, the beginning of the Book of the Servant, began with God’s heart to comfort His people. We came to understand their need for comfort, which followed the national tragedy of utter defeat and exile to Babylon. God sends messengers to comfort the people with a promise of physical redemption from Babylon back to restoration in Israel. God promises to raise up a servant named Cyrus to set Israel free. That’s the message of comfort. But with that message, Isaiah reveals a dark thread that runs through the whole story. Israel has been sent into exile by God Himself as a response to perpetual, persuasive, unrepentant sin. The darkened heart and rebellious mind of man infects all of God’s people. The critical enemy is not the outer oppressor of Babylon, but the inner oppressor of fallen human nature. That was the tragic message at the end of chapter 48. “If only you had paid attention to my commandments your well-being, [your shalom, your peace], would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea.” But they could not remain true to God’s commands. And so the chapter ended, “There is no peace, [no shalom], for the wicked.” Who are the wicked? Not just Babylon. Look inward, oh people of God! It is you. God sent you into exile out of His just wrath. National redemption has not changed your human nature. You will bring back to Jerusalem the enemy within.

The comfort of physical deliverance is fleeting. Is there any chance for lasting comfort? Any freedom from sin, any hope for peace with our God? Yes! And we were building to that hope through each of the servant songs. In chapter 53 we’ve arrived at the answer. The Suffering Servant takes our place. That’s the “how” of spiritual redemption. We esteemed Him not. But in God’s eyes He is high and lifted up, and greatly exalted. He is pierced for our transgression and crushed for our iniquities. He renders Himself a guilt offering in our place. He justifies the many, bearing the sin of transgressors.

Now, how ought we respond to the sacrifice of the Servant? “Shout for joy O barren one!” “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters... Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.”

That’s the first line of chapter 54 and the first line of chapter 55. These two chapters are God’s comment on the fourth Song. Each Servant Song has been coupled with a comment section that comes after, a comment from God. The comment section of the first two songs confirmed the work of the Servant. The comment section of the last two songs invites a response to the work of the Servant. This climatic fourth Song took up all of chapter 53 with the prophetic promise of New Covenant redemption fulfilled by Jesus Christ, who sacrificed Himself on the cross as a substitute of atonement. The comment that follows is the longest one yet, appropriately extended to two chapters, Isaiah 54 and 55. In this comment section we encounter a two part exhortation to respond to the grace God has provided through the Servant.

As I said in the introduction, this universal invitation for a spiritual response is very much at home in the New Covenant. It will resonate in the heart of every New Covenant believer. In these chapters we are still going to encounter some of the archaic language of poetry, like the image of “enlarging your tent.” No one in Isaiah’s day was enlarging his tent. That language takes us back to the time of Exodus. We will see more language that points back to the Exodus as a symbol of future redemption. We are also going to hear language that sounds like it’s looking forward to the national restoration after the exile in Babylon. It may sound like we are talking about the national physical redemption. But as we have seen previously, we have to take great care in our interpretation of redemption language. As New Covenant believers, we are tempted to interpret the idea of redemption as

spiritual every time we see it, though sometimes it really is referring to the physical rescue of the Jewish people from Babylon. At other times, Isaiah is using very physical language of rescue and return metaphorically to describe spiritual redemption and restoration. And that's these two chapters. Here, the language of national redemption is used in an exhortation for everyone to enter into the blessing of spiritual redemption that has been paid for by the Servant.

The assurance of secure relationship with God that we are going to hear in chapters 54 and 55 follows from the spiritual work accomplished in chapter 53. The covenant of peace is accomplished by the line of David. The love of God results in everlasting joy. We are being invited to a new kind of kingdom made possible by the substitutionary atonement of the Suffering Servant. These two chapters apply as a message of comfort to Isaiah's contemporaries, who must look ahead to the promised victory of the Servant. At the same time, these two chapters apply even more concretely to those of us who now live after the triumph of the Servant. This exhortation is for all of us who are looking back to the amazing love of Jesus Christ as He is lifted high on a cross. How ought we respond to what He has done for us? Shout! Sing! Come! Seek!

Isaiah exhorts us to sing in chapter 54, and to come in chapter 55. Our first chapter is divided into two parts by two controlling metaphors; the barren wife, and the unassailable city. We begin as the barren wife, who the prophet exhorts to "shout for joy" and to "cry aloud" like a woman who has just given birth. This is Isaiah 54:1-10.

Exhortation to sing: The everlasting love of God offers security, peace and righteousness (Isaiah 54)

The Barren Wife Restored and Made Fruitful (54:1-10)

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| <p>¹ "Shout for joy, O barren one,
you who have borne no child;
For the sons of the desolate one will be more
numerous</p> | <p>Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud,
you who have not travailed;
Than the sons of the married woman,"
says the LORD.</p> |
| <p>² "Enlarge the place of your tent;

Lengthen your cords</p> | <p>Stretch out the curtains of your dwellings,
spare not;
And strengthen your pegs.</p> |
| <p>³ "For you will spread abroad to the right and to
the left,</p> | <p>And your descendants will possess nations</p> |
| <p>And will resettle the desolate cities.</p> | |
| <p>⁴ "Fear not, for you will not be put to shame;

But you will forget the shame of your youth,</p> | <p>And do not feel humiliated, for you will not be
disgraced;
And the reproach of your widowhood you will
remember no more.</p> |
| <p>⁵ "For your husband is your Maker,
And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel,</p> | <p>Whose name is the LORD of hosts;
Who is called the God of all the earth.</p> |
| <p>⁶ "For like a wife forsaken
Even like a wife of one's youth when she is rejected,</p> | <p>And grieved in spirit, the LORD has called you.
Says your God.</p> |
| <p>⁷ "For a brief moment I forsook you,</p> | <p>But with great compassion I will gather you.</p> |
| <p>⁸ "In an outburst of anger
But with everlasting lovingkindness I will have
compassion on you,"</p> | <p>I hid My face from you for a moment,
Says the LORD your Redeemer.</p> |
| <p>⁹ "For this is like the days of Noah to Me,

So I have sworn that I will not be angry with you</p> | <p>When I swore that the waters of Noah
Would not flood the earth again;
Nor will I rebuke you.</p> |
| <p>¹⁰ "For the mountains may be removed
But My lovingkindness will not be removed from you,</p> | <p>And the hills may shake,
And My covenant of peace will not be shaken,"</p> |
| <p>Says the LORD who has compassion on you.</p> | |

I initially followed Motyer in titling this chapter, “An Invitation To Sing.” But “invitation” is not a strong enough word. We are not merely invited. We are exhorted. Isaiah communicates with imperative after imperative and reason after reason, exerting urgency and positive pressure on us to respond to the great love and compassion of God. He exhorts us to sing because the everlasting love of God offers security, peace, and righteousness.

This metaphor of the barren wife who is restored divides into three parts, each beginning with an imperative followed by supporting claims. The logic of each part is “do... for.” Do this... for this is true. Each part covers a little more text. Part 1 is verse 1, part 2 is verses 2-3, part 3 is verses 4-10. The first part exhorts us to joy over a supernaturally gathered community.

Joy over a supernaturally gathered community. (1)

¹ “Shout for joy, O barren one, you who have borne no child; For the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous	Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have not travailed; Than the sons of the married woman,” says the LORD.
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The woman is barren. She can have no children. The phrase, “you have not travailed,” does not mean she has not suffered in life. It means she has never experienced the pain – or the joy - of giving birth.

The story of God giving a barren woman a child occurs several times in the Bible, and beginning with Abraham and Sarah, who could have no children. And yet, God promised them a multitude of descendants. The promise here is to barren Israel, who cannot produce spiritual children. The promise here doesn’t seem to be limited just to Israel as the conception of God’s people. Zion has been mentioned after each of the first three Servant Songs. Significantly, Zion is not mentioned in chapters 54 and 55. The barren woman is not only Israel. The lack of the term, “Zion,” frees us to think of a multinational community; really, of the Church. No human community, no instance of people of God can produce children for God. We are all spiritually barren and impotent. And yet, we are to sing for joy because God will give His people spiritual children. We can’t do it. God can do it.

And that promise is made possible by the work of the Servant. The idea of the many descendants, more numerous than the desolate woman, connects us back to the repetition of the words, “many,” and, “descendants,” in chapter 53. “He will see his offspring (His descendants)... he will justify the many.” Because of the Servant’s work, the barren woman will produce numerous descendants. This is the logic of the verse. “Shout for joy!” That’s the imperative. “Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud!” Why? “For the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous than the sons of the married woman.” This is joy over a supernaturally gathered community. The next imperative exhorts us to act in faith on that promise.

Expansion in expectation of growth. (2-3)

² “Enlarge the place of your tent; Lengthen your cords	Stretch out the curtains of your dwellings, spare not; And strengthen your pegs.
³ “For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left,	And your descendants will possess nations

And will resettle the desolate cities.

Imagining the nomadic journeys of Abraham or of the Israelites in the wilderness, the wife has the responsibility here to enlarge her tent to an extravagant size, “stretch out the curtains of your dwellings, spare not.” Why is she exhorted to lengthen her cords and strengthen the pegs to bear greater tension? What is the “for” that goes with the imperative to enlarge the tents?

“For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left. Your descendants will possess nations and will resettle the desolate cities” The language of national restoration is pointing us to a spiritual reality. God’s people will increase. In New Testament terms, this is a promise that God will build His

Church. Act in faith with an expectation of growth. You might be barren but spiritual children are still coming!

So we have been exhorted to joy in our hope of what's going to happen. We have been exhorted to expansion to prepare for this growth. Next we are exhorted to personal confidence. The imperative in this third part is followed by several reasons. The initial pattern is in verses 4 and 5.

Confidence in the future. (4-10)

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| <p>⁴ "Fear not, for you will not be put to shame;
But you will forget the shame of your youth,</p> | <p>And do not feel humiliated, for you will not be disgraced;
And the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.</p> |
| <p>⁵ "For your husband is your Maker,
And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel,</p> | <p>Whose name is the LORD of hosts;
Who is called the God of all the earth.</p> |

The woman has reason for fear and humiliation. The shame of her youth and reproach of her widowhood is felt in the lack of children and the lack of a husband. A barren woman feels not only loss in the ancient Near East. She feels shame. Isaiah does not bring attention to any responsibility the woman has for her shame. A woman can be barren and without husband through no fault of her own; she is still going to feel the shame. We do know from the context that this woman bears responsibility. The Suffering Servant had to die for her sin. That will be made explicit soon. But it is not the initial emphasis.

The emphasis here is not on what the woman did to contribute to her state. The emphasis is on the new status God provides. No more fear. No more humiliation. No more shame. No more reproach. Why? "For your husband is your maker, whose name is the Lord of Hosts. Your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel who is God of all the earth."

By making redeemer parallel to husband in verse 5, Isaiah invites us to think of redeemer as the kinsman-redeemer in Jewish law. That parallel is strengthened by making the woman out to be a widow. She is like Ruth, widowed and without child and as a widow, without hope of a child. Ruth can give Naomi no descendants. You know, there is no hope. And who would even want to marry a poor, widowed foreigner like Ruth? Well, the good and wealthy landowner Boaz, that's who. He accepts his responsibility as kinsman-redeemer to Naomi, and so he marries Ruth and, through Ruth, provides a child; provides descendants to Naomi. That child turned out to be the grandfather of King David, the ancestor of Jesus Christ.

God is kinsman-redeemer like Boaz. He takes the woman, His people, in. He gives her a new status as wife. He gives her security in relationship with Him. He gives her inheritance. He provides children to fill her with joy. Isaiah makes sure we know who does this. Who is this kinsman-redeemer? Your husband is your Maker, Yahweh of hosts, the Holy One of Israel, God of all the Earth. That's who you're depending on for your current status. Be confident, not ashamed! Really, fear and shame have been removed. Isaiah expands on his reasoning, "You have no fear of humiliation for this reason." Verses 6-8.

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| <p>⁶ "For like a wife forsaken
Even like a wife of one's youth when she is rejected,</p> | <p>And grieved in spirit, the LORD has called you.
Says your God.</p> |
| <p>⁷ "For a brief moment I forsook you,</p> | <p>But with great compassion I will gather you.</p> |
| <p>⁸ "In an outburst of anger
But with everlasting lovingkindness I will have
compassion on you,"</p> | <p>I hid My face from you for a moment,
Says the LORD your Redeemer.</p> |

Now we address that responsibility that the woman, that all of us bear for our own forsaken state. This is true of Israel. It's true of all of humanity. Everyone who would call themselves, "the people of God." We are first forsaken. We have incurred the anger of God. The language reminds me of what Jesus endured. Isaiah says we are like a wife forsaken. We deserve to be forsaken for our many

adulteries. Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He did not deserve to be forsaken, but He took our place. Isaiah says, “In an outburst of anger I hid my face from you for a moment.” Jesus experienced that on the cross. He took that outburst of anger on Himself during the moment of the cross.

Of course, it seems like much more than a moment however long we are separated in life from God because of His just wrath against our sin. But it will be just a moment compared to our restored relationship that is going to last forever. Why are we to put away fear and shame? We might fear as a wife who hides the wickedness of her past from a good, new husband. He must never know what we did or He might reject us. So we bear the secret shame of our adulteries.

That is not this relationship. Isaiah assures us God is fully aware of our sin. He knows about our wandering hearts. He knows it so much more deeply than you even get it! And in that awareness He has gathered us with great compassion. He chose to die for us and He invites us in with full knowledge of our past and full comprehension of the continuing difficulty we face in our struggle with the flesh. God the Husband is fully aware.

Isaiah connects God’s compassion to His everlasting love, or “loving-kindness” as my Bible translates the Hebrew word, “hesed.” In doing that, Isaiah is referring to the name God revealed to Moses in Exodus 34:6. When faced with the question, “How is it that holy God can live among sinful people? How does the fire remain on the bush without destroying it?”, God declares His name. This is how it will be. He will not ignore sin. His grace will overcome sin. He reveals Himself as “Yahweh, Yahweh Elohim, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and truth.” We have been restored to relationship not in disregard to our sin; we are not in ignorance of our sin, but in spite of our sin. He has made a way because He loves us. He wants us. Isaiah highlights our security by pointing out that God’s loving-kindness is everlasting.

Put aside fear and shame because your kinsman-redeemer is your Maker, the Holy One of Israel. He redeemed you with full knowledge of your sin with a love that is everlasting. And, this is next, He declares an oath to you as a husband declaring the covenantal vow of marriage. That oath is in verses 9-10.

⁹ “For this is like the days of Noah to Me,	When I swore that the waters of Noah
	Would not flood the earth again;
So I have sworn that I will not be angry with you	Nor will I rebuke you.
¹⁰ “For the mountains may be removed	And the hills may shake,
But My lovingkindness will not be removed from you,	And My covenant of peace will not be shaken,”
Says the LORD who has compassion on you.	

How can we be sure that our new relationship with God will never fail? How can we be sure we will not be removed from this New Covenant? God’s word is good enough. We should not need more. But so that we can be sure how serious He is, God makes an oath. He swears that He will not be angry or rebuke His people. And He swears in terms that could hardly be more momentous. Remember the flooding of the entire world? Remember that judgement? And remember that God promised to Noah that He would not repeat that kind of judgement? So now, He swears with the same everlasting seriousness not to be angry with the newly re-constituted people of God.

How can God not be angry with His people? He can only do so, if He has completely satisfied justice and removed the possibility of punishment for sin. I think we should imagine here an active anger. Can God still be disappointed or grieved by His people? Sure! God is promising that He will not act in wrath against those who have entered into a covenant of peace. And this covenant of peace is the New Covenant. We earlier noted the reference to peace at the end of chapter 48. That’s where it became quite clear that national redemption would not be enough. Israel would return, but they would be unable to stay true to the commands of God. So the chapter ended, “There is no peace for the wicked.” But here, God declares peace with the language of eternal security. “My lovingkindness will not be removed from you, and my covenant of peace will not be shaken.”

God is so confident because the security of this covenant of peace doesn't depend on us. It depends on the work of Jesus Christ. The people of God must have been removed from the place of judgment for this to work. And the only way to step out of the judgement seat is to have someone else step into the judgement seat as a righteous substitute. That's Isaiah 53. Wrath is removed as a possibility for us because we stand to the side in grace, while Jesus takes our place judgement. The covenant of peace is guaranteed by the work of Jesus. That's what Paul says in Romans 5:1-2,

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.

Let's sum up this first metaphor of the barren woman. Why are we exhorted to shout for joy? Oswalt puts it this way,

Because the childless, rejected wife is going to be restored to the arms of her loving husband, who promises that nothing can prevent him from loving her, and she will have enough children to fill the earth. Here indeed is cause for praise: abundance for emptiness, honor for shame, and eternal love for lonely despair. This is our God.¹

Isaiah follows the metaphor of the restored wife with the metaphor of an unassailable city. The barren woman emphasized the personal aspect of secure restoration. Though we know the woman represents the whole people of God, we can each one of us imagine ourselves as the woman, restored from shame to loving relationship. The metaphor of the city maintains an emphasis on our corporal security; our security as people. This is 54:11-17.

The City of God Restored and Made Unassailable (54:11-17)

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| <p>¹¹ "O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted, Behold, I will set your stones in antimony,
And your foundations I will lay in sapphires.

And your gates of crystal,</p> <p>¹³ "All your sons will be taught of the LORD;</p> <p>¹⁴ "In righteousness you will be established;</p>
<p>¹⁵ "If anyone fiercely assails you it will not be from Me.</p> <p>¹⁶ "Behold, I Myself have created the smith
And brings out a weapon for its work;</p> <p>¹⁷ "No weapon that is formed against you will prosper;</p>
<p>This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD,</p> | <p>¹² "Moreover, I will make your battlements of rubies,
And your entire wall of precious stones.
And the well-being of your sons will be great.
You will be far from oppression, for you will not fear;
And from terror, for it will not come near you.
Whoever assails you will fall because of you.
who blows the fire of coals
And I have created the destroyer to ruin.
And every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn.
And their vindication is from Me," declares the LORD.</p> |
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The image of the barren wife restored emphasizes the loving-kindness of God and a new relationship of peace and security. The image of the city builds on the idea of peace and security and connects us in with the vision of a righteous community.

The first phrase of this section creates an overlapping connection with the previous reference to Noah. The people of God are "afflicted, storm-tossed, not comforted." They are a "ship buffeted by the sea." That insecure, tenuous ship-tossed existence is immediately transformed into the stability of the strong, beautiful, walled, abundant city firmly established on the ground. The city of God is a recurrent theme begun by the description of Zion in chapter 2. Again, we notice the significant lack of reference to Zion here; this city is for everybody.

¹ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 415.

The description of the city reminds us of the much later vision of John recorded in the book of Revelation: battlements of rubies, gates of crystal, entire wall of precious stones. We get this is more than a city. Just as the numerous descendants of the barren woman must have a spiritual source, so too, the amazing wealth of this city points to something much more than a physical city of man.

Yahweh is present in the city. He will teach the sons of the people Himself. In 13b, the Hebrew word, “shalom,” is repeated, translated in my Bible as, “well-being.” “The well-being of your sons will be great.” At the end of the previous section, God affirmed a covenant of peace with an oath. The covenant of peace promises restoration of relationship in the sense of a removal of hostility. We are no longer enemies. We now have peace with God. Here in 13b, we see the broader meaning of the word, “peace,” that emphasizes the blessing that flows from this secure relationship. Peace is both cessation of hostility, and also wholeness or well-being.

In the metaphor of the barren wife, security in relationship with God is promised. He will never put her away again. Justice has been fully and eternally satisfied. In this metaphor of the city, security from outward enemies is promised. No human foe can breach her walls. Neither can any spiritual enemy. “No weapon formed against you will prosper.” That’s a spiritual promise. “Every tongue that accuses you in judgement you will condemn.” That’s a spiritual reality.

I hear that phrase, “No weapon formed against you will prosper,” and I think of God’s New Covenant promises to protect His people against the forces of evil. Jesus declared in Matthew 16:18,

I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

When we take the whole verse together, I think of the end of Romans 8. Notice the reference to weapon, and condemnation, and vindication in 54,17. “No weapon that is formed against you will prosper.” And, “Every tongue that accuses you in judgement you will condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their vindication is from Me,” declares the LORD.”

Now listen to Romans 8:34-37.

³⁴ Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ Just as it is written, “FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED.” ³⁷ But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.

Who condemns us if our vindication is from God? What weapon can harm us if we cannot be separated from His lovingkindness? We are the bride of Christ. We are the city of God. We sing because the everlasting love of God has provided for us eternal security, peace, and righteousness.

One exhortation, however great it is, is not enough to follow Isaiah 53. Isaiah makes it a double. We are being invited to sing. We are also invited to accept for ourselves the abundance and security made possible by the work of the Servant. Come to God! Seek Him! Depend on His Word! It never fails. That’s Isaiah 55. It also has two divisions in 1-5 and 6-13. We start with Isaiah 55:1-5, an exhortation to come to the Lord’s table.

Exhortation to come: The everlasting word of God provides full, covenanted pardon and complete restoration (Isaiah 55).

Exhortation to Come to the Lord’s Table (55:1-5)

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| ¹ “Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
Come, buy wine and milk | And you who have no money come, buy and eat.
Without money and without cost. |
| ² “Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, | And your wages for what does not satisfy?
And delight yourself in abundance. |
| ³ “Incline your ear and come to Me.
And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, | Listen, that you may live;
According to the faithful mercies shown to David. |

- ⁴ “Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples, A leader and commander for the peoples.
⁵ “Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, And a nation which knows you not will run to you,
Because of the LORD your God, even the Holy One of Israel; for He has glorified you.”

The invitation to the barren wife highlighted our inability to produce spiritual children. The invitation to the Lord’s table highlights our inability to satisfy our needs. We spend whatever resources we have to fill ourselves and nourish ourselves. But nothing we buy is bread. None of it satisfies. Ironically, what we actually need is free and abundant. “Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost... And delight yourself in abundance.” God has set the table. He has sent the invitation. Will we respond?

Motyer lays out the internal logic of verses 1-5 as four ideas. These same four ideas will be repeated in the same order in verses 6-13. The content of the two divisions is parallel.²

(1) The first idea is the invitation to come in verse 1. “Come to the waters.” “Come, buy wine and milk.” The invitation is stated in terms of grace. You cannot buy for yourself what you need. You can only receive it as a free gift, without cost. Remembering back to 53, we recognize that “free” does not mean “cheap.” The lavish spiritual abundance provided at the table of God came at a great cost. The Servant paid the price of humiliation, rejection, painful death, and most significantly He took on Himself the wrath and anger of God against the sin of the entire human race. That’s how much this “free gift” cost! It just cost God, not us. He invites us to participate in the abundance of that for which He has already paid.

(2) The second idea is the centrality of the Word of God. This is in verse 2 and the first line of 3. We are exhorted to listen to what God communicates.

- ² “Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And delight yourself in abundance.
³ “Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live;

To respond to the offer, we need to hear the offer. Faith needs the Word. The language here is reminiscent of the third Servant Song, “He awakens my ear to listen as a disciple.” To truly listen implies not only hearing, but also responding in humble obedience to what we hear.

(3) The third idea is the promise of a New Kingdom for those who respond to the word of God. This promise is in the second line of verse 3 through the first line of verse 5.

- And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, According to the faithful mercies shown to David.
⁴ “Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples, A leader and commander for the peoples.
⁵ “Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, And a nation which knows you not will run to you,

The first line speaks to all who hear. The “you” is plural. These are the people of God with whom God makes an everlasting covenant, the covenant of peace promised in 54:10. The invitation to come is an invitation to New Covenant in line with God’s faithfulness shown to David. In this context, faithful mercies shown to David are faithful mercies revealed through the chosen son of David, the Messiah.

In verse 4, the Lord changes who He is speaking about; He is speaking about the Messiah in third person. “Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.” The reference to covenant and the reference to David imply kingdom. A covenant is a statement of relationship between King and people. David is the king and His Son will establish an eternal kingdom. God calls Him, that Son of David, a witness to the peoples. He is the witness who makes God known. He is also a leader and commander of peoples. He is not a witness to a people, or a leader of a people. He is a witness to peoples and a leader of peoples. He is a King of kings. A King not over one nation; a King over many nations. This Kingdom is not for Israel alone. So, what has been implied so far by the absence of a specific reference to Zion is now stated clearly. This is not just

² J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 452.

for Israel. The invitation includes all peoples. God makes this promise directly to the Messiah, switching to second person singular in verse 5, “You will call a nation you do not know, and a nation which knows you not will run to you.”

(4) The final idea grounds the New Kingdom reality in God. This is the second line of verse 5.

Because of the LORD your God, even the Holy One of Israel; for He has glorified you.”

Motyer sums up this first half of chapter 55 by noting the threefold invitation in verse 1 [Come... Come... Come] was followed by a threefold exhortation in 2-3 [to Listen... Incline your ear... Listen] and then concluded in 3-5 with the threefold guarantee of Covenant, King, and Lord.³

Moving to our final passage, we are going to see in the second half of chapter 55 a restatement of these four key ideas that we have just gone over in the first half of chapter 55. This is Isaiah 55:6-13.

Exhortation to seek the Lord (55:6-13)

- | | | |
|----|---|--|
| 6 | Seek the LORD while He may be found; | Call upon Him while He is near. |
| 7 | Let the wicked forsake his way
And let him return to the LORD, and He will have
compassion on him, | And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. |
| 8 | “For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
declares the LORD. | Nor are your ways My ways,” |
| 9 | “For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
And My thoughts than your thoughts. | So are My ways higher than your ways |
| 10 | “For as the rain comes [down upon the earth]
And do not return there
And making it bear and sprout, | and the snow from heaven,
without watering the earth
And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to
the eater; |
| 11 | So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
Without accomplishing what I desire, | It will not return to Me empty,
And without succeeding in the matter
for which I sent it. |
| 12 | “For you will go out with joy
The mountains and the hills will break forth
into shouts of joy before you, | And be led forth with peace;
And all the trees of the field will clap their hands. |
| 13 | “Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up,
And it will be a memorial to the LORD, | And instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up,
For an everlasting sign which will not be cut off.” |

That’s good stuff! Let’s go back to it and look at the four ideas that parallel the ideas we already saw in verses 1-5.

(1) The idea of an invitation is restated in verses 6-7.

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 6 | Seek the LORD while He may be found; | Call upon Him while He is near. |
| 7 | Let the wicked forsake his way
And let him return to the LORD, and He will have
compassion on him, | And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. |

Our problem is not merely spiritual impotence; that we have no resources in ourselves to meet our spiritual needs. Just as with the barren wife, our problem is now shown to arise from our own sin nature. The invitation is not to the spiritually rich but to the spiritual poor, not to the healthy but to the sick. The invitation is for the wicked. There is a sense of urgency, though. “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.” There will come a time when He cannot be found and will not be near. The invitation goes out with the promise that He will have compassion and He will abundantly pardon.

³ Motyer, 452.

(2) The centrality of the Word of God is restated next in verses 8-11.

- ⁸ “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor 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 comes [down upon the earth] and the snow from heaven,
And do not return there without watering the earth
And making it bear and sprout, And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to
the eater;
- ¹¹ So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty,
Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter
for which I sent it.

This is a basic premise for the disciple. Listen! Turn your ear to the word of God! Why? Not only can you not provide for your own needs, you cannot even understand your own needs. Like our ancient forerunners at the Tower of Babel, we try to define relationship with God on our own terms and we try to control our own self-definition, to make a name for ourselves.

But if we are fallen, wicked, dependent creatures, how are we supposed to wrap our minds around the nature of infinite God? How are we to understand the depths of our own soul or the height of what we, created in His image, can be? If we are futile in our speculations and foolish in our darkened hearts, how can we understand the depth of our own sin, much less the height of His justice, love, and beauty? We cannot define our own needs; we don't even understand them, much less produce a cure for what we need.

We incline our ear to God and listen, because His thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways. Even if we were purely logical in our thinking, which we are not, and pure in our hearts, which we are not, we are still limited as created beings in a created world. We are part of the experiment. We cannot be objective. We cannot get above and outside of physical reality to peer back down and see and understand how everything works.

God has none of these limitations. There is no comparison at all between our understanding of goodness, truth, beauty, justice, and God's understanding.

- ⁹ “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts.

How much higher are the heavens than the Earth? What's the comparison? Our Sun, the nearest star in the heavens, is 93 million miles, or 150 million kilometers, away. That's how much higher the heavens are above the Earth. So, that's the scale of difference between your thoughts and God's thoughts. God's word is truly transcendent. It is also truly efficacious. It does exactly what God intends it to do.

- ¹⁰ “For as the rain comes [down upon the earth] and the snow from heaven,
And do not return there without watering the earth
And making it bear and sprout, And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to
the eater;

Robert Alter describes how this metaphor artistically communicates both the idea that God's word cannot be retracted, and God's word creates its intended effect.

Just as the rain and snow cannot be turned back to the sky from which they come, God's pronouncements, once issued, cannot be reversed; but the rain and the snow fructify the earth, irrigating it so that it can yield life-sustaining produce, and in this prophecy of restoration, the

word God issues is a word of bountifulness, with an effect like the rains of blessing, making things “prosper.”⁴

- ¹¹ So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty,
Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter
for which I sent it.

(3) We also see restated here the idea of a New Kingdom for those who respond to God’s Word. The New Kingdom is described in terms of a New Earth. This third idea is in verse 12 and the first line of verse 13.

- ¹² “For you will go out with joy And be led forth with peace;
The mountains and the hills will break forth And all the trees of the field will clap their hands.
into shouts of joy before you,

- ¹³ “Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up, And instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up,

Paul will follow Isaiah in personifying the creation, writing, “the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God (Romans 8:19).” Paul’s personification comes in the period of waiting, a longing. Isaiah’s personification comes when that anxious longing is over. The children of God go out with joy and are led forward with peace. There is that “shalom” word again. The creation responds with its own excitement.

The mountains and the hills will break forth And all the trees of the field will clap their hands.
into shouts of joy before you,

As humankind is restored, so also are his surroundings. The curse is reversed.

Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up, And instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up,

No wonder the mountains and hills break forth into shouts of joy and the trees of the field clap their hands! The curse is gone!

(4) And finally, just as in verse 5, this new reality is grounded in God. That’s our fourth idea, stated in our concluding line, 13b.

And it will be a memorial to the LORD, For an everlasting sign which will not be cut off.

That word, “sign,” is important. Isaiah uses it as a literary link tying together the three main divisions of his prophecy. The Book of the King is bracketed by two signs. After the introduction of the first 6 chapters, Ahaz, the bad king, is given a sign in chapter 7, “The virgin shall bear a son.” Hezekiah, the good king, is then given a sign in chapter 37, “The shadow will move backwards on the stairs.” Now, here in chapter 55 at the end of the Book of the Servant, Isaiah promises the everlasting sign of a New Earth. And finally, in chapter 66, at the end of the Book of the Conqueror, God will promise to set a sign among the nations.

So that word, “sign,” is important in chapter 7, and at the end of the Book of the King, the end of the Book of the Servant, and the end of the Book of the Anointed Conqueror. And it’s yet another example that shows the connectedness between the whole of Isaiah. This was not written by three people. This was written by one great poet. Isaiah announces this sign at the end of the Book of the Servant using language from Exodus. The announcement of God’s name in Exodus 34 as compassionate and full of loving-kindness, which was a reference to chapter 54, was the second time God announced His name to Moses in Exodus. The first time was in Exodus 3. God appeared to Moses as fire on a bush, declaring, “the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” We can easily imagine Isaiah feeling some connection with Moses since his own vision and call involved the Holy One of Israel and burning coals.

In Moses’ meeting with God, God tells Moses that he is being sent to bring God’s people out of Egypt (Exodus 3:10). Then God speaks His name to Moses, telling him it is a memorial-name (3:15). And

⁴ Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019) 1971.

then God proclaims this sign to Moses that he will stand on this very spot with the rescued people of Israel (3:12). That's all in Exodus 3. All three of those terms also occur here in the last two verses of chapter 55. "You will go out and be led forth." That's the "going out" phrase. "It will be a memorial to the Lord," and it will be "an everlasting sign."

This is a second Exodus, the spiritual redemption of all people. Sometimes a sign points ahead to something that will be. At other times, a sign reminds us of what has been accomplished. Moses standing with the people of God on Mount Sinai was a sign that all God told Moses when He first called him had, indeed, did come true. Just like a memorial. Likewise, when God finishes the whole story, when He overcomes the curse and forms a New Heaven and a New Earth for His redeemed people, the absence of sin and the beauty of the new creation will stand as an everlasting sign to the glorious grace of God. That's the sign here.

Isaiah wants us to know that what God has accomplished through the Suffering Servant is truly everlasting. He has used that word three times. What the Servant accomplished enables us to enter into the everlasting loving-kindness of God. Our union with Him is based on an everlasting Covenant that will be marked by an everlasting sign. Everlasting loving-kindness, everlasting Covenant, everlasting sign. We are secure in the work of the Servant. And we are secure because He has done the work. We cannot produce spiritual fruit. We cannot meet our needs. But He has. And He has set the table and He invites us to come. Let's end with that invitation.

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| ¹ "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
Come, buy wine and milk | And you who have no money come, buy and eat.
Without money and without cost. |
| ² "Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, | And your wages for what does not satisfy?
And delight yourself in abundance. |
| ³ "Incline your ear and come to Me.
And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, | Listen, that you may live;
According to the faithful mercies shown to David. |

The Chiastic Structure of Isaiah 55

The structure of Isaiah's poetry often has multiple layers. To experience the effect of this chiastic structure read each parallel section together. Read A¹ in verse 1, then skip to A² in 12-13. Then do the same with B¹ and B². And the same with C¹ and C². Finish with D.

- A¹ The first picture: individual renewal, needs met (1)
- B¹ Hearing the word of the Lord (2–3b)
- C¹ The certainty of the promises (3c–5)
- D The content of the word: a call to repent (6–7)
- C² The seriousness of the call (8–9)
- B² The efficaciousness of the word of the Lord (10–11)
- A² The second picture: world renewal, the curse lifted (12–13)⁵

- | | | |
|----------------------|---|---|
| A¹ | 1 “Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
Come, buy wine and milk | And you who have no money come, buy and eat.
Without money and without cost. |
| B¹ | 2 “Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good,
3 “Incline your ear and come to Me. | And your wages for what does not satisfy?
And delight yourself in abundance.
Listen, that you may live; |
| C¹ | And I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
4 “Behold, I have made him a <u>witness</u> to the peoples,
5 “Behold, you will <u>call a nation</u> you do not know,
Because of the LORD your God, | According to the faithful mercies shown to David.
A leader and commander for the peoples.
And a nation which knows you not will run to you,
even the Holy One of Israel; for He has
glorified you.” |
| D | 6 Seek the LORD while He may be found;
7 Let the wicked forsake his way
And let him return to the LORD, and He will have
compassion on him, | Call upon Him while He is near.
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. |
| A² | 8 “For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
declares the LORD.
9 “For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
And My thoughts than your thoughts. | Nor are your ways My ways,”
So are My ways higher than your ways |
| B² | 10 “For as the rain comes [down upon the earth]
And do not return there
And making it bear and sprout,
11 So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
Without accomplishing what I desire, | and the snow from heaven,
without watering the earth
And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to
the eater;
It will not return to Me empty,
And without succeeding in the matter
for which I sent it. |
| C² | 12 “For you will go out with joy
The mountains and the hills will break forth
into shouts of joy before you,
13 “Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up,
And it will be a memorial to the LORD, | And be led forth with peace;
And all the trees of the field will clap their hands.
And instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up,
For an everlasting sign which will not be cut off.” |

⁵ Motyer, 452.