

Isaiah 55:6-11

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[0:00] I wonder if you've ever read a novel, maybe a mystery or crime novel, where you reach a certain part of the novel and you feel the need to backtrack and reread a previous chapter in the light of what followed. I hope that even makes sense as a question. Sort of a few nods just to encourage me so one or two people know where I'm coming from on this. Well, I had a kind of like that experience as I was wrestling or grappling with Isaiah 55 just in these past days. I like chapters in the Bible, probably anywhere else for that matter, but especially in the Bible. I like chapters to be neat and tidy. So I can do a sermon in verses 1 to 3 and then 4 to 6, 7 to 9. Well, you get the idea.

That's the way chapters should be. I don't mean that, of course. They are what they are. But that would be my preference. Neat little packages that I can have a nice, neat little sermon series on. But of course, it doesn't always work that way. That's not the way the Bible was written. Certainly, large parts of it follow a different pattern to that neat little pattern that I would appreciate.

Certainly, that scheme was somewhat blown out of the water as I was preparing the sermon for this morning, and my intention being to look at the next little section, verses 8 through to 11 of Isaiah 55. Now, I won't tell you just yet how that scheme was somewhat disturbed, as that would kill the suspense. But I will take you back to the beginning of the chapter, and from there set out where we're heading this morning. So a kind of roadmap, I suppose, of where we're heading and the direction that we're going to be going in as we consider part of this chapter this morning.

So chapter 55 of Isaiah begins with this exciting invitation to live to life. Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters. The very language kind of draws you in. Very attractive language.

[2:37] You know, we're drawn in by this fulsome and generous invitation. This invitation to come to God and live. At the heart of it, we have it there in verse 3. Come to me. Come to me that your soul may live. And last Sunday morning, we were looking at verses 6 and 7, where it seems to me we're given the answer of how we are to respond to that invitation. What is the way that we are to go in order to come to God and live? And what we discovered last Sunday morning, that the way that God has provided is the way of repentance, with the word or the verb turn there in verse 7.

So, very much capturing this sense of the need for us to repent. And as we repent, so we are responding to the invitation to come to God and to live. There then follows in the chapter two sections, let's call them two sections, with truths about God and about God's Word. So, specifically, I'm talking about verses 8 and 9, with a very big truth about God. And then verses 10 and 11, which has, presents to us an important truth about God's Word. And the language of these sections is familiar language, I think, for many of us. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and neither are your ways my ways, and then also the language of God's Word going forth and not returning to Him empty. It's familiar language, I think, for many of us.

And that's not a bad thing, but sometimes when the language is familiar, we imagine that we know what is being said. And maybe we do, or maybe we know in part, but maybe there's truths that we haven't actually grasped within the passage. And this very familiarity makes us maybe complacent and thinking, well, I know what that's about.

So, for example, let me just develop that. Verses 8 and 9. There in verses 8 and 9, we read, for my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways. And we hear those words. And for those of us for whom they're familiar, we probably nod our assent to that truth. And maybe there are circumstances in life, and we'll trot out this verse, maybe in the face of a mysterious providence, and we'll remind ourselves, ah, yes, but then God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts. And so, how should I possibly understand this? Because God's thoughts are so higher than mine. Then we have verses 10 and 11, where God's Word is presented as life-giving and effective. And again, we nod our mental assent. We may even draw some encouragement from the assurance that our preaching or sharing of the gospel will somehow produce fruit. It has to. The Bible says that it does,

so it must.

Even if we don't see it, or even if it doesn't appear to, it must somehow, because that's what the Bible says. And it's, I think, right to draw encouragement from verses 10 and 11 in that way.

[6 : 08] However, the difficulty with such a treatment of these two sections, verses 8 and 9 and verses 10 and 11, is that I don't think it does sufficient justice to what God is saying through Isaiah in this chapter.

You see, verses 8 to 11, so these two little sections included in verses 8 to 11, are intimately connected to verses 6 and 7. And that could be demonstrated in a number of ways, an obvious way that they're in the same chapter, but in more specific ways that could be demonstrated. And suffice it for now to note one way in which that connection is explicit. Verse 8 begins with the word, for my thoughts are not your thoughts. So, there's a clear intention to make us see that what is now being said is connected to what has gone before, what has immediately gone before. Interestingly, in verse 10, though the version of the Bible that we have, or the translation of the Bible we have, doesn't pick up on that, verse 10 also begins with the word, for. So, it's as if Isaiah is developing what he said in a number of ways, or certainly a couple of ways, and he's connecting what is said in verses 6 and 7 to then what follows in verses 8 through to 11. So, what is going on? What are the connections? What is the logic, even if it's not linear? What I'm going to do is, and I suppose this is the roadmap, what I'm going to do is we're going to start by thinking about verses 8 and 9 that speaks about God's thoughts being higher than our thoughts. We're then going to backtrack to verses 6 and 7, which also speak about thoughts and ways. And then we're going to jump forward to verses 10 and 11 that speaks about God's Word. And I suppose if I needed to kind of give a title to each of these little sections, we could provide the following. In verses 8 and 9, we're going to identify a big but dispiriting truth. Then in verses 6 and 7, we're going to be confronted with a hopeful but tantalizing call. And then in verses 10 and 11, we're going to be confronted with some seriously good news that kind of solves the puzzle that we will have identified in what we've seen before.

Okay, I hope you're following so far. Right, let's start with verses 8 and 9. Verses 8 and 9, I'm describing these two verses as a big but dispiriting truth. In these verses, we are presented in vivid language with the big truth that there exists a vast chasm between God and us. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. Now, the clear connection with the previous two verses, 6 and 7, is to be found in the language and subject of thoughts and ways. In verses 6 and 7, or in verse 7 specifically, there is this call on the wicked to forsake his way and the evil man to forsake his thoughts. So, ways and thoughts are talked about, and then immediately Isaiah goes on and says, or God through Isaiah, for my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways. So, there's the connection even in terms of vocabulary.

What do we draw out from this in terms of this big truth? Well, we acknowledge that our thoughts are flawed, and God's thoughts are perfect. Our thoughts are foolish. His thoughts are wise. Our thoughts are fleeting. His thoughts are firm. Our thoughts are changing. His thoughts are eternal. [10 : 17] Our thoughts are superficial. His thoughts are deep, but no doubt we could go on. And maybe with the apostle Paul, we can know what it is to exclaim, oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out his thoughts higher than our thoughts. His ways higher than our ways. But of course, there's another contrast, and I think it's the crucial one in the context of this chapter. Our thoughts are evil, and God's thoughts are righteous. See, that's the specific truth that we have about our thoughts in the previous verse. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the evil man his thoughts. So, our thoughts are evil thoughts, but God's thoughts, who are much higher than ours, they're altogether righteous thoughts.

And as I say, there's many contrasts that we could make, but maybe this is the one we need to focus in on, given what has gone before. What about God's ways versus our ways? Well, a similar picture emerges. The reality is that in terms of our ways, we're not just a little off track. We're heading in the opposite direction, to the direction that God would have us going. Sometimes in life, we speak of getting back on track. You might hear a football manager after a few bad results saying, oh, we need to get back on track. Or maybe in the context of work, you know, a boss or a manager will say, well, we really need to get back on track. But that's not where we are in relation to

God as men and women. We don't need to tweak our direction of travel or reset the sat-nav. Rather, we need to forsake our ways. We're going in completely the wrong direction. We need to abandon our ways, and we need to adopt and walk in God's ways. And that the distance that separates us from God is visually illustrated in verse 9. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. Now, for Isaiah's original audience, there could be no greater distance conceived than that between heaven and earth.

We could update or paraphrase the language used and say, as the furthest galaxy, as yet undiscovered and possibly undiscoverable, is distant from the earth, so are God's ways and thoughts higher than or distant from ours. Now, this is all true. It's a big truth about God. It's a big truth about us. But though it's true, at one level, it can be quite dispiriting. You see, all that we're being told here is that there's this big chasm that separates us. And so the question is, how can we even begin to approach a God who is so far removed from us, whose thoughts are so much higher than our thoughts? How could we ever be on His wavelength?

[13:23] The distance is so great. The chasm is so enormous. Well, we'll just hold that thought or that difficulty. And let's backtrack to verses 6 and 7, where we have what I'm describing as a hopeful but tantalizing call. Now, we need first to again highlight the connections and the vocabulary that we've already noted when we were talking about verses 8 and 9, particularly the language of ways and thoughts.

So our thoughts are down here, and God's thoughts are way up there, and the call in verses 6 and 7, the call, the invitation is to bridge that chasm. God is saying to us, We noted last week that verses 6 to 7 constitute a call to repentance, though the actual word repentance or the verb repent isn't explicitly found, but this language of let him turn to the Lord is the language of repentance. And this call to repentance is a call to think like God, to replace our thoughts with His thoughts. This aspect, this central aspect of repentance is echoed or picked up on in the New Testament in the Greek word that is translated repentance in our English Bibles.

And the Greek word translated repentance is a word *metanoia*. It's a composite word constructed with the words change and mind. Repentance is a change of mind. We forsake or abandon our thoughts about ourselves and replace them with God's thoughts. You know, we think we're okay, we're good, basically, and that thought needs to be abandoned and needs to be replaced with what God says about us.

That's what happens in repentance. We forsake or abandon our thoughts about God and replace them with God's thoughts about Himself, as we're told what He says concerning Himself in His Word.

We forsake or abandon our thoughts about how to get right with God, and we replace them with God's thoughts and ways about how we are to get right with God. That's what repentance is.

[16:02] The call to repentance, then, is a call to bridge the chasm. But I describe that call, or I use two adjectives to describe that call. I use the word tantalizing and hopeful. You know, why tantalizing?

Well, again, it's the problem of the chasm being so great that we're left perplexed and bemused as how we can ever move from here to there. So we know the chasm's there. We hear the invitation. We say, yeah, okay, I'd love to be there, but how do I get there? The distance is just so great. So it's tantalizing. You might even say, in the absence of what we're going to move on to discover, you might even say it's somewhat cruel. You know, come to me, but you're actually never going to be able to. You know, come and be like me, but you know, it's impossible, actually, because my thoughts are so much higher than yours. So there's a tantalizing aspect to it, but there's also a hopeful aspect, because Isaiah tells us, rather perplexingly, in verse 6, that this God, whose thoughts are so much higher than ours, is near. Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call on him while he is near.

So his thoughts are higher, way higher. His ways are higher, way higher, but he's near. So there's an element of hope. There's a shaft of light that gives us hope that maybe there is a way.

So where are we in our journey? Well, we've identified this huge chasm between God and us.

There are verses 8 and 9. We've also heard God's call to bridge the chasm, the invitation to come to him, to turn to him in verses 6 and 7. But how can the chasm be bridged? Well, now we turn to verses 10 and 11, and this is where we find some seriously good news. Embrace yourself, because this is dynamite.

[18 : 04] This is mind-blowing. Perhaps not so much mind-blowing as mind-enlightening and transforming. But first we need to establish the connections, or note the connections in the vocabulary between verses 8 and 9 and 10 and 11. What are the key words that are repeated in these two sections? Well, they're the words heaven and earth. So in verse 9, as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. So in verse 9, the words heaven and earth are presented to emphasize the great distance that there is between God and us.

But then these same words are found in verses 10 and 11, and something is going on. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth. So heaven and earth again. But what's happening? Do you see what's happening? See, in verse 9, they're presented as this way of describing how distant God is from us. But in verse 10, what happens? The two are brought together. The two are brought together.

You see, from heaven, so much higher and distant from us, comes down to earth the rain. And so heaven and earth, seemingly unbridgeable, given the chasm, are brought together. Heaven comes down to us. The picture used to illustrate this is of rain and snow and the effect of this rain from heaven. Rain is given unconditionally by God. Rain produces life, and rain is effective in securing God's purpose. All of that, as we're told in verse 10, it waters the earth. It makes it bud and flourish. It yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater.

[20 : 01] All of these things are secured by physical rain coming from heaven to earth. But what does this picture represent? What do the rain or the snow represent? Well, they represent God's Word. That's clearly stated in what follows in verse 11.

So is my Word that goes out from my mouth. A Word that is given by God, that produces life, and that is always effective. And what is this life-giving Word that bridges the chasm between heaven and earth, that draws us near, that joins that which seemingly was so distant that could never be joined? What is this life-giving Word? Well, it's God's spoken Word. Let's focus on that first.

And indeed, what is said here in verse 11 of God's spoken Word is true of every word breathed out by God and spoken to us. And of course, for us, we have that Word, those words gathered together in the Bible. The Word of God, the Scriptures, breathed out by God, inspired by God. These are God's words that God sends from heaven to us that we might know His thoughts, that we might know His way.

words that bridge that gap, that chasm. Every word out of God's mouth enjoys this characteristic. But I think in the context of Isaiah 55, I think the word in particular that is being focused on or that we are to focus on is the word of invitation that constitutes the whole chapter.

[22 : 07] This word to come to God and to live. This call to repentance, to turn to Him. This word from God is life-giving. This word from God is effective in drawing those called that they might respond to the invitation. This word is given and pronounced with the intention of blessing those to whom it is delivered. God speaks out. God speaks out this word, this invitation, this call. Come, all you are thirsty.

Come to the waters. Come to me that your soul may live. This is the word that goes out from His mouth, that comes down from heaven, and is directed to us that it might draw us to God. This is the word that bridges the chasm. And the amazing thing is that this word is not only delivered, but is delivered in such a way as to secure God's intended response. God speaks, His word enlivens, and His word draws irresistibly. The word that God speaks is not only true. We might be of a mind to concede that, and we say, well, yes, if God says something, then it's true. It must be true, given that it is God who has said it.

But it's not only true, it's powerful. It's effective. It draws. So, God doesn't just say, well, here's the information you need. Do with it as you please and see what conclusions you've come to.

But there are the truths that you need to know about yourself and about me and about salvation. Right, you sort yourself out what you do with that. No, that very word draws us to Himself. The word is true, but it's also powerful in its effect. Now, this reality about God's word is both challenging and encouraging. You see, God calls us, He calls you and me as His people, to proclaim His word, to share His word, to speak His word, and to do so with the assurance and the confidence that it will refresh, that it will enliven, that it will draw. I wonder, have you been following the news about the crisis with water in Cape Town? I was speaking about it with the children. I think it was just a couple of days ago that it was being predicted that Cape Town would be the first major city in the world to run out of water sometime in April. And then on Friday, it rained. And you can just imagine the

excitement, the delight. There was one tweet, there were several tweets in the report, the BBC report, they picked up on some of the tweets that folks in Cape Town had been tweeting. And one of them was as follows, the sound of rain in Cape Town is absolutely magnificent. You know, we think, well, we look out at the wind and it's raining and we grumble.

[25 : 23] You can just, you can place yourself where they are and it's magnificent, the sound of rain. It's exciting. It's magnificent. And many of the residents, you know, they were in restaurants, it was in the evening apparently, and the people were just walking out of the restaurants and just standing in the street, just enjoying the rain. You can imagine why people would do that.

And what God is saying to us is that that's what His Word is like when it is spoken and shared by you and me. Perhaps the passage in the Bible that most powerfully and visually describes the life-giving power of the Word of God is found in Ezekiel in chapter 37 at the valley of the dry bones. Let me just read a few of the verses without passing comment. Just the reading of the verses is sufficient. The hand of the Lord was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley. It was full of bones. He led me to and through among them. And I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, Son of man, can these bones live?

I said, O Sovereign Lord, you alone know. Then He said to me, prophesy to these bones and say to them, dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones. I will make breath enter you and you will come to life. And the passage goes on. And that's what God's Word is like as it refreshes parched souls and enlivens the spiritually dead, resurrects the spiritually dead. And I think we need to discover or perhaps recapture a sense of the power of God's Word. And we'll do that by speaking God's Word. So, go into our dry and parched city, thirsty for love and hope and life, and speak. Who could you speak to this week, bringing God's Word that is refreshing and life-giving and enlivening? Can you imagine just picking up on Cape Den again, something of the excitement in that city on Friday night? It would have been amazing to have been there and to experience firsthand that excitement. But we can experience excitement of that kind here in Aberdeen, and in greater measure, as we speak God's refreshing and life-giving Word. Now, is the impact of that spoken Word, is it immediate? Well, not always. Just like the rain watering the earth, the time passes, and it takes time for that rain to have its effect and the harvest to come.

[28 : 20] But we are told that it will produce a harvest. But let me just say one further thing about God's Word. As well as what we might call God's spoken Word, these verses, verses 10 and 11, it seems to me, it seems to me also point forward to God's living Word. Indeed, the words are in the future tense. God, through the prophet, seems to be looking forward to a particular time when His Word would come down from heaven and bridge the chasm. Isaiah was looking forward to the day when God would bridge that chasm between heaven and earth as never before, looking forward to the sending of God's own Son. God sent Jesus to bridge the chasm. God sent Jesus to refresh and enliven. God sent Jesus with a purpose to save that is being and will be fulfilled. You know, we began just a few moments ago by standing in perplexed awe at the chasm that separates us from God. His thoughts are so far above our thoughts and His ways so far above our ways. But what happened when Jesus came into the world?

When the Word became flesh? Well, God's thoughts and God's ways were brought near in the person of Jesus, in the person of His Son. But God's purpose is not exhausted in us admiring His thoughts and ways, but in us thinking His thoughts and walking in His ways. What does Jesus say to all who would be His disciples? Follow Me? Follow Me? Abandon Your way and walk in My way? What does the Apostle Paul say to the believers in Philippi and to us? In chapter 2 and verse 5 of that letter, let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.

Think like Jesus. Think God's thoughts. Think like God. Have the attitudes that God has. And so that which seems so distant, so beyond our grasp by the coming of Jesus is brought near to us. God's thoughts, God's ways to live in Christ. God's lives. God's lives. God's lives. And so that which is a great way to do with Him.

God's lives. And so, God's lives in Christ. And He's done a great way to do with Him. There is a huge chasm that separates men and women from God. The passage makes that very clear. God invites us. He invites you to cross that chasm and come to Him. But He doesn't just invite you. He extends a bridge over that chasm. He comes to you and He takes you by the hand and He draws you to Himself. And praise be to His name for such grace. Let's pray.

[31 : 39] Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You that it is the Word that comes from Your mouth. We thank You that it is powerful and effective. We thank You that it is refreshing and life-giving. We thank You for its power to draw us to Yourself.

We pray that that power would be manifest and evident, even as we're gathered here this morning, listening to Your Word and receiving Your Word, that it would be a Word that would draw us nearer to Yourself. Help us to abandon our ways and to walk in Your ways. Help us to think Your thoughts, to have that mind that was in Christ Jesus. And we pray these things in His name. Amen.