

Isaiah 55

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[0 : 00] Please turn back with me to the passage which I read a moment ago, Isaiah chapter 55. This will be the text from which our message comes this morning.

But before we begin this sermon, why don't you join with me in prayer one more time. Father, feed us by your word today.

By your Holy Spirit, we pray that you would open our ears to hear. That you would open our eyes to see. You would open our hearts to believe the great message that you have prepared for us. Father, glorify your Son Jesus in our eyes today. Holy Spirit, direct our gaze to the Son, in whom all of your promises are yes and amen.

We pray this in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. It was in a pub some time ago that someone asked me a thought-provoking question.

[1 : 31] He had asked me what I was doing in Aberdeen, and I explained that I was here to work toward a Ph.D. degree in theology or divinity.

Now, he was somewhat interested in what that entails, and so I explained that theology is the study of God.

And that a theologian dedicates himself to understanding the ways and the works of God. He grew a bit agitated, and then he asked me this question.

He said, How is being a theologian any different from being a food critic? How is being a theologian any different from being a food critic?

Hmm. Well, I understood what he meant. He was an engineer, and like all scientists, engineers understand the need for experiment and verifiable facts.

[2 : 36] And, of course, he was assuming that theology has no such verifiable facts. Now, doesn't that make religion something of a subjective choice? Sort of, I like vanilla, you like chocolate.

You know, theologians are just food critics. One happens to think one thing about God, and another thinks another thing. But nobody can really know, can they?

Well, the occasion did not result in a full discussion of these matters. And I think that's probably a good thing, as God's providence would have it. You see, the question has occupied me for some time now.

And I think I have a different and somewhat better answer to that question than the one I would have no doubt given that night. You see, there was a time in my life when I would have answered something like this.

Let's see. Is religion and theology a matter of subjective taste like being a food critic? Of course not! Christianity is absolute truth.

[3 : 44] And it is true whether you or me or anyone else actually believes it. In other words, I would have zealously guarded the honor of God as the source and the standard of truth.

He's not something doubtful. He's not something unknowable. Now, with some qualifications, as a matter of fact, a lot of qualifications, that's a fine answer.

It's all good and true. God is the source and standard of truth. He is who He is, regardless of whether anybody believes Him or not. That's all good and true.

But I've come to notice something lately. That is a very defensive answer. Is God really as threatened or intimidated by that question as I appear to be?

Alas, the Scriptures indicate that God is not nearly as insecure as I am. In fact, I want to suggest today, there is a very real sense in which being a theologian, that is, being a student of God, which is what all professing Christians are to be, students of God, there is a sense in which to be a student of God is very much like being a food critic.

[5 : 05] God Himself invites people to do just that. We sang this morning, Taste and see that the Lord is good, the psalmist says.

God is so confident that if any genuine food critic tastes of His goodness, he or she will not be disappointed. And so it is in our text this morning, where God issues a universal invitation to all who are hungry, to all who are thirsty, to eat the food He provides.

And He promises, Your soul will delight in the richest of fare. I would like to provide a two-fold answer to my friend.

And this morning, I will argue the first half of that answer. I will argue this morning that yes, Christianity is for food critics. If you come back this evening for the evening sermon, I'm going to give another equally important answer that goes something like this.

No, Christianity is not for food critics. If you want to find out how that's not a contradiction, you'll have to come tonight. The Bible has a lot to say about food and drink.

[6 : 27] Jesus turns water into wine. And we should note that on that occasion, a critic declared that He had saved the very best for last. He multiplies loaves of bread. He declares that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled.

He tells stories of royal banquets. To the Samaritan woman, He offers living water so that those who drink will never die.

He promises to pour new wine into old wineskins. He gave to His church the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, a meal to be enjoyed with one another. He himself loved wine, food, and fellowship. So much so that His enemies falsely called Him a drunkard. But there's more. From another perspective, we can see that the entire Bible is about food.

Have you ever thought about this? We find it on the very first pages of our Bible, don't we? We open it up, and there it begins in a garden, Eden. Out of which flows four rivers.

[7 : 37] And this garden is supplied with all the food and sustenance that the man and woman, Adam and Eve, would need to rule over creation. Including the tree of life.

This is a kingdom where God and humanity live together. They ruling the world in subjection to His purposes. But now, if we turn over to the very last pages of the Bible, as a matter of fact, turn over to the final page in Revelation 22, the story ends there in a city.

It's the New Jerusalem. It says that in this New Jerusalem, there's a river. The river of the water of life. Clear as crystal. Flowing down the middle of Main Street.

And it's lined on both sides with the tree of life. This, too, is a kingdom where God dwells with humanity. And it says in Revelation 22, 5, they will reign forever and ever.

The whole Bible is about how we get from a garden to a city. From a garden to a city. Now, Adam and Eve, as we know, forfeited the right to dwell with God and eat from the tree of life.

[8 : 55] They did this by eating food that God had not provided for them. The Bible is a story of how we, in spite of this, nevertheless enter a kingdom and city where God lives and we partake of eternal life.

We do this by eating the food God has provided for us and of which He invites us to eat in Isaiah 55. For us to know what this food is and how we can obtain it, we need to understand something about Isaiah's place in this overall story.

From the garden to the city. Pardon me. This text is an extraordinary invitation to attend to the promises of God.

Come, he says. Listen. Listen to me. Give ear to me. Come to me. Hear me.

Seek the Lord. Call on Him. Turn to the Lord. These are the repeated refrains. Well, why? What are the benefits of coming, listening, seeking, and turning to God?

[10 : 11] This portion of Isaiah's prophecy highlights four things that God will do for those who come to Him. Four things. First, He promises food that will satisfy.

Second, He promises a new king or ruler. A new David who will rule the world with splendor. Second, a new king.

Third, He promises forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness of sins. And fourth, He promises a new land for God's people.

A new land for God's people. And finally, all this is given a divine guarantee. He says, just as the rain and the snow do not evaporate without first watering the ground, so God's word of promise will not return to Him without accomplishing these purposes.

It's important for us now to actually walk through the text and look at each of these four promises in turn. First, the promise of food and drink that satisfies is obvious from the very first words, isn't it? [11:18] which urges all those who are thirsty and poor to come to the waters and to buy and eat. But this is not ordinary food.

Buying these provisions means, verse 2 tells us, that your soul will delight in the richest of their. And in verse 3, it means that your soul may live.

This food is, metaphorically speaking, in other words, eternal life. That's what this food is. It's eternal life. Now, compared to this food, God can rightly ask, why spend money on what is not bread?

Compared to the banquet that God provides, everything else that would compete for our attention is not real food. It does not and it cannot satisfy.

Second, God promises a new king. This is seen, look with me, at verses 3-5, where God intends to remember His faithful love promised to David.

[12:26] That promise, now what is that promise? That faithful love promised to David. That's a promise that you'll find in 1 Samuel 7, where God promises David to raise up from His descendants a king from His line and establish His throne forever.

An eternal kingdom of peace and righteousness. And immediately, the text points us to this new king. It says, See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and a commander to the peoples.

That's verse 4. Verse 5 now indicates that the kingdom of this righteous ruler is a universal kingdom encompassing not only Jew, but Gentile.

The splendor with which this king is endowed will draw all the nations to God. So first, food that satisfies. Second, a new king.

And third, God promises us the forgiveness of sins. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord and he will have mercy on him.

[13:35] And to our God, for he will freely pardon. It's verse 7. Now, immediately following this is the somewhat strange and cryptic comment.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways. My ways, declares the Lord. You know, this is a statement that is sometimes taken and turned into a general principle.

Okay? That God's knowledge of himself and creatures is of a different kind or character than human knowledge, generally speaking.

Now, while not wanting to deny that in the least, I believe that's an absolutely true statement, surely the primary meaning of this statement is different here in Isaiah 55.

And it is this. True, genuine forgiveness of sins is inconceivable to us.

[14:35] True, genuine forgiveness of sins is inconceivable to us. How can God forgive, as he says, the wicked?

How can he forgive the evil man, it says? Speaking for myself, I find forgiveness very difficult. You see, I generally want evildoers, especially the ones who do evil to me, to pay.

They've got to pay. But God is not like us. His thoughts are not ours and his ways are not ours and what a blessed truth that is.

We pay others what they deserve. God treats the repentant as they manifestly do not deserve.

Grace is not a concept natural to us.

We tend to think, and the world tends to think generally, in the strictest terms of cause and effect.

What goes around comes around, but grace travels outside the limited confines that we imagine.

[15:49] grace is something foreign to us, but with God, it reveals his native disposition. His native disposition.

Grace, the forgiveness of sins. Fourth, God promises a new land. This is a little less straightforward in the text, but if you look closely with me at verses 12 and 13, I think we'll see this.

the creation itself, the mountains, the hills, and the trees will rejoice, we are told. They will burst into song. The trees will clap their hands, applauding for God's people.

What is going on here? What is this all about? Verse 13 provides us an important clue. It says, instead of the thorn bush, we'll grow the pine tree, and instead of briars, the myrtle will grow.

Do you remember when Adam and Eve were being cursed by God and driven out of the garden, God tells Adam that the ground is now cursed because of him.

[17:04] He says, cursed is the ground, and the ground will now produce thorns and thistles, he says, in Genesis 3.18. What we have here in Isaiah is a promise that creation will be restored.

The curse God has laid on it will be lifted, and creation itself will rejoice over the children of God. Listen to how the Apostle Paul puts it elsewhere.

In Romans 8.19-21, Paul says this, for the creation was subjected to frustration in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

This is a promise of a new land, a new heavens, and a new earth, as Isaiah himself will go on to describe it in Isaiah chapter 65.

A new heavens and a new earth. Four promises. Food that satisfies a new king, forgiveness of sins, and a new land. But now a question arises.

[18:17] These words were addressed to the people of Israel, were they not? Had not God already made extravagant promises just like this to the people of Israel?

Were they not already supposed to be dwelling in a land flowing with milk and honey, with plenty of food to satisfy? Were they not already to have a king sitting on David's throne, ruling in righteousness?

Did they not already have forgiveness of sins, mediated on a day by day and yearly basis by the priests and sacrifices in the glorious temple built by Solomon?

This is all true. This is all true. But Israel has just been told by God through Isaiah that on account of their wickedness and their unfaithfulness, righteousness, they are about to be exiled from their fruitful land.

Their temple and its sacrifices is about to be destroyed. And their king, far from enjoying a universal and eternal reign, is going to be taken captive and made to serve the king of Babylon, the enemy of God.

[19:35] It is to these people that God now makes these promises of grace in spite of their ruin and exile, the loss of king, land and temple, in spite of their unfaithfulness to him, he will remain faithful.

Here God lifts their eyes above the present dark circumstances and shows them a glimpse of what he will yet accomplish for them. A new land with food and drink that satisfies and gives eternal life and a new king, David's descendant.

Well, you might be tempted to wonder, well, if these promises are given to a specific people, Israel, in particular circumstances, their exile, well, what could they possibly mean for us today?

Well, here's where we need to keep in mind the bigger story I was talking about earlier. The story from the garden to the city. We need to hear the echoes here.

God's people living in a fruitful land in fellowship with God Himself. An exalted ruler exercising his office in righteousness under God's command.

[20:52] God dwelling directly in the midst of the people in the temple. All this is soon to be forfeit. They will be driven out of the land to which they are entitled because of their unfaithfulness and their wickedness.

Does any of this sound familiar? Adam and Eve were also living in a fruitful land. They were to rule over creation, we are told, in subjection to God's will.

God Himself lived among them in direct fellowship. But because of their unfaithfulness and their wickedness, they too were driven out of the land to which they had been entitled.

Seeing these connections helps us to see that Israel's story is a repeat of Adam and Eve's story. And Adam and Eve's story is ultimately our story.

God's promises to Abraham that He would provide him a people and a land. His promise to David that there would once again be a man who rules the world as God intended.

[22:01] His promise to forgive Israel's sins by the blood of temple sacrifices. This is all intended to point forward to the day when God would accomplish the great and final reversal.

Humanity, instead of being like Adam and Eve, evicted from a garden, would be invited to a city. Invited to a city.

Now, Abraham himself understood this. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Abraham looked forward not to the real estate of Palestine, but for a city with foundations whose builder and architect is God. Hebrews 11. And he looked forward to a better country, a heavenly one. God is promising His people in Isaiah 55 that He has not forgotten His promises.

Food that satisfies, a new land, a new king, the forgiveness of sins. God has sent Adam and Eve into exile, you may remember, He left them with a word of great hope.

[23 : 13] He told of a seed of the woman, one day a descendant of the woman, would arise to conquer and destroy the serpent who had tempted Eve, that great enemy of God, Satan himself.

love. Well, so also, as Israel goes into exile in Babylon, with the words of Isaiah 55, God sends them a word of thrilling hope.

His promises are not in vain. He will remember His promises. promises. We children of the 21st century, A.D., are not like Israel.

We are not in exile. We are not looking forward to the fulfillment of all of these great promises. We first look backward to the fulfillment of all these great promises.

You see, the Scriptures go on to tell us in Galatians chapter 4 that when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under law.

[24 : 33] Born of a woman, born under law. Born of a woman refers to God's promise. I just mentioned that one day a seed of the woman would destroy the serpent.

Born under law means that He would fulfill all of God's purposes for Israel, the people of the law. The message of the gospel, the message of Christianity, the message our world needs to hear is this, the great reversal has come.

We need not be exiles any longer. We can be sons and daughters of God. Jesus Himself proclaimed it in the very first words of His public ministry.

Mark 1.15 The time has come, He said. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.

The good news. If this is true, if the kingdom has come, if there's now good news, then where is this food that satisfies?

[25 : 41] Where is this new king ruling the world? Where is this new forgiveness found? Where is this new land? How has God kept His promises given to Israel and given to us in Isaiah 55?

Well, we need not look far for an answer. The Apostle Paul tells us the very clue we need to unlock these mysteries. For no matter how many promises God has made, Paul says, they are yes in Christ and amen through Him.

2 Corinthians 1.20 All of the promises of God find their fulfillment in Jesus. And since those promises are yes, let us now listen to Jesus Himself.

Turn with me if you would. turn with me to John chapter 6. Instead of just hearing it, why don't you turn with me and let's listen to the words of Jesus.

I'm going to start in verse 34. And read through verse 51. Listen to Jesus. Sir, they, the Pharisees, said, from now on give us bread.

[27 : 00] Then Jesus declared, I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry. And he who believes in me will never be thirsty.

But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me, I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will, but to do the will of him who sent me.

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but will raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

At this the Jews began to grumble about him because he said, I am the bread that came down from heaven. They said, is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, I came down from heaven?

Stop grumbling among yourselves, Jesus answered. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, Isaiah 54, by the way, they will all be taught by God.

[28 : 18] Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. No one has seen the Father except from God. Only he has seen the Father.

I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh which I give for the life of the world.

Jesus himself is the food. He is the provision given by God for hungry and thirsty sinners. It is his flesh broken and bruised in his crucifixion that is the forgiveness of our sins and our eternal life. He truly is, as John the Baptist put it, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. [29 : 30] Upon his resurrection from the dead and his exaltation, Jesus proclaims himself the universal ruler in fulfillment of God's promise through Isaiah.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, he says. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, Jew and Gentile, of all nations. In triumph, this Jesus will return to raise up his people at the last day. The great reversal from sin and death to eternal life is found nowhere else than the resurrected Jesus who is the new creation. And Paul declares this, if anyone is in Jesus, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. In Christ, in other words, we participate in the new heavens and the new earth. In Christ, God dwells with us. It is Jesus Christ who takes us, we children of Adam, living east of Eden in the wasteland in the wilderness of our own sin, and brings us to the holy city, the new Jerusalem, where he says, Revelation 21 says, these are the words of Jesus, it is done, I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. [30 : 55] To him who is thirsty, I will give to drink without cost. You who have no money, I will give to drink without cost.

From the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God, and he will be my son.

What promises God makes to us? In Jesus, he has made good on those promises. Who does not want this? Who is there who is not hungry and thirsty? Who does not want eternal life? Who does not want forgiveness of their sins? Who does not want a righteous and glorious leader? Who does not want a new heavens and a new earth? Who will reject such an invitation? Who will not come? Will you? Oh, but there is so much to distract us, isn't there?

[32 : 04] There is so much to entice us. There is so much to make us think that there really are better things. The problem is not that we are food critics, you see.

The problem is that we are food critics with very weak taste buds. C.S. Lewis put it this way. Our desires are not too strong, but too weak.

We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.

We are far too easily pleased. We are far too easily pleased. The world offers us ambition, sex, power, money, control.

It offers everything. It makes such extravagant promises to us. But God isn't intimidated by competition. I want you to notice something very important about Isaiah 55 this morning that I have not touched on yet.

[33 : 21] God gives reasons why we should come to Him. To not partake of the food He offers is pure foolishness. Why spend money on what is not bread?

Or labor on what does not satisfy? Does it strike you as strange that God would offer an argument like this? Is there really any need for God to reason with His listeners?

I mean, He's God. Does not His command alone obligate us? Can't He just say it and we need to do it? Listen, God in His condescending goodness stoops to our weaknesses.

He takes on the role of a merchant in a crowded marketplace trying to shout over the den, come! Why buy anything else? My food satisfies. The competitors don't satisfy. I satisfy. He's a merchant in a market.

[34 : 29] We live in a crowded, crowded marketplace these days. Our world is a giant marketplace. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Kabbalah, Scientology, Mormonism, Neo-Paganism, you name it.

They're all on offer and they all offer promises to satisfy. Our own hearts are marketplaces with competing desires constantly warring for control of our minds, affections, and our actions.

Today, God enters into the marketplace. Listen, even now, He enters into the marketplace and He argues with you.

He pleads with you. Why go anywhere else? Only He provides the real food. Jesus Himself.

The alternatives pale in comparison. No one else can provide forgiveness of sin. They're too busy denying that there even is such a thing.

