

2. God is calling us: An unbreakable promise

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] So in our Bibles, if we'd look at page 615 please, and coming again to Isaiah 55, and today we are going to read the first five verses of that chapter. The verses we'll look at today are verses 3 to 5, but we'll read the first two verses as well. Where Isaiah the prophet speaks of how the word of God, the invitation of God, the promise of God comes to each one of us. Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk, without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me. Hear that your soul may live, and I will make with you a never-lasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that you did not know shall run to you, because of the

Lord your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. Amen. May God bless that reading to our hearts and to our minds. God is calling us. That's the subject of this series in the month of October. Last week we looked at the generous invitation, and that generous invitation comes attached with an unbreakable promise in verses 3 to 5. How many promises have you broken? How many promises have other people made to you that have been broken? We're all very familiar with that. I'm not just talking about promises that we didn't intend to keep.

I'm talking about promises that we did intend to keep, and found ourselves unable to do. Some years ago, when we were in Edinburgh, we had a problem with plumbing about 10 o'clock on a Saturday night. So we thought, aha, 24-hour plumbers, and we looked up yellow pages. Half an hour later, after discovering we only got answering machines, eventually we got one 24-hour plumber who actually replied. And I said, great, you're a 24-hour plumber. Will you come and help us? Oh, not at this time of night. But I said, you're a 24-hour plumber. Well, not at this time of night. Then I realized I was getting nowhere, and I thought, there's no point in arguing with this man. We as well argue with him. Maybe he was a recording machine. Maybe he wasn't really a human. But you see, our world is full of promises that are made, but promises that are not always kept. But God's promises are unbreakable. And here we have this great word in verse 3, an everlasting covenant. When God makes a covenant, he commits himself to us with promises that he will not, that he cannot break. And so, to the generous invitation, we saw last week, the extravagant generosity of God's invitation, showering on us everything we don't deserve, and extending to the whole world. And now we have an unbreakable promise. And the content of that invitation begins to be developed. I want to look at two particular things, which are already there in that hymn. Trust and obey. We're going to look at it in the reverse order. First of all, we're going to look at obeying the commands, and secondly, trusting the promises. Because that's very much the heart of the, that's very much the heart of the faith, obeying God's commands, and trusting his promises. So first of all, in the first part of verse 3, incline your ear, and come to me here, that your soul may live. That's about obeying the commands. The gospel has content. It's not just a promise with a blank sheet where we fill in the details ourselves. It's a message which has content. And the first thing, the prophet says to us, is we must listen carefully and persistently. Incline your ear and hear. In other words, not just being present when the words are spoken, but listening carefully, deliberately listening, deliberately deciding we're going to listen to this voice, and we are going to make a choice. Now, the world is full of voices, is it not?

[5 : 06] More so than ever. Opinions on every subject under the sun are beamed into our homes and spread abroad in our streets, through the media, through the internet. How are we going to make sense of all those competing voices? And therefore, we need to listen to a voice which speaks with authority.

We need to read the Bible. We need to read it diligently. We need to read it every day. We need to pray for understanding. We need to listen to teaching about the Bible. And we need to read helpful books, such as those on the bookstall. That's not a commercial. That is really a significant point. Because if we don't do these things, we'll remain confused. We'll remain baffled. We'll remain gullible. And we'll remain subject to every whim of opinion and every conflicting voice that speaks. So the first thing about obeying the commands of God is actually knowing what they are. And if we don't read the Bible, if we don't listen to the Word of God, then we're not going to know what those commands are. And we're going to be listening to all kinds of theories.

But the other thing, though, is notice the incline your ear and come to me. The first verse says, come to the waters, expressing the generosity and life-giving nature of the message.

[6 : 33] But now the message becomes, come to me, says the Lord. It's not just believing a doctrine. It's not just believing certain theories. It is coming to me, coming home.

And the Lord God who speaks through the prophets says, come to me, the creator, the savior, the redeemer, the one who made you. That's the way the New Testament puts it as well.

Peter in his first letter says, come to him. That's what the gospel is about. Not asking you to join a church. Not asking you to sign up to anything. The gospel is ultimately, come to me.

I was reading recently about that remarkable Christian of the mid-20th century, the Tibetan Sadhu Singar Singh, who was converted to the Lord Jesus Christ after his career as a professor of comparative religion.

And someone said to him, what did you find in Christianity that made it different from other religions? What did you hear there that you didn't find and hear from other voices?

[7 : 36] And Singar Singh replied, I found the dear Lord Jesus. And that's what coming to me means. He didn't find new theories, although he did.

He didn't find a new worldview, although he did. But ultimately, that worldview comes through the dear Lord Jesus, comes through Jesus Christ himself. And that's what the prophet is speaking about.

And notice as well, in here that your soul may live. Now the soul is not a disembodied entity inside us. The soul is all of us. Please bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

So what the prophet is saying, if you're going to obey the Lord's commands, you've got to know what they are. You've got to listen persistently and carefully, and with eyes open and with ears open, so that you may know what the message is.

You come to the Lord himself, and not just the theories about him. And you come to the whole Christ, if you like. You bring your whole self to the whole Christ.

[8 : 42] You hear and you live. But to hear that means obeying the command. So that's the first thing. The unbreakable promise can only be enjoyed if we obey the commands.

The second thing is trusting the promises. Trust and obey. There's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey. Trust the promises.

And that, of course, is the great biblical word, covenant. Now the word covenant is one of the themes that bind the whole of Scripture together. When God creates, he commits himself to his creation.

And he commits himself to bringing it to a new creation. He commits himself to completing the work that he's done. When the Lord commits himself to you and to your life, he commits himself to finishing that task.

Paul says, he who begins a good work will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. And Isaiah also uses the word, which always goes with the word covenant, steadfast love.

[9 : 47] The kind of love that belongs to the covenant. God wants to enter a relationship with us. So what does that involve? Excuse me. It involves, first of all, becoming part of his family.

My steadfast, sure love for David. Becoming a part of the family, it goes back to David, indeed beyond David, to Abraham. Becoming one of the people of God.

But how can this be? Isaiah is looking forward and speaking to a people at a time after the exile, after they've returned, when there is no longer a king on the throne.

Indeed, there never again is to be a son of David sitting on the throne in Jerusalem. How is that promise to be fulfilled? And Paul tells us in Romans 15 how that promise is to be fulfilled.

Paul says, as people everywhere listen to the message about the greater son of David and become part of his kingdom, as the king reigns in the hearts and lives of people everywhere, that promise is fulfilled.

[10:56] The son of David is reigning in the hearts and minds and lives of people everywhere. So you see how this is an unbreakable promise. In one sense, you could say, well, what came of the promise?

There's no longer a Davidic king. There's no longer a throne. And yet, as the kingdom of God comes into people's hearts and lives, as the king plants his flag, think when there's a child, there's a flag flying high in the castle of my heart, when the king is in residence there.

Some of you remember that, those actions to it, and I'm not going to do them. And this is the fulfillment of that prophecy. You'll become part of the people of David. You'll become subjects of the Davidic king if we come to him in faith and trust his promises.

See, God's promises are like an hourglass. Everything flows through Christ. Everything before him comes right down until it comes to him and then once again flows out to the whole of the nations. If you read the end of the Bible, you'll find that one of the last things the Lord Jesus Christ says about himself is, I am the root and the offspring of David.

[12:08] This wonderful paradox. David came from me and I came from David. So the whole of the story hangs together. So that as people all over the world become subjects of great David's greater son.

It's an object lesson of God's grace. I will make with you a everlasting covenant. And that's the point of verse 4. Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. In other words, this is good news for the whole world. The whole world is going to receive that news which the early prophets brought. And that really is the other point.

It is good news for the whole world. Notice the words there. Behold, you shall call a nation and a nation you did not know shall run to you. It's active sharing of the gospel.

Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know. And active response to the gospel, a nation that you did not know. shall run to you. This worldwide vision that the prophet shows.

[13:15] 700 years before Christ. 700 years before the incarnation. 700 years before the cross and the resurrection. This prophet's eyes are looking out all over the world.

We need to have a worldwide vision if we're going to trust the promises of God. One of the reasons we find it difficult to trust the promises of God is because we become so parochial in our thinking. We look at our little part of God's kingdom and say, well, there's not all that much happening here. Or else, on the other hand, we look at our little part of the kingdom and say, we're doing very well. Thank you very much. And we lose the worldwide vision. And that's when we have to trust the promises. Because if we lose the worldwide vision, we become depressed.

I read recently about someone who went on one of those trips that go around the eastern Mediterranean and visit the sites of the seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation, the churches to which that book was sent.

[14:22] And this guy, when they stopped at Smyrna or Izmir, said, where was the Christian church, the church at Smyrna to which this letter was sent?

The guy said, we've no idea. It was probably there where the mosque stood. What happened to that church? What happened to the work of God when that church went? It continued, didn't it?

Because one church goes, because one church disappears, the work goes on. The work continues. And then this guy, probably one of those annoying guys that are always hanging around guys and ask them to do things that are not in the itinerary, says, can we go to the island of Patmos?

Which, of course, was where the book of Revelation came from. The guy said, well, no, because it takes a day to get there and a day to get back. And when you get there, there's nothing to see. Nothing to see. Try telling that to the Apostle John. I saw, I saw, I saw. I saw the triumph of the Lamb. So it's so important that when the work of God appears to be going underground, we remember this.

[15:29] A nation you do not know, you shall call. A nation you did not know shall come to you. Who knows how many nations, how many people are still to come to Christ before he returns again.

We have to trust the promises. At the end of the 18th century, there was an absolutely dismal spiritual wasteland in this country.

Hardly anybody was going to church and those who did were pretty apathetic about it. And Bishop Butler wrote in his journal, the church in this country as it now exists, nothing on earth can save. He was a good man, decent man, trying to do his best, utterly depressed that on Easter day only five people turned up at places like St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey.

That was the sick, that was the, how low the flame had burned. Only 18 months later, another man sat in London in Aldersgate listening to an exposition of the letter to the Romans.

[16:35] And John Wesley was later to write, My heart was strangely warmed. And from that grew the great Methodist revival. God laid his hand on the Wesleys, on Whitefield and others.

Within a few short months, revival was sweeping through this country, through parts of Europe and parts of America. And the great missionary movement of the 19th century was launched, which brought the gospel to more people probably than had been brought since the time of the apostles. Hymns such as, hymns with the worldwide vision, the whole wide world for Jesus, this shall our anthem be. See, that's what Isaiah is talking about. Talking about, talking to those people, when they return from exile to the low-key, downbeat situation, they are to see that the whole wide world belongs to the son of David, because God has promised that.

But how do we know it will happen? And Isaiah says, because of the Lord your God and the Holy One of Israel. How did Isaiah know that?

Because sometime before, he had a vision of that Lord where the whole earth, holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is filled with his glory. At that time, it looks as if the whole earth was full of the Assyrian armies and violence and bloodshed and all sorts of things.

[17:57] We look out in a world, in our own backyard, there are threats of recession. We look out at a world where there is famine, where there is violence, where there is plague. How do we know that these nations are going to come?

How do we know that God's generous invitation is going to be responded to? How do we know that God's promises are unbreakable? Because the Holy One of Israel, whose glory fills heaven and earth, will do it.

That is a gospel worth proclaiming. That is a faith worth building our lives on. Let's pray. Jesus shall reign where'er the sun does his successive journeys run.

Father, in times of barrenness, in times of difficulty, help us to believe that, help us to share that message, to take it out to the world, so that the world may taste and see the riches of his grace. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.