

3. God is calling us: An urgent summons

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[0 : 00] Now, if you'd like to turn in the Bibles, please, to page 615 and once again to Isaiah 55. Today we are particularly going to look at verses 6 to 9, but we'll read verses 1 to 9.

We've been looking at this great chapter under the general heading God is calling us, and our particular title today is An Urgent Summons. So let's read the chapter then, chapter 55 and verses 1 to 9.

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 yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear and come to me, here that your soul may live, and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

[1 : 08] 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 did not know you shall run to you.

Because of the Lord your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near.

Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him return to the Lord that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

This is the word of the Lord to us. Not just the word Isaiah spoke then, but the word that through Isaiah is being spoken now. So far, we've had a generous invitation and an unbreakable promise.

[2 : 18] We're coming today in verses 6 to 9 to an urgent summons. Sometimes you read of very sad, indeed tragic stories of an old person dying in a nettock, in absolute squalor and degradation.

Obviously, nothing in this world, and dying alone, and perhaps only found many weeks later. But sometimes when that's happened, a further search of the flat has discovered literally thousands and thousands of pounds, hidden away in plastic bags, stuffed under the bed, stuffed up the chimney, and so on.

In other words, this person has died in unnecessary squalor, has died in unnecessary poverty, because all the time within reach were the money that could have changed everything.

So, we've got to ask the question, if the invitation of God is so generous, if the promise is so unbreakable, why is the whole world not benefiting from it?

Why is the whole world not Christian? Why do we need to do more than simply say the invitation is available? Why don't people accept it?

[3 : 34] I mean, after all, if you went out into the street offering thousands of pounds, you would probably find many takers. If you go out into the streets and give this invitation to people, some may listen, but some will not listen, and some will be very annoyed.

So, why is the whole world not benefiting from this offer? Why is everyone who is thirsting not coming to the waters? Why are people spending money for that which does not satisfy?

Now, remember the situation of the prophet. He's preaching 700 years before the coming of Christ in 7th century Jerusalem. And his ministry begins with a great vision of the Lord himself in chapter 6.

I saw the Lord high and lifted up, and the whole earth filled with his glory. And the background is that the country is threatened by the great Assyrian Empire on the Tigris.

And in the midst of this, Isaiah appoints the Lord, who is greater the Lord of hosts, who has greater armies than the Assyrian king. He goes on to talk about those verses which we'll all hear, I'm sure, in a few weeks' time.

[4 : 42] Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. But he also tells them that persistent sin will lead to exile, and that is what happens.

The people are taken away to exile in Babylon. And now, in these later chapters, Isaiah is looking beyond that to the return. And he's told them, in chapter 40, that this God is still great.

He's still in charge. He is still the one who holds the whole universe in his hands and controls history. And in chapter 53, this God is going to send a servant, who is both his servant and also himself, who is going to die and rise again.

And that is going to make possible, this invitation of chapter 55. But this invitation isn't just to Israel, it's to the whole world.

Because the whole world, in a sense, is in exile. This began in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve were driven out of the presence of God and wandered in exile over the whole earth.

[5 : 44] So let's look then at this urgent summons. The prophet is saying, God's given a most generous invitation. He won't get a better one. His promises are unbreakable. He's made a covenant.

He's not going to go back on that. But now he is summoning you. He's saying, are you paying attention? So there's two things here. First of all, there is the commitment to turn to the Lord.

Verse 6 and the first part of verse 7. Seek the Lord. Now, seek doesn't mean looking for something that's lost. Seek means a determination to come to someone who is already there.

It's often said that religion, a word I don't like, but we know what it means, is human search for God. The Bible is not interested in the human search for God.

The Bible is totally interested in God's search for us. But, if God searches for us and we continually run away, then that's going to cause a problem, isn't it?

[6 : 45] And the urgency is implied in this call upon him while he is near. There isn't unlimited time to respond to this invitation. It's like those kind of offers we're all familiar with.

And three weeks later, we decide we're going to take it up, this offer of a room, this offer of a new DVD player or something. And then we discover the sell-by date has passed.

Now, so it is here. Call upon him while he is near, while he may be found. Now, there's all kinds of reasons for not. I'll wait until I'm a bit older, says the young person.

Maybe when I finish university. And then when that happens, I'll wait until I'm settled into my new job. And it happens, well, I'll wait until I'm married and things settle down.

Well, I'll wait until the family grows up. And then, oh, maybe I'll wait until they're married and settled down. Maybe I'll wait until the mortgage is paid off. All these kind of things. And so it goes on and on and on.

[7 : 49] And life dwindles away, never really listening to the invitation. Now, of course, you can listen to that invitation at any time.

But it is no accident that most people who respond to that invitation are young people. Not always. I mean, God's grace is wonderful. And people do respond at every age.

You hear about very old people turning to the Lord, which is great. But for the most part, when people get into old age, having rejected or neglected this invitation, then they find it increasingly difficult to respond.

Because their whole way of life, their whole worldview, their whole circumstances are such that they don't want radical change. Now is the accepted time, says the letter to the Hebrews.

Now is the day of salvation. While he is near, and near is a word that's used quite often in the Old Testament, used in the book of Ruth, for example, about Boaz who married Ruth.

[8 : 48] He was our kinsman redeemer. So it's calling us into a relationship. So, the commitment to seek the Lord. And this word, seek, doesn't just mean a casual glance.

It means a diligent, careful, and persistent search. But also, there is the need for drastic changes.

Let the wicked forsake his ways, the unrighteous man his thoughts.

Let him return to the Lord. If we're going to respond to that invitation, there's drastic changes. And in two ways. First of all, we've got to turn away from certain things.

Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Now, way is the whole, what we would call lifestyle nowadays. It's the whole outward circumstances of our life, and our outward

actions.

The kind of things we do, the kind of things we value, the kind of things that fill our imagination, that fill our thoughts. That's our way. And our thoughts, of course, is the inner thing which drives that.

[9 : 57] So it's both inward and outward behavior. Who are the wicked? This is a group of children. I might ask you to put your hands up.

Hands up those who are the wicked. I'm not going to do that. Hardly any of the children would put their hands up, wouldn't they? Who are the wicked? And the answer is, all of us. All of us are the wicked, because we have turned away from God.

And that's what the word ultimately and fundamentally means. It would be awfully easy for us, wouldn't it? If we could say the wicked are the drug pushers and the murderers and the rapists and so on, the warlords.

Well, they are, but so are we, because in our hearts we all are capable of that. We all are capable of doing these things. All are capable of being these kind of people.

The difference between the wicked and the righteous is not that the righteous are terribly, terribly good people and the wicked are terribly, terribly bad people. The difference is simply this.

[10 : 56] The righteous have responded to the message. The righteous, in fact, have admitted we are the wicked and we need to change. So, that's the first thing we've got to change. We've got to turn our back on our life, which is taking us away from God.

There are a few more frustrating things than driving down the motorway and realizing you've passed the junction. You're meant to go off. Now, if you want to get where you want to go, it will not help to put your foot down and drive faster down the motorway.

What you've got to do is you have got to turn off at the next junction and come back. And that's what it means to be wicked, as it were. We put our foot down on the accelerator, which says, my way, and we hurtle along there.

What we need to do is take our foot off the accelerator, turn off, and turn back to God. So, you see, what matters is whether not what we've been, but what we can become.

And that's the second thing. Not only turning away from, let him return to the Lord. What does it mean to return to the Lord? Now, in the initial sense, Isaiah is talking to his people who are going to be sent into exile and will literally return to the land.

[12 : 15] That's true. But as I said, we are all in exile. We are all in the image of God. We were made by God and for God. But if we are continuing to live in order to please ourselves, then we are not going to return.

To return to the Lord is basically to say, I made a mess of it and I'm not going to do any better until I come back. And notice, to our God.

Not just the Lord, but to our God. In other words, what matters is not our track record to date, but what we are going to be in the future.

And that applies to those of us who are Christian as well. Because even when we turn away from our own way, we are continually wanting to go back to it, aren't we? We continually find tempting byways that we want to explore.

Or wonderful detours, which of course lead nowhere, lead into blank walls and lead into misery and so on. But we are inclined to do that still.

[13 : 16] So we return to the God who loves us. Not because we are good, but because he can make us good. That is what the righteous are. Those whom God has made good through the death of Christ.

Some of us have never really understood that. Some of us have the gospel so much tied up with traditionalism, with being nice. Nice is not a word the Bible, I'm aware, actually uses, except when it's talking, using the word nice in the old sense of precise distinctions and so on.

But, and that's why we see the gospel as demand rather than invitation. One of the reasons people will not accept this invitation is because they don't see it as an invitation.

One of the reasons why they won't listen to the summons is because we are afraid of what will happen. So that brings us to the second thing. First of all, the commitment to return to the Lord. Secondly, the loving welcome, which is guaranteed. And that really begins in verse 7, that he may have compassion unto our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

[14 : 24] The welcome is certain. Now I've said often before that God is extravagantly generous. You can see this in creation. You can see this in this free offer.

Abundantly pardon. Pardon with interest added. And nothing to pay back. Remember, this is not a loan. This is a gift. And it is a gift that increases in value as the days and the months and the years pass.

But the reason, of course, we don't like this is because, particularly if we are British, we feel, particularly if we have this idea, oh, we'll pay for this. You get a lovely day, oh, we're going to pay for this.

Somebody gives a generous gift to you. What on earth are they wanting from me? I think there's a particularly British thing. In Italy or Spain, people just say, oh, thank you, thank you, mamma mia, and so on.

This is wonderful. But in Britain, of course, we are so stiff upper-lipped and we can't take generosity. And we prefer our squalor and our emptiness because we are not sure if we are welcome.

[15:32] It's rather like sometimes you're invited somewhere and you're actually not really sure if you're very welcome. You sort of hang around as you go in wondering if you're really welcome at all.

Or wondering if it was really you that you meant to invite. You don't get people like that. But God is not like that. When God welcomes us, he welcomes us. Remember the story of a prodigal son.

The best ring gets out, put away. The bird's eye hamburgers get out, fill at steak. And all the rest of it, he's welcome. He's home now. So the welcome, the loving welcome that's guaranteed compassion and abundantly pardon.

And then comes this rather strange verses 8 and 9. You may wonder, what else has this got to do with what comes before? For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. And I think that the point is, the point I've been trying to make. God, we think when we receive an invitation like this, it can't possibly be a real one.

[16:33] It can't possibly be true. There must be small print in it. There must be a catch in it. And that's why God says, my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither my ways your ways.

There's nothing niggerly about the invitation. There's nothing dodgy about the promise. There is nothing half-hearted about the summons. My ways are not your ways, neither my thoughts your thoughts.

And they show how turning back on our false thoughts and behavior are necessary. If we don't think like God, if we don't behave like God, then that change is absolutely necessary and absolutely vital. And the reason we don't is because our reason is fallen. That doesn't mean we can't reason. It doesn't mean we can't use common sense. But it means that it's fallen. How can the gulf be bridged as the heavens are higher than the earth?

That's the distance. How on earth can that gulf be bridged? And we try various bridges, don't we? We try the bridge of good works.

[17:37] What does the prophet Jeremiah say about good works and righteousness? Like filthy rags. Like if you're invited to the palace and you turn up in your painting clothes, scruffy and unwashed.

Not good enough. We try religion. We'll do it. We're church people. We're good people. That won't wash either, will it? Because after all, it's not good people who are in heaven.

It's forgiven people who are in heaven. You may have seen the fridge magnets. Christians are not perfect. They are forgiven. Never forget that. And the gulf seems too great.

And it would be apart from what God has done. There is only one bridge that is long enough and strong enough and wide enough to bridge that gulf. That's the bridge that was made when the servant of God gave his life.

That cross between heaven and earth opening the way back to God. And that's why it's so important we have a true realization of who Jesus is. Jesus is not the most admirable specimen of humanity, standing at the head of the human race and stretching out his hand to reach God while we hang on to his coattails.

[18:51] No, Jesus is the hand of God stretching out to lift us up to his presence. That's what the invitation is. Nothing of Jesus is saying, come on guys, I'll see if I can get you in.

It's that Jesus is coming saying, I've come from my father. He wants you. He welcomes you. Come with me. Welcome to the party. Welcome to the blessing.

But we need to be ready. We need to be willing. We need to seek the Lord while he may be found and call upon him while he is near. Let's pray.

Father, in a world that's full of free offers and invitations which often turn out to be bogus or not what they claim to be, we thank you for this free offer of the gospel, this wonderful gift of salvation which is ready and open for us.

And all we need to do is to stretch out the empty hand of faith. May we rejoice in that, in your goodness, in your invitation, in your promise. May we accept your summons.

[19 : 58] In Jesus' name. Amen.