

5. God is calling us: A glorious new creation

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[0 : 00] Now if you would turn in your Bibles, please, to page 615, and we come to our last study in this great chapter, Isaiah 55. We're going to be looking at verses 12 and 13. Once again, for the last time, we'll read the whole chapter to get the flow of it and to see how these verses fit in with the rest of it.

Chapter 55, verse 1.

1. Incline your ear and come to me, hear that your soul may live, and I will make with you an everlasting 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 did not know you shall run to you because of the Lord your God and 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. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there, but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth. It shall not return to me empty, and it shall accomplish that which

I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace. The mountains and the hills before you shall break into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress.

Instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle, and it shall make a name for the Lord, a never lasting sign that shall not be cut off. Amen. That is the word of God, and may he bless it to our hearts and our minds.

[2 : 54] From where we live in Clarkston, if you look out of our bedroom window, when the sky is clear, that's been about twice since we came to Glasgow, there is quite a magnificent view in the background. There are the lower hills, which I think, and if you know your geography better than me, and I've got it wrong, this doesn't spoil the point of the illustration at all. There are the foothills of the Campses and so on, and then behind it rises the great peak of Ben Lomond. Now, the point is, from where we are looking, it seems as if Ben Lomond is rising immediately behind the lower hills. But of course we know it's not. Between the hills and between the bend, there are miles and miles of countryside, of village, of town, of plain, of river, and so on. But from that vantage point, it looks as if they are just close together. Now, as the Old Testament prophets looked into the future, their view was something like that. They saw that God was going to intervene in history in a dramatic and spectacular way. They saw that someone was going to come, someone whom Isaiah has already described as the servant, also described him as the king, and the other prophets saw this as well. What they did not see was that this would be a staged process, that the king would come, but what he did would not all happen immediately. He would come, he would die and rise again, but before his final coming, and before the wonderful transformation we read about in this chapter, there are going to be many, many years, many centuries, and none of us have any idea how long it will still be, before the final coming of the new heaven and the new earth. So Isaiah stands 700 years before Christ, and as he gives this glorious prophecy, his book is really giving us a kind of glimpse of the whole history of God's purposes. He speaks to people under the threat of conquest by Assyria. He helps them through this, and then points out the time of exile will come.

But people will return from exile, and in one sense, verses 12 and 13 are talking about the people returning to Jerusalem. But if you read about that in Ezra and Nehemiah, it's a very low key return.

Trees of the field were not clapping their hands. There was no rejoicing in creation, and yet it was pointing forward to that time. First of all, when the servant would come and suffer and die and rise again, and to the point which is still future to us, when he would return to set up his kingdom. So we've got these two-stage coming. I know we talk about it as the first and second comings, but in a sense it's one coming in different stages. And the New Testament writers, when they look forward to it, simply call it the coming. Peter, in his letter, talks about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Immediately after the Second World War, preachers used the illustration of D-Day and V-E-Day. On D-Day, the Allies landed, and in a sense, the war was over. But 18 months or so of fierce fighting, some of the most savage fighting, had still to take place before V-E-Day. So in a sense, we stand between D-Day and V-E-Day. And Isaiah is pointing us forward now to this final coming. He's invited us to a party. Come, everyone who thirsts, he has no money. Come by and eat. There's nothing niggardly about God. This is not tea and biscuits from chipped cups in a drafty church hall. This is a wonderful party with wonderful food, where everyone's going to enjoy themselves. And the surroundings are glorious, the trees of the field clapping their hands, and so on. It's a generous invitation. God is extravagantly generous. Never run out of food. Never run out of generosity. So what's going to happen then when that comes? There are two things particularly. First of all, there is personal transformation, which really is verse 12, the first part of it. You shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace. If we are going to join the party, if we are going to be part of this glorious new creation and rejoice along with the trees of the field and the mountains and the hills, we need to be transformed as well. There are two sides to this personal transformation. First of all, there is our own willingness. You shall go out in joy. We've got to make a decision. We won't be forced to come to this party. We won't be pushed into the kingdom. We have to make a choice. We have to respond to the generous invitation. We have to believe the promises. We have to listen to the urgent summons. And we have to believe in the living word of God.

[8 : 06] Now this joy here, this joy is deep and lasting. It's not superficial happiness simply. It doesn't mean when you come to Christ you'll be clapping your hands and dancing around all the time and singing choruses. That can be very superficial. And that can be simply surface. It is a deep lasting joy, not just for this life, but for the life to come. Admittedly, it would probably do some of us some good if we were happier and more joyful. Christians in Britain are often so miserable, but that's just part of our natural characteristic. We identify godliness with moroseness so often. Christians in Uganda probably understand this far better than Christians in Scotland. Anyway, you'll go out in joy. Whether you're an old misery guts or a cheery individual, if you accept this invitation, you will go out in joy. It's a personal response. But also,

God is active as well. You shall be led forth in peace. Notice it's not just going out, it's being led forth. In other words, the response is itself the work of the Spirit of God, planting the word in our hearts and causing it to spring up and bring life. And you should be led forth in peace. Once again, that's not necessarily peace in this world. Many Christians live in situations which are not situations of peace. Many people, even in peaceful countries, live in personal turmoil and so on. This is the kind of peace. That is the gift of God, which, as Paul says, passes all understanding and which, Paul, is a wonderful phrase in Philippians. It garrisons our hearts. It guards our hearts like an army guarding a beleaguered city which is being besieged. That is the peace of God. Now, clearly, this was partially fulfilled when people returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and the temple. And you can read in the book of Ezra how, when the foundations of the temple were laid, people rejoiced. But people also wept because some of the older people there could remember the glorious temple of Solomon, which had been destroyed. And this new temple looked very imperfect and very shabby alongside it. Nevertheless, it was an essential link in the chain. But the fulfillment had not yet arrived. So that's the first thing. Personal transformation. Do we respond to the invitation? Do we believe the promises? Do we accept the urgent summons and believe the word? But secondly, the main part of these verses is universal transformation. The mountains and the hills, the trees of the field, and so on. God began a work in Genesis 1 verse 1. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. That work at the moment is an unfinished work. It's not a show house. It's a building site. And of course, the noises here remind us of building sites. A building site is a dirty, uncomfortable, uncomfortable and messy place. But a show house shows you the kind of thing that will happen once the building is completed. And this passage is one of the many passages that tell us that not only did God begin the work, not only is he continuing, but God will complete it. And God will complete that work of personal transformation in you and I as well if we respond to his word. So

what does this mean then in these verses? First of all, it means that God will remove the curse that lies on creation. When God created the world, he placed us, he placed humanity, he placed Adam and Eve as stewards of that creation. Told them to look after it, told them to guard it, told them to till it and water it, and told them to reproduce themselves so that all over the world there would be stewards of God who would guard and look after his creation. Now we know that we blew it. We know we got it wrong. And as a result of the fall of humanity, it's not just humanity that's fallen, the created order has fallen. It's under a curse, under futility, vanity, emptiness, the book of Ecclesiastes talks about. So we have brokenness as well as beauty. Sometimes you can wander through an autumn woodland or look up at the night sky, walk by the sea, and you can see how good and glorious creation is. But creation also has dust balls, has acid rain, has cancer, has all kinds of blights upon it. And this passage is telling us that when the new creation comes, all those things will be gone. And all those things will be gone because God's people will be then able to resume what God originally intended. Paul says in Romans 8, creation is standing on tiptoe. It's a wonderful phrase. Longing, eagerly longing, standing on tiptoe, waiting for the revelation of the children of God. In other words, when the children of God are truly made in God's image, truly like Christ, then the ancient command to look after creation can be fulfilled. And that is why the gospel is never just about personal transformation, important as that is. It's never just about individuals believing the gospel, vital as that is.

It's about those individuals being made into the image of Christ so that when the kingdom comes, we'll be able to resume our original task of being stewards of the new earth. That's how big a thing the gospel is. It's a wonderful and glorious reality. Creation can be free and us humans will perform what God originally intended because God has never changed his mind. God didn't introduce plan 1b right from the beginning. God planned this right from the beginning. God created the earth so that his redeemed people would be his stewards there. Second thing about this universal transformation is that death will be swallowed up in life. See, the thorn and the briar are symbols of the curse. God said to Adam, because you have sinned, the earth will be cursed. Thorns and thistles it will bear.

Now, of course, of course, of course, it still bears beautiful things. It also bears thorns and thistles. And the thorn and the briar are symbols of these, whereas the cypress and the myrtle are symbols of new life.

[15:12] And the mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing. This is a poem, glorious poem, about how the whole of creation will praise God. If you look at the later Psalms, you'll find that.

The whole created order is called upon to praise God. Praise him, you highest heavens. Praise him, you stars. Praise him, sun and moon. Praise him, you sea monsters. Praise him, you living creatures and so on. Everything joins in the sheer joy and the, yes, the fun of the new creation. It will be great fun, the new creation.

Yes. Yes, well, you don't look as if you're looking forward to it very much, but Dick Lucas said last week, we're an African brother here. But anyway, the sheer joy, the sheer fun of the new creation as the mountains and the hills break into singing, as the trees of the field clap their hands.

Now that's saying a bit more, I think, than just that creation will be beautiful. It means that creation, which is good, which God made to be good, will be fulfilling its purpose.

When God makes anything or anyone and calls it good, it means they fulfill their purpose. Now a tree, you can say if you like, or trees of the field clapping their hands, when in the new creation, trees will be perfectly trees.

[16:37] They won't be attacked by mildew and blight and so on. They will be exactly what God created them to be, as will the mountains and the hills. Now the mountains and the hills are beautiful, but the mountains and the hills are also places of tragedy, places of loss, places of disaster.

But in the new creation, there will be none of that at all. So that's the second thing. Death will be swallowed up by life. But in the very last part of the chapter, we really return to the major theme of the chapter.

It shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. But it's simply, this will prove that God's word is true.

That's what this passage has been about. God is calling us. And this, at the moment, it's a matter of faith. We live by faith. We don't see these things happening.

As the author of Hebrews says, we don't yet see everything in subjection under Christ's feet. When that day comes, it will make a name for the Lord.

[17 : 40] When we sing our hymns of praise, when we live lives of praise, we are actually saying that what appears to be happening in the world isn't the major reality.

When we say Jesus is Lord, that is a statement of faith. That is a statement where we plant the banner of Christ in enemy territory.

Where we say this belongs to Jesus. It does not belong to the devil. And one day it will be acknowledged, this is. In one sense, the only difference the second coming will make is to show the reality that Christ is Lord.

And that's why Isaiah says it shall make a name for the Lord. The Lord's name, if it's used at all nowadays by your average person, tends to be used as a curse or an oath.

In that day, people, the name of the Lord, and this is the covenant God, the God who is committed to his people and to his creation, my promise is that he cannot and will not break.

[18 : 44] An everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. Now, Isaiah was living through a time of great crisis. He had seen the northern kingdom cut off, if you like.

He had seen the northern kingdom disappear to Assyria. He had seen the southern kingdom, Jerusalem, saved, but he knew they were going to go into exile. In other words, God had placed in the world the signs of his presence, his people.

Over and over again, they were cut off. Over and over again, the public witness to God disappeared. What would happen if Christianity were actually to be driven underground in this country?

If it were made illegal to preach the word of God or to meet together? Well, it would be very distressing, wouldn't it? But in another sense, what would happen to the kingdom of God?

In another sense, nothing at all. God carries on his kingdom, and through all the times the sign has been cut off. Through all the times the church has been driven underground.

[19 : 46] Jesus has been Lord. His word has still had power. Oh, look what happened in China. The amazing growth of the gospel there after the missionaries were expelled.

So many other places in the world where the public witness has disappeared, but the Spirit of God has moved and changed things. But this sign will not be cut off.

In other words, there will be no return to the curse. There will be no return to death. Because in the new creation, it's not just that people won't die. The book of Revelation says death will be no more. There will not just be no dying. There will be no possibility of dying. It's not just that people will not sin any longer. There will be no possibility of sinning. It's not just that people will reluctantly say that Jesus is Lord.

It will be that visibly, openly, he will be seen to be reigning. And that will last forever. And the question this chapter faces us is, have we responded?

[20 : 51] Do we want to be part of that glorious new creation? If we haven't, there never was a better time to than now. And if we have, let's grasp it in faith with rejoicing.

Because the Lord's name will be honoured. And the everlasting sign will not be cut off. Let's pray. God our Father, how we praise you.

You've invited us to your party. You've invited us to this glorious new creation. And we pray that in the midst of brokenness, in the midst of futility, that we will look forward to that time.

It will give us confidence now to plant the banner of Christ, to speak the name of Christ in places where he is not honoured and not known. So that many, many more will come into his kingdom and will rejoice with us when that glad day comes, when he returns, and when he sets up the kingdom. It will never be destroyed. We ask this in his name. Amen.