

1. God is calling us: A generous invitation

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- [0 : 0 0] Now, if I ask you to turn in the Bibles, please, to page 615. This is the third chapter of Isaiah that we've looked at in recent months.
- We've looked at chapters 40 and 53. Now we're going to look at this chapter, and it's a chapter of invitation, a chapter about the Word of God.
- Today we are going to look at only verses 1 and 2, which I've called a generous invitation, but we're going to read the whole chapter. Chapter 55, verse 1.
- 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.
- [1 : 0 5] 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 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.
- 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.
- [2 : 2 9] It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall 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 forth 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, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.
- Amen. That is God's word to us, and may he bless it to us as we look at it together. A generous invitation. Verses 1 and 2.
- One of the features of contemporary life is junk mail, and increasingly junk email. And the other day I looked at my emails, and I found one that said, a generous invitation.
- And this is what the generous invitation said. You and your loved one can have two nights at Hyde Park Hotel in London at very cheap prices.

[3 : 49] For only £560 per person, per night, you can enjoy two nights of wonderful luxury. And if you're prepared to pay a little more, there will be a bottle of champagne in your room on arrival.

I deleted it. Because that was not, as far as I'm concerned, maybe to some of you, a generous invitation. But here, in Isaiah 55, we have the most amazingly generous invitation.

God calls us, his offer is generous, there are no holds barred, and there is no one omitted from the invitation. That's what this chapter is about, everyone.

That's who this invitation is addressed to. Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. Just a quick word about the place of this in the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah is preaching some 700 years before Jesus is born. And in the first part of his book, he's helping people to face a great crisis.

[4 : 57] The great superpower of Assyria, a country we now call Iraq, was threatening the borders, threatening to gobble up the tiny kingdom of Judah. And Isaiah, first of all, rebukes King Ahaz for his faithlessness, and then supports King Hezekiah as he trusts in the Lord against the king of Assyria.

But here in chapters 40 and following, he's pointing forward to a much later period. God's people have gone into exile in Babylon and they're now back in the land.

And he's telling them, this God, who both rescued you in the time of Hezekiah, who punished you at the time of the exile and sent you to Babylon, this God is calling you back now.

And that's chapter 40, which we looked at at lunchtime services some months ago. Tell the people that their exile is over. How is he going to do that?

Now in chapter 53, which we also looked at, a servant is going to come who is both to be God's servant and indeed God Himself. And he's going to fulfill all the promises as he dies for the people and as he defeats death and rises again.

[6 : 11] And because of that, there is a generous invitation. Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. 700 years before Jesus was born, 700 years before he died and rose again, Isaiah preaches the gospel.

This is a great gospel chapter. And there are two things I want to speak about in verses 1 and 2. First of all, there is the amazing, extravagant generosity of the invitation.

We're left in no doubt that we're welcome. Three times the word, come. If you didn't hear it the first time, come. And if you're still deaf, come. And who is to come?

Everyone. Now this isn't just repetition. This invitation really is a threefold invitation. And the first come is inviting us to come because we desperately need what God offers.

Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. Now, don't think of this as in our country where we sometimes feel we're desperate for a drink.

[7 : 20] I often feel I must have a coffee or else I'm going to pass out. That's totally extravagant. I'm not going to pass out at all. It's just I rather want the coffee. Think of it as the hot, blistering afternoon in the east where literally you will die if you don't drink.

Where water is the difference between life and death. See what Isaiah is saying. the gospel is basic necessity. If you don't take it you'll die.

If you don't drink it you will not live. We cannot live without it. Now many people of course do live without the gospel. And many people think they're making a very successful way of life without that gospel.

Nevertheless, what about eternal life? There is no life beyond this world without the gospel. And what is water? Water is the life of God himself.

I am come says Jesus that you might have life. You might have it in all its fullness not just in this world but in the world to come. And this supply of water is generous.

[8 : 27] It's plural come to the waters. They cascade down like a great waterfall and you can never exhaust them. You can bathe in them. You can drink them. You can never exhaust them.

So the first come is come because we desperately need it. Look at the second come. He who has no money come, buy and eat. Come because it's a free gift.

We can't work for it. We don't deserve it. But it comes to us as a gift. Now this is wonderful paradox. Come buy without money and without price.

You've no money so come and buy it. In other words there's nothing you can do to earn it. And this of course is why many people reject it. In Britain I think we are particularly proud in this way.

Oh we don't accept charity. We'll earn everything we get. We work hard for our living. And in our pride we want to earn salvation.

[9 : 31] We want to be able to give something in return for eternal life. we want to build up credit in the bank of heaven. We want to be in heaven because we deserve to be there.

Don't we? That's why you discover that many people don't want to go to heaven. They don't want to sing worthy is the lamb. What they really want to sing is worthy am I.

Look at what I've done to be here. This is a great credit sheet I've got. And that's impossible because it is a free offer. It is something that we will not earn.

It's something we will never deserve. But it's something that we will be given as a free gift. But the third come goes well beyond our wildest dreams. Come by wine and milk.

See the gospel is basic necessity. The life that God offers is water. It is bread. We can't live without it. But it goes far beyond that. And water wine and milk is not just the basic necessity.

[10 : 37] God is going to give you extravagantly and generously far beyond anything we can imagine. Just as in his creation God is extravagantly generous.

Why should he give us blue skies and sunsets? I don't want to say why should he send us rain. We get a rather lot of that. But why do we have all the beauty and the wonder and the splendor of creation?

Because God is love. God is generous. How can it be both free and also at a price? And that's where if we look back at chapter 53 we'll discover it is only free because someone else has paid the price.

The servant has paid the price. The Lord Jesus Christ by dying for us has paid the price for our sins. Him we used to sing at school said there was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.

He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in. That's why we can't earn it. He's paid for it with his life. He's paid for it with his death.

[11 : 48] And therefore the offer comes freely and generously. And just one other thing about the generosity of the offer. These three comes. Come is plural. It is everyone.

No one is omitted. But the you is singular. The he is singular. In other words, although the offer is for everyone, available for everyone, it has to be accepted.

It has to be taken. It has to be received. It's very hurtful, isn't it, in human terms. If you give someone a gift and they ignore it, they despise it, they set it aside, you can't really say they've received the gift, because they haven't.

The gift is there, but they haven't taken it. There must be an individual response. We can look at the cross, we can think of the life of Jesus, we can admire him, we can say wonderful things about him, but unless we put out the hand of faith and trust him, believe in him, take him and what he offers, then the gift, we're not going to enjoy the gift, we're going to die thirst, we are going to suffer eternally.

Jesus paid it all, and therefore we can take it freely. So that's the first thing then, verse 1, the sheer generosity of the offer. Secondly, the emptiness of the alternative in verse 2.

[13 : 15] Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, or labour for that which does not satisfy? why work for nothing when you can receive for nothing?

And here it's the sheer emptiness of life without God, the waste of effort which comes to nothing. Read the book of Ecclesiastes, there everything is tried, all the wealth, all the power, all the luxury, all the relationships the world has to offer, glittering, splendid, attractive.

What do they amount to? They amount to futility, to emptiness. They don't satisfy. They don't satisfy when we make them ends in themselves. They are good gifts of God.

And surely that's so much at the heart of our modern life, the sense of fear and angst and alienation in the presence of economic turndown, the pressure in our financial institutions and so on.

Fears for the future, people fearing for their jobs, people fearing for their savings, people fearing for what's going to happen. In that we need something that will not perish, someone who will not let us down.

[14 : 34] And the emptiness of the alternative. So why do you spend money for that which is not bread? Why do you spend all your time, all your money, all your effort on actually building castles in the air, on building on sand?

But notice the second part of the verse, listen diligently to me and eat what is good. Now notice how these two things are parallel, listen diligently and eat.

The key is hearing God's word and responding to God's word. That's the listen diligently. In other words, don't just let the words swim over you as well you're here.

if you have brought up children, we'll know at a certain stage in their life you say things like, well you never listen to what I say. Oh I heard you dad. Which means of course they were present when the words were spoken.

But they were not listening in the biblical sense and paid no attention to them. Listen diligently, listen to the word of God, listen to the voice of the gospel.

[15 : 38] But eat shows that it's not just an intellectual experience. Eat shows that it is a whole self commitment. To listen diligently to the word of God is not just to take an interest in it, not even just to do it, but to do it wholeheartedly.

There's no point being a hokey-cokey Christian and putting your left foot in and your right foot in. That will never achieve anything. We listen diligently and we eat.

It becomes part of us. Now there's a great interest in our contemporary world about eating and about healthy eating and what we eat and how it affects us. What we eat in the spiritual sense obviously affects us, not only in this world, but in the world to come.

And notice the words, delight yourselves. As they say in restaurants, enjoy. That's what God is saying to us as he offers this food. Enjoy and delight in rich food.

This is no takeaway from McDonald's. This is real healthy, nourishing food that will cause us to grow, that will make us strong. An invitation that is generous, an alternative that is empty.

[16 : 52] What does this, what question does this leave with us? I think it leaves with us this question. Are we thirsty? Are we hungry? Because if we are, there is something here that will satisfy, something that will not disappoint us, something that will not only give us life in this world, but life in the world to come.

Everyone who is thirsty, come to the waters. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord God, we are thirsty and hungry.

We try so often to fill ourselves with food that does not satisfy, with activities that lead nowhere, and with plans that come to nothing.

Help us, indeed, to eat and drink of this rich food, to luxuriate in the wonder of your offer, and to trust you with all our hearts.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.