

4. God is calling us: An unfailing word

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Date: 22 October 2008

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[0 : 01] Now if we could turn to our Bibles once again to page 615. We're looking at verses 10 and 11 today, but we're going to read the whole chapter so that we can see where these verses fit in with the flow of that chapter.

Isaiah 55, and the prophet writes, Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. 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 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 of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

[1 : 18] 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, 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, 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 into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

[2 : 28] 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, and shall not be cut off.

This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us. When I was a boy, there was a rather silly childhood playground rhyme which went like this.

Sticks and stones can break your bones, but words can never hurt you. Now apart from being doggerel, it's also nonsense. Because words can hurt, and can hurt terribly.

Years afterwards, a thoughtless word, a cruel word, and you can suddenly remember it, and you're in turmoil, you're in pain, because of the power of those words.

And in history, there are many examples of this. Hitler used words very powerfully, very effectively, to devastating effect, as he stirred up the German people to a campaign of hatred, and to a campaign of violence.

[3 : 40] And there was a stage during the Second World War when Churchill practically fought the war with words, because there was nothing else left to fight with. Those great speeches, I went to visit the Churchill Museum the last time I was in London.

If you visit that, you'll hear recordings of Churchill's great voice. These speeches about fighting on the landing grounds, fighting on the beaches, and so on.

It's actually quite difficult to be an orator nowadays. If Churchill had been around now, Jeremy Paxman would be saying, and which beach are you going to fight on, Mr. Churchill? And which landing ground is it going to be?

But these words kept the national spirit alive. These words were effective. These words were powerful. Even in ordinary life, words can be effective.

Words can actually translate into actions. Certain times in my life, I have said to a young couple, and no doubt we'll say again, I pronounce you husband and wife.

[4 : 43] And of course, they became husband and wife. Not because of anything intrinsic to me, but because of the situation, because of the circumstances, because I had the right to say these words.

That doesn't mean I can just go down the street and talk to any couple and say I pronounce you husband and wife, because apart from thinking I was rather silly, it wouldn't work, would it? Similarly, people can say, I offer you this job.

But if you don't have the power to offer you the job, then of course it's nonsense. Anyone can say the words, but there have to be conditions in place. Now you can see the difference here between human words and God's words.

It's not that human words have no power and no effectiveness. It's that human words need other conditions, other things to be in place for them to be effective. This is not the case with God's word.

God's word creates and God's word is in control of all the situations which are necessary to make that effective. And that's why we come today in verses 10 to 11 to an unfailing word.

[5 : 52] We've looked at this chapter, God calling us. We've seen that God's word is a generous invitation, which means, of course, that God has the wherewithal to provide all that he promises.

We've seen it's an unbreakable promise, which means that when God says something, it's going to happen. We've also seen it's an urgent summons, which means that we can't just ignore it and carry on as if nothing had been said.

But now it's an unfailing word. How do we know that this word is different? And that's what the prophet is now addressing here in verses 10 and 11.

This prophet, living seven centuries before Christ, preaching the gospel, as we sang in our hymn a moment, God has spoken by Christ Jesus, pointing forward to the time when God's word would take human form and when all the words that the prophets had spoken about him would be seen to be true.

When all the utterances of Isaiah and the other prophets would be embodied in this one human life, this one who, the servant of God of chapter 53, who is both God's agent and God himself.

[7 : 05] And this is a word now that Isaiah is speaking to the people of that time. He's told them they're going to go into exile. He's told them they're going to come back from exile. And all this is going to happen through the word of God.

So two things then about this word. First of all, it is a public word. Verse 10. Now he's talked about the heavens being higher than the earth in verse 9.

And now he picks up the idea of heaven again. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven. And he makes an extended comparison between the word and these great natural forces of rain and snow.

Rain is a public phenomenon, particularly if you live in this part of the world. It's difficult to avoid the rain that comes down from heaven. Day after day as you waken up in the darkness and in the gloom and hear the battering of the drops on the window.

But remember when we grumble about rain that in ancient, the ancient world, in ancient Israel, rain spelt the difference between life and death. If there were no rain, there'd be no life.

[8 : 18] There'd be no fertility. There'd be no plants so that the livestock would die and the result would be disaster. So it's a public word like the rain and the snow.

And that public word is given without preconditions. Notice what the verse says. It does not return. Just as the rain comes down from heaven and doesn't go back there, so God's word comes down.

There are no preconditions. It's not like those letters, please, please deliver to the sender if you can't find anyone in. This word is not going to go back to the sender.

This word comes without preconditions. It's not hedged around with provisos. Like the rain, it showers down indiscriminately. It's not just for ancient Israel.

It's for the whole world. And these later chapters of Isaiah are saying what the prophets spoke in ancient Israel, this is the message of the living God to the whole world.

[9 : 21] Let the whole world know about this. There are no preconditions. But the second thing is it's an effective gift. It's an effective word, this public word. Notice, making it bring, it waters the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater.

See, God's word, when it's accepted, does its job. It has to be accepted. If you, the rain may come down, but it, and the rain may, the rain may bring life to the earth, but this word has to be accepted.

If you simply, as it were, stand and allow to fall around you and do nothing about it, then that's not going to be effective in your life. Now, back at the beginning of the chapter, Isaiah said, come to the waters.

And these waters are not just waters, they give water. In other words, this message is not just a message about God.

It's not just telling us, giving us information about God. It's giving us life-changing words. So it's effective. And the third thing about it, as a public word, it is totally satisfying.

[10 : 36] Notice, the seed has life-giving potential. When you put the seed in the ground, it has the potential to grow.

Bread sustains life. So you see, this word both brings life and sustains life. That's the difference between the words of God and the words of humans. As I said already, there are many, many human words which are wonderful words, great words, even human words which can transform people at the time.

But this is the only word that can create and sustain life. Just as the word of God, just as the rain and the snow comes down from heaven in a public display, so the word of God comes down.

Let me put it another way. The gospel, the word of God is public truth. It's not just private opinion. Just as a group of people getting together and coming up with their philosophies and their ideas.

This is public truth. This is truth for the whole world. That's why many of the great missionary hymns of the 19th century said this, the whole wide world for Jesus, this shall our anthem be.

[11 : 50] Because they believed that this word transformed people in Glasgow and in Guatemala, transformed people in Edinburgh and in Ecuador, transformed people in Athens and in Amsterdam.

It's for everywhere, for everyone. It is public truth. And it's public truth right from the beginning. When Abraham was called, he was called so that all the nations would be blessed.

And how would they be blessed? They'd be blessed by hearing the living word. Until at the end of the story, a great multitude whom no one could count would stand before the throne of God, all having listened to that public truth, all having accepted it, all having believed in it, all having been transformed by it.

So let's not be embarrassed by this word. This word is public truth from the living God. This is a word that can be preached everywhere. And that's what Jesus said before he returned to heaven.

Go and make disciples of every nation, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. This word is public truth.

[13 : 02] It's a public word. But secondly, it's a personal word. Public truths, as I've said already, can fall around you, can hit your ears the way that rain and snow falls and nothing much happens.

But this is a personal truth. That seems to me to be what's happening in verse 11. So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth that shall not return to me empty, but shall accomplish that which I purpose and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Notice, neither here nor anywhere else in the Bible are we told the process by which this happens. How is it that these words, these ancient words, which are also contemporary words, how is it that they fall on people's ears?

Sometimes for months, sometimes for years. Nothing happens. And then one day, suddenly the penny drops. One day people realize what's being said.

And one day they respond to it. Now we're not told that process. And Jesus says much the same thing to Nicodemus. The wind blows when it wills.

[14 : 12] And you hear its sound but cannot tell where it's coming from or where it's going. So is everyone that's born of the Spirit. Because this word is more than words. This is the living word brought to us by the Spirit of God.

And words and spirit are always natural bedfellows in Scripture. They're never divorced. Word, after all, words, words, words are the outward expression of breath, aren't they?

We can't speak if we're not able to breathe. But if we only breathe and say nothing, then of course we don't know what the thoughts are. So God's thoughts would remain totally concealed to us unless he actually spoke and unless we actually responded.

So, this is a personal word. And a couple of things about that personal word. First of all, it reaches everything and everywhere.

It shall accomplish that which I purpose. That phrase, that which I purpose, is not so much a vague phrase as a comprehensive phrase. In other words, whatever God says will happen.

[15 : 26] Whether it's for good or ill, whether it's judgment or salvation, that which I purpose. What about the people who don't believe it? What happens if people simply hear the public word and make no personal response?

But that is in itself a response. Paul went to preach in Athens. We looked at that great chapter in Acts 17 some months ago. And Paul had three responses.

Well, he didn't only have two responses. It seems like three responses. Some mocked. Some deliberately rejected it. Some believed. But there was a third response. Some said, well, this will hear you again.

But that third response was actually identical with the first response. It was an unbelieving response. We can hope and pray that some of those who did reject it at that time or who wanted to hear it again did return, but there's no guarantee they did.

So you see, when God speaks, whether people accept or whether they reject, it's actually carrying out his word. If you listen to the word of God and you walk away from it, God's word has still had an effect.

[16 : 43] It's not been neutral. You go with a different person from what you were when you heard it, just as much as if you respond. So it reaches everything.

It reaches everywhere. The second thing is this is the word which actually leads to repentance and forgiveness. Shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Now the previous section, which I call the Nurgent Summons, verses 6 to 9, talks about returning to the Lord. It talks about repenting.

Now does repenting save us? Now it doesn't in itself because it is the word of God that causes the change. In other words, it's not my words of repentance but God's words of forgiveness that cause the change.

What's the point then of my words of repentance? My words of repentance are holding out my hand and saying, yes God, my hands are empty. I need that gift. But it's not my stretching out my hands to God, it's God stretching out his hand to me.

[17 : 51] It's not my speaking to God, it's God speaking to me. So you see, this word not only talks about repentance, this word not only talks about forgiveness, this word leads to forgiveness.

Just as the rain and the snow cause the vegetation and the natural process is to result in the transformed world, which we'll look at next week in verses 12 to 13.

So the word of God leads to that mysterious working in our hearts which changes us. One of the least useful descriptions of the Bible is a guidebook or a rulebook.

I shudder when I hear people saying this is God's rulebook, this is God's guidebook for us. Of course it guides us.

Of course there are rules and laws. But think about it this way, you could have a wonderful shelf of cookery books and yet be incapable of cooking anything anyone wants to eat.

[18 : 56] You could know the highway code backwards and yet be a rotten driver. You could get all the DIY manuals and put up shelves which instantly fall down.

See the point I'm making? These guidebooks, these rule books give instructions but give you no capacity to carry them out. This word is different. This word not only tells us what to do, this word gives us the power to do it.

It's not rules, it's the living word of the living God which transforms. forms. It's the word which moves us from death to life, from darkness to light.

Because not only is it a public word for the whole world, it is a personal word. And that personal word comes to you and I, whether we are Christian or not. This word comes to us asking us whose voice matters most in our lives.

Whose voice are we listening to? The world is full of voices. Whose voice are we listening to? And Isaiah is telling us we must listen to the living word of the living God because that word will never return empty.

[20 : 06] That word will accomplish what he set it out to do. Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, God, the God who speaks and who not only speaks but carries out what you say, speak deeply into our hearts.

Help us to love that word and transform us by it. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.