

Study Outline

Launching Question

Someone in your CG tells you that they are finding Christianity disappointing (!): why doesn't Christianity make everything good in their life? What would you say?

Questions on 55:1-5

READ 55:1-5

Who is being invited?

What are we being invited to? (*possibly look up Isaiah 25:6-8*)

Why is this such a wonderful description of gospel grace?

How does someone 'come'?

In 3-5, Isaiah is talking about the covenant that God made with King David:

what was promised (according to these verses here)?

How was it fulfilled in the work of the Servant? (*cf Commentary re Psalm 89*)

Thinking it through

Put verses 1-5 into very simple words: what are people being invited to?

Questions on 55:6-13

READ 55:6-13

How does someone 'seek' the Lord?

What would this have meant for Israel in exile?

Look at 12-13. How would this promise be 'heard' by the exiles in Babylon?

How is it fulfilled in Christ?

How should we 'hear' it today?

What are all the things that verses 8-11 tells us about God's word?

Look back at 41:21-29; 45:9-13; 46:5-11; 48:3-5 (*perhaps different pairs look up different verses*): what is the contrast with idols?

Why does Isaiah labour this point so much?!

These verses are often applied as encouragement for gospel evangelists ... but before we get to that, why is it said here? (*cf v8, 9, 10 all begin with a 'For ...'*)

What confidence/encouragement is contained in the metaphor of 10-11?

Now we've seen the context, why is it appropriate to apply this to gospel evangelists today? what is the encouragement for us, and why do we need it?

Thinking it through

Put verses 6-13 into very simple words: what is promised?

How should this affect the way we describe what's promised in the gospel?

How does this passage conclude all that we've been learning in Isaiah 40-55?

If you were to write a letter to the exiles in Babylon, what is the message of 'comfort' (cf 40:1) for them?

Isaiah 55:1-13

Isaiah at a glance

Chapters	1-35	the threat from Assyria
	36-37	deliverance from Assyria
	38-39	the threat from Babylon
	40-55	return from Babylon

Isaiah prophesied around 740-680 BC when God's people had rebelled against him and judgment was imminent. 39:6 ends the first section of the book with the catastrophic news that Babylon will soon carry them off into exile. But in ch 40-55, Isaiah looks beyond this coming punishment to a return ... and so much more: a whole new world for all nations, enjoying unimaginable prosperity!

ADDITIONAL NOTE: how big are God's plans?

We can often make it sound as if God's plans are all about me and my salvation. The OT helps us to see that God's focus is 'a people', not just saving a group of individuals. The NT helps us to understand that 'the people' are 'the church', not national Israel. And both OT/NT make it plain that his one people are always God's means of bringing blessing to all people. His plans are massive!

So the story of God's dealings with Israel always points us beyond itself to something bigger. For example, Israel's exile to Babylon is an 'illustration' of the much more significant 'exile' that the whole Bible story tells. We were exiled from Eden (Gen 3:22-24) because of our sin, and 'groan' to return there again (Rom 8:18-25). But we cannot do so without another Exodus: the blood of a substitutionary lamb must be shed, and the Lord must pass over (rather than destroy cf Ex 12:1-32). Only then we can return to our heavenly homeland.

Similarly God's promises to David are fulfilled not in Israel and its national conquests, but in great David's greater Son and the peace he won for us.

So let's look for the fulfillment of what God promises in something more extensive than the events of the OT itself. Greater even than the NT describes. We were saved in the 'hope for what we do not yet see' (Rom 8:24-25).

Theme Sentence

God firmly promises a whole new world ... and we are invited to share in it!

Application

- Come (1-5)! Coming to the Lord means listening to the Lord.
- Seek (6-13)! Seeking the Lord means repentance and faith in the Lord.
- The salvation God promises has massive dimensions: the total restoration of everything to its pre-Fall state for ever: wow!
- And when He says something will happen, it surely will. What an encouragement to everyone who proclaims God's gospel word.

Commentary

Isaiah 54 refers to three covenants that God makes in the OT: with Abraham (1-3), at Sinai (4-8) and with Noah (9-17). This non-chronological order may seem odd, but the point is an ever-widening circle: from individual, to nation, to (at Gen 9:8-17) the whole world! Which is why 54:11-17 concludes the chapter with the widest possible panorama of an entire universe renewed!

1-2 So, after this broadest vista, anyone and everyone, anywhere and everywhere, is invited to join in! It's for people who are needy and poor (and even 'wicked' [7]), and what is offered them is wonderful and rich!

How can we buy 'without money and without price'? Only because the cost has already been paid for by the death of the Servant (53:4-6). The offer on the table is the fruit of the servant's work. So now God can call out to everyone: come and feast! There is such a thing as a free lunch!

The OT prophets introduced the idea of a Great Banquet as a symbol of the blessings of God's kingdom at the end of time (eg, in 25:6-8 where Isaiah makes the first explicit prediction of God's final victory over death), and Jesus recycled the picture in (eg) Luke 13:29; 14:15f.

2 The alternative (= idolatry) costs money and you only get 'ashes' (44:20)!

2b-3 What was metaphor ('come to the waters' 1) is now reality ('come to me' 3): the Lord himself is the feast. And the 'food' of 1-2 represents the totally satisfying, spiritual sustenance that God himself gives freely from heaven - the forever-promises that God makes (and remember that another word for 'covenant' is 'promise').

Three times, Isaiah says 'Come'; three times he explains that what we actually need to do is 'Listen!': it is his word that we need (cf Deut 8:3).

3-5 The theme of covenants (from ch 54) continues: now we turn to the covenant with David. In 2 Sam 7:8-16, God promised an everlasting kingdom of peace and safety ruled over by David's offspring. Psalm 89 interprets this kingdom's prosperity in terms of worldwide dominion (cf v22-27). But it also talks of it being achieved through a rejected servant (38-45). In other words, the Covenant King is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 40-55. Through his dying (and vindication), the promised blessings of David's rule are freely available ... a banquet of God's favour and forgiveness (6-7) is now spread out on the table.

Who can enjoy that? 54:1-3 pictured a family, who are the 'offspring' of 53:10. The same growth is here (5), now expressed as an ever-expanding kingdom. The Gentile world hastens to join in because they can see how good it is to be part of the Davidic kingdom/people of God/Zion!

Why are the nations drawn? *Because of the Lord* (and not because there's something intrinsically magnetic about you!): he's beautified you!

1-5 is the invitation; 6-13 is about the fulfillment/enjoyment of what's promised.
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6-7 Isaiah starts by making clear how someone comes to share in the banquet: it involves repentance (as the wicked turn from their ways) and faith (depending on God's revealed character of mercy and pardon). It could be said that the message of Isaiah has a sharp, evangelistic edge. Indeed, there is urgency in this call to repent (cf '... while ... while ...').

7 Repentance involves both forsaking (7a) and returning (7b). We come to the Lord as we are, but not to stay as we are!

8-11 8-9 describes a very sharp division between the ideas and plans of earth and heaven. 10-11 describes how that division is bridged, by a gift that comes down from heaven! God's word is the gift ... and it gives life.

Of course this just begs the question: can his word do this? Really? Answer: yes! Rain and resulting fruitfulness is the picture used to give us confidence. Rain comes down and makes plants grow; God's word comes down and makes plans come about. It's as simple as that!

These chapters in Isaiah (40-55) have made this powerful effectiveness of his word the main marker of difference between God and idols: he speaks and what he says is what then happens (cf 41:21-29; 45:9-13; 46:5-11; 48:3-5), whereas they can't even talk! He speaks 'word-events': a direct link between words that come out of his mouth and things actually happening as a result. God's word spoke the world into existence. It has lost none of its ancient power. Nothing can frustrate it or divert it from its course: he says there will be a new creation, a new world, and the return from exile is part of that. So it surely will be so.

Link 55:10-11 back to 40:6-8. These are like bookends to this section of Isaiah. God's 'comfort' (40:1) in the terrible judgment of Israel begins with the effectual word of God: he speaks to say that he will solve things.

This is why the future blessings of 12-13 could not be more assured! Freedom instead of slavery. Return instead of exile. Fruitfulness replaces barrenness. Trees of beauty and usefulness supplant the thorns and briars. No wonder Nature is applauding!

13 'Peace' is a word that's easy to overlook here. But *shalom* is a very significant Bible idea that means something like 'complete wholeness, the sum total of covenant blessing, the full enjoyment of everything that God has promised'. There is no *shalom* for the wicked (48:22). We need the Prince of *Shalom* (of 9:6-7) to bring *shalom* to Zion (52:7), God's people: their salvation is the good news of *shalom*, their new covenant is *shalom* (54:10) and they will enjoy *shalom* (54:13). All creation will rejoice to watch them led out from their captivity in *shalom* (55:13). And finally, the Lord will establish *shalom* at the end of history (26:3). All this happens only because the Servant took our punishment on himself (53:5).

Every covenant had a sign (a rainbow for Noah, circumcision for Abraham, sprinkled blood at Sinai). For the covenant with David, the 'everlasting sign' of 13 is ... a permanently renewed universe! Wow! God has a much bigger project underway than just bringing his people back from Babylon!