

Engage the World with the Gospel
God's Word will Not Return Empty
Isaiah 55

If I were to ask you to list the Top 10 great chapters of the Bible, what would make your list? Obviously, this is a subjective list. Your Top 10 may be quite different than mine, but there would be some chapters about which we would all agree, although our biggest problem would be limiting the list to 10 chapters. Genesis 1, Genesis 3, Genesis 12 and 15, with the Abrahamic Covenant, Exodus 20, with the Ten Commandments, Psalms 1, 23, and 119, Isaiah 53, Matthew 5-7 with the Sermon on the Mount, John 1, John 3, or just about any other chapter in John, Acts 2, Romans 8, 1 Corinthians 13, Hebrews 11 – you get the picture. I am well past 10. Today's message comes from a chapter that you may not think about often, but it belongs in this rarified air – Isaiah 55. I think you will agree, even as the text is read.

We are rounding the bend to a lengthy home stretch of a series about Jesus' command for us to share the gospel, the title of which is taken from the third prong of our three-fold Purpose Statement: Engage the World with the Gospel. Today's message examines the role of Scripture in the sharing of the gospel message. That may sound redundant because there is no gospel message apart from Scripture, but it is amazing how often we depend on clever presentations, on the one hand, or we feel like a failure, on the other hand, if the person does not believe the gospel. It has been said several times in this series and it is time to say it again – sharing the gospel *is* successful evangelism. How can we know this? Because God's word always accomplishes the purpose for which it was intended. Be blessed as the truth of Isaiah 55 washes over you. In respect for the word we now read, I will ask you to stand.

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.

2 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.

3 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.

4 Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.

5 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.

6 “Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call upon him while he is near;

7 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.

8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

10 “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,

11 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.
12 “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.
13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall make a name for the Lord,
an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

My goodness – the themes in this chapter! The invitation to all peoples for salvation, the grace of God’s gift of salvation, belief and unbelief, the blessings of salvation, priorities and covenant, the omniscience and omnipotence of God, the blessing of repentance, the wisdom of God, the faithfulness of God, the power and life-giving properties of Scripture, redemption and restoration, and the promise of eternal bliss. I will stop here, but trust me, there is more.

The primary focus for this morning is the power of Scripture to accomplish God’s purpose of salvation, although we are privileged to play an important role in sharing the gospel. David Calvert has spent years thinking about Isaiah 55:10-11. This year David is writing a doctoral thesis on Speech Act Theory that is informed by this text. I wanted you to hear from him about his work as it relates to the topic at hand today, so David, enlighten us on the importance of the truth of Isaiah 55:11 – “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.”

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID CALVERT

So, what does this have to do specifically with Speech Act Theory?

How is the Trinity at work in our text?

In the same way that the Trinity is clear to us once we have the NT to make sense of what God was doing all along, we also see the gospel of grace in the OT, and it is abundantly clear in Isaiah, when you know what you are looking for. If Isaiah 55 were in the NT with the slightest adjustment to the wording, it would be the very place to which we would send disciples to know how to share the gospel with those who don't know Jesus. But, knowing that the gospel is all the way through the Bible, not just the NT, there is no reason we should fail to receive instruction from this important chapter.

Here is the way we will proceed from this point. I will give you the three points for the message and offer a brief comment for each point, then we will work our way through the text. At the end, we will revisit the three points for just a moment. I hope that you will be thinking all week about Isaiah 55 and the privilege it is to share God's free-gift of salvation with the world. First:

1. Make certain that you emphasize God's grace to sinners through Jesus when you present the gospel

Probably the most *difficult* aspect of evangelism is getting over our fear of what others will think of us if we share the gospel. Probably the most *frustrating* aspect of evangelism after you have shared the gospel is the seeming inability of the hearer to understand that salvation is by grace through faith and not of good works even though you have spelled it out in detail. You share the gospel and ask if they understand and they say, "Yes – do the best you can and hope you can be good enough to get into heaven." Think of ways to counter this misunderstanding with something like, "I used to think that, but then I realized that Scripture repeatedly says that *he saves me* – I do not and cannot save myself. Salvation is not by works of righteousness that I have done, but according to his mercy he saved me. That is Titus 3:5, but there is much

more where that came from. Emphasize repentance, as our text does, and share the gift that God offers to everyone who hears and believes. Second:

2. God's way of salvation is far above man's attempts to get to God

Our ability to understand God's mind was distorted by the fall. Distorted beyond any ability to discern his thoughts unless he reveals them to us, which he does by the Holy Spirit who elevates Jesus in our minds and makes the gospel plain to us. I spoke of frustration when people do not understand the simple message of the gospel, but remember, if God had not opened your eyes and ears and heart to him, you still wouldn't understand grace. Third:

3. When you have shared God's word, trust him to accomplish his will

Is God's word that powerful? Think about this from Hebrews 11:3: "By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible." God *spoke* the universe into existence. Out of nothing. He also brings new life to those who are spiritually dead. That is how powerful his word is. That is what David was explaining. Let's look at Isaiah 55.

For all the world, verse 1 looks like an open invitation to receive the delights that God offers – and, in one respect, that is exactly what it is. If we were reading directly from the Hebrew, though, we would recognize that these words of invitation are imperatives, or, commands. There are, in fact, 12 imperatives in the first seven verses. The first word in the chapter, in the Hebrew, instead of "come," could be translated, "Hey!" In other words, God wants your attention. Then, he makes an astonishing promise – you can enjoy the richest blessings that are available to mankind for free. Your money is no good here, but the goods are available, nonetheless. In other words, you will not receive

my blessings through your good works. Come and drink. It is very much like “look and live” from John 3.

Isaiah 55 is situated at the end of a section that comprises 16 chapters – Isaiah 40-55. For even more context, the first 39 chapters of Isaiah mostly concern God’s judgment on his people for their disobedience, their breaking of the covenant that God made with them through Moses and the law. Isaiah prophesied that the people of Israel would be taken into captivity to Babylon. Isaiah 40 marks a turning point in the book and the latter half of Isaiah offers comfort and assurance that God will bring his people out of bondage back to the land. It must be noted that Isaiah talks a fair amount about Gentiles being recipients of God’s blessings. Chapters 40-55 emphasize the role that God’s Servant has in God’s plan. God’s Servant sometimes refers to Israel, his people, but there are times where an individual is clearly in view, such as we learned a few weeks back in Isaiah 52-53 where Jesus is the Suffering Servant. Clear to us, that is, though not so much to those who first heard Isaiah’s prophesy. Although someone during the Babylonian captivity would have found great hope in the promise of returning to Jerusalem, someday, there seems to be so much more offered here. In fact it is in this same fashion that Jesus offered living water to the woman at the well, in John 4, and to the people at the Festival of Booths in John 7, as we saw a little over a month ago.

In verse 2, God asks how the people can be content with less than him. Why do you spend your money for that which will not nourish and sustain you? People are often open to the gospel when they recognize the inability of this world to satisfy them, or, when their ability to fashion a wonderful life for themselves is no longer viable. Instead, God says, “Listen to me and delight yourself in fatness.” The word “Listen” is key. Remember Romans 10 – “Faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ.” How did God speak to his people? Through Isaiah speaking God’s word. How does God bring the truth of the gospel to the lost in our day? Through you speaking God’s word.

The Hebrew conception of “hearing Scripture” included obedience, which demonstrated belief. That is why Jesus said, “Let the one who has ears to hear, listen.”

That is the point of verse 3. There is a lot I am unable to say here because of time, but it is interesting that God invokes his covenant with David rather than the Mosaic Covenant of law. God had already told the people through Isaiah that they would be punished because they repeatedly broke the law that God gave them through Moses. By pointing to David, God reminded the people that the Messiah is coming. Who is the Messiah? Verse 4 can only be referring to Jesus. And the promise of a leader for the nation must be associated with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. How can the people buy food without money, without price? Because the price has already been paid by Jesus. Verse 5 is quite the encouragement for a people who feel outnumbered and despised by others. If everyone mocks you at work or in the dorm, know that God is for you and one day you will not only be blessed by God, but you will be a blessing to others who will, in some cases, come running to you.

Verses 6-7 form a call to repentance. In fact, if a person is repentant, she *will* be seeking the Lord and she *will* enjoy God’s blessing of salvation through Jesus. Encourage people to call out to the Lord in repentance and faith. Do we choose him or does he choose us? Yes. Don’t concern yourself with such matters when you witness – encourage those who don’t know Jesus to call out to him. In fact, if you find yourself at the bedside of a loved one who is dying, encourage him or her to call out to Jesus, who died for their sins. Even if the person you love is in a comma – who knows what may be heard or not? Roman 10:13 tells us that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Believe it! Encourage others to believe it! God is a merciful God and I have seen several late-life professions that for all appearances seem genuine. Call on the Lord.

Verses 8-9 remind us that God's way of salvation is not the way we would choose. God's way is a theology of the cross set against man's theology of glory. Man seeks to achieve glory by climbing up to God, but God descends to our level and speaks from the unlikeliest of places – the cross. That's Isaiah 53, made clear by the Holy Spirit, who revealed the Father's plan of salvation in the sacrifice of the Son. Although Isaiah 55:8-9 relate first to our salvation, there is much application for us with the craziness of our lives – God's ways are higher than our ways. You can always trust God.

Let's read verses 10-11:

10 "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,
11 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.

Do you believe this? God's Word will always accomplish the purpose for which it was intended. In Isaiah's time, rain determined the difference between life and death. So does God's word for all people of all time, but the stakes are eternal, not for this life only. In fact, we could say that the spiritual stakes are infinitely higher than our physical well-being. God's word is 100% reliable. When you believe God's promise to you, you will then have life. 1 Peter 1:23 puts it this way: "You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God."

God's accomplishment of his predetermined purposes is a prominent theme all the way through Isaiah. We are told in Isaiah 55 that God accomplishes his purposes through his word. No doubt, this was in the

Apostle John's mind when he wrote the first words of his Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John was referring, of course, to Jesus – God's final word of salvation for his creation. When you have shared God's word with the lost, when you have shared Jesus with those who don't know him, you will have done all that you can do. You can pray, of course, and that is part of God's plan, but you can be sure that God's Word will accomplish the purpose for which it is intended. For some, the gospel is life, but for those who refuse to believe, it is condemnation. As difficult as this may be to accept, God uses you to deliver his word in both directions. Make sure, though, you understand that it is God who saves and it is God who judges. Your job is to deliver his word.

Verses 12-13 point to the joy of all creation with the mention of returning to the Lord at the command of his word. All creation, ruined by man's sin, will one day rejoice at the return of the resurrected Jesus and the restoration of creation to its original state of perfection. Have you heard that recently? If you were here last week for the message from Romans 8, you did. God's word is consistent, from beginning to end, and God's Word is powerful enough to call us to repentance and faith in Jesus. What a privilege to share this wonderful news with the world!

So, as we conclude, let's look at the points that were mentioned earlier, summarizing the truth of Isaiah 55 as we think about engaging the world with the gospel.

1. Make certain that you emphasize God's grace to sinners through Jesus when you present the gospel
2. God's way of salvation is far above man's attempts to get to God
3. When you have shared God's Word, trust him to accomplish his will