

An Invitation to Life

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on April the 4th 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled An Invitation to Life and is from Isaiah chapter 55 verses 1 to 13.

In the old city of Jerusalem is the marketplace. And if you walk in through the walls of the old city through Jaffa Gate, you walk down a little lane called David Street and you get swallowed up by the market.

Little tiny shops with corrugated iron roller doors on their windows when they're closed. Just little shops not very deep and certainly not very wide on the street.

And in the mornings when they're setting up, out come all their coat hangers and their rods and they hang items outside their shops. So the sense of the lane is that it's crowded over with items and bits of buildings and awnings stuck out over you as though you're really going underground.

[1 : 17] It's a great place. I love the times that I've been there, walking through there. The smells. Smells of spices and cinnamon and coriander and all sorts of weird and wonderful things.

The smells of animals hanging. When you go to their butcher, they'll cut you off a bit of the meat that's hanging outside the shop. The smells of the donkeys walking down or the cats on the side of the street.

Interesting. It's a very busy, bustling place. It's not a quiet, reflective place. You have to keep watching for where you're going. Rather than bumping into people all the time, it's a crowded place. You have to keep your hand on your wallet so that it doesn't get pickpocketed or so that you don't spend too much money. It's a noisy place. Because all the vendors are out to sell their wares and they shout and talk loudly, calling to you across the street to come and buy from their little shop. Or even their shop around the corner or their shop a few lanes away. So eager are they to get your business. It's a busy, noisy place as people talk to each other and argue with each other in very loud Arab type language and gesticulations all the time.

[2 : 41] It's a very interesting place to just stand on the side if you can find a safe spot and watch. It's an aggressive place. People haggling prices.

People arguing about how much they'll buy or how much they'll sell for. To give you an illustration, some years ago when I was there, one time I was asked by this vendor to go into his shop and write out in English for him closing down sale.

Now I knew it was a ploy and I knew that this person could easily write English. But I felt a bit obliged to do it. So I did. And he was very grateful.

My special friend for you, I'll give you free this necklace and bracelet for your wife. I don't have a wife. For your girlfriend, this necklace and bracelet, it's free for you.

I didn't know what to say about not having a girlfriend so I kept my mouth shut. And you can buy the matching earrings that go with it for just 60 shekels.

[3 : 49] The whole lot combined was probably not even worth a shekel. I wasn't interested. And the price went from 60 down to 3 before he realised I wasn't interested and didn't buy.

Oh yes, free necklace and free bracelet. It's a bracelet but it comes with strings attached. I don't think you get a bargain in old Jerusalem. I don't think it's possible.

But certainly your ears prick up when you're offered something for nothing. When you're offered a special price. That you think maybe just now I've got something at a bargain basement price.

We always listen, don't we, when somebody offers us something cheap or something free. Although we're always probably very cautious as well.

If you can imagine walking down those lanes of old Jerusalem. And God speaks. And God invites you to come and buy.

[4 : 57] It's enticing. It's alluring. He's wanting to trap the passers-by into coming into his shop to look at and buy from his wares.

To the thirsty he shouts out he's got water. To the hungry food. Even better than that, wine and milk. But God's not talking about physical food.

He's talking about spiritual truths and spiritual realities. He's offering spiritual salvation and satisfaction. But then comes the paradox.

Then comes the thing that makes you prick up your ears as you're walking through this busy marketplace. Come and buy without money. And without price.

Hang on, you think there must be strings attached. There's no such thing as a free lunch. Especially if it involves wine. What's God's invitation saying?

[6 : 00] The reason he's offering these spiritual truths for nothing is for a couple of reasons. One is because we couldn't buy them even if we had lots of money.

You see, the spiritual truths that God offers us can only be received by people who acknowledge their spiritual poverty. That they cannot save themselves. That they cannot earn enough.

Whatever it is, enough of. To buy the spiritual salvation that God offers. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot satisfy ourselves spiritually.

We cannot buy the ticket to heaven. We can't buy the ticket on that boat to heaven. Unlike that rich man, that awful rich man in the film Titanic.

Who tries with his wads of American dollars to buy a ticket on a lifeboat. That is only taking women and children. We can't buy the ticket to heaven.

[7 : 01] We can't buy salvation. No matter how much money we've got. No matter how much moral worth we have. It will always not be enough.

But the other reason God is offering this for free. Is not just because we can never have the goods to buy. But rather because the price has already been paid.

The price has been paid by the servant who died. Two chapters before in chapter 53. A passage I preached on on Good Friday morning. There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.

Except for that servant who died. And the price is paid in full. Here's the price. Ours the freeness. So God issues this amazingly generous invitation. No strings attached. Come he says. And buy without money.

[8 : 01] Without price. And three times he issues the invitation in verse 1. Everyone who thirsts. Come to the waters. And you that have no money.

Come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money. And without price. And yet the oddity is. That these people prefer to spend their money.

On something that will not satisfy. They prefer to try and spend all their money. And receive nothing. Rather than pay nothing.

And receive everything. That's what verse 2 is saying. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread? Why do you labour for that which does not satisfy?

You see the Israelites to whom this is addressed are in exile in Babylon. They think God has abandoned them. So they've turned to other gods and idols. And they think that those gods and idols will satisfy them spiritually.

[9 : 06] And God is saying they won't. They don't even offer bread. What you think you're getting to satisfy is nothing at all. Why do you spend your labour? Why do you expend your energy and your labour and toil for that?

Why are you trying to work your way to that salvation when there's no salvation on offer anyway? Because those gods and idols are nothing. I often think that false religion are like prawn crackers.

You know those things you get at Chinese restaurants. They sort of taste nice. But they don't do anything really, do they? They just sort of dissolve in your mouth.

And the only result is they make you thirsty. False religions like that. It looks nice. Might even offer something for free.

Because they usually give them to you free at Chinese restaurant. If you pay enough money for the other things. But then they don't satisfy, do they? They just make you thirsty. So you have to buy lots of drink.

[10 : 12] False religions like that. That's what God's saying here to these Israelites. You're barking up the wrong tree. You're spending all your money and not getting anything in return.

But come to my shop. Special price for you, my friend. It's free. You don't have to buy a thing. But what I offer satisfies. God is trying to direct his stubborn people to his food that satisfies. And so he moves into the reality. He's used a metaphor of coming and buying and offering water and wine and milk. But now he gets down to the real thing. He says in the middle of verse 2. Listen carefully to me. And eat what is good. And delight yourselves in rich food. Not the sort of junk food of the false religions. Not the golden arches of Babylonian worship. But rather real, rich food that satisfies. Incline your ear, he says, and come to me.

[11:20] That's what it means to come to the waters. That's all the metaphor, if you like, in verse 1. The reality is come to me, to the God of the Old Testament, to the God of Israel, to the God of Abraham, to the God who makes the promises in the Bible, to our God as well.

Come to him. He says, come to me. And how do we do that? The parallel in these verses is listen to me. If you come to God, then you listen to his word.

That's what coming to God is all about. And remember from what we've seen in recent weeks in Isaiah, in the mornings at least, is that when we listen to God's word, it carries the connotation of obeying.

Hearing implies heeding. And the coming to God is made possible by the servant's death. It's the servant who's taken away every barrier that precludes us coming to God, enabling us to come to him and listen to him.

Now the sort of problem that Israel has got with God is this. They think that God's broken all his promises. He promised them a land.

[12:29] The land's been conquered. He promised them a king. The king's been killed. He promised them a temple. The temple's been destroyed. All the promises of God seem to have come to nothing. So why listen to him?

So God reassures them that he is faithful. That despite their exile in Babylon, his promises still stand, and he is still reliable to the things that he said. So at the end of verse 3, he says to them, I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

Who was David? The second king of Israel, 300 years before these words were spoken. And the promises that God made to David in the book of 2 Samuel, were that David would always have a descendant on the throne.

Now it's clear that that's not true at the time that these words apply in exile. But God is saying, my promise to David still stands. There will be a king on David's line, a king forever on David's line, in David's line on David's throne.

My promises are not abandoned. They're not broken. They still stand. And then he goes on in verse 4 to say, see I made David a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.

[13:45] But not only is he speaking about David here, he's also speaking about the one who will culminate David's line, or bring it to a culmination. That is the servant we've already seen who will die.

He's the one who's descended from David, the Messiah. And so as a result of that king, that messianic king in David's line, you the nation, the people, in verse 5, shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you, shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he's glorified you.

What's going on there? It's saying that God's promises for the world still stand. He promised that through the descendants of Abraham, and through the descendant kings of David, he would bring blessing to the world.

That's not a promise that's broken, even in exile. And he's saying that through this Messiah king to come, the servant who we saw in chapter 53 dies, those promises will be fulfilled.

And that's why the nations shall come to you, in verse 5, and that's why the people are being glorified, the end of verse 5, all through the servant who dies.

[14:56] Well, God repeats the invitation in verse 6. This time he uses different language, but it's the same sort of thing. Seek the Lord.

But two things are added here. Two dimensions are added to this seeking or coming to God. One is a sense of urgency. The other is a sense of repentance.

Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near. The implication is there will come a time when he is not near, when he will not be able to be found.

Now is the time that he is near and can be found. Call upon him now is the sense of urgency in this verse. It implies that time is limited. In chapters 56 to 66, we see where world history is heading. There the chapters we'll be looking at in the weeks to come, in the evening service. It's culminating in the final kingdom, the new heavens and new earth of God. But until that time is actually consummated, there is an opportunity to come and seek the Lord and find him.

[16:11] But once that new heaven and new earth arrived, the time is lost. So there's an urgency here about seeking the Lord. Don't delay.

And that urgency, of course, applies to us two and a half thousand years later, because we're two and a half thousand years closer to the time when it will be too late. Don't delay.

The other sense that's added in these verses six onwards is a sense of repentance. Now, I think I've known people, and you probably have too, who think that coming to the Lord is sort of like adding a sort of God into your portfolio of life.

That somehow your life is just heading down a little path, and as you pass by, oh, there's a bit of God, well, let's sort of take him on board, and we'll carry on our merry way. But the reality is different and more sobering than that.

The direction of a non-Christian life doesn't pass anywhere near God. It's heading right away from him. So if we're to seek the Lord and find him, then it will mean a change of direction.

[17:28] It's like entering the freeway the wrong way, going down the off-ramp, and you find a bold red sign, wrong way, go back.

No pleas about it. Go back. That is a call to repent, to turn around, to do a U-turn. And what any person needs to do if they are to find God is precisely that.

And that's the dimension that's added in verse seven about seeking the Lord. If you want to seek the Lord, if you want to call upon him, then this is how you do it, and what must be entailed.

Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts. Ways and thoughts that are wrong, that need to be forsaken or abandoned, in order to turn to God.

Now, in chapter 53, when the servant died, he died taking and bearing wickedness. But if it's our wickedness that he is bearing, then we subjectively have to forsake it, give it to him, get rid of it, pass it away.

[18:40] Don't be deceived into thinking that your ways and your thoughts approximate even God's. They are far from God's.

That's what the point of verse eight and nine is. To make it clear that none of us can think that our ways or thoughts don't need to be abandoned or forsaken if we're to come to the Lord.

For my thoughts, God says, are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says 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.

It's not just saying that God's so much bigger than us that he thinks big things and our minds a little limited. It's saying that our minds are so warped and small by sin and by evil and wickedness.

God's ways are pure, ours aren't. God's thoughts are pure, ours aren't. The contrast and difference is not because God is infinite and we're finite. The contrast is because God is perfect and holy and we are not.

[19:44] So we are to abandon our ways and thoughts. And notice how sin is described there, for that's what it is. Our ways, that is our behaviour, our actions, our patterns of life, and our thoughts.

The things that might mull around in our minds that never get acted upon or sometimes do. You see, sin is both of that. Often we think only in terms of actions, because that's what we see in ourselves and in others.

But just as dangerous, if not more so, are our thoughts. More so because other people can't see them and we think we can get away with them. But God knows and he sees and he judges and he calls us to forsake them and abandon them.

For those who are prepared to forsake their ways and their thoughts comes a great reassurance of mercy and pardon.

The end of verse 7. For those who are forsaking their way, let them return to the Lord that he may have mercy on them and to our God for he will abundantly pardon.

[20:57] It's saying the same thing twice which is typical of Hebrew poetry. For those who forsake their ways, there is mercy and pardon. all made possible by the death of the servant in chapter 53.

Without his death, there's no mercy or pardon that God can offer. But because he died, there is. And it's real.

And it's worth having. And it's free. No doubt you all know people who are unreliable.

People who say to you they'll do something, they never do it. People who promise you faithfully that they will do this and they don't. And it's very easy to think that oh well, I don't trust their word.

It's very easy to think sceptically of some people. And it's very easy to be surprised when they actually do what they say for a change. I guess for Israel in exile, they had every opportunity to doubt God's word.

[22 : 06] Every promise of his seemed broken. And no doubt there were many of them who became quite sceptical about God's word and God's promise. And doubted that he'd ever keep a word.

So God now in verses 10 and 11 makes it clear to him that his word is effective and it is reliable. And whilst it may look to them that it's broken, that is not the reality.

God's word is not idle chatter. It's not empty verbiage. It's not just a bundle of meaningless words. It's not a religious fantasy. His words are substantial, reliable and effective.

And he compares them to rain or snow. Both rain and snow, as well as God's word, in a sense come from God or from heaven, which is God's place. And like rain and snow, God's word is to produce life.

Rain and snow, physical life. God's word, spiritual life. And like rain or snow, which is basically effective in doing that when it waters the ground, so is God's word.

[23 : 22] And like rain or snow, which vaporizes to go back to where it came from, God's word returns to God. Effective. Doing what it sets out to do.

Not being thwarted by the world into which it goes. God, you see, will accomplish what he purposes. That's what verses 10 and 11 tell us. For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they've watered 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 succeed in the thing for which I sent it. If God's word is that effective, then there's all the more reason to listen to it.

The sort of life which God's word creates is described in verses 12 and 13. For you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace.

The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress.

[24 : 41] Instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle. The hills are alive with the sound of music, basically, is what this is saying. Whilst now in exile there's no joy, the life that God's word creates, that is the God's word of pardon and mercy creates, is full of joy for those who've returned to God.

And whilst for the wicked there is no peace, as we've seen already in earlier chapters of Isaiah, for those who've repented and forsaken their wickedness, now there is peace with God.

And whilst now in lives of sin there are, at least metaphorically, thorns and thistles along the way to make life hard and difficult, ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden and he brought God's curse, brought forth thorns and thistles in the land, all those thorns and thistles will be gone in this perfect place.

This is paradise regained. That's where the people are heading, not just back to Jerusalem, but to God himself, to a renewed garden of Eden and paradise.

And this will be permanent. It will last forever. It shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. This is resurrection life.

[26 : 04] This is kingdom life. This is the life that the servant's death procures and brings. It is life abundant. It is life in its fullness.

It is life forever and it is life with God. And Easter is the day of new life. The day of new beginnings. It's the day of invitation to enjoy the fruits of the servant's death. It's the day of pardon and peace. It's the day of coming to God, of listening to him, of repenting and enjoying the benefits of life with him.

Verse 3 says, Incline your ear and come to me. Listen so that you may live.

So that you may live the resurrection life. That you may live in eternal life with God. And that invitation still stands. It wasn't just an invitation, you've got to pick up this bargain by the 31st of March type brochure in the middle of the newspaper on a Saturday.

[27 : 12] This is an invitation that stands until the final kingdom comes. It's an invitation that was reissued by Jesus himself in the temple. In John chapter 7, when Jesus said so boldly, let anyone who is thirsty come to me.

In the Old Testament, in this passage in Isaiah, it's come to God. But Jesus, with incredible audacity, says, if you're thirsty, come to me.

To God or to Jesus? Or are they one and the same? But the invitation didn't stop there, either. Because in the very last page of the Bible, the same invitation still stands for you and me. The Spirit and the Bride, that's Jesus, say, come.

And let everyone who hears say, come. And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life.

[28 : 29] as a gift that is free. Coming to God means coming to Jesus Christ.

The same Jesus whose resurrection we celebrate today. The Jesus who is the resurrection and the life. You see, if you come to God to live, then you come to Jesus the life giver.

And the life that he gives is free. because it's bought with the price of his death. The invitation begs the question to each and every one of us.

Have we responded? Have we come to him? Have we listened to him? Have we sought him? And found his life?

Do you live the resurrection life? Do you live the resurrection life? Do you know I can't say him? Do you have to subscribe to your movies.

[29 : 48] Bye! I can't continue to