

# Hungry for God!

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Looking back quite a number of years now, what I really loved most in life was going fishing. I always believed in God and I would go to church on a Sunday because a lot of my friends did.

And really, although I believed in God, it was really to keep in touch with my friends. But if I possibly could, Saturday or Sunday when I wasn't at school, school holidays, I would much prefer to be going fishing.

But in England in the spring, and this was coarse fishing, it wasn't trout, so it was the other fish, and that's not salmon. There was a closed season through March into June, and then on June the 16th the season began again and I would be back at the lakeside once more.

Being England, it was a lake, not a lot. And church was okay in the closed season, I didn't have anything else to do.

And that's how life was. Fishing was my real love. And then one of my fishing friends became a Christian. And he lost interest in fishing because he got something more important to him to do.

[ 1 : 2 0 ]     And I couldn't understand because I'd go to church and I'd come on. But no, he was very adamant and resolute that no, he wanted to be in church on Sunday because that had come to matter more.

And he wasn't very good at explaining it, but I could see there was something that changed in his life. And really annoyingly, he seemed a lot happier as a result. He found a joy in life that I certainly didn't have.

And that really made me begin to think. And occasionally when I went to church, there would be a gospel sermon. Jesus wants you to follow him. And I would quietly ignore that.

And then, towards the end of the closed season that year, Richard, my friend, was baptized. And I went to the baptismal service.

And I'd been sort of thinking and thinking and thinking about this. And this was the week before the closed season ended. The following week, I would be back at the lakeside.

[ 2 : 2 1 ]     But no, that wasn't to be. The minister preached the gospel sermon. And it was as if God himself was speaking. I can't remember what the minister was saying. But it was as if Jesus was saying, I want you to follow me.

A bit like the disciples, follow me and I'll make you fishes of men. Although I don't think that was the passage. And I knew that if I wanted any sense of purpose in life, and I wanted God in my life, I had to put him first.

And I can remember thinking, oh, what am I letting myself in for? I remember thinking, do I really want to do this? But also thinking, I don't want to not do it.

This matters more. And it was that night that I became a Christian. And the following Sunday, I wasn't by the lakeside. I was in church. And there was a new joy and a new purpose and a new reality in my life.

But that hunger, I think, had sort of grown over those few months of that closed season. Until that point, when I was challenged, I knew I had a very real choice to make.

- [ 3 : 31 ] And thank God, it was the right choice in the end. And after becoming a Christian, I was still free to go fishing. I still did. I still do.
- And I love chocolates and biscuits probably more than I ought to. But in their proper place. We got caught out once. Back when I was working as a hospice chaplain, we had a planning meeting in Cambridge overnight in one of the Cambridge hotels.
- And we were planning that year's annual conference together. And the hotel looked after us pretty well. It gave us a chance to actually spend time with one another as fellow chaplains.
- But we were a bit disappointed on the last morning because we booked in for lunch and we were going to go back home our separate ways after lunch. And what came through wasn't really that great.
- It was a sort of selection of biscuits and nibbles. And yeah, it's okay very well, but not really a lunch. But we filled up on that and we continued just to sort of tie up the meeting.
- [ 4 : 42 ] And then about 10, 15 minutes later, this really impressive lunch was wheeled through. And what had happened was that the sort of morning coffee break sort of biscuits and nibbles with the coffee had come through a bit late and we'd mistaken it for lunch.
- And we really filled up on the nibbles and we really had no room for the very nice food. All I can say was that Carol got the benefit along with lots of other people because it was all doggy bags for the walk.
- It didn't go to waste. But it is that sense of when you are hungry and you fill up with wrong things or the right thing in the wrong place that your hunger is met and you haven't got room for the things that really matter.
- Lord, as we look at Isaiah 55 together, we pray that you would speak to us through it, that you would feed us, that you would encourage us and build us up with the good things that you have in store for us today.
- Amen. Isaiah has that vision here in chapter 55 of an appetite that is very real and that isn't being properly met.
- [ 5 : 59 ] People are hungry. They are thirsty. They're even dissatisfied. But it isn't that they're not trying. They're trying to meet their needs.
- They're trying to meet that thirst, meet that hunger and find satisfaction, but they're going about it in the wrong way. And Isaiah at this point steps in and offers them an alternative.
- Come, all who are thirsty, come to the waters. You have no money. Come, buy and eat. Why spend money on what is not bread? And your labor on what is not satisfying.
- They're spending their money. They're spending their time. They're spending their labor. They're running out of money, time and labor for stuff that isn't nourishing them, isn't making them feel full and content.
- They fill themselves up, but they never stop feeling hungry because this that Isaiah is talking about isn't the real thing. And nutritionally, and Carol is a food specialist here, so we could wheel her in at this point, and she could talk to us about the problems of junk food and empty calories and deceptive packaging and all the other things that when you were working in environmental health you would be up against on occasion.
- [ 7 : 14 ] Stuff that wasn't good. And it would, in another sense, it could still leave you feeling hungry if it didn't give you food poisoning. People try to fill up, and when they fill up with the wrong things, it doesn't help.
- But Isaiah here isn't talking about food safety or food standards. He has a spiritual point to make. On this occasion, at this time, actually Israel, materially speaking, was a prosperous nation.

Things were going well for them. You've never had it so good, the government could be saying to Israel, as Isaiah prophesied. The problem was, with all their material prosperity, they didn't feel any better for it.

They felt inwardly unfulfilled. One of the big problems they had was that they were worshipping the wrong gods. And Isaiah, on this occasion, decides to use the carrot rather than the stick.

Rather than pulling them up short for their idolatry and denouncing their many and very real sins, in this chapter, on this occasion, Isaiah offers them a better alternative.

[ 8 : 28 ] Rather than saying, you are a bunch of idolatrous, adulterous sinners. The line Isaiah takes in this chapter is, don't you realise how much you are missing out on?

Because by turning away from the Lord, you are missing out on the good things that he has for you and those are the things that would really bring you satisfaction. Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters.

Why spend money on what is not bread? Listen to me, eat what is good and your soul will delight in the richest of fear.

This is both the gospel passage. We can use this for the Lord to say, come to me for the first time. Turn to me. Let me into your life because I've got something better for you.

Or we could be Christians for years and we occasionally need that refresher, that reminder, hang on, I've got a bit stale, I've got a bit dry, I've got a bit off course.

[ 9 : 31 ] And Isaiah is saying to you, the Lord has got more for you. And Isaiah 55, this third Sunday in Lent reading, as we go through a fast, traditional fasting time, Isaiah speaks of satisfying, nourishing food, food for the soul.

It helps us to take stock as we consider what Easter means for us, what Jesus is suffering and dying and rising again, means for us the better things that the Lord has in store for his people.

As we go on through Isaiah 55, verses 3 to 5, give ear and come to me, hear me that your soul may live. This is nothing new, Isaiah is actually saying here.

This is the Lord's standing commitment to his people. It's a long term standing orders thing. It's always been the case, it's always been available, it's available now.

And Isaiah is saying, come on, listen, receive it at last, give ear and come to me, that your soul may live.

[ 10 : 44 ] That's a very attractive quality. There's something wholesome, something real about that statement. So that your soul may live.

what is really within you, what is the real you, deep down inside, needs to be alive. Needs to be really, really alive.

And that's what Isaiah's talking about here. There's something really attractive about that. And it's a bit like what Jesus says in John chapter 10, verse 10, where he says, I've come that you might have life and have it abundantly.

I've got something that is indescribably wonderful and good. And it will reach down into the depths of your being and make you feel and be good.

It'll put you in touch with God. There'll be that sense of this is what life is for. This is what I was created for. And all the things I try to fill my life up with, to try and achieve that and never quite make it, this gets down there in a way that none of them can.

[ 11 : 55 ] I remember before I became a Christian, when my friend Richard had become a Christian, thinking, why on earth it's so nice fishing and just sitting out and being out and being part of nature and it is nice.

And I loved it and I still do. That sense of being outdoors and very much and seeing the wildlife and being part of it all. And why on earth would he want to sit in a church on a Sunday morning when he could be doing that?

It didn't make sense. And yet when Jesus came into my life, it did make sense. Jesus says, I've come that you might have life and have it abundantly.

Because he then sends us out to do these things with an additional quality to them. Because we take Jesus out of here with us. there's something special about praising him together as his people.

But it doesn't stop at 12 o'clock. We go out and Jesus goes out with us. If he puts his spirit within us, the Holy Spirit stays with us wherever we go, whatever we do, whoever we meet and brings that extra quality of life with him.

[ 13 : 08 ] I've come that you might have life and have it abundantly. And yes, this isn't anything new. this was God's lasting plan of salvation. It's what he spoke about to Abraham.

It's what he spoke about to David. And what he would centuries later speak about through Jesus. On this occasion, Isaiah links it to David. I will make an everlasting covenant with you.

My faithful love promised to David. That love that I promised to David, I will give to you. That is what God was saying through Isaiah.

To know God loves you. He knows you, he knows all about you, and he loves you. And letting that love into your heart and into your life is what makes all that difference.

That is God's lasting plan of salvation. Let him in. Isaiah is mission-minded as well. He's not setting barriers or limits, he's not excluding people.

[ 14 : 16 ] And as we read on through verses 4 and 5, we see that Isaiah has recognized that God's plan isn't just for a few people, it's not just for the nation of Israel, it is for everybody.

I have made him a witness to the peoples. And the peoples is basically a word, you know, it's for everybody. wherever they are, whoever they are, whatever nationality.

I've made him a leader and commander of the peoples. Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations that don't know you will hasten to you. This is about everybody else, including us here.

He is going to be a witness to us, he's going to lead us, he's going to summon us, and he's going to attract us to himself. All these different words that speak about God coming to us, and drawing us, and calling us to him, as Jesus did to the disciples.

Drop what you're doing, leave the fishing, follow me, I've got something better for you to do. As a gospel message, this is for you.

[ 15 : 25 ] If you've never done that, if you've never let God in, he is wanting to come in. If you've been a Christian for years, it's a reminder that we have that outward looking mindset as part of what God wants us to be like.

He wants us to be looking outwards and sharing his love with others. Nothing new, it's the Lord's long term commitment. Then as we look through really most of this chapter, verses 6 to 11, there's a bit of a tension here that this is a time limited offer but it's also time less.

We need to be careful with this. We're very often warned these days against high pressure sales pattern. This is a limited offer only, you've got to sign up for it and it's only available today.

If you leave it till tomorrow, you're too late. You always have an alarm bells ring, I'm being railroaded into something here before I can think about it. And I know that evangelists can be pushy at times.

You'd rather respond to Jesus today because if you go out, I remember somebody did that last week and they were run over by a bus. And that sort of thing. And you're left thinking, am I responding to God's call here or am I responding to a very pushy evangelist?

[ 16 : 49 ] And Carol has a testimony, I'm going to tell a little bit of it, perhaps she'll tell more another time. But she too became a Christian following an evangelistic sermon.

Minister preached the gospel and Carol, being Carol, said I'm not going to respond today, if it's real I'll feel the same way about it tomorrow and then I'll be a Christian. So she did that, she didn't respond on the occasion, but she did, I mean that was a genuine, it wasn't a sort of a, I'm putting that off and making my excuses.

The next morning she prayed, Lord, are you still there? If this is real, yes I will become a Christian. And she responded and became a Christian the following day.

And that way she tested that calling, that it wasn't an evangelist's patter, it wasn't high pressure salesmanship or manipulation, she knew the voice of God was still calling the following day because that offer was timeless.

But there is an urgency in Isaiah 55 because we are very prone to prevaricating, putting it off, procrastinating, leaving things later, and we can close our minds and forget.

[ 18 : 08 ] And so Isaiah is saying, call, seek the Lord while he may be found, call on him while he is near, because this is a serious thing and it is to be taken seriously.

But God's mercy is freely offered. We've just sung, to God be the glory, and it speaks about the vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Reminder that we do need to be saved, we do need to be forgiven, we do need a change of direction in life. God's mercy is freely and widely available, but we do need to avail ourselves of it.

It doesn't mean that we don't need it, that we can put it off and quietly forget about it. Isaiah in verse 7 in this chapter says, let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts.

That is primarily a call to the wicked that they need. If you know that you've got a guilty conscience, that there are things in your life that you're not proud of, there's an opportunity to turn away from them.

[ 19 : 22 ] There's also a responsibility for the good guys to let them and to welcome them when they do. The conversion of St. Paul, he was on his way to persecute the church and to kill believers, and yet Jesus stopped him dead in his tracks and turned him around.

And it was actually thanks to Barnabas, a Christian in the neighborhood, who actually recognized that this was a genuine move of God in Saul's life. He changed his name to Paul and said, look, this is real.

And he welcomed him into the church. When a lot of other Christians were very wary about having anything to do with this man, he says he's become a Christian, but is he just trying to worm his way in so that he can find out where we are, who we are, and then arrest us.

There's a risk involved here. But let the wicked forsake his way, and the evil man his thoughts, let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him.

There is forgiveness available. God's way is very clear. How he works, how things are. God's ways are seeds and the rain comes and waters them.

[ 20 : 59 ] God will do something similar in bringing to life and bringing to fruit what he's wanting to do in our lives. And like the seasons and like the weather, we have to work with it.

We're just at the moment sorting out our garden and beginning to sow things, caramel sots and onions. Earlier than usual, we've got potatoes chatting in the lounge, ready to be sown.

For once, we're reasonably on time this year. But gardener's lesson number one is read the seed packet. Don't just rush in and do what you think. You need to know when to sow, how far apart, what sort of soil, what sort of circumstances.

Read the seed packet. Likewise, God given laws of nature guide us in what to do. We have to work with nature rather than work against it.

And Isaiah's point here is just as God sends the rain to water the ground, and different things need seed, sowing and watering in different ways and at different times, but just as God does that, so his word will achieve its promised end.

[ 22 : 12 ] And what we need to do is see, what is God doing here? How do I fit in with it? How does it work? How do I fit in? And the hope throughout all the scriptures is that God has got good plans and work plans and he will see to it that they happen.

We don't have to work it out from scratch, we just have to say, Lord, what do you do? How do you do it? How do I fit in with the way things are? God's word is God's word is like rain coming down on dry ground and bringing things to life.

So it's a time limited offer. Call on him while he is near. But it relates to a timeless plan. God has always worked in these ways.

He can be trusted and depended upon. And what is that plan going to involve? Verses 12 to 13, you will go out in joy and be led forth in peace.

The mountains and hills will burst into song before you. Oh yeah, that chorus that we sometimes think, this is where it comes from. The trees of the field will clap their hands, that beautiful picture, in the wind the branches are waving.

[ 23 : 49 ] Instead of the thorn bush will grow the pine tree. Instead of briars, the myrtle will grow. And this will be for the Lord's renown. The outcome is going to be good in the end.

Despite all the thorn bushes and briars that we clutter up our lives and the present circumstances when things go wrong so easily, the final outcome will be good.

And Isaiah is looking ahead into a distant future at this point. And saying that at the end of time, at the end of creation, all things will work together for good and they will be redeemed and they will be restored and there will be a new creation.

You can read about that in Romans 8. And God's people are going to enjoy being part of it. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace.

And that is our ultimate destiny. To go out with God and to know his joy and to know his peace into eternity. And that final outcome will be for the glory of God and lasting soul, an everlasting sign which will not be destroyed.

[ 25 : 04 ] Is Isaiah's last word in this chapter. So, if you are spiritually thirsty and you are spiritually hungry, don't fill your lives up with wrong things like a child grabbing the biscuits before dinner.

Come to the water that Jesus offers and drink of that. Jesus who describes himself as living water. In Christ you will find living water.

That spiritual reality that brings everything else to life. And a new way of living and a new way of being that can start now and start today and takes us on through the rest of our lives and into eternity.

To God be the glory. Great things have been done. Amen. Amen.