

Means of Grace

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 April 2019

Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[0 : 00] chapter of the Bible, that song was on. It's the same one. It's the same one. So, if you'd like to turn to Isaiah chapter 55, and you're going to get to see what we've just been singing, and it's just wonderful.

Listen, I'm only teasing the Bible. There's a lot of words in the Bible to remember. And those who probably did remember it would probably find that Isaiah 55 is one of those perhaps favorite passages, hence why it comes to mind quickly. So, Isaiah chapter 55. And as we have sung, we now read God's word.

So, now hear God's word. 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. 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, and your soul may live.

[1 : 22] 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.

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 your thoughts. 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.

[2 : 44] So shall my word be that goes out of 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 with joy, and be led forth in peace. And the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

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.

Well may God bless the reading of his word. If you have your Bibles with you, please turn to Isaiah chapter 55, or turn back there.

As you sit in the congregation this evening, and as I stand here, all of us should really only have one thing on our mind, at least at the point of the service beginning, and our participation through it.

- [4 : 02] And that is that we should want to worship God. And we should want to know the ways in which God is worshipped, so that we're doing it properly.
- We want to know what pleases God, and then we want to participate in those things which please God. Now, when we do that, there are benefits to us.
- God blesses us, but we shouldn't be like the person who does this in order to get that. And the reason for that is because you can always tell when a person is, right, with children, they're saying sorry so that they can avoid the discipline.
- They're asking for forgiveness so that they can avoid what's coming. And that doesn't mean that asking for forgiveness is wrong, but asking for forgiveness for that reason is wrong.
- And this is one of the things that we ought to do as we come to God's word. That as we seek to worship God, we need to find out what does God want?
- [5 : 12] What music does God like listening to? What prayers does God incline his ear to? No, what does God want from us? Now, God is in need of nothing, but there clearly is a way of approaching God that honors him, and there's a way of approaching God that dishonors him.
- As you sit here this evening, I want you to leave this evening when the service is all over. I want you to be blessed, but I want you to be abundantly sure as to how God blesses you.
- And while I'm not going to address other issues like why he doesn't, and we could get on that another time, I want you to sit here this evening and go, God, I now know God wants to bless me, and I now know how God does it, and I now know why I've not been blessed in the past, or why I've not been blessed recently.
- And it could be because you're avoiding some of the things that are mentioned here in Isaiah 55. So over the last four weeks or so, four services at least, I've mentioned the importance of the means of grace.
- The means of grace are those means which God extends to us the benefits of redemption. All the work that Christ did, all the blessing that God has, he has for us in Christ Jesus.
- [6 : 39] And through the means of grace, I'll get on to what they are, those benefits are extended to God's people. They're poured out to them. They are there for the taking. We have to be in the right place to receive.
- Hence, Isaiah's called to the people, come, come. He's trying to line up God's people with God's blessing. So that as the blessing comes down, they are there, they are there in the place where they will receive.
- Now, if they're not there, then the blessing doesn't come down on them. They don't get to receive the blessing. They don't get to have any of it.
- And that's not because God isn't blessing, but it's rather the case because they haven't come to the place of blessing, to the person of blessing. Or they have come, but they've come in the wrong way or they've come, you know, in a different direction, whatever it may be.
- So what we have here is an example of what we see in the New Testament of God extending his blessings to the people of God based on an invitation of them coming to receive those blessings.
- [7 : 52] And that answers the question, and this is so important for this church, of how God cares for the souls that he has purchased with the blood of Christ. How does God care for you bearing in mind that you exist at the cost of Christ's death?
- So here you are, you enjoy all the blessings of God. Surely the price that God paid must look like something. So the issue is, is what does that look like down here on the ground?

And do we live a life that shows that we appreciate the cost paid? So we can reverse it the other way around. The way God cares for those that he has purchased with the blood of his son is by extending the benefits of redemption to those people through the means of grace.

The means of grace being prayer. The means of grace being the word of God. The means of grace being communion, baptism, faith. Those graces, those means, are how you receive the blessings of God.

And God wants you to have them because of the price he paid for you. He paid a dear price, and that's then now opened up the way where he can pour out to you the blessings that he has for you.

[9 : 18] So you will notice here that all the blessings come at a cost. And we see that in Isaiah 55. We also see in the New Testament that we are blessed in Christ Jesus, and we are only blessed in Christ Jesus with the blessings that God has for us.

So what this means is, does the life you live reflect the cost that Christ paid? Okay, let it sink in.

Is the life that you're living reflecting the price that God paid for you to live, have the life that you have? And that's what Isaiah is getting at here.

It's getting us to consider these things. Now, of course, we can consider these things in great detail when we get into the New Testament, but simply put, there's the question. Does your life reflect the price that God paid for it?

And we know that the price that God paid for it is a very dear price, the death of his own son. So dear, in fact, that we saw something happen which had never happened in the whole of eternity.

[10 : 31] When Jesus said, my God, my God, why have thou forsaken me? Never before was there that kind of conversation between father and son. Never before was that kind of separation between father and son.

And yet here we are sitting in the blessing of reconciliation at the cost of that separation. So it's very, very costly. Very, very costly.

And we ought to live a life that reflects that we understand at least that cost, that we're moving to understand that cost. So as we come to Isaiah 55, here's a summary or an outline of what Isaiah does.

You'll notice that the word come appears a few times. And the word come is simply God's invitation to you to come to him. And the invitation for you to come is to receive the blessings that God has for you.

So the blessings are there and so the invitation is now extended. Okay? I want to bless you. I want to, you know, come you who are thirsty. Come, eat.

[11 : 40] They're here, but you have to come. The invitation's being given, but you have to come and be aware of what you're coming to. Now this is where people, even God's people, go off the rails.

They're invited to come and then they scratch their heads as to the direction. So God invites you to come and you're going, okay, and how do I do that?

Right? And that's the question that you ought to be asking. Because the invitation for you to come begs the question of how do I do that? Where do I go? Okay?

If you're being invited to come to God, how do you do that down here tonight in this service or tomorrow morning after breakfast? Wherever you do it, whenever you do it, the question or the invitation of you to come begs the question of where, how, when, how do I get there?

And if you don't ask the question, you simply said as a mantra, God wants me to come to him, but you never get there. And you never get there because you're not sure how to.

[12 : 48] So what Isaiah spells out is not only the invitation for you to come, but he lays at the direction of how to get there and how to receive the blessings that God has for you.

You'll notice that these blessings in verses 1 and verse 2 come at different types of costs. Okay? There are costs in verse 1.

Let him who has no money come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money, without price.

And then verse 2, we have a different type of cost being paid and this is by the person who's not listening. Hence, by the end of verse 2, there is a call, not only an invitation, but an invitation for you to listen diligently.

Pay attention to God. In other words, don't say you're a good listener if what you're listening to is not what you ought to be. Okay? The issue here is that you're called to listen, but it's what you're called to listen to.

[13 : 59] Okay? All of us can be good listeners to the wrong thing. All of us can pay attention, it seems, to other things far more easily than we can to the things of God.

You know, we would think nothing of perhaps sitting down and watching a lengthy program, but struggle to study God's Word for 15, 20 minutes. And that there is simply, perhaps it's a bit of laziness, but it's, perhaps it's because our listening can only cope with easy stuff.

You know, stuff that doesn't involve any moral change on our part, any challenge on our part, any growth on our part. We can just take it in like chewing gum for the eyes and just chewing gum for the ears.

It's just easy and we can spit it out a few moments down the road. So the call here for you to listen diligently is a difficult thing to do.

It takes a bit of effort. It takes quite a lot of effort. So you may be a good listener, but the question of whether or not you're God's type of listener will depend on what you're listening to.

[15 : 13] Now, having listened, the reader then understands, or the listener understands, that he is to repent. He is to repent of not listening before. He is to repent of the way that he has been going.

He's to repent of trying to get to God, perhaps in a different way than he has. Okay? Isaiah's background here is speaking to a people who are not doing the things that they ought to be doing.

So when Isaiah invites them to come to God, it is because they're not coming to God. When Isaiah, God is inviting them to listen, it is because they're not listening. Okay?

When Isaiah is telling them to repent, it's because they're not repentant. So that's the background of people that he is speaking to. Why does God want us to repent?

Well, because he wants us to learn. And the only people that learn in the church are those who repent. Okay? Repentance is simply a means of learning. Learning God's ways, God's thoughts, and God's, the way God wants things done in the world.

[16 : 20] And then there's the reassurance as we go down into verse 11, that when God speaks, his word changes things, his word creates things, brings things into existence.

the benefits of redemption are the trees breaking out in joy and clapping their hands. It's a picture of what will be, but what currently is not.

It's a picture of what God's word is able to accomplish, and of course, able to accomplish in your life, if of course, you come, repent, and receive the blessings of God.

God. So for those who are far off, for those who are close, for those of you who may be somewhere with God that's at a distance, come. Here's your opportunity.

God's telling you here in Isaiah 55 to come. Just come to him. Okay? There's, he's no, when you get there, you will not be turned away. And, and he's inviting you, and he's saying, well, I'm not ready yet.

[17 : 24] You're, you're, you're never going to be ready on your own terms. So just come as you are. And that's the invitation. Don't wait for all the pieces to be aligned and in place before you come.

You know, we've all met those people who set out to do a good job, but they, they never make a start because they never have all the pieces ready to make a start. Well, start with what you have and the rest will come as in when you need, just come, just begin and let God bless and change you.

And how do I come? What's the direction? Well, prayer, faith, the word of God, communion, baptism. These are the means of grace.

This is the direction in which you will receive the blessings of God. When you are being invited, as we hear in the New Testament, you are invited to come and this is how you come.

This is how you come to the place where God pours out his blessing, in prayer, in the word of God, in the word of God being preached, in the word of God being studied, in the word of God being read, in you participating in communion, in faith.

[18 : 38] This is how God pours out his blessing to you. And if you're not there, you're not there to receive the blessing. So, I don't go on about the reason why you should turn up at Bible study.

I don't go on for the reason and perhaps I should. Perhaps I just should strip it all the way back to the bare theological position of the means of grace. The reason you need to come and study your Bible, okay, and have perhaps me, the teacher of the church, teach it to you is because it is the means by which God will bless you.

The reason why you need to come together and pray together is because it is the means by which God will bless you. The reason why you need to come together and strengthen one another's faith is because it is the means of God by which God will bless you.

The reason why we ought to participate in communion together is because it is the means of grace by which God will bless you. So, when God invites you to come, in the New Testament as we read, that is, there it is.

There's what that's, there's the direction. It's been laid out. That's the path that you're to walk in because God has made clearly that he wants to, you simply got to come in that way.

[19 : 53] So, I only have, that was the summary and I only have one point which you'll be pleased about but it's an important one and it is understand the invitation. Understand the invitation.

The cost as well but more importantly the invitation. God is inviting you. God is, God is putting in his word, words which to get you from where you are to come to him so that he can give you what he has.

Understand what God is doing. And so, the invitation is here, let him who has no money, you know, the thirsty person, come to the waters. Come to the waters.

I will quench his thirst. Let the hungry person come and I will feed, I will support, I will build him up. And you'll notice here that it doesn't come without a cost.

Hence why verse one is such a strange verse. If you read it carefully, this is how it reads. Come, everyone who thirsts comes to the waters. Well, that makes sense.

[21 : 02] And he who has no money, come, buy and eat. Well, if you're paying attention, you'll understand that there's a difficulty there.

How can the person who has no money buy? Okay, is this an invitation for only those who have money? And that's not what's being said here.

Rather, what is being said here is in the context of what verse two then goes on to say. Because verse one finishes, come, buy wine and milk without money, without price.

verse two, why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy? What we're noticing here is that people inherently understand that things cost.

But when it comes to the things of God, we tend to forget that cost. So, all of God's blessings to you have a cost. the difference is is you don't have to pay for them.

[22 : 09] They have been bought for you by Christ. So, you're invited to come and the cost has already been met. Okay? The cost was been paid by the shed blood of Christ.

Every payment that needed to be made was made by Christ Jesus. In fact, even the payment for your life means that now you are not your own but you are bought with a price.

your life is bought with the same blood that Christ shed is that then pays for all these blessings to be extended to you.

Why? Because in Christ only are these blessings extended to us. So, there is a cost to God's blessings but the blessing is you don't pay it.

Jesus does. Okay? There is a cost to the blessings of God but it's a cost that you don't pay. It's a cost that God pays himself hence why he can extend this invitation to those who have nothing.

[23 : 12] Absolutely nothing. You can come and eat and drink. You can come and feast on God. You can come to the place where you are in want and God has the blessings to give you.

Just come. Yeah, but just come. Yeah, but what about just come? And if you have to repent on the way like Isaiah calls these, you repent on the way but you do it as you come.

As you come to God, you say, well, this thing's in the way. This thing, repent of it and come. Isaiah's not shy in pointing out the things that will keep you back but he tells you how to get past them.

Repent. Forsake your ways and pursue God's. Forsake your ways of thinking about things and doing things and pursue God's and the way to forsake them is to repent of them.

That means to turn away from them and just do it God's way to put it absolutely simply. Now, it is possible to go through this life and waste money.

[24 : 17] In a very material sense. You may have even fallen foul of the position of having paid for something and then perhaps a day later or a week later, you know, a week after Christmas while things have broken and you go, that was a waste of money.

Right? We all experience that purchase and then recognize that the value of that purchase isn't turning up. And we're not afraid to say that was a waste of money.

The price that was paid for it is not proving itself in the thing that I've actually bought further down the line. And Isaiah uses that image as a person not listening to God.

They go out in the world and they are engaged in costly pursuits trying to gain and all of it ends in zero. All of their pursuits ends in zero.

They don't listen to God where there is blessings bountiful if only they came. Rather, they go out and spend their money. They spend their time. They spend what they have, their time, their attention elsewhere.

[25 : 27] And when they calculate the books at the end of the week, they go, that was a waste of money. Okay? I've got nothing to show for it. And even if you have got something to show for it in the temporary, in the here and now, okay, it doesn't stay around for that long.

So it may have limited temporary value that gives you pleasure as long as the novelty is still there, but that soon goes. You're spending for that which does not satisfy.

And so a person who engages in their unbelief, who doesn't listen to God, it's like a man who spends money realizing that every time he spends it, he looks back on what he's bought and goes, that's a waste of money.

That's what Isaiah likens a person who doesn't listen to God like. That's what he's like. He's wasting everything. He's got, there's lots of cost involved, but it's all wasted.

It's all wasted. All your pursuits end in zero. Hence why you are called to listen to God. You're called to come.

[26 : 35] You're being invited to God. Now, as we move through this, there are blind spots that you might have and I guess it's my opportunity, my position, my, to be able to point out perhaps a blind spot.

But I want to be able to do it in the same way that Isaiah points it out for us here. here. You will notice that when the man is thirsty, or whoever it is that's thirsty, everyone, then God's solution to this is water.

That's not all that surprising, but it's surprising how often that correlation isn't understood by people who belong to God. You'll also notice that when the person is hungry, he's told to come and eat.

And so, what you begin to notice is that what you have on one side is matched by what's on the other side. They match. The thirsty person, okay, is met and matched with water.

And they two go together and none of us find any complication there why that's a problem. Because there is no problem. A thirsty person who drinks water has his thirst satisfied.

[27 : 53] Okay, what about a hungry person? Well, in the same way, a hungry person who eats food, who eats bread, has his hunger satisfied. In other words, you'll notice quite clearly that the solution to the problem matches the problem in that it's the positive of the negative.

Okay, a thirsty person needs some drink, needs water. And God knows this. And what Isaiah is showing us is that when you are spiritually thirsty, in other words, this isn't a physical thirst now, this is a spiritual thirst.

And when you are spiritually hungry because you just are, then what's the counterpart? You go, well, I don't know.

I know that if I'm physically thirsty, I know the counterpart is water. I know that if I'm physically hungry, I know the counterpart is bread. I know it's food.

But what happens when I'm spiritually thirsty? What's the, what happens when I'm spiritually hungry? What's the answer to that? Well, the answer is you can't find it anywhere in the world.

[29 : 05] You can't find it anywhere in the world. You can only find it through the means of grace. God will give you what he needs to give you at that point as long as you come and present yourself through the means of grace.

Now, you're going to say, well, what's the difficulty in that? I can understand. I can understand how that works out. But let me try and just illustrate it in a slightly different way.

When a person is spiritually weak who belongs to God, what do they do? When a person who is spiritually hungry and they belong to God or they're spiritually depressed and that all of these things are possible, they're not only possible, they are real.

What do you do? Well, a lot of Christians treat it in the same way they treat a headache. Exactly the same way they treat a headache. Okay? So when you have a headache, what do you do?

You go and take a paracetamol. But when you take a paracetamol, it is not because your body is lacking paracetamol. So why do you do it?

[30 : 12] When you're thirsty, you drink water because your body is lacking water. When you're hungry, you eat food because your body is lacking food. And when you've got a headache, you take a paracetamol.

And yet your body is not lacking paracetamol. And the same thing, you do the same thing spiritually. So you're spiritually down, you're spiritually depressed, you're spiritually in a weak spot and you take the equivalent of a paracetamol rather than the food in the water.

Why do you do that? So something so simple, you wouldn't think that any of us could get it wrong. But here we are, we go and get it wrong. And people get it wrong because they have the spiritual down, they have the spiritual depression, they have the spiritual headache of sorts, and what do they do?

They buy a bottle of wine. They book a holiday. They spend some money. They spend some money just for the sake of spending some money. Or they sit down and just watch TV for no other reason than just watching TV.

Even worse if it's in the middle of the daytime. Pointless shows. Okay, why do you do all those things? Well, you do all those things because you've got the equivalent of a spiritual headache and you're trying to take paracetamol.

[31 : 26] You're masking the issue. You're covering it up. You're unable to notice what you actually need. And yet, you can all spot it when it comes to physical thirst and water.

You can all spot it when it comes to physical hunger and food. But the moment it gets into a spiritual life, this simple principle just seems to disappear on many.

And we end up taking the spiritual equivalent of paracetamols and masking the problem. We're just pain-killing. Okay? When people book holidays because they have nothing else to do, they're pain-killing.

So that they don't, when people spend money because they have nothing else to do but spend money, they're pain-killing. When people put the TV on because they just can't cope with thinking that through, they're pain-killing.

That's what they're doing. They're just trying to kill pain. And what does it do? It kills pain, at least for a little bit. And then it all comes back. Why? Because all of those things end in zero.

[32 : 29] None of them work. And none of them work because God promises to give you his blessings in a certain way. So, listen. Listen to God.

Listen to God's invitation and come. But come in the way that God has appointed. Come in the way that God will pour out his blessings to you.

Don't try and get them another way because you won't be able to. And don't try and think that I can... How long can I manage with this headache before I have to take paracetamol?

And, you know, some of us do that with a headache, right? I don't like taking tablets. And so if I've got a headache, I try my hardest to how long can I go. And because I'm a man, it's not that long, right?

You know, two minutes. Right, okay. Whatever it may be. And, right, it's a bit longer than that. But you understand. And don't... If you...

[33 : 30] Those who are spiritually weak, down, this is an invitation that you shouldn't say, hang on a minute, let me think about it. Don't think. Just come. Come to God in God's way and let him pour out his blessing.

And this is why it's so important. Verse 11. As you come through repentance for not listening, if you haven't listened, you need to repent. If you haven't come, you need to repent and come.

You need to turn and come. But here we see in verse 11 that God's word goes out of his mouth and it shall not return to him empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Why is the word of God a means of grace? Why is the word of God the means by which God extends to you the benefits of redemption? Because God's word is the means by which God fulfills his promises.

If you keep yourself from his word, then you keep yourself from that which God sent it out to accomplish. That's why you're called to listen. You're called to listen and the next thing Isaiah says is that God's word goes out of his mouth and it shall not return void, that it will accomplish the very thing that it was set out for.

[34 : 51] So come. As you come to his word, know that you're met with a God who not only promises, but his words are the very means of making sure those promises are met in your life or are met in the world, period.

So come. Don't keep yourself from the means of grace. And when we don't understand that God works that way, we're doing the spiritual equivalent of taking a paracetamol.

We just try and deal with things in a totally different way. So here's the exhortation as we close. God's inviting you this very evening.

You're being invited to come to God. And the invitation is an invitation to come through repentance to the means of grace, to the place where God pours out his blessing, namely his word, his prayer, faith, communion.

But here we see it's verse 11 through his word to his people. He's asking you to forsake your vain efforts and your wasted costs.

[35 : 59] Don't go back to them. Don't repeat the same thing over and over again. The reason why self-help books and bookshops are so successfully there all the time is because people think this book will do it.

All I have to do is read this one book and everything's going to be different. It's a wasted cost. It's a cost, but it's a wasted cost because that's not a means of grace.

That's not where God pours out his blessing to his people. So don't think you can get this a different way. You can't get it a different way. You can only get it through the means which God has chosen.

So if you've kept yourself from prayer, if you've kept yourself from exercising faith, if you've kept yourself from studying God's word, then repent. Repent.

And come to God. He's inviting you. Come to God. He is inviting you. As a final thought then, those who respond to that invitation this very evening do so because they recognize the blessing and where the blessing comes from.

[37 : 12] They also recognize that it's the very cost that Christ has paid so that they can have those blessings. As you present yourself through the means of grace, the study of God's word, prayer, faith, communion, and these means, you are recognizing the very cost that Christ paid for you to be able to do that.

You are recognizing Christ's death on the cross for you. And you are saying to God, as you present yourself to God's word, as you present yourself to God this very evening in this service, you are saying to God, I recognize the cost and I'm demonstrating that it's worth it.

I recognize what you did to buy me and I'm demonstrating with my very life this evening that I'm thankful, that I appreciate it, that me being here worshiping you, God, is a reflection of my understanding of what Christ did for me on the cross and I thank you for it.

And those who don't, those who don't apply the means of grace, those who don't appropriate the means of grace and even listen to the command of God to listen to him, are in grave danger of giving the impression of not appreciating what God has done.

or at least they're reflecting that the Christ, the price that God paid through the death of his son isn't having the impact on them that it is or that it ought to have.

[38 : 43] So as we worship God, our whole life is a reflection of what we recognize about the price that God paid for us. And so with that in mind, with that price in mind, that cost in mind, without you having to raise one ounce to come before God, come.

Everything's paid for. Everything's been paid for. So come. Come to Christ Jesus. Amen.