

Are You Still Hungry | Isaiah 55
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I. Isaiah 55:1-5 (The Invitation)

Isaiah 55 has long been read as a prophetic rally cry for evangelism, an invitation for “everyone who thirsts” to “come to the water.” To come “without money.” To partake of the food and drink that truly satisfies the soul—the water, bread, milk, and wine of God. Whoever eats this “good food,” says the prophet, “will live,” he will benefit from God’s “steadfast, sure love” through God’s everlasting covenant.

It is curious how the call to “come and eat” is largely achieved through *hearing*. “Listen diligently and eat what is good” (v. 2) and “delight yourselves in rich food, incline your ear to me, hear, and you will live (v. 3). The food of life—the water, bread, milk, and wine—clearly stands for salvation in Christ which we ‘eat’ by ‘hearing’ and drawing close to God in faith.

We see this concept of “faith as eating” elsewhere in Scripture. In Jeremiah the prophet says to God, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart.”

Or as the great Advent Anglican collect says,

Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and the comfort of your holy Word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life .

. .

The prophet invites “he who has no money” to “come, buy and eat!”

“Come, buy wine and milk,” he says, “without money and without price.” If “eating” is a symbol for “faith”; “buying with no money” is a picture of God’s grace, his undeserved, unearned favor by which he offers salvation as a free gift to be received by faith.

The economy of God's grace does not devalue redemption by offering it freely. Salvation is not easily obtained by the Lord through cheap grace. Saving grace was costly. The grace of God came at the cost of an infinite debt paid by Christ on our behalf through his atoning death and victorious resurrection so that salvation could be infinitely offered freely to all by grace alone through faith alone. How strange would it be to the flow of Isaiah's logic if showed up to the waters and insisted on paying a fee? Not only would it be contrary to the freedom of the offer; it would be presumptuous to think that some finite and fallen thing or amount that we could offer could supplement the all-sufficient merit of Christ's sacrifice.

I was listening to a worship song from the early 2000s that captured this well:

You are everything that is bright and clean
And You're covering me with Your majesty
And the truest sign of grace was this
From wounded hands redemption fell down
Liberating man
But the harder I try the more clearly can I feel
The depth of our fall and the weight of it all
And so this might could be the most impossible thing
Your grandness in me making me clean
Glory, hallelujah
Glory, glory, hallelujah

David Crowder, "Wholly Yours,"
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Drinking of the divine water, wine, and milk; eating of the divine bread; these can be freely offered without price because the debt has already been paid by God himself. As Scripture says, 'we were bought with a price through the precious blood of Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 7; cf. 1 Pet. 1:18-19).

As Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us,

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

‘Eating’ and ‘drinking’ as a metaphor for ‘faith’ are found not only in the Old Testament Prophets and beloved Anglican prayers; the idea of “faith portrayed as eating” is central to the teaching of Jesus and the New Testament. In this way, Jesus provides the New Covenant key to the fullest sense of Isaiah 55.

Isaiah says, “Come, buy, eat; without price; don’t settle for **bread** that can never satisfy.”

Jesus said to his disciples, “**I am the bread of life**; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever **believes** in me shall never thirst.⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever **believes** has eternal life.

Isaiah exclaims, “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the **water**.”

Jesus cries out to the crowd, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” (John 7:37-38)

Jesus, after asking the Samaritan woman at the well for a drink said, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you **living water**.” ¹³ Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the **water** that I will give him will **never be thirsty again**. The **water** that I will give him will become in him **a spring of water welling up to eternal life**.” (John 4:9-14)

Isaiah says, “Come, buy **wine** and **milk** without money and without price.”

The gospels and are the eucharistic words of institution tells us, “Likewise, after supper, Jesus took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink this, all of you; for this is my Blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for you, and for many, for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this in remembrance of me(BCP; cf. Lk. 22:14ff).

And the apostle Peter says, ² Like newborn infants, **long for the pure spiritual milk**, that by it you may grow up into salvation— ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

The bread, the wine, the water, the milk—they are the food of the feast of salvation offered freely by grace to all who would come and eat **by faith**. This word, “all” or “everyone” is significant.

We see in verse five that “the nations” run to God’s people because of his glorious presence and his steadfast love exhibited through the light of his eternal, unbreakable, sure covenant. God had promised Abraham that through him, “all the families of the earth” would be blessed. In Christ Jesus, God has been faithful to that promise. His salvation has gone out as a light to the world.

But is the invitation to “come and eat” meant to be taken as an invitation to “eat” by exercising faith in Christ only at conversion? Is this the ancient equivalent of a Newcomer’s meal, or the TFCA 20s-30s lunch, where once you age out, no more metaphorical Chipotle?

Is not the nourishment of faith required throughout the entirety of the Christian life, not just at the beginning? Are food and nourishment necessary for the newborn alone?

Friends, when’s the last time you ate? (And I don’t mean breakfast). When’s the last time you felt *truly* spiritually hungry, and not lethargic and full? The nutrients of the gospel require regular consumption through the ongoing feast of God’s word procured through faith; not just the initial “eating” associated with conversion. Therefore, Isaiah 55 is not *only* a call to evangelism; it is a call to ongoing growth in the obedience of faith and of holiness for Christians new and old.

The passage does say, however, that the nations and new converts **run** to the people of God because of the Lord’s presence and provision. The word rendered “**run**” means to “**flee for refuge**.” The newly initiated **flee** to the feast. Perhaps, this is because a hungry person is, by nature and circumstance, keenly aware of the pain of an empty stomach.

But I want to address Christians, which constitutes many who are here this morning. When you hear about the gospel, after all these years, however many they may be for you, does your instinct tell you:

- “Run to the feast!”
- “Long for pure spiritual milk.”
- “Come, buy with no cost”
- “Eat the bread, drink the wine, let the living water well up in you to eternal life so that you might never thirst?”

As we turn to verses 6-13, I want to ask a question related to the state of our soul, and whether or not we feel a consistent ongoing felt need to flee for refuge to the feast of the gospel. After all this time, are you still hungry for God, or has your soul been satiated by something else, someone else, even yourself?

II. Isaiah 55:6-13

Ila. Are you still hungry? (vv. 6-9)

- 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.

It is a strange thing to find oneself, many years down the road with Jesus, and yet strangely not hungry. Have you ever felt that? It's not so much a dark night of the soul, as it is a spiritual diet that lacks a desire for full surrender to God.

We *desire* to desire more of God; but like a child who eats dessert before dinner, we sense that somehow, we might have spoiled our spiritual dinner. Why is it that we so often lack an innate, insatiable hunger for the things of God, as good, and eternal, and superior as they are to all other earthly things on offer? The answer is that we cannot hunger for a feast if we come to the table already full.

Full of what? Well, if verses 6-7 provide any clue, full of *ourselves*. Our thoughts. Our ways. Confidence in ourselves, our skills, our ability to control outcomes all on our own. In response to this, Isaiah exhorts us to forsake (which means “to abandon”) our ways and our thoughts so that we can receive the Lord’s compassion and pardon by following God’s ways and God’s thoughts.

Someone might say “what is all this *we*, language.” Is not Isaiah speaking exclusively here to non-believers? After all, he refers to them as “the wicked” and “the unrighteous man.” Would the Bible speak of believers in this way?

Notice, though, what else Isaiah says about the wicked, “let him **return** to the LORD.” Who can “return” to the LORD except a person who has already tasted and seen God’s goodness and grace?

In the Old Testament, these two terms, “wicked” and “unrighteous” do not mean, “the most morally terrible, evil, corrupt and horrific people on planet earth.” When the Hebrew Scriptures talk about the “unrighteous” or “the wicked,” this is technical term for them that refers to people whose thoughts and ways don’t align with God’s thoughts and ways; people who are either *are* outsiders or who are *acting* like outsiders, even though they should know better.

In using these terms, Isaiah is *not* referring only to unbelievers; he is referring to *us*; to we who have already “come to the waters to eat and drink without cost”—who have, in other words, “believed.” He applies these terms to believers whose thoughts and ways have caused them—intentionally or unintentionally—to become misaligned with the ways and thoughts of God. He is calling them, he is calling us to return to the Lord. If Isaiah 55 verses 1-5 is all about faith; verses 6-13 is all about repentance and ongoing faithfulness.

The reason so many of us lack spiritual hunger is because we are already spiritually full. We are still partially or primarily full of ourselves. We talk about wanting to be filled with the Spirit. But how can we expect the Spirit to fill a space that is already fully occupied—by ourselves; by our ways and our thoughts! We sing “Holy Spirit you are welcome here” while wearing a blinking spiritual “No Vacancy” sign around our neck.

Given the rest of what Isaiah 55 says, that God's word, "shall not return to me empty," but it shall accomplish that which God purposed, and shall succeed in the thing for God sent it. And that that God's word and ways, leaves us not only hungry but also satisfied,

"You shall go out in joy
and be led forth in peace."

[Testimony]

Last year was a difficult year for me. I found myself full of myself—full with my own thoughts and ways of solving problems; full of my own ways of dealing with disappointment, disillusion, uncertainty, and fear.

I found I had little felt hunger for God. My problems were *my* problems. Only I could solve them, or so I thought. To be 'too spiritual' about it would risk yielding my agency to a force beyond my control.

Paschal's wager would say, trust God, if you are wrong, you lose nothing; but if you are right, you gain everything. But I found myself operating almost in reverse.

If I surrender it all to the Lord—to God's ways and God's thoughts—what if I lose control of the result? What if the windows that are open to me to become my true self, the choices and opportunities open to me, what if they close forever, and I miss my window. How foolish I would feel for trusting God and losing out. Perhaps God would even slap my wrist, "The saying is don't just sit there, do something," not "Don't just do something; sit there." I worried that full surrender and trust in the Lord would leave me disappointed, unfulfilled, and embarrassed for being so spiritually trusting, so 'supernaturally naïve.'

I had people telling me, "if such and such doesn't happen by age 50, you'll get left behind; you'll never arrive at your full potential." This created a negative feedback loop in my soul that brought to places of deep despair and even depression. Just as a bad physical diet will lead to bad bodily health outcomes; a bad spiritual diet will lead to a certain weakness of the soul; the self consuming itself because it is full of the self. One leads to atrophy of the body; the other to an often slow and

almost undetectable atrophy of the soul. And I speak as a pastor, a Christian.

The bizarre thing is, when we ‘take charge’ over our own lives we wrongly sense that we are strong, stoic, even manly. Full surrender to God’s sovereign governance of our lives can seem weak, inferior, passive, like a retreat in advance, like a somber resignation of all remaining resolve leading to a premature death of the soul rather than a spiritual virtue leading to its life.

During this time, I found myself consistently present with God and others, but unable to fully enjoy them. When major decisions needed to be made, and my wife would need to be made, I would reassure her, “I hear you, but I will make it work.” I was hearing her; but not hearing her. It was hard to focus on the simple joys of life, because filling ourselves with our ways and thoughts has its own way of causing a visual spiritual lethargy and blurriness. Everything perceived comes through the lens of unclear thoughts and motivations untethered from God’s providential jurisdiction.

Conclusion

The most well-intended people will let you down. They’ll mean well, and they’ll forget. And, you will surely let others down—sometimes through not fault of your own, and sometimes on purpose. We’re imperfect, often well-intentioned, image-bearing, flawed creatures. As the old hymn says, “a certain sign of grace is this: From the broken earth flowers come up pushing through the dirt.”

We over-promise and underdeliver because our plans and intentions are not offered with the guarantee of God’s infallible, unchangeable, unbreakable covenant underwriting. But God says “I will make with you an everlasting covenant” (v. 3). God will raise up evergreen trees, myrtle and cedar, pushing through the broken earthiness of our createdness to conform us to the image of the creator, Jesus Christ. Do you still hunger for him? Do you still thirst for more of the living God? Then come to the water. Come buy, eat—with no money. And as Isaiah says, “you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace.” In order to feel the hunger and thirst for righteousness through which alone we will be satisfied (Mt. 5), the Lord calls us to forsake being full on ourselves, so that he might fill

us with himself, a greater portion of his Spirit, and a greater affection to bring his glory to the world he came to save.

DQ

- 1) Do you feel that you are full of too much of yourself and therefore, insufficiently hungry for God, for his ways, thoughts and will? Identify some of this human food that has filled your spiritual stomach and then practice prayerfully removing it so that you might hunger for God.
- 2) Why do we have a tendency to 'come to the water' but to want to 'contribute' rather than to 'come, buy and eat with no money'? How does salvation by grace alone through faith alone, and faith as "eating" help us to recalibrate our performance mentality and to recognize our own deep need for grace and for God?
- 3) What does the fact that believers are referred with loaded language here as 'wicked' and 'unrighteous' do to motivate you? What does it mean that a person can be 'in the Spirit' but act as if that's not true, as if they are 'in the flesh'? How can what we are in fact (righteous by faith) be demonstrated and lived into in how we live? Do we live by what we are, or do we live as if we were still "in the flesh" or "unrighteous"?