

Robert Vannoy, Major Prophets, Lecture 20

Isaiah 55 - 56

Isaiah 55:1-56:2 Free Offer of Salvation

Let's pick up with Isaiah 55:1-56:2, which is the second section that we're looking at here. It's an invitation to individuals to avail themselves a free offer of salvation. I think like the previous chapter, like 54, so this chapter rests directly on the description of the redeeming work of the servant in Isaiah 53. So again, you're speaking about results of the work of the servant, and in the first three verses you have an invitation to people to avail themselves of the results of the work of the servant.

Isaiah 55:1-3a God's Invitation—Don't Chase What Cannot Satisfy

In verses 1 to 3, that invitation is given in rather general terms. Notice, "Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come to the waters. He that hath no money, come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money, without price. Why do you spend money for that which is not bread? And your labor for that which satisfieth not? Harken diligently unto me and eat that which is good and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear and come unto me. Hear and your soul shall live." I think the breaking point is after that first phrase there in 55:3a. But here you have God's invitation in general terms. I don't think from reading those three verses it's possible to learn a great deal about the exact nature of the invitation because it's in very general terms.

But the stress of the verses is that while people are laboring to secure something, it is really never going to satisfy them, yet God is offering true satisfaction without cost. "Why do you spend money for that which is not bread?" People are searching for that which satisfies. They're diligently working for it, yet God is offering true satisfaction without cost. So people are urged to forsake their vain hunt for that which will never give them true satisfaction or happiness. Instead of seeking that by their own means and devices, he directs them to accept the free offer that God is laying before them. So the listener's invited to come to the waters to buy wine and milk, to eat that which is good, to

let his soul delight itself in fatness. I think it's clear the terms are figurative. It's not physical bread or water or wine or milk, but something that could be properly compared to them. I think they're examples to what is desirable, necessary, and basic to support life, and the gospel invitation is then put in those terms.

It's somewhat like Jesus in John 4 with the woman at the well. "Whosoever drinketh of the water I shall give him will never thirst." You come here to drink of this water of this well, but you're going to thirst again. I'll give you the water where you will never thirst. But you see, this is free. "Come to the waters, he that hath no money, come. Why do you spend money for what is not bread? And you labor for what satisfies not." See, your efforts at trying to find whatever and by whatever means that which gives true satisfaction will not avail. All such effort is futile and done in vain.

The description of happiness here is more general. Salvation could be included in it, but I don't think it's limited to that. People seek satisfaction and happiness in all kinds of ways, both religious and non-religious. But what the Lord is saying here: I will give you free of charge that which does give full and complete satisfaction.

Isaiah 55:3b-5 Covenant – Sure Mercies of David – Spread of the Gospel

Now, when you get to Isaiah 55:3b through 5, you have something else addressed. Then it says, "And I will make an everlasting covenant with you – even the sure mercies of David. Behold, I have given him for a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the people. Behold thou shalt call a nation thou know not. And nations that knew thee not shall run unto thee because of the Lord thy God and for the Holy One of Israel. For he hath glorified thee." God offers a covenant, an everlasting covenant, which may be described as the "sure mercies of David." Those who will receive this invitation, he says, I will make an everlasting covenant with you, and that everlasting covenant can be described as the "sure mercies of David."

Now you ask, "What are the mercies that were given to David? What were the 'sure mercies' of David that are here offered to all that become partakers of God's covenant, to all who respond to this invitation?" I think the outstanding feature of the

covenant God made with David is the promise concerning his Son. God promised David a continuing line of descendants to sit upon his throne, an eternal dynasty. Ultimately, of course, that is fulfilled in the coming of Christ.

Now verse 4 says, “Behold, I have given him for a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the people.” And it seems to me that the “him” there is not David, it’s the One who was the center of God’s promise to David. “Behold, I have given him. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David.” The “sure mercies of David” ultimately is pointing to the coming of the seed of David, the coming of Christ. “And I have given him, the one who was the center of God’s promise to David, for a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the peoples.

Then verse 5: you have an interesting switch of reference, you might say, as you go through these three verses. Verse five addresses the Messiah directly. You see that when it says, “Behold, thou,” that’s addressing the Messiah directly. “Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou know not and nations that knew thee not shall run unto thee because of the Lord thy God and for the Holy One of Israel; for he hath glorified thee.” Now I’m inclined to think that this doesn’t so much speak of the victory that Christ wins at the beginning of the millennial period, but rather to the outgoing of the Gospel. The coming of Gentiles to believe on him--that is what is in view. “Thou shalt call a nation that thou know not, nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee because of the Lord thy God and for the Holy One of Israel; for He hath glorified thee.” So it seems to me that the stress is upon the call of Christ as it goes out presently in this time, to those with whom he had no direct connection during his earthly ministry, but which now are being presented with the Gospel message. Furthermore, those of whom the Jews in Palestine had not even heard of later would become a prominent part of the people of God.

Isaiah 55:6-7 Gospel Invitation and a Need for Pardon

Verses 6 and 7 have the Gospel invitation repeated, but this time with emphasis on the need for pardon. Chapter 55, verses 6 and 7, say, “Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the

unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” In verses one and two, where you have that initial invitation, the listeners are not addressed as unrighteous or as wicked. In verses one and two the reference was simply to those who hunger for something real. In verses one and two you are directed to where that could be found. But now, in six and seven, the need for repentance and pardon is stressed. “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” The emphasis on repentance, the need for pardon, and the consciousness of sin are a vital parts of the Gospel message. No call to salvation is complete without them, but it’s not always necessary to begin at that point. In this chapter Isaiah doesn’t begin at that point. He addresses those who have a sense of need. They’re longing for something: fulfillment, satisfaction, and he tells them that here it is offered. But as the chapter progresses, he addresses this issue of the need for repentance and pardon.

I have a note here from page 35 of your citations, under E.J. Young, which refers there to verse 6. “Seek is not to be restricted to sacrifice nor even to prayer, nor to a combination of both, but the basic meaning is ‘to tread.’ The action of seeking is probably the stepping to God or simply coming to him. Parallel ‘to seek’ is ‘to call him.’ The two expressions together signify the repentance of faith and obedience. They involve an abandonment of the old way of life, the way of the wicked and the man of iniquity, and the whole soul turning unto to the true God in humble repentance. This must be done while he is near” and so forth.

Isaiah 55:8-9 God’s Ways Not Our Ways

Let’s go on to verses 8 and 9. Isaiah says, speaking for the Lord, “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ saith 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.’” Now, I think the idea of verses eight and nine relates both to what precedes in this section of Isaiah as well as to what follows. If you look back in

the context to what precedes, the normal attitude of human beings is not to forgive people who offend them, who do something against them. The usual attitude is to get even, and certainly fallen man would never think of himself bearing the penalty due by the law to the one who had wronged him. But these verses say God is quite different. “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways.” The climax of that servant passage is where the servant takes on himself the iniquity of those who had sinned against God. So these verses show how different God is, who took our sins upon himself in the person of the servant. “My ways are not your ways, my thoughts are not your thoughts.” But then looking forward in the context, I think they point to what follows in verses 10 and 11.

Isaiah 55:10-11 God’s Word Will Accomplish His Will

In verses ten and eleven you read, “As the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, returneth not there, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.”

At Christ’s first coming, the Jews expected him to set up his kingdom by force. They were looking for this great ruler, a powerful figure, but instead you had the Suffering Servant. The one who comes and dies, and then sends a small group of disciples forth to proclaim what? Proclaim his word. It’s a method that seems like it wouldn’t be successful. It seems futile, this small group of uneducated people proclaiming the word. But that’s the way God has chosen to accomplish his will and spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth. So again you see, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” The emphasis in verses eight and nine points both backward in context to what precedes and forward to verses ten and eleven that in God’s purposes now it’s his word that is going to accomplish his will in the world. And we can be sure that when the Word goes forth, it will accomplish that which he pleases and prosper in the thing to which he sends it.

Isaiah 55:12-13 Figurative: Mountains Break Out in Singing [Nature or Believer?]

On to chapter 55, verses 12 and 13, the last two verses of the chapter. Just a suggestion here. Let me read them first: “For ye shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

Let me just make a suggestion that it’s a figurative statement a beautiful figurative statement of the results of God’s mercy in the lives of his people. All of nature takes on new significance to those who are the children of God. Verse twelve, “Ye will go out with joy, be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” So these are new attitudes, you might say, as the result of the work of God in the hearts of his own people. I think by any viewpoint, verse twelve is figurative. I don’t think anybody would argue that all the trees of the field shall literally clap their hands. I doubt that there would be those, even those who claim to be literalists in their interpretation, who would deny the figurative there.

But when you get to verse thirteen you see then you can ask the question: Is thirteen also figurative? “Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the Lord for a name.” I guess it would be possible that you could say the verse looks beyond what has gone before to the time when the curse is removed from the earth either in the Millennial period or the new heavens and the new earth. Instead of the thorn tree you have the fir tree and you take it literally. But in the context, it would favor understanding it as figurative of the new life of the follower of Christ in close connection with what goes before in verse twelve. In other words, in the hearts of the redeemed, thorns and briars don’t spring up any longer. They’re places filled with the shade of the fir trees and with the beauty of the myrtle tree. The character is different, and that is what you see in the last half of verse thirteen, “It shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.” The

Gospel produces changed lives that are observable. “This shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.” I wouldn’t be dogmatic about that, but again you have an illustration and you see the difficulty, particularly in Isaiah, of sorting out what’s intended to be understood literally and what’s intended to be understood figuratively. And I know of no simple way to give you some kind of formula that you can simply apply and it will solve things like that for you. You have to make judgments, and I think, allow for differences of judgment.

The question is, in verse thirteen, are you talking as in twelve about the lives of those who enjoy the benefits of the results of the work of the servant, or are you talking about nature itself? Seems to me it’s one or the other. Now, I realize that you know there’s a truth that there will come a time when the curse is removed from nature, but whether that’s what verse thirteen is talking about, or whether verse thirteen is simply using the figure of the thorn and the thistle to represent something in the life of a person, I think that’s the question. I’m inclined, because of the way it relates to verse twelve, to take it as figurative of speaking about the character traits of those who are the servants of the Lord as being something observable.

Isaiah 56:1-2 God’s Grace Results in Good Works

You’ll notice that I have included Isaiah 56:1 and 2 with chapter 55. I think it flows on into 56 in 1 and 2: “Thus saith the Lord, keep justice and do righteousness: for my salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed. Blessed is the man that doeth this, and the son of man that layeth hold on it, and keepeth the Sabbath from polluting it and keepeth his hand from doing any evil.” I think that in chapter 56, verses 1 and 2, you have the idea that God’s grace results in good works in the lives of his people. This is the same idea that Paul speaks of in Romans 6: “How shall we that are dead to sin live any longer in that sin.” It is a similar idea. It’s a denial of the idea that man can continue to willingly walk in sin after having become a Christian. So “Thus saith the Lord, keep justice, do righteousness...Blessed is the man that doeth this, the son of man that layeth hold on it, and keepeth the Sabbath from polluting it.” God will give blessing

to those who are trusting in the work of the servant and demonstrate that by holy living. These verses are placed where they belong, not at the beginning of the offer of salvation. At the beginning we have, “Come, receive, accept freely, without money, without price.” That’s not dependent on works, not by works of righteousness that we have done. But here at the end of this offer it comes as an indication of the kind of life that the redeemed person is to live.

The last phrase there in that verse is, “He that keepeth the Sabbath from polluting it, and keepeth his hand from doing any evil.” Young comments that Calvin is probably correct in holding that the Sabbath here is used as synecdoche—part for the whole—and stands for observance of all that God has prescribed. So it’s not that that’s the only thing he is to do, but that’s lifted out as an illustration, or representation for the whole: observance of all that God has prescribed. That brings us to the end then of that second section.

Isaiah 56:3-8 Gospel Invitation Is Not Limited

The final section is 56:3-8: The Gospel invitation is not limited to any race or nation but is open to all. This is the third section. Remember, these sections describe the results of the work of the servant. I think all this material relates back into the work of the servant, Isaiah 53. Chapter 54 gives the assurance of future extension and blessing. Chapter 55 is the Gospel call, its invitation to individuals to avail themselves of the free offer of salvation. Now we come to a short section that stresses the universality of the Gospel invitation.

Verse 3 says, “Neither let the son of the foreigner that hath joined himself to the Lord speak, saying, ‘The Lord hath utterly separated me from his people.’ Neither let the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a dry tree.’ For thus saith the Lord: ‘To the eunuchs that keep my Sabbaths and choose the things that please me and take hold of my covenant, even unto them will I give mine house within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and daughters.” Look at your citations page 34, under Alexander, bottom of the page. Speaking of verse three he says, “The essential meaning of this verse is that all external

disabilities shall be abolished, whether personal or national. The whole class of personal disqualifications is represented by the case of the eunuch. In reference to Deuteronomy 23:1, the expression is generic, or representative, of more particulars than it expresses. The meaning is that all restrictions--even such as still affected proselytes--should be abolished.”

In Deuteronomy 23:1 it says, “He who is wounded in the stones or hath his privy member cut off shall not enter the congregation of the Lord.” There’s a limitation, but now what is being said is all external disabilities, personal or national, are being abolished. The Gospel invitation is open to all regardless of race, nation, or personal disqualifications. So all restrictions that affected proselytes are abolished.

Isaiah 56:4-5 On Eunuchs and Sabbath

When you get on to verse 4 and 5 it says, “For thus saith the Lord: ‘Under the eunuchs that keep my Sabbath, choose the things that please me, take hold of my covenant, even unto them will I give mine house within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.’” Now it seems to me that the walls there, and the house there, it’s not those of Jerusalem or of the temple. Again you’re speaking in a more ideal sense. They’re the walls of God’s house, or dwelling, which had been mentioned in chapter 54, verses 11 and 12. The figure there is of the building where the foundations are laid with sapphires, windows of agates, gates of carbuncles, and so forth. It’s God’s house.

I think you have an interesting illustration of this in Acts chapter 8 because there you read of Philip’s encountering the Ethiopian eunuch and in verse 28 of Acts 8 we read, “He was returning and sitting in his chariot reading Isaiah the prophet, then the Spirit said unto Philip, ‘Go near and join thyself in the chariot. Philip ran there to him, heard him read the prophet Isaiah, and said, ‘Understandeth what thou readeth?’ He said, ‘How can I except some man should guide me?’ And he besought Philip that he should come up and sit with him, and the place of the scripture in which he read was this: ‘He was led as a sheep to the slaughter, like a lamb before a sheerer; still, he opened not his

mouth. In his humiliation his judgment was taken away. And who shall declare his generation, for his life is taken from the earth.” He was reading from Isaiah 53. Then the eunuch answered Philip and said, “I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself or some other man?” Then Philip opened his mouth and began from the same scripture and preached unto him, ‘Jesus.’ And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water, and the Eunuch said, ‘See, here is water; what doth hindereth me from being baptized?’ And Philip said, ‘If thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest.’ He answered and said, ‘I believe that Jesus is the Son of God.’ And they went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.” Here you have an illustration of a eunuch who as a proselyte who would have been excluded from the congregation of Israel, but here he is welcomed into the family, or household, of God.

Isaiah 56:6-7 Burnt Offerings Accepted

Verses 6 and 7: “Also the sons of the foreigner that joins himself to the Lord to serve Him and to love the name of the Lord, and to be His servants.” Here is that phrase again; plural. “Everyone that keepeth the Sabbath from polluting it, and taketh hold of my covenant, even them will I bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings, their sacrifices, shall be accepted upon mine altar, for my house shall be called an house of prayer for all people. The Lord God who gathereth the outcasts of Israel says, ‘Yes, I will gather others to him besides those that are gathered unto him.’”

Now, in verses six and seven you have a form of expression utilized that is derived from the ceremony of the Old Testament economy. “Burnt offerings, their sacrifices will be accepted on mine altar.” So that worship is described in terms familiar to the writer and to his original hearers. It seems to me that what is in view here is that the true worship of the Lord is not to be limited to those specific forms. I think its much like Malachi 1:11. In Malachi 1:11 you read, ““For from the rising of the sun until the going down of the same, my name shall be great among the nations, and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name. And pure offering for my name shall be great among the

nations,' saith the Lord of Hosts." Now when it speaks specifically of incense and a pure offering, that's in terms of the Old Testament economy. What I think it's speaking of is in terms of the old economy but it's speaking of true worship of the Lord. It's going to take place from the rising of the sun to the going down. That's globally where people join themselves to the church and follow the Lord and seek to worship him in spirit and in truth.

Isaiah 56:8

So verse 8 follows that and concludes our discussion of this passage. "The Lord God who gathereth the outcasts of Israel says, 'Yet will I gather others to him beside those that are gathered unto him.'" See, not only Israel will be gathered, but also "I will gather others to him besides those that are gathered under him." It seems to me that in the last phrase that's speaking of the calling of the Gentiles.

Summary of Isaiah 54-56 The Results of the Work of the Servant

So chapters 54 through 56 are results of the work of the servant. You see how the work of the servant provides for this free offer of salvation without limitation or restriction in a national or a physical sense and this offer will go to the ends of the earth.

Student Question: In verse 8 what is the Lord talking about when he says he gathers his worshippers? Is he talking about national Israel or the church?

Vannoy's answer: I'm more inclined to think the latter in this context because it is in the context of the Gospel message. In the Old Testament period there was Israel according to the flesh, and then there was a true Israel--a true people of God. And you have then that movement using Paul's Romans figure from Israel in cutting off the domestic olive tree branches and grafting in the wild branches. But ultimately Israel will be bought back and all of Israel will be saved. I think that it's not a gathering in the sense of returning to the land, but of a coming to the Lord, to the knowledge of Christ, and acceptance of the work of the servant and Messiah in salvation.

I was reading from the King James. Now I'm looking at the NIV—it gives you

quite a different impression in the NIV—which is more along the line of what you’re suggesting, and may be a better way to take it. So the emphasis is on the Sovereign Lord who will gather others besides those already gathered. He also will return Israel from exile, you might say. But the emphasis is on gathering others [Gentiles] to them besides those who are already gathered [Israel].

Okay, let’s stop here. What I’m going to do as far as our lecture is concerned, you notice that is the end of our discussion of Isaiah. Next we will move onto Daniel. I thought I would get into Daniel this morning but I hesitate to start it here with five minutes left. So let’s stop at this point and we’ll begin our discussion with Daniel next week.

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