

Our God Saves: Believe

The Great Invitation

Isaiah 54-55

Mark Vroegop

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 yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; 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 than your thoughts (Isa. 55:1-9, ESV).

Every March, a kind of “madness” descends upon a subculture of our society.

Many of you already know what I’m talking about. Some of you already have your brackets filled out. Others of you are really excited to see your alma mater compete in “the Big Dance.” It’s a great tradition in our country even if you don’t follow a team all year.

Candidly, I don’t have a favorite team. I follow the NCAA tournament not because I’m a huge fan of NCAA basketball. I watch because I love underdog stories. I’m captivated by games that are upsets. I love what some call a “Cinderella Story” in basketball when an under-valued team is able to out-perform and pull off a surprising victory.

Some of you probably relate to this. It’s part of the appeal of the NCAA tournament.

Have you ever wondered why we love “underdog stories”? There have been a number of studies that suggest a few reasons:¹

¹ <https://www.vox.com/2015/3/20/8260445/underdogs-psychology>

- Some people don't really cheer for the underdog, they just want the assumed victor to lose. The pleasure is not in the victory of the underdog but in the defeat of the powerhouse. You don't care who Tom Brady plays for, you just want the other team to win.
- Other people cheer for the underdog out of a sense of justice. They like to see smaller schools with less money and support win because it just seems to be right.
- Still others root for the Cinderella team because it's just more fun. There's no emotional let-down because the team is expected to lose. But if they win. . .it's amazing.

Even if there are no under-dog stories in this year's tournament, just the possibility will draw in millions of people to watch. And that's because the possibility of an upset is deeply appealing and motivating.

But what if an upset wasn't just a possibility? What if it was promised? What if it was guaranteed? How would that motivate you?

Let's take this another step because it relates to Isaiah 54-55. What if we're not talking about basketball, but instead we are talking about your life. Isn't the possibility of a disaster turning around incredibly hopeful? Isn't it motivating when you have hope that something that seems impossible could change? Do you understand why the book of Revelation is in the Bible?

Here's the thing: the Bible doesn't merely highlight the possibility of redemption; it promises redemption. And this promise of redemption—the greatest upset ever!—creates an invitation to draw near to God.

Let's see how Isaiah 54-55 highlight these two themes of redemption and invitation.

1. Promised Redemption

The theme of Isaiah has been "Our God Saves." In chapters 1-39 the prophet called God's people to turn from their idolatry with the looming threat of invasion. Today we're concluding part two where Isaiah invites us to believe in God's ability to provide comfort and hope. This section includes chapters 40-55.

Isaiah keeps returning to the same themes but from different angles. And in chapter 54 we find three painful metaphors over which God proclaims the hope of a promised redemption:

- A barren woman
- An adulterous spouse
- A destroyed city

The people of God are often described by the Scriptures in terms of a spouse or a city. But in this context, the metaphors are designed in order to evoke an emotional connection—even a reaction. God is offering comfort to his people, and he uses these metaphors to highlight his love and compassion.

The Barren Woman Sings (vv. 1-3)

Chapter 54 begins with a powerful contrast: Sing, O barren one (v. 1). And it's repeated along with a promise: "the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married." Isaiah uses a tender and deeply personal metaphor here. It's the pain of desiring children and not being able to conceive. It's the pain of desiring children but not being married.

Isaiah is using this metaphor to describe the grief that the whole nation feels over the disappointment of their nation. They don't feel blessed; they feel barren. And Isaiah promises them a day when their pain and disappointment will be eclipsed by the spiritual blessings under God's care. They will sing!

For some of you, this isn't a metaphor; it's personal. You know the deep pain of barrenness. You know the disappointment of good but unrealized desires. While this text isn't a guarantee of children in this lifetime, I hope it's comforting, at some level, for you to know that this text acknowledges the unique suffering of barrenness. Part of your pain is probably the insensitivity of others. You have to apply a lot of grace. And I hope that it's helpful for you to see that the Bible acknowledges how hard it is.

In fact, it's the first metaphor Isaiah uses. Why? Because a barren woman singing is a miracle! Isaiah uses this metaphor to capture the promised redemption of God's people: the barren will be so blessed that they'll sing!

The Unfaithful Spouse Is Affirmed (vv. 4-10)

The next metaphor reflects another kind of emotion: deliverance from shame. Specifically, this is the deliverance from the shame of marital unfaithfulness. Isaiah uses this example as a way for the people of God to marvel at God's love and grace in light of their failure.

Throughout the Scriptures, the Bible describes spiritual idolatry in terms of marital infidelity. In Isaiah 1:21, the city of Jerusalem is called a "prostitute," and in 50:1 Isaiah talks about a certificate of divorce. Yet there is incredible hope here with the removal of shame, confusion, and disgrace.

This text goes to great lengths to communicate the mercy of God. Over and over, God affirms his love for his people despite their rebellion.

"For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you," says the LORD, your Redeemer (Isa. 54:7-8).

The people know that they are unfaithful, and yet God affirms his love. It's an incredible act of mercy and grace:

“For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,” says the LORD, who has compassion on you (Isa. 54:10).

The story of grace is a record of God’s mercy applied to his people’s waywardness. But the only reason that they are affirmed is because of the kindness of God. They find their security and support, not in their behavior or their track record but in the compassion of a God who loves them.

The Destroyed City Is Restored (vv. 11-17)

The third metaphor is a city that has been attacked and destroyed. This image of a city appears throughout the book of Isaiah as a symbol of God’s people (1:26-27; 4:2-6; 12:1-6). Verse 11 describes it as afflicted, storm-tossed, and not comforted.

However, the city is restored to glory under the blessing of the Lord:

- The city walls and gates are studded with jewels and gems (vv. 11-12)
- Generations will be instructed by the Lord and there will be peace (v. 13)
- All threats, oppression, and terror will be removed (vv. 14-15)
- Final victory will have been achieved (v. 17)

Consider what a staggering statement the second half of verse 17 really is:

“...no weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall refute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD and their vindication from me, declares the LORD” (Isa. 54:17).

Do you see what kind of message Isaiah is sending here? He wants God’s people to do more than merely understand what kind of promised redemption he has in mind. Isaiah has in mind a people who are in going to be in exile. They are going to look around and think, “This is impossible!” “We’re ruined.” “We’ve totally messed up.” “There’s really no hope.” He writes to a people who are going to feel like an underdog in ways that are deeply painful. And he wants us to read this with a different part of our brains—even our hearts. He wants us to feel it.

We’re talking about a promised redemption that is incredible. A barren woman who sings. A person with past failures who hears, “I love you just the way you are.” A destroyed city that is rebuilt to even greater glory and beauty.

This is what God promises to his people. And it sounds a lot like what we read in the book of Revelation:

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death

shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:2-4).

Beautiful isn't it? Long for it? But what makes this exceedingly attractive and appealing is that God is the one who does it. He dwells with them. They are his people. He is their God. He wipes away their tears.

The remarkable thing about heaven will be the beauty, the peace, the glory. And knowing that it was all the work of God. Heaven will be stunning because we'll see grace on full display, and we'll know that we're there when we didn't deserve it!

And that's a truth to be celebrated, not only in the future but also right now. It's like the song at the beginning of the service: "You are good, when there's nothing good in me. . . You are light when the darkness closes in. . . You are peace when my fear is crippling."

This is our promised redemption. It's the most amazing underdog story ever written. And it leads us to an invitation.

2. Divine Invitation

Don't make the mistake of thinking that this promised redemption is only about the future. This is a central truth in Christianity that we live in light of the future. What happens next is how we live right now. Since this is the future hope, Isaiah issues a powerful two-fold invitation: come and seek.

Come to Him

Chapter 55 shows us where true comfort comes from. Hope is given to those who come to the right source. But notice the nature of this invitation. What are the qualifications? It's offered to those who are needy:

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 (Isa. 55:1).

Here is the essence of grace! It's not those who are full but those who are needy who need to come. Jesus quoted a version of this verse in John's Gospel when he said:

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37).

What an invitation it is! In light of the promised graciousness of God, we're invited to come right now. We're invited to turn away from the things that will not ultimately satisfy us. Verses 2-3 are a stark contrast between the beautiful invitation and our petty trust in all the wrong things.

Where did you satisfy your thirsts this week? Where did you run for your sense of meaning, purpose, fulfillment, or identity? Where did you spend your wages this week to try to achieve status or power or wealth? God invites us to come to him.

In verses 4-5 Israel is promised the future blessing of God. And in Christ, there are even more promises related to forgiveness, cleansing, and renewal. Come to him.

Seek Him

Another way to hear this invitation is found in verses 6-7.

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 (Isa. 55:6-7).

Isaiah is commending spiritual intentionality. The verbs in these verses point to decisive action: “seek, call, forsake, return.” There is mercy and grace available, but it must be sought, pursued, and embraced. God is ready and willing to extend compassion and forgiveness, thus the invitation to seek him now!

According to verses 8-11, this gracious offering is rooted in who God is. Verses 8-9 highlight the fact that God is not like us. Aren’t you glad that your ways are not God’s ways? Verses 10-11 identify that the promises of God (“my word ... that goes out of my mouth”) will not return empty. In other words, God’s purposes will be accomplished.

What is the effect of this beautiful vision? Notice the incredible joy!

For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; 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 (Isa. 55:12-13).

The whole creation joins in the beautiful celebration. It’s like a global parade as the created world cheers for the grace and mercy of God displayed through God’s people. And no wonder! The redemptive plan of God is amazing. It’s worth celebrating!

Isaiah 54-55 brings to a close this second section of Isaiah with a clear invitation. It’s an opportunity to believe. In what? In God’s promised redemption and in God’s call to come to him.

For those of you who are not yet Christians, this text is an invitation for you to believe in Christ, turn from your sins, receive the forgiveness of your sins, and have your life changed. You might think that it’s something you can deal with later. You might think you can put it off. But if you wait, the invitation becomes so familiar that it can be drowned out by other things. Seek the Lord while he may be found. Come to Jesus today.

For those of you who are Christians, this text is a reminder of the miracle of God’s grace. It invites us to consider the promise of redemption, the removal of shame, the affirmation of God’s love, and the restoration offered to us in Christ. Stop and think where you’d be without a personal relationship with Jesus.

And then use that gracious rehearsing to push you toward seeking him again and again. You are a spiritual underdog—a Cinderella story of God's grace. That's who you are because of God's grace.

So seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com