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Isaiah 55:1-5

12th Message

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# THE INVITATION

*SERIES: GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

It was July 14, 1988 when a team of 15 of us made our way into Nicolae Ceaușescu's communist Romania. We had prepared by training and praying, but we were still terrified when the plane landed in Frankfurt. We were in a room waiting to go to Romania and we knew the only other people waiting in that room were Securitate agents. When we landed it was as if time went backwards to 1930.

In the 1980's Ceaușescu became obsessed with repaying his Western loans so he exported the entire food supply to pay the country's thirteen billion dollar debt. The nation went under severe food rationing so that legally you could buy 10 eggs a month, half to one loaf of bread per day and 500 grams of meat. He outlawed all religion other than the Orthodox Church which was corrupt and infiltrated by the Secret Police. Every sect outside the Orthodox Church was illegal.

A week before my arrival, the Lord's Army church in Cluj was bulldozed by the Securitate. It was illegal to have foreigners in your home and informers were everywhere since that's how they earned enough money to survive. Ceaușescu was so paranoid he developed a secret service police of foreigners made up of orphans from other countries, like Lybia, so they had no loyalties to the Romanian people. As he was exporting the nation's precious food supply, he was building an extraordinary palace for himself which was bigger than Versailles.

Looking away from the palace, two parallel lines of stone buildings were being built much like our Washington D.C. mall. At the end was a tiny butcher shop, where a long line of hungry hopefuls were queuing up hoping to secure a monthly, minuscule ration of meat. Arthur took out his Bible and read from the prophet Amos, "Though you have built houses of well-hewn stone, you will not live in them...[because] you turn aside the poor in the gate" (Amos 5:11-12). Ceaușescu was shot before he took residence in his palace.

So how did Romanian Christians evangelize in such a hostile environment? The only setting it was legal to share the gospel was at a wedding. So the Christians in the Lord's Army made use of that setting to the maximum. After the official ceremony in the church, the bride and groom would be escorted through the village inviting everyone to the reception where they would be fed a feast. A huge tent would be erected in the forest and after the guests were fed, several preachers would preach the gospel for 3-4 days.

In similar fashion, in our text today God takes on the role of a generous host who goes out to his languishing people and

personally invites them to a lavish banquet that he has prepared in their honor. When the guests arrive they discover that there is far more at this table than mere food. The king has invited his guests to share in his reign. Incredible. The text did much to shape the ministry of Jesus and reveals in part why he was so effective in connecting with people, and sadly why evangelicals today are so ineffective. The fact of the matter is that reaching out to a lost world is much simpler than you might think. Today my objective is to turn you all into witnesses for Christ in a mere thirty-five minutes.

Oswalt summarizes the chapter.

Chapter 55 is the second part of Isaiah's celebration of the work of the Servant. In the first part (ch. 54), he rehearsed the effects of that work as Israel's estrangement from her husband is healed and her spiritual poverty and despair are replaced by the glorious city of righteousness. Now he moves from the descriptive mode to the prescriptive mode, calling Israel to receive what is now hers to have.<sup>1</sup>

## I. Motivations to Come (Isa 55:1)

**Come (lit. "Ho!"), everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and he who has no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy without money  
and without price wine and milk. (ESV modified)**

### A. The passion and persistence of the host

The most important factor that motivates someone to accept an invitation is the passion of the one extending the invitation. As anyone in marketing will tell you, if a salesperson doesn't exude passion about his or her product, there is little chance you will consider purchasing it. Our host comes with a plethora of imperatives, "come, come, come," as if he refuses to take "no" for an answer.

### B. He addresses our most pressing needs

His impassioned plea is coupled with a warmth and tenderness that make it difficult to resist. His first word, *hōy* ("alas! woe!"), is an empathetic exclamation designed to arrest their attention. It is most often a cry of woe or lament by the prophets, but here it depicts a woeful heart that is filled with pity and sympathy.

The invitation comes from one who knows our pain and gives voice to our most urgent and pressing need. In the case of the exiles their most urgent need was water. "Come to the

waters” and drink. “The reference to the sale of water (and to the high cost of bread) suggests the exigencies of war.”<sup>2</sup> The woeful cries of the exiles voiced by Jeremiah in Lamentations have not fallen on deaf ears. The host has been deeply moved by that which rends their hearts.

**All her people groan  
as they search for bread;  
they trade their treasures for food  
to revive their strength.  
“Look, O LORD, and see,  
for I am despised.” (Lam 1:11)**

**The tongue of the nursing infant sticks  
to the roof of its mouth for thirst;  
the children beg for food,  
but no one gives to them. (Lam 4:4)**

Oswalt notes that “Elsewhere in this book, water is associated with the giving of the spirit of God, poured on the ground that has been parched by sin and disobedience (32:15; 44:3). In those places this spiritual water is a promise. Now, everyone is invited to come and receive it.”<sup>3</sup> In similar fashion, Jesus invited the Samaritan to “come to the waters” and “drink.”

Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”...The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “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.” (John 4:9-10)

And on the Feast of Tabernacles he made the same offer to the nation:

**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. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37-39)**

### C. The attractiveness of the feast

Having arrested their attention and addressed their greatest need (water), our host draws them in with “a series of images of increasing wonder.” As Goldingay observes,

First there is water for the thirsty. Second there is such water for people who have no money to pay for it, and something to eat too. Third there is provision that goes beyond the basic (water and bread) to milk and wine...[the Lord] goes beyond the quenching of human thirst to the provision of other delights for the human palate.<sup>4</sup>

Three things make this feast utterly appealing. The first is its availability. There are no pre-requisites required to enter the party and partake of the feast. The door is wide open to any who thirst. There is no class to attend, no rules to obey, no liturgy to memorize, no traditions to master, no dress code

to adhere to. There are no age requirements, nor background checks; there is no passport control, nor TSA agents or metal detectors to pass through.

Secondly, the quality of feast is second to none. “Waters, wine and milk” harken back to the Promised Land, a land rich in natural resources, with an abundant supply of milk and honey (Deut 8:7-10).

Third is the price. How much does it cost? Absolutely nothing! “Come...without money and without cost.” The host of the banquet, God himself, is going to pay all the expenses. Just like the father of the bride at a wedding, he will pick up the tab. There are no hidden costs to be paid at the end of the meal. It’s an invitation too good to be true, one we cannot refuse. It is a banquet, but as we shall see, one that is rich in life beyond mere food.

## II. Life or Emptiness? (Isa 55:2-3)

**Why do you spend your money (lit. “weigh out silver”) 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. (vv. 2-3)**

### A. Laboring in vain

If we are not yet convinced to accept the invitation, our host probes us with questions that strike right at the heart of our defenses. Why do we resist something so rich and so free? The answer in a word is “shame.” Our host is well acquainted with all our ways. He knows all about our debts and the consuming appetites that once stimulated our senses, but now leave us empty and longing for more. He looks on with astonishment as we “weigh out silver,” our hard-earned wages, and other resources – like our wives and children and other priceless relationships – for that which brings no satisfaction. Idolatry has a voracious appetite, and consumes them in exchange for a momentary adrenaline rush. Idolatry consumes them all.

The Lord’s probing question is not to shame us or punish us, but to help us bring our addictions out into the light of day. When we openly confess the things that hold us in bondage, sin is robbed of its power and we are free to be joined to another. No shame need prevent you from enjoying this feast, but it must be addressed to gain entrance and eat freely. If we are too ashamed to name our sin, our gentle host graciously names it for us. All we have to do is say, “You’re right, Lord.” This is why Jesus asked the Samaritan women that penetrating question about her husband, when she asked him for “living water.”

**The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that  
I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.”**

**Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.”**  
(John 4:15-16)

### B. The gift of a new Eden

With no obstacles remaining, God stands at the door and for a fourth time beckons us to come with even more urgency: “eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food...come to me and live.” With our shame behind us, we have ears to hear and begin to perceive there is more at this feast than merely an abundance of food.

“Delight” (*ānag*) is a rare word and means to take exquisite pleasure in something because it is a rare luxury. The food being served at this feast is not common fare. It is something rare and unknown to the world, for it imparts a quality of life that is beyond the original creation. The language harkens back to the Garden of Eden. To “eat what is good” and “delight yourself in rich food” is an invitation to come to the tree of life, to take its fruit and to feed on the very life of God himself.

We were in Tuscany on a marriage retreat, about three years after we began the process of allowing God to “bring health and healing” to our marriage (Jer 33:6). On the first day of our retreat, we met a couple in Cortona and hit it off with them. At the end of our lunch with them, they found out that we didn’t have anything planned for the weekend after the retreat, so they invited us to come and stay in their guesthouse at their home on the back side of Cortona.

When we arrived the next Saturday morning, it was a beautiful place with no other places in sight and a beautiful view of olive groves, vineyards, and mountainside. When we had lunch with our new friends, they let us know that they would be leaving the next morning and that we had the whole place to ourselves. We spent that afternoon, walking around Cortona and everywhere we went, we kept seeing the work of this sculptor who had created these beautiful olive trees that had been given human form. They were olive trees with human hands stretched to heaven.

The next morning we woke up and opened the doors to our room. The two glass French doors opened into a beautiful garden and we both had this sense that somehow we had returned to the Garden of Eden. When we walked out into the garden, we were both struck with the sight of this beautiful olive tree. It had two trunks that were side by side and very much independent, and yet it looked like the tree had grown into a single tree. It was at that moment that God spoke to us both and let us know that He had completely restored our marriage. We spent the rest of the day, alone in the Garden, enjoying the love that God had brought to us and the beauty that He had designed for our marriage.

### C. Reigning with the king

The threefold emphasis on “hearing” (“listen diligently,” “incline your ear,” “hear”) indicates that it takes due diligence to *listen very carefully* to God’s voice. The vitality they seek is not coming through just any channel. There is only one tree

of life, God’s Servant, who is now further identified as being a future king of the line of David.

If the covenant between God and Israel, which was central to Israel’s self-understanding, was to be maintained after the exile, it would have to be on a new basis. It has been broken and thus, in a real sense abrogated...How was the nation to continue in covenant with God? Through the life and work of the Davidic Messiah.<sup>5</sup>

This is what the Samaritan women discovered – behind the offer to drink living water was the host, David’s Messiah, who was offering his very life to her.

**The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.”**  
(John 4:25-26)

Unlike the covenant God made with Moses, this covenant is not conditional, but eternal. It is rooted in his unfailing, utterly dependable, acts of covenantal love. For all who diligently obey, God will restore them in a new eternal covenant where they will share in the reign of God’s messianic king. The blessings of the Davidic covenant now belong to all the people.

What will that reign look like? Isaiah compares and contrasts it to king David’s former reign.

### III. Sharing in the reign of the King (Isa 55:4-5)

**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.**

Verses 4 and 5 both begin with an emphatic call to attention, “Behold.” The first looks back to the ministry of David, while the second looks ahead to the ministry of David’s successor (there is a switch from the plural “you” in vv. 1-4, to the singular “you” in v. 5), and by implication of all who place their trust in him.

We are familiar with David’s role as a leader (*nagid* – a word that “is both a general term and a royal designation for a leader”), and as one who issues commands for his people. The term witness (*‘ed*) might seem surprising, because it is never used of David in the historical books. However it is clearly implied in the Psalms, as David repeatedly gives testimony to God’s faithfulness and loyal-love before the nations. As Oswalt suggests, “As he gained hegemony over the surrounding nations there was reason to believe that his God was indeed God. He was not so much building a kingdom as declaring the character of the one who alone can be called King of all the earth.”<sup>6</sup> In placing the term “witness” first, Isaiah is reminding Israel of their chosen purpose of bearing witness to the nations of God’s power, covenantal love and glory (Isa 43:10, 12; 44:6).

If verse 5 is addressing David's descendant, it demonstrates that God will keep his promise that the house of David will never lack a descendant on the throne. But there is something gloriously new occurring as the Servant takes his throne. Under the New Covenant the Servant does not conquer his enemies with the sword, nor expand his rule outside the borders of Israel by force. Rather he merely calls and nations coming running to hear his testimony. There is no coercion in this kingdom; instead there will be an eager anticipation to hear the announcement among the nations.

**He will not grow faint or be discouraged  
till he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his law. (Isa 42:4)**

After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, John tells us that some Greeks had requested of Philip to see Jesus. When Jesus heard their request he knew his hour had come, the time had been fulfilled.

**Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." (John 12:20-23)**

By implication, when we taste the wondrous love in this feast, we become transformed into servants and worldwide witnesses, who live to tell the story of the Son of Man who has been **glorified**.

In your bulletin is an invitation to a banquet that I would like you to fill out. Let me help you by answering some questions.

**First, who should you invite?** The answer is that it really doesn't matter, but here are some suggestions:

1. anyone outside your circle
2. strangers to the area
3. those who lack family

4. people travelling from out of town
5. hurting classmates at school
6. pray that God will lead you and He will!

**Second, how should you motivate someone to come?**

1. Be sympathetic – go to where they are and listen
2. Be relevant – meet their most urgent need
3. Be generous – absolutely no cost to them
4. Be persistent – don't take "no" for an answer

**Third, some tips on preparing the banquet.**

1. Make the setting attractive, but not formal or religious.
2. Keep the menu a simple fare, but specially prepared.
3. Maintain a relaxed and leisurely atmosphere. Don't be in a hurry.
4. You might add a special touch, as a song, a photo, or even a poem.

**Fourth, probe to discover the longings beneath the conversation.**

1. Ask them to share their story.
2. Listen with a prayerful heart.
3. Ask question about their story that probe beneath the surface.
4. Ask them if they would like to hear your story.
5. If yes, then share an abbreviated version of your story. The goal is to arouse interest to further the conversation, not to close the deal.

1. John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 433.

2. Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 544-45.

3. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66*, 435.

4. Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55*, 545.

5. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66*, 438.

6. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66*, 440.

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I've invited Dr. Steve Belton to share about a banquet God gave him after he and Wanda lost their daughter Missy in a car accident. As Steve partook of God's feast, it opened the door so that he could feed others.

Have you ever suffered a loss so great – or suffered a grief so deep – that it takes your breath away; that it strikes you mute; that God seems impossibly absent? In desperation, you might write these words, as I did a few years ago,

**Abandoned, adrift, alone. I weep and sob and stare as I wait for the pain to abate.**

**My waiting is not answered, my pain is unremitting, and my soul is about to burst.**

**God is absent – How could He be a part of this? – and my heart longs to have Him by my side.**

It is times like these – the trials of life, whether great or small – when we become absolutely dependent upon the touch of God through friends – through the body of Christ – through the gift of love – a feast as Brian is describing for us today. Wanda and I have this story – and I know full well that many here today also have similar stories they could tell – stories that include not only needing to be the recipient of such a feast but also that include the gift of being the giver of such a feast.

Many of you know that in 1999 Wanda and I lost a dear daughter, Missy, and it was then that I penned the words that I opened with.

Missy was a beauty inside and out, well loved by so many, she brought joy to every occasion. She was gifted athletically, academically, and especially musically. She was attending Biola University on an oboe performance scholarship when she was involved in a fatal car accident. Upon hearing the news, Wanda's and my life seemed to come to an end.

But God had other plans, and He used people – the body of Christ – as His instrument. People came around us, people that knew and loved Missy – of course our daughters Sarah and Julie – but also people like Alise Drury and her dear family who provided meals for many weeks – like Carol Schultz who “happened” to stop by on one of Wanda's most difficult days – like our friends at The King's Academy, who planted a weeping willow tree and placed a plaque at its base that read “In memory of the much loved Missy Belton who was joyfully received into heaven's symphony April 10, 1999” – or like Jim Ziegler, who walked with us through the horrific days at the funeral home and the cemetery.

These people – and many others who may not have even known Missy – like Gabi Banks – provided this feast of love for us, food that nourished our hurting souls, as if we were being nursed back to health by the bread of life itself through these acts of kindness and love done by each one. These were gifts of time, prayer, food, comfort, words of encouragement – simple, but nourishing gifts.

Then, as if that wasn't enough, God used a trip to Romania in the summer of 2000 to continue the healing touches – the banquet. Brian had dedicated this family Bible conference to Missy; my daughter Julie and I told our story; and we accepted the warm embrace of our Romanian brethren, who had experienced such deep agony themselves through years of Communist oppression. In this case, in the mountain campground, we literally did enjoy a banquet feast, eating meals at sun-drenched tables filled to overflowing with food and spiritual nourishment. It was here that I wrote:

**Warm days around a banquet table of love;  
Saints gather amidst this heavenly feast from above.**

We spent our evenings there with the 70 or so Romanians singing songs written by one of their church fathers, Traian Dorz, while he was in prison; beautiful songs telling of God's love despite the pain and persecution, of God's eternal love through His son Jesus, available to all, freely given to all that would come to the throne of grace. Of course, they sang in Romanian, but God provided an angel, one of the Ille cousins, who sat close to me and whispered in English into my ear. I later wrote of her:

**... poetic messenger,  
one voice whispering sweet  
words of Love's pure love.  
An angel's voice brings peace, peace,  
a heavenly holy kiss,  
with grace, smile, and song.**

A simple act of kindness, yet part of God's nourishment just for me.

And then, isn't it interesting how God then even outdoes all of that?

For, as much as we needed the feasts that others were providing to us, we also needed to learn that true healing – life itself – comes in the giving of feasts. Even as all of these things – these ways people were loving on us – were unfolding after Missy's death, God gently began to bring people into our lives – families that were hurting through loss, or cancer, or some other tragedy – people that needed a touch, and who allowed us to be part of that with them.

It was in Romania perhaps that the most remarkable thing happened. A young girl – at the time just 13 years old – miraculously came into our lives to be both a giver, and a receiver, of love.

As I told our story of Missy, of our loss, of our love, of her life and music and love of oboe, a young man came to me and told me of his young sister, Ana, who was not at the camp, but who played the oboe! So I met her parents, and presented her father with a little silver locket that I had brought with me – it had a picture of Missy in one side – and I asked him to give it to Ana when he returned home.

But God had other plans! Her father called Ana and had her travel to camp – overnight, with Violeta Altmann – then

16 years old – along with her – bringing her oboe to play for Julie and me. That morning, after hearing the oboe there in the forest, her father handed the locket back to me, for me to place around Ana’s neck.

Later as I reflected on all of this, I was overcome by the emotion of it all. I went to our dormitory room, thinking I would be alone, when dear Bob Bunce miraculously appeared, holding me tight as I cried, becoming the arms of Jesus around me. Another feast! More nourishment.

We returned home determined to provide a new oboe for Ana to replace the old worn out oboe, the one with broken keys and a cracked bell and held together by wire twisted together. We raised money from within the body here and had the same oboe maker in Napa that had made Missy’s oboe make a new one for Ana. It was inscribed in Romanian: “For Ana, May east and west kiss in every oboe breath. Given in memory of Missy.”

At Christmas that same year, we traveled back to Romania, our whole family, and spent a week with the Fosters and a week with Ana and her family, and we gave her the new oboe and her teacher played it for her and exclaimed, “Oh, Ana. What a lovely tone.” Ana smiled, and our hearts melted.

Since then we have supported her in her studies each year. She attended a conservatory high school, and then auditioned for one of the smaller university conservatories. But when she played, the judge from the main conservatory in Bucharest snatched her up for his own program, which she graduated from four years later.

The summer before her senior year in college, we brought her to the US to be with us for three months. We arranged for her to study with two teachers – Missy’s old oboe teacher and the Principal Oboist with the San Jose Symphony. Wanda and I were quite nervous about the emotional impact of having Ana live with us, using Missy’s bedroom, using Missy’s music stand, going through her daily practice the same as Missy used to practice, filling our home with the same scales and exercises that Missy had played so often.

But Ana endeared herself to us when, on Missy’s birthday, which we spent at Alta Mesa where Missy is buried, she poured herself into the photo albums of Missy’s life, asking questions about Missy, and wanting to know who this Missy really was. At the end of the three months with us, she gave a beautiful recital – her very first!

After graduation she planned on entering a Master’s program – but needed a new professional level oboe. After much prayer, we sent Missy’s oboe to her, carefully hand delivered two years ago by yet more angels, Moni and Johnny Hanneman, and Ana will complete that master’s program next month playing Missy’s oboe.

And now, this summer, as if all of this hasn’t been blessing enough, Wanda and I will go to Romania to stand in as God-Parents for Ana as she marries a wonderful Christian young man, Ionuts. And just as I gave each of my daughters, Sarah and Julie, a ruby and gold necklace on their wedding day – the ruby to remember Missy – it was her favorite stone and her favorite color – and the gold to remind us of the refiner’s fire that we ourselves pass through on a daily basis – so I will give the same to Ana as a wedding gift.

Wanda and I have been the recipient of much love from many and am grateful for each one.

But I believe, that even more than that, it is our ability to enter into giving to others – Ana among them – that has given us true healing and deep peace. It is both the receiving and the giving of God’s banquet table, that has allowed us to stand among you as we do.

And it has changed the utterly broken-hearted verse I opened with to this:

**Nighttime sorrow has given way  
to nighttime peace,  
And eternal praise for the One  
who fills us with joy at the  
very thought of Him!**

Thank you.