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Isaiah 55:6-13

18th Message

Brian Morgan

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AN INVITATION TO REPENT

SERIES: A NEW SERVANT, A NEW COVENANT, A NEW AGE

The Servant Songs from the book Isaiah were written to comfort the exiled Israelites during their Babylonian captivity (586 BC). They had lost everything they held dear—their temple, their land, their seed (they had been reduced to a remnant)—and they were held captive in idolatrous, materialistic Babylon. Most tragic of all, they had lost their relationship with God. They were feeling a deep sense of abandonment and loneliness as a result. Isaiah's comforting words to them, however, declare that out of the ruins of the exile a restored kingdom would result—not from the dust up, as they might expect, but rather from heaven down. From it would come a Servant who would embody in his very being everything that Israel was originally intended to be. In fact, in Isaiah 49 this Servant is given the very title “Israel”: “This is My Servant Israel in whom I will show my glory.” So Isaiah writes these beautiful poetic pieces describing the work and ministry of this coming Servant who is none other than Jesus of Nazareth. In chapter 53, the prophet details the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. Chapter 54 resounds with a shout of joy as this Messianic King gives birth to a new age. And this new age is described in the terminology of the Old Covenant—a seed, a land, a city, a relationship—but in the new age everything is brand new in Christ, so new that a sense of transcendent joy ought to fill our being as we come to understand its implications.

Isaiah 55:1-5, which we looked at last week, describes a rare and precious, abundant feast given free of charge by God, to which he invited all of Israel and the Gentile nations. As we have seen, this feast was really the Garden of Eden restored—even down to the tree of life. What the Host was offering, of course, was eternal life itself. The feast to which he was calling the nations to eat their fill was incomparably better than the empty feasts of the world. And it was free of charge, unlike the expensive banqueting tables of the world which cost wages and silver, perhaps even life itself.

An obvious question arises at this point: Why would anyone refuse such an offer? As a young Christian, I thought the stumbling block was intellectual in nature. The cure, I felt, was for Christians to write books on apologetics to demolish these stumbling blocks to the banqueting table of the Lord. Something happened in my freshman year in college to change my mind, however. One evening, David Roper, our college pastor at that time, was leading an evangelistic meeting in one of the dorms. A young woman interrupted and said, “If your gospel is true, and Jesus is the only way to salvation, what about the people in Africa who have never heard of the gospel?” David graciously answered her question, and went on with his presentation of the gospel. But she interrupted again and asked the same question she had asked earlier. David looked at her, and with penetrating insight said, “Isn't it a fact that the reason behind your refusal to believe the gospel has nothing to do with the natives in Africa, but rather because you don't want to stop sleeping with your boyfriend?” “You're right,” she replied, “that is the reason.” I was astonished!

As Jesus once said, “And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God” (John 3:19-21). People refuse to

come to the feast to which God had invited them, not because they have intellectual scruples with what God is offering, but because there is a moral problem in their lives. What is required before we can enjoy this rich banquet of eternal life, of course, is repentance, a turning from our old ways and a returning to the Lord. Isaiah 55:6-13, to which we now come, is a powerful exposition on the nature and basis of Biblical repentance.

This text is built around this term, *repent* (*shuv*), meaning, to turn, which is used three times in the text. First, we have its definition; second, what motivates it; and third, what is the hope of repentance.

I. A definition of repentance: “Turn and return” (55:6-7)

A. Turning away from old habits and thoughts

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;

And let him return to the LORD.

Many people have a faulty definition of repentance. They feel sorry for their actions not because of their sin, but merely because of the consequences they have brought on themselves. King Saul (the Clint Eastwood of the Old Testament) had this problem. He had been rebuked by Samuel for failing to obey the Lord in his mission to destroy the Amalakites. Confronted with his sin, the king at first denied any wrongdoing. Then he admitted saving some of the spoils of battle. But he blamed the people for this, and said they were going to devote all of it to sacrifice. He finally admitted his sin, but he asked that still he be honored in the presence of the elders and the people. “I did obey the voice of the LORD, and went on the mission on which the Lord sent me, and have brought back Agag the king of Amalek...but the people took some of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the choicest of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God at Gilgal...I have sinned...but please honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and go back with me” (see 1 Sam 15:20-33). Saul was sorry for the consequences of his sin, not for the sin itself. Repentance, however, has nothing to do with wallowing in self-pity, or with the consequences of sinful actions.

The Hebrew word *repent*, which is used three times in our text, means literally, to turn 180 degrees. Thus, repentance is a complete *turning* away from one road, and *turning* back to God. It requires forsaking old ways, followed by prayer and actively seeking God. The word “forsake (“Let the wicked man forsake his way”) is the same word used in Genesis 2 instructing man to “forsake” (literally abandon) his parents and cleave to his wife.

Last summer I led a men's retreat at a church in Calgary. A brother there who used to fellowship with us (and who really came alive spiritually at that time) invited me to come and take along with me some men I was discipling. He promised great times of adventure and spiritual intimacy in the Canadian Rockies. How do you think he would have felt if we arrived in a caravan of TV-equipped motor homes, towing boats and dirt bike trailers, and all of us wearing Walkman radios?

In the same way, we cannot experience eternal life if we insist on bringing all our baggage with us. Times of intimacy do not require any of these props.

The same principle applies in our relationship with the Lord. We cannot have intimacy with him and return to him if we are carrying baggage with us. That is not repentance. We must first abandon and leave our old ways of sin.

B. Returning back to the Lord

Positively, this is what we must do. We must “Seek the LORD...Call upon Him...return to the LORD” (55:6-7). This is modified by the two verbs “Seek the Lord,” and “Call upon Him.” “Seek” means, do something—start your feet moving toward the Lord, seek fellowship with other believers, attend where the Word is taught so you can hear from him. Then, “Call”—pray to God. Many people try to clean up their act, thinking that is repentance, but they never seek to restore their relationship with God through active prayer and an aggressive seeking of him. True repentance is impossible if we are still clinging to all the old baggage. I have been studying Psalm 119, the longest psalm in the Psalter (it has eight verses for each letter in the Hebrew alphabet), and I have been surprised to discover that the petitions of the psalmist are rather striking. They can be distilled down to two main requests: “Revive me” (give me eternal life), and, “Teach (disciple) me.” You can do no better than the psalmist. Call out these things when you want God to be intimate with you, when you want to repent.

Repentance then is not mere sorrow, nor is it wallowing in self-pity. Repentance is an active abandonment of old ways of thinking and actions, followed by an aggressive pursuit of God through his word and prayer.

Some people, however, feel they have created so much destruction and rubble by their sin they think it is impossible to ever clear a pathway to heaven to make the journey home. This was how the Israelites felt in Babylon. How could they ever go home? they wondered. It was way too far, and there were just too many obstacles in their path. Even if they succeeded in making it home, they fretted, how could they be sure God wanted them back? Hadn't he abandoned them in the first place? How could they be sure now that God wanted them home? Isaiah's goes on to give two motivations to repentance.

II. The motivations for repentance (55:6-7)

A. God's accessibility (55:6)

**Seek the LORD while He may be found;
Call upon Him while He is near.**

The nation was thousands of miles away from Jerusalem, but God is not limited by that. The moment you acknowledge your guilt he comes right to your door and forgives you. There are no obstacles too great for him. Call upon him, then. He is near to you.

Of course, God was not always accessible to the nation. Once he left them to their lovers and idols, and he was not to be found. But that was only temporary thing, meant to cause them to repent. This is what Hosea wrote about,

**They will go with their flocks and herds
To seek the LORD, but they will not find Him;
He has withdrawn from them.
They have dealt treacherously against the Lord...
For I will be like a lion to Ephraim,
And like a young lion to the house of Judah.
I, even I, will tear to pieces and go away,
I will carry away, and there will be none to deliver.
I will go away and return to My place
Until they acknowledge their guilt and seek My face;
In their affliction they will earnestly seek Me. (Hos 5:6-7a, 14-15)**

In the age that follows the death and resurrection of the Servant, God will be easily accessible and near to those who will seek him. Israel (and the nations) must take advantage of this unique time period in history and repent. He won't always be easily found, so enter through this window of opportunity. Call upon him in this hour.

In an amazing text in Deuteronomy, Moses predicted this captivity of the nation, “And the LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you shall be left few in number among the nations, where the LORD shall drive you...But from there you will *seek* the LORD your God, and you will *find* Him if you *search* for Him with all your heart and all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days, you will *return* to the LORD your God and listen to His voice” (Deut 4:27, 29-30).

God is accessible. He has come to Babylon, and he has come to you. All you have to do is acknowledge your guilt.

But would God truly forgive? Did he keep a list of wrongdoings committed by Israel? I used to keep a list of the things my big sister did whenever my parents were away. I couldn't wait for them to return so I could get out my list and cause trouble for her. God is not like this. He does not keep a list.

B. God's mercy (55:7)

**Let the wicked forsake his way,
And the unrighteous man his thoughts.
And let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him;
And to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.**

The word translated “compassion” is the same Hebrew word used for “womb.” God has the same feelings for a sinner who repents as a nursing mother has for the child of her womb: she is moved to pity to help her helpless infant. In the same way, Isaiah says that the love and mercy of God should motivate us to repent. If the wicked and unrighteous man will forsake his sinful attitudes and actions and run to God he will not find a condemning judge, but a loving Father who has been waiting for him. In the story of the prodigal son in the New Testament, the son bankrupts his father, wishes him dead, and spends his inheritance on wild living. Finally he comes to his senses. The weight of his sin so fills his heart he composes a speech to share with his father when he repents. But he never gets to deliver his prepared text. Seeing his son on the horizon, the father pulls up his skirts (something men did not do in the Ancient Near East), and runs to his son, falling upon his neck and weeping with joy over his return. There is no penance to be done, but rather a party to attend as the father instructs the servant to kill the fatted calf for a celebration feast. This is how God thinks of everyone who has been away from him and who wants to return home. There is no penance, no list to go over, only a party to celebrate.

“Pardon” means unmerited forgiveness. This concept is so radical that it is never used in the Old Testament of the way men treat other men. Men are reluctant to forgive. They may claim to have done so, but they still keep account. But God through his Servant lifts up our sin, places it on the Servant, carries it away, buries it in the depths of the sea, and erases it, not only from his memory, but from ours as well. The only thing that can disqualify us from this gift is our own refusal to accept it.

If you doubt what I'm saying look to the story of Manassah. Manassah was the most wicked king in his history of Israel. He rebuilt all the high places which his father Hezekiah had torn down. He erected altars to Baal, made Asherah poles, worshipped the host of heaven, built altars to idols in the house of God, made sons pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft, and consulted mediums. But by far the worst thing he did was place the carved Asherah pole in the holy place of the temple. The Ancient Near Eastern view of their god was that he was an old man lacking energy and he needed to be stimulated through lust.

They sought to accomplish this by placing a carved image of a female front of him so as to stimulate him, and the result would be that rain would fall on their land. Manassah did this very thing in the holy place, declaring, in effect, that the God of Israel was just like all the other false gods of the land.

Beyond this, he led the nation to partake of child sacrifice to the god Molech. The Israelites placed their firstborn on the flaming altar to Molech and watched as they burned to death. This wicked king of Israel was an ancient Saddam Hussein. God judged him, and he was taken to Babylon in distress by the Assyrians. There Manassah humbled himself: “he entreated the LORD and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. When he prayed to Him, He was moved by his entreaty and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem to His kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God.” (2 Chr 33:12-13). Manassah repented. He removed all the high places and restored the house of God. Do you doubt that God abundantly pardons? Then remember the story of Manassah.

What are the obstacles to repentance? There are none. Climb out of your pit and look up to heaven. All the obstacles have been cleared to make a smooth highway to heaven. The only encumbrance left is the boulder of pride which remains at the door of your own heart.

But, someone asks, Is this really the only way? Do I have to repent? Isn't there another way to heaven? We find the answer to this question in the next section.

III. The necessity of repentance (55:8-9)

“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 way higher than your ways,
And My thoughts than your thoughts.”

A. Man does not think like God

The holiness of God is so profound compared with the depravity of man that it is greater than the chasm between heaven and earth. How then can one possibly relate to God without first repenting of one's wicked ways? It's impossible. The chasm is too great. Jeremiah said, “The heart is more deceitful than all else, And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9).

Man does not think or act like God. This word “thoughts” in the Hebrew Bible refers to the way the human mind thinks, weighs things, evaluates, makes rational assignments of place and rank. Once, the grief-stricken Hannah, distressed over her barrenness, was pouring out her heart before the Lord in the temple. She was so upset she could not talk, but was only moving her lips. Eli the priest came along. What did he think was going on? 1 Samuel tells us: “Eli *thought* she was drunk” (1 Sam 1:13). Our wicked hearts cannot make right evaluations. Tamar was the daughter-in-law of Judah. Seeing her in the street one day, her face covered, “Judah *thought* she was a harlot” (Gen 38:15). An incestuous relationship was the result of Judah's faulty evaluation. Job's body was so deformed by sickness that his maidservants *considered* him “a stranger” (Job 19:15). Another wrong evaluation. Job was beloved of God. Proverbs instructs us, “Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is *considered* wise; When he closes his lips, he is *considered* prudent” (Prov 17:28). All a fool has to do to be considered wise is keep his mouth shut. The Jews themselves had this evaluation of Lord of glory, “We *esteemed* his stricken”—smitten of God, in other words (Isa 53:4).

Man does not think like God. I learned this lesson on my first visit to Romania. I was sitting in the back of a covered truck with a number of very poor looking peasants, on our way to a week-long retreat. As I looked at them, listening to our translator, whose English was not good, I must say I was not very impressed. Yet these people were the spiritual sons and daughters of Traian Dorz, the great spiritual leader of

their denomination. The translator turned out to be a spiritual giant. Now these brothers and sisters are taking our messages and translating them into Romanian for distribution in their newspaper to half a million people. So much for my evaluation. Man does not think like God.

B. Man does not act like God

Because man does not think like God, he therefore cannot act like God with his moral perfection or mysterious way of salvation. We see the two juxtaposed in stark contrast in the life of Joseph: “And as for you (Joseph's brothers), you *devised* evil against me, but God *devised* it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive” (Gen 50:20).

C. The chasm between the two is infinite

This moral difference between man in his sinfulness and God in his complete holiness is so great that it is higher than the heavens are from the earth. If you need proof, just consider the offerings which the Israelites made to Molech. They thought that sacrificing their children in the fire was an act of worship which would be pleasing to God. But here is what God thought of this: “They built high places to Baal to burn their sons in the fire, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it ever enter into my heart” (Jer 19:5). Even the infinitely wise and all-powerful God could not think of such a perversion. By the time of Jesus, the valley in which these things were practiced had become the garbage dump of Jerusalem, a place of constant burning. It had been renamed Gehenna, the word which Jesus used for hell all through the NT. The place of man's misguided and evil worship had been renamed hell. This is what God thinks of modern day abortion. People have abortions to spare themselves the expense and stresses of child rearing, but God calls this hell on earth. This is how different are man's ways from God's.

Therefore, how can reconciliation be possible if man will not forsake his ways of thinking and his actions? Isaiah says it is impossible. How then can Christians neglect to have a daily quiet time? We need our minds cleansed daily. Does a mariner neglect to consult his compass? If he does, he will stray off course. Likewise the Christian who neglects the Word of God. You might consider purchasing one of those one-year Bibles. Read and meditate on it daily. Hearing the Word will cleanse you. Then get a journal and write down the gentle rebukes which God brings to your spirit. Last week I noted 12 different occasions when God gently rebuked me. I got two more following the first service this morning! Let us therefore immerse ourselves in the Scriptures so that we may hear his voice morning by morning.

Having explained the definition, motivation, and necessity of repentance, Isaiah now concludes with the hope of repentance.

IV. The hope of repentance: God's omnipotent word (55:10-13)

What hope do we have that things will really be different this time? We want to be different—we have repented—and we want life to be different. Man need not be left in despair because of this great moral divide between himself and God. Isaiah tells the good news that God is ready to bring about a whole new creation by the power of his word, not the faltering efforts of men. God's new creative work (which we have already seen is based on the work of the Servant) will actually give man a new heart so he can dwell in God's holy presence. And God will ultimately remove the curse from the existing creation.

Isaiah first describes the power of God's word, using the metaphor of rain (50:10-11), and then he explains its reality (50:12-13). If we will but *return* to the Lord, the Lord will send his word to us and, like the rain which does *not return* without making the earth fertile, so it will *not return* to him without accomplishing his purposes of leading his people out of bondage into a new exodus and a new creation.

A. Described in metaphor: It is like the rain (55:10-11a)

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
 And do not return there without watering the earth,
 And making it bear and sprout,
 And furnishing seed to the sower
 And bread to the eater;
 So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
 It shall not return to Me empty,”

In February, we had government committees meeting all over California discussing how to allocate our meager water resources. Then the heavens opened in March. Once more we learned that we are helpless to make the land fertile. The rain must do that for us. The rain descends from heaven by God's command and does not return without accomplishing its purposes; it makes the creation fertile. As it waters the earth it makes the land fertile, causing it to bear much fruit. And it satisfies the creature. The result is an abundance of food that brings life and satisfaction to the creature, and the potential of a new crop for future generations.

Isaiah says that the word of God is like the rain: “It shall not return to Me empty.”

B. Described in reality: It is greater than the rain (55:11-13)

“So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
 It shall not return to Me empty,
 Without accomplishing what I desire,
 And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.
 For you shall go out with joy,
 And be led forth with peace;
 The mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy
 before you,
 And all the trees of the field will clap their hands.
 Instead of the thornbush the cypress will come up;
 And instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up;
 And it will be a memorial to the LORD,
 For an everlasting sign which will not be cut off.”

The word of God comes from his mouth in the heavens and, like the rain, it shall not return to him without doing all for which he sent it.

Notice the intensification in each line to describe the power of God's word: 1) It shall not return *empty*; 2) without *accomplishing* what God desires; and 3) without *succeeding* (the same word for the Servant, who would succeed or prosper, 52:13) in the matter for which God sent it.

And what will God's word do? The implication is that this will give us absolute confidence that the word of God can change the wicked hearts of men into fertile gardens that bear abundant fruit. The dry soul which formerly could not respond to God will be changed into a new heart, and eternal life will come pouring in.

When this new creation is complete we will be led out of our present exile on earth (which Peter describes as living in Babylon, 1 Pet 5:13) with great joy and peace (unlike the first Exodus when Israel was led out only to be chased by an Egyptian army).

Not only will God's word create a new humanity, but this new humanity will dwell in a whole new created order with the curse of Genesis 3 completely removed. Rather than leaving and going into an empty wilderness (like the Israelites in the first exodus), God's word will create a whole new order. This is why the apostle Paul writes in Romans 8, “For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that

the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:19-21). Under the curse, in this generation man was created from the dust, to work in toil and pain, only to return to the dust. But if he returns to the Lord, God will send his word from heaven to water his life and return him to heaven. “And there shall no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His bondservants shall serve Him; and they shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. And there shall no longer be any night; and they shall not have need of the light of lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God shall illumine them; and they shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 21:3-5).

How eager we ought to be to repent! God has arranged it so that nothing ought to stand in our way. Every obstacle has been removed. If we come, we will find compassion, forgiveness, and the power of God's word to cleanse us and give us a new heart to obey. And then on that great day we shall be freed from our exile once and for all to enter into the new heavens and the new earth.

Isaac Watts has well captured the yearning of my own heart to enter into the new life that true repentance offers. May this be our legacy too.

We are a Garden wall'd around,
 Chosen and made peculiar Ground;
 A little Spot inclos'd by Grace
 Out of the World's wide Wilderness.

Like Trees of Myrrh and Spice we stand,
 Planted by God the Father's Hand;
 And all his Springs in Zion flow,
 To make the young Plantation grow.

Awake, O heavenly Wind, and come,
 Blow on this garden of Perfume;
 Spirit Divine, descend and breathe
 A gracious Gale on Plants beneath.

Make our best Spices flow abroad
 To entertain our Saviour-God:
 And faith, and Love, and Joy appear,
 And every Grace be active here.

Let my Beloved come, and taste
 His pleasant Fruits at his own Feast.
 I come, my Spouse, I come, he cries,
 With Love and Pleasure in His Eyes.

Out Lord into his Garden comes,
 Well pleas'd to smell our poor Perfumes,
 And calls us to a Feast divine,
 Sweeter than honey, Milk, or Wine.

Eat of the Tree of Life, my Friends,
 The Blessings that my Father sends;
 Your Taste shall all my Dainties prove,
 And drink abundance of my Love.

Jesus, we will frequent thy Board,
 And sing the Bounties of our Lord:
 But the rich Food on which we live
 Demands more Praise than Tongues can give.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

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