

God's Invitation

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks, James. We're going to look through this great chapter together this morning. As always, it'd be worth keeping your Bible open in front of you so that hopefully you're able to see that what we're saying is the same as what Isaiah was saying and what Isaiah was meaning as he wrote all those years ago.

This is really a passage, I hope that comes across just in the reading of it, but a passage of real joy and celebration that we're looking at this morning, this idea of an abundant invitation.

I really felt this week a kind of a connection with Isaiah, a bit of common ground, as when Isaiah is looking for an image of joy, of abundance, of all that is good, he describes that using the language of food.

And that is a subject close to my own heart. That is a great picture of the kind of abundance that Isaiah is speaking about. And really, this is a passage that is here to encourage us.

This is a passage that is here to build us up, to help us, whether this morning you are a Christian or not, a passage to help us see just how good what is offered to us in the Bible, what is offered to us in the Gospel, in the message of Jesus, ultimately, just how good that really is.

[1 : 1 9] So we're going to be thinking about that together. Just one thing before we get into that, perhaps hearing that, if even considering the idea of joy, of abundance, if as soon as you hear those things, it makes you feel, I don't know, a knot in your stomach, or you roll your eyes slightly, or it just feels so far from your current experience, or it makes you worry that this is just going to be kind of wishful thinking that doesn't correspond to real life or to your situation.

I think it is helpful before we dive into the chapter to remember here that the setting that Isaiah is writing into. Daniel helped us to see this a couple of weeks ago when he began this second section of Isaiah that begins at chapter 40 with those great words, comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

And that section runs right through to the end of this chapter. And really the audience in view here in this section, the audience that Isaiah has in mind, or really that God is speaking to through the prophet Isaiah, are his people in exile.

Are his people having been taken far from home. Are people who are suffering and in hardship. And so as joyful as this passage is, it is not a passage saying, wow, isn't everything brilliant?

No, it's a passage that is here to strengthen our faith in hard times. Often hard times of our own making because of our own mistakes. But to encourage us of that ultimate restoration to come of all that is good.

[3 : 0 1] And because that's available, because that invitation is there, it can make this genuine difference in the present as well. So as we look through this chapter, we want to keep in mind what's often called that kind of now, but not yet.

There is this real joy offered now to God's people, but there is even better still to come. So let's have a look. This passage breaks down into three main sections.

We'll look at each of those in turn. Mainly the first two, the last one will be very brief. But the first one is this, as we've already hinted, a gracious invitation to life in its fullness.

A gracious invitation to life in its fullness. Let me read the first couple of verses again. These brilliant words of invitation. 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.

[4 : 01] And your labour for that which does not satisfy. Listen diligently to me. And eat what is good. And delight yourselves in rich food.

When I was younger and I lived in Manchester, I used to live quite near what is known as the Curry Mile, which is a pretty magical place. It's basically a street which is lined kind of wall to wall, both sides of the road, with curry houses all the way down.

And if you walk down that street in the evening, particularly if there was a group of you, each restaurant would have someone at the door trying to kind of coax you in. You know, come on here, come on in.

Here's a special discount for you. You know, come on in, you get the poppadoms here, come on in. The curry here is better at the other 50 curry houses that you're just about to walk past. This constant invitation inviting you, come and eat, come and drink.

And of course, what they really wanted was your money. Come and buy. And they got more of my money than they should have over the course of my time there. But there was that invitation that they were trying to kind of draw you in with.

[5 : 06] And yet see how the invitation here in Isaiah is a bit different, isn't it? Three particular things that stand out. Firstly, is that it is free. As James was mentioning just before, Isaiah isn't talking about a 10% discount.

He says, come without money, without price. Whatever this invitation is, and we'll talk about the details of that, it is something that is available to everyone free of charge.

And we see as well, it's something that everyone needs, that it is something essential. Come everyone who thirsts. Come to the waters. Isaiah kind of equates this to that most essential of human needs, the thing we cannot do without, of water itself.

This is an invitation to something that we can't live without. But also, thirdly, although it's free, although it is essential, we are not just being offered the bare minimum here, but rather we are being promised the very best.

It's not just water and a crust of bread to keep us alive. But verse one, come by wine and milk. Verse two, delight yourselves in rich food.

[6 : 20] This is not the curry mile where you're kind of tempted in because it's cheap, but you weren't always quite sure what variety of meat you're actually eating once you were inside. What has been spoken about here is the very best available.

It's free, it's essential, it's the best. And so Isaiah then rightly kind of asked the question, well, why would you go anywhere else? Verse two, why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Why would you do that, Isaiah is saying? Why would you go anywhere else when this, that God is offering, is freely available to you? So it's a no-brainer, isn't it, when he lays it out like that.

But what are we actually talking about here? That's a big question, isn't it? What is this kind of banquet really a picture of? Now let me read verse three. It says this, incline your ear and come to me.

This is God speaking through Isaiah. 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.

[7 : 38] We see here actually in this verse that this passage is speaking about life itself. That there is this free invitation to the thing we need most of all, which is not kind of miserly or dull, but which is abundant and which is joyful.

And that that is living life under the perfect rule of God's perfect king. See there, kind of the covenant language which is used there.

That word covenant is a promise that God makes. And so God had made a covenant, a promise to King David that his descendants would rule forever and that they would rule being a blessing to all of the people.

And so this Davidic king, as people call it, is almost like the kind of the showerhead that God is going to pour out his blessings through. That all those under the king will receive those blessings from God.

And that blessing that, as Isaiah says, means that our souls may live. What we're being offered here is this steadfast and sure love that God promises to David and through him, through his descendants, to us as well, as we come under his rule.

[8 : 59] And the New Testament makes it really clear that Jesus fulfilled that role of King David. That King David was kind of like a scale model. But that Jesus is the true descendant of David, the ultimate Davidic king.

That we're invited freely to come under Jesus' rule. And there we find all we need in abundance. That is the thing we need the most.

And that is where we find true blessing. Jesus himself says it in John's Gospel, chapter 10, verse 10, I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Now we have this invitation to perfect love in Jesus, perfect security in Jesus, perfect rest in Jesus. Because Jesus is the perfect king of perfect love.

And we're free to come under that rule. And as Isaiah says, you know, why would we look anywhere else? Why would we labor for what cannot satisfy?

[10 : 03] Why do we chase after still the things of the world? Why do we put our hope in things that are unstable or that come and go? When we have this gracious invitation to eternal life in all its fullness through having Jesus as our Lord.

That is what we're invited to this morning in this passage. And a couple of quick applications of that before we move forward. First, I think, is simply to hear that, to be reminded of that, to be encouraged in that.

That actually Christianity is good news. That Christianity offers joy. That Christianity offers abundance. Those are probably not the first words that come to mind for a lot of people if and when they think about Christianity.

Perhaps that's you this morning. Perhaps your kind of thoughts of Christianity would be that it's something kind of stuffy or dull or restrictive. I hope these words in this chapter are kind of sure that that is not what's promised.

Rather, something that is full and joyful and abundant is what the Bible promises. And yet again, that's not promised in a naive way, as if all of our problems will just magically disappear because of God or because of when we trust in him.

[11 : 25] But it's promised in a way that we can be certain of, can look ahead to, as well as sharing in the present. Just like for those people, the first kind of hearers of Isaiah who were in exile, this promised abundant feast keeps them going through that hard time.

Just as the sight of the finish line gives that extra boost of energy to the marathon runner so that they can keep on going. So the perfect joy promised helps us experience that same joy in the present as we really have here and now that steadfast love, that sure love from God for all those under the loving rule of Jesus.

And also then, because of that, this gracious invitation to life in its fullness, it means, doesn't it, that it wants to be something that we are eager to hold out to others.

That actually this is something that is a privilege to share because it's something for everyone. That's what verse 5 is all about. Nations unknown, people from the far reaches of the earth being brought in, coming to accept that invitation offered because it is such good news.

We want to celebrate this joy that's offered to us. We want to hold out this incredible invitation to others and be proud to do that. And again, if you're here this morning and you're not yet a Christian, we want you to know that this invitation is for you, that it's free, that it's essential, and that it's the very best thing there is, that it is the only thing that can satisfy, and incredibly that it is available to each one of us.

[13 : 07] Okay, well that then leads us on to the second section, our next section in the passage, which I suppose really answers the question, well how then do we accept this invitation? We talked about this invitation, how do we accept it?

What does it mean to come? What does it mean to listen? How do we come under this loving rule that is promised and enjoy that abundance that we've been looking at?

And the answer that we see here is that this invitation is accepted through repentance. This invitation is accepted through repentance.

Have a look with me again at verses six and seven, where this second section begins, and this is really kind of the heart of this chapter. It says this, We really get, I suppose, both sides of the picture here.

The call on us is to seek the Lord. And wherever we see that word in the Bible, really, it's not like kind of hide and seek, because if God is trying to avoid us, he's in a cupboard somewhere and we have to track him down.

[14 : 30] No, these verses are making it clear that he is there to be found, that he is near, that he's making himself available for us to come to him, that he's there.

That also comes with a bit of a warning, doesn't it? While he may be found, while he is near. There's that degree of urgency included here. This can't just always be tomorrow's issues, because one day tomorrow will be tomorrow.

So there's that call to come to God now and to come, as we said, in repentance. And so repentance really means to kind of put one thing down and to turn to another, specifically to turn to God.

And we see that laid out in verse seven, don't we? Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts. These things are put down, are turned away from, and instead, that verse continues, let him return to the Lord.

And actually that word used for return there is the same word used and translated elsewhere as repent. This invitation is accepted through repentance.

[15 : 40] We turn from our old way of life and we turn to God and trusting in him. And really important just to say here, that doesn't mean when we say turn from our old way of life that we kind of sort ourselves out, we clean our act up, and only then God is willing to have us.

That's not the thing. It's not one and then the other. But as one writer on this passage puts it, we come to the Lord as we are, but we do not stay as we are.

Yet our part is simply that turning to God. And having seen that repentance, that turning, we then see God's part, God's response in the second half of verse seven.

Do have a look there. We see that he has compassion. And as it says, that amazing promise at the end of that verse, for he will abundantly pardon. The abundance and the fullness of that invitation is matched and is enabled by the abundance of the pardon, the fullness of the forgiveness, the mercy God shows when we turn to him.

That reminder, as we turn to God, that he will never turn away from us. And we see then why that's needed as we continue working through these verses into verse eight and nine.

[16:57] And 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.

These are quite well-known verses, I think, are quite, I'd always thought or assumed prior to this week, that verse simply means we can't really understand what God is doing, but we can trust in him.

His ways are higher than our ways. We don't know what's going on, but he'll sort it out. You know, actually that's definitely true. But actually in this verse, God's ways, God's thoughts, are here being contrasted to the wicked ways and to the unrighteous thoughts that we've just read about in verse seven.

There's that deliberate echo there. Really what the verse is showing is the chasm, not just in understanding, but more significantly in morality between us and God.

Again, that big theme that we've come across time and time again in the book of Isaiah, of the holiness of God and our sinfulness. The vast gap that needs to be bridged.

[18:12] Why that repentance is so needed. Why that pardon has to be so abundant. We don't accept this invitation by sorting ourselves out that that gap is too big.

It would be like trying to jump to the stars. I know we accept that invitation through repentance, turning to God as he bridges that gap by coming down to us.

God does the work. And incredibly, humbly, even our repentance we see here is God's work in us. Verses 10 and 11, do have a look at those, that comparison there, that is the rain from heaven has its effects on the plants, that it produces growth, it produces its crops.

So God's word from his mouth carries out his purpose. It produces what God requires. And what is that that it produces? Well, it's this repentance that we're just talking about.

That as God speaks to us in his word, as he reveals himself to us, as he shows us the scale of this chasm between him and us, between his ways and our ways.

[19:20] But also remember, as he shows us in his word, that he is near, that he might be found. Ultimately, as we read on into the New Testament, that ultimately he has bridged that chasm, that gap, by coming down in the person of Jesus himself.

As we look at God's word, that brings us to repentance, to turn away from our old way of life and to turn to him, to trust in him for our rescue.

God's word is central in producing that fruit, that crop of repentance within us. And so for those of us who are Christians, we need to keep God's word at the heart of our lives.

And so it will continue to accomplish what God has promised it will. It is the word of God that does the work of God in our lives. That work of moving us from self-reliance, from self-dependence, from self-righteousness.

Instead, moving us to that continual repentance, turning away from our old selves and instead turning to God through Jesus in the gospel. And I think that helps us understand one of the kind of paradoxes in some ways of the Christian life that as we grow closer to God through his word, as we mature in our faith, as we seek together to be a growing community, people growing in our love and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, that actually as we do that, it doesn't feel as if we have less and less to repent for.

[20 : 53] Instead, actually, as we do that, we realise that we have more and more. That's not because we're getting worse, but it's because we're grasping more and more just how much God's ways are higher than ours.

And yet, as we grasp that, as we move to repentance by that, that's not a kind of a despairing repentance, but actually, it moves an even greater joy in knowing that through Jesus that that gap is crossed, that as we repent and turn to him, we are welcomed home.

And we see more and more just how incredible this gracious invitation here is. And so this passage encourages us, if we are Christians, to keep on in God's word, to grow in our repentance as he works in our hearts through that, but it also gives us confidence that God will do that same work in people that don't yet know him.

That again, as people are brought into God's word, into contact with God's word, it will accomplish his purposes in bringing others to repentance as well, in bringing others to turn to Jesus.

It's so important that we never lose sight of that role of the church, that great commission of offering this gracious invitation to others. Passages like this are a great encouragement that we don't do that in our own strength, but that we always remember that is God's work and he has promised that he will do it.

[22 : 20] He does that through his word that we have in our Bibles. And for me, this has been a real challenge this week and I'd love this to be something that we would all be challenged by and think about, wrestle with.

How can we bring those around us who don't yet know Jesus into contact with his word that God might work through it as they see that joyful invitation it holds out?

And maybe that is inviting people along to join us on a Sunday morning. Maybe that is a Bible book group. Maybe it's asking a friend, you know, have you ever read the Bible as an adult?

Would you be interested in reading the Bible together? I was speaking just a couple of weeks ago with a guy who works for the Scottish Bible Society and he was saying some of the amazing stories that they have of people turning to Jesus simply by reading the Bible.

And actually, we shouldn't be amazed by that because that's exactly what God promises will happen. That gracious invitation is held out, that invitation is accepted through repentance and even that repentance is God's work as he works through his word just as he's promised.

[23 : 35] So there we go, a gracious invitation accepted through repentance. We're going to finish and we're really brief here just with the final two verses. It say this, 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 bria shall come up the myrtle and it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Some amazing language in those verses, aren't they? Perhaps a slightly strange sounding language in some ways. The mountains singing, the trees clapping their hands, those aren't things we come across that frequently.

We sometimes sing similar words in Psalm 98 as well. What are we actually meaning when we read those words? I think really the idea is that the whole world, the whole of creation joining in this party as God brings this universal restoration, this transformation, this new creation, which is the ultimate end, the ultimate goal of the Bible.

And that's these last couple of verses here. This invitation promises is a universal restoration. That ultimately what we're being invited to is an eternal peace and joy, a perfect rest.

[25 : 02] That there is real joy here and now as we come to Jesus, as we repent and turn to him, as we receive that abundant pardon and as we move under his loving rule.

There is genuine blessing and joy for God's people here and now. And yet the Bible never says that we are living our best life now.

The promise is always that the best is still to come and that the best will certainly come as God restores all things. And that we, through his grace, are welcomed to take our place in that.

And we're told that right at the end this was the ultimate goal of all this, this incredible work of restoration and transformation shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

That all of this work ultimately is a revelation and a demonstration, a signal of God's character. I'm sure we all have things kind of around us in our homes that reveal a little bit about us.

[26 : 08] Maybe you have posters or pictures up at home. They show a little bit of what you're like, what you're into. Maybe you have an incredibly neat lawn or maybe you have a lawn like mine which is not really neat but they show a little bit what you're like, what you're into.

Perhaps especially things that you have created, things that you have made. They show a little bit about what you're like. What shows us what God is like?

Well, we see here that it is a restored universe with evil removed, where repentant people are forgiven, where there is singing and joy forevermore because of what God has done in the gospel through Jesus.

Because of who God is, the holy, almighty, gracious, merciful God of steadfast and sure love. That is the God who this very morning invites us to know him and to enjoy him forever.

Invites us to come under that the rule of his perfect king, his son, Jesus Christ, where there is perfect joy, perfect blessing, perfect peace forevermore.

[27 : 19] The fulfillment of that which comes in the future but the foretaste of that we can enjoy here and now as we repent, as we turn away from so much of the world that offers so much but actually delivers so little and instead turn and put our trust in God and his promises and all that he has done.

Let's pray together.