

Isaiah 54 & 55

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The words of Isaiah 54 come after the Servant Song. They are deliberately connected. If anyone misses that connection, he will miss the driving force of Isaiah 54, 55. Isaiah covered the death of Christ in 53; now he shows results in 54, 55. The work on the cross will affect *many* nations (52:15; 53:11, 12). With so *many* justified, the Lord tells Israel that they will have this large number in their tent, which is in great need of expansion, in fact so large that Israel will have to occupy other nations, because their land is too small. This is a tremendous change for the people of Israel. In Isaiah's day their country was desolate (1:7). The loss was so great that earlier the people of Jerusalem had been called "survivors" (1:8). The Lord told Isaiah when he called him to be a prophet that the nation would be cut down to a fraction less than one tenth (6:11-13). Then the Lord Jesus came to do his Father's will; he came to do something for sinners, and chapters 54 & 55 show the effect of his work. The large number whose sins he would bear will not be a mass of humanity unrelated to each other. They will be a family, the children of a certain woman.

This woman in Isaiah 54 is Israel, who had suffered the loss of many children in God's judgment. Therefore Isaiah writes a message of comfort for them. Isaiah 54 has three distinct parts. Israel was a 1) barren woman, 2) a deserted wife, and 3) a city that had suffered from enemy armies. All of that was from the Lord for their sin. The Servant had become a guilt offering for sin, so the effect was that judgment against them was over, and comfort from the Lord is emphasized. Israel would no longer be in danger of extinction from attrition, nor alienated from a loving husband, nor a city in fear of the enemy.

When Isaiah 54 looks back to Israel's trouble, it is not speaking of the experience of the Gentiles. When it speaks of Israel dwelling in *their* cities (54:3) and then makes reference to a city which can only be Jerusalem (v.11), the focus is on Israel. The wife in vv.6-10 deserted and restored by the Lord, can only be Israel, because the Lord never took any other nation to be his covenant people (Deuteronomy 4:20, 34; 7:6). Then in chapter 55 the invitation extends to all nations (v.5), to all who are thirsty (v.1). Thus these two chapters give the effect of the work of Christ on both Jew and Gentile.

In Isaiah 53:5, 6, peace comes because Christ came under our punishment. In 53:11 the righteous Servant brought his righteous status to those he justified. Both themes, peace and righteousness, reappear in chapter 54 as a covenant of peace (v.10) that cannot be broken. The city is established in righteousness (v.14) and the righteousness of its people comes from the Lord (v.17). In this way, Isaiah moves from the events in the service accomplished by Christ to the resulting experience of his family. The work of Christ on the cross in chapter 53 is the reason for all the good news in chapters 54 & 55.

54:1-5 Many children This section opens with gentle commands. Israel should sing, enlarge the tent, and fear no more. Gentiles are called to a similar blessing in 55:1, where people are invited/commanded to a feast without paying. All of this is in response to the work of Christ. His people do not participate in the Servant's atoning work; he did his work for them without their help. But now they have benefits they did not deserve or produce, and they are called to sing for joy. Like a woman who never went through labor but has the baby nevertheless, the people of God enjoy the work of their Savior in their behalf. Isaiah is teaching salvation is a gift.

All the commands, such as enlarging the tent, rest on who God is and what he has promised. They are not told to produce the children; God will do that. They are to enlarge the tent. Likewise, the Christian life is not an activity *so that* we may have an inheritance with Christ. That is a secure gift for each believer; we begin our lives as Christians with our inheritance firmly in place. Gospel truth replaces uncertainty with joyful singing.

Barren women without husbands do not produce children. This double difficulty illustrates the threat to the continuation of the nation. Christ brings *many* who will be his seed! (53:10). The Father promised the Son a family. (In Hebrews 2:10-18, Jesus' seed is referred to as: sons, children, and brothers.) His mission was to save many (53:11, 12). Now 54:1-5 speaks of the many he will have, plus the new problem of where to put them. The people of the God of Israel (v.5) will become so numerous they will possess other nations (v.3). Their tent is too small and so is their country! The "many" to come are his and are also part

of the people of God. This Scripture will not allow the independent spirit that they might be his, yet not part of his people. Christ's seed (53:10) and Israel's descendants are the same people (54:3).

54:1 In some cultures a barren woman is looked down on as a disappointment to her husband. She could be embarrassed when she is around other women (1 Samuel 1:3-8). The Lord promises what cannot happen, for nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37), so the woman who cannot have children will have many. When Jews read this, they would probably think of barren Sarah who became their mother. (Genesis 11:30). This shows the supernatural working of God. God's working did not cease with the resurrection of Christ (53:10, 11); it continues in the children who are coming. The influx of the promised multitude is impossible for men; it is the powerful creation of God's Spirit (John 1:13; 3:5-8), the reason for a song of joy.

54:2, 3 Anyone enlarging a tent would look very foolish if the children did not come. This is not possible. The great increase is not a conditional promise but a declared fact that their seed will spread out so much that they will possess nations.

54:4, 5 The former shame (endured by some women without children) will be gone. Israel was once a proud nation under David and Solomon. They had fallen to the status of exiles in a foreign land. No one looked on them as a nation any more. This disgrace would end because of the effective intervention of the mighty "Arm of the Lord" (53:1). Apart from him they would now be as extinct as almost every nation of their time. With him they will no longer be humiliated; nations will come to them to learn the ways of the Lord (2:3). The nations will rally to Jesus, the Son of David (11:10). This happens because the Lord who made them to be a nation at the beginning is still their God. He is the Almighty God, not only of Israel but of all the earth (Romans 3:29; 4:18).

54:6-10 A reconciled husband We must be careful to discern why Israel was a deserted wife. It is not that some evil man left her and broke covenant with her. It is the opposite; she was faithless, so the Lord left her (Jeremiah 3:6-11; Hosea 3:1). That is how she became a deserted wife. Isaiah speaks of a restored marriage; her sins, now forgiven, are not mentioned. This is a paragraph about reconciliation. With good reason the Lord had been angry with her; now compassion prevails, because his anger had fallen on Christ in chapter 53. Isaiah states a benefit without repeating in 54 what brought about reconciliation. God's *covenant of peace* will never be removed, because God has been reconciled to her.

Covenants were made in the context of a blood sacrifice. (In fact the Hebrew idiom for making a covenant is to "cut" a covenant.) This is seen in Genesis 8 & 9 in the covenant with Noah. It is also how covenants were made with Abraham (Genesis 15:10), Israel in the desert (Exodus 24:8), and the new covenant (Matthew 26:28). Covenants (with sinful man who would break them) were made by sacrifice (Psalm 50:5). We should therefore read chapters 53 and 54 together. The covenant of peace (54:10) rests on the sacrifice that brought peace (53:5). God's anger against his faithless people was expressed – not on them but on Christ. This meant his love could flow freely to Israel; her sin had been paid for (40:2). Christ is our peace (Ephesians 2:14). His death brought reconciliation, because he absorbed God's hostility toward his sinful people. Thus Christ could proclaim peace to Jew and Gentile alike (Ephesians 2:15, 16). The wrath for his people's adultery fell on Christ; the Faithful One suffered for the faithless, the Righteous One for the unrighteous (1 Peter 3:18).

54:6 The gospel is in the completed events of chapter 53; the call to return continues in the preaching of the gospel. Isaiah 55:6, 7 is a call to the world for them to repent; here God informs Israel of his response to the death that brought peace. He has called them back, and so they will come back, because God's call is effectual (1 Corinthians 1:9, 26-31; Romans 8:28-30).

54:7, 8 God abandoned them briefly; that situation is now over. The moment of anger is replaced by everlasting kindness. Forgiveness means there will be no penalty, but there is more than forgiveness here; there is restoration. A criminal may be pardoned and then never seen by the one who gave the pardon. The situation here is of a restoration to intimacy.

54:9 The promise to Noah is a tremendous parallel to the gospel. In anger God had destroyed the world with a flood except for eight persons. When his judgment was over, because his justice was satisfied, God declared that it was over; therefore a worldwide flood would never come from him again. So now God swore for the same reason that he would never be angry with his people again [See Hebrews 6:16-20]. Just as Noah's flood is unrepeatable; so is the wrath poured out on Christ. He died for sin once and only once (Hebrews 9:25-28; 10:10-14). That sacrifice was for his people. Those who were not his were not spared from God's wrath; it is still on whoever rejects the Son (John 3:36).

54:10 Mountains appear immovable, yet even mountains can be shaken; it is God's covenant of peace that is eternal. Compassion, love, and kindness are what God has been determined to show his own. Only by means of the sacrifice has he been able to do this. It is not that the cross provokes God's love; it was God's compassion that provided the sacrifice, so that he could show his favor.

54:11-17 A Safe City Jerusalem had been threatened by Assyria and destroyed by Babylon. Under God's severe dealing they had no comfort, but now the covenanted peace is applied to the city – not just the people but the city too. The city is Jerusalem, though it is not named; vv.11 & 12 fit the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:9-21 with walls of precious stones. The severe dealing fell on the Servant and so the city has peace. God's holiness required judgment; since now there is righteousness, there remains no moral barrier to God protecting his city. The Lord by his righteous Servant provided the needed righteousness (v.17). Christ is our peace (Ephesians 2:14) and our righteousness (1Corinthians 1:30, 31).

How could Jerusalem be destroyed in 70 AD when God had promised Israel that no weapon would prevail against them in 54:17, and the city would never be demolished again, according to Jeremiah 31:40? The simple answer is that unbelieving Israel was no longer Jerusalem, the city of God, as the Apostle Paul pointed out in Galatians 4:24-27 when he quoted Isaiah 54! They had become "not his people" (Hosea 1:9). All the Jews who believed Jesus' warning left Jerusalem and left it to the destruction of the Romans (Luke 21:20-24). In other words, God's heavenly Jerusalem left the other Jerusalem behind. When Hebrews was written, Jerusalem had not been destroyed by the Romans, yet Hebrews 12:22 refers to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, and the city of the living God, as different from the earthly Jerusalem. Just as God dealt with Israel's unbelief in the desert for 40 years (Hebrews 3:7-11) so he waited for the 40 years between the crucifixion in 30 AD and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. God with finality brought his wrath upon them (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16),¹ which reveals they were not truly his (Romans 9:1-9). The promise of Isaiah 54:17 is for the true Israel of God (Galatians 6:16), which looks for a city whose builder is God (Hebrews 11:10).

54:11, 12 The splendor of God's holiness (Psalm 96:9) is now found in the city. Once its silver was dross (1:22), but God had made it the City of Righteousness (1:26). It is a beautiful place. Stones, walls, and gates cannot be morally pure; redeemed people are. In Revelation 21:9, 10 the New Jerusalem is actually the Bride of Christ; that is, it is people not inanimate things.

54:13 The beauty of Jerusalem is related to its sons being taught by the Lord to be righteous. The relief God has as a result of the cross is a peace extended to his people. Peace for the sinner comes when he believes (Romans 5:1), an unchanging status that begins with justification. This peace is reconciliation; the war is over. Peace is then produced and increased in the lives of believers by the Spirit (Romans 8:5-

¹ In my observation, this is a very neglected verse.

8), as we are less and less in conflict with God's holiness (Psalm 119:165). This peace is fellowship with our Lord. He disciplines his children to produce a harvest of righteousness and peace (Hebrews 12:1-14).

In John 6 when the Lord spoke of the inability of unbelievers to come to him (v.44), even as they heard him in person (v.36), the Lord quoted 54:13. Only if we are drawn by the Father will we come. For us to learn, God must teach us, or we will never come. But if God is doing the teaching, He will bring us to hear. All made to listen come (v.45). Isaiah 54 & 55 speak of the response that fits the Servant's work in chapter 53. In order to have a proper response, we are dependent on the mercy of the Lord to teach us and compel us to believe. When sinners believe they are justified, so they are established in righteousness (54:14), and all the benefits promised to their new status is guaranteed to them. The sons of Jerusalem will have great peace; they will be out of the reach of the enemy to destroy them (Romans 8:38, 39).

54:14-15 Tyranny is oppression from within. Jerusalem had much of it, as its people shed the blood of their neighbors (1:15). Terror is more likely from an external enemy. Such fear will be forever gone. Earlier with his hand raised against Jerusalem (10:4), God sent the Assyrian (10:5, 6). Then he sent the Babylonians (Jeremiah 25:8-11). When sin was laid on the Servant (53:6), relief was secured for God's Jerusalem; he will never send an enemy against her again. Any attack will not be an expression of the wrath of God. It will fail, so we have nothing to fear (Matthew 10:28). The onslaught of the enemy will happen and has happened for all these centuries, yet it is the enemy who is frustrated, and the church remains protected, alive, and growing (Matthew 16:18).

54:16, 17 God now explains why an enemy could not succeed against them. He is in control of all things: all weapons, events, and even the motivations of evil men. (See 10:5-19). Even the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord (Proverbs 21:1). So when God says no enemy will succeed, no enemy will succeed. They will certainly try, but God will not be sending them to destroy his people.

54:17 In history two things have been the chief tool of Satan against the church: a) persecution with bloodshed, and b) false doctrine. One threat is to the body and the other to the mind. (False doctrine has done more harm than the sword.) No weapon or device, no matter how ingenious, can overthrow the church. His church with no sword may appear weak, but the mighty Arm of the Lord looked very weak once too (53:1, 2). God's strength is shown in our weakness (2Corinthians 12:9), and his gospel is powerful even when men treat it with contempt and view it as foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). Jesus did not die on the cross only to have his entire effort end up a failure. God is committed to his glory, to the success of his goals; it is his enemies who shall fail.

The Sword This is Biblical language for military might and the power of the civil government. The work of the church is never done with the sword or the power of force. Jesus told Peter to put his sword away (John 18:10, 11). When they showed two swords (Luke 22:38), he said, "Enough!" (I think he meant they had two swords too many.) God's work is done by the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17) which is the Word of God, the very thing God asserts that he uses in power to accomplish his agenda (Isaiah 55:10, 11). Christians live in willful submission to the sword of the government (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17).

Isaiah adds a word about being accused. His people on earth prior to the Second Coming of Jesus do have sins (1 John 1:8 – 2:2); however, those justified are cleared of all offenses. Their pardon is from the Lord God who no longer accuses (Romans 8:1). Christ is our intercessor, so in God's court no accusation against us can stand. It is impossible for God to decree opposite verdicts. He cannot condemn those he has already justified (Romans 8:31-34). If God no longer accuses us because of the blood of Christ, it does not matter when men or Satan do so. They will fail. Accusations would succeed if our righteousness were from ourselves. Such defective righteousness would be open to accusation appropriately, but our righteousness is not only from the Lord; it is the righteousness of the Lord Jesus' behavior as a man. God

will never reject his gift to us of the perfection of Christ's obedience. The resurrection is proof that God has viewed Christ as righteous. We have been represented by him in his life and his death; by faith we are in him and assured of a resurrection to life (John 14:19). Once we were enemies (Colossians 1:21); now God calls those who believe in his Servant, "servants".

Isaiah 55 has two sections that begin with invitations: "come" and "seek". In the first (vv.1-5), the Lord broadcasts his gifts to the world. In the other section (vv. 6-13), another speaker quotes God's word, so both sections emphasize hearing the Word of God (vv.2, 3 & 8-11). Those called have great needs; God promises to meet them, but he demands a coming and seeking that accompanies repentance. The note *Come* continues to link with John 6:35, where the invitation is personal, "...*he who comes to me.*" With chapter 54, this is the great sequel to the last Servant Song. Jesus died for sinners, and so pardon, based on his accomplishment, is promised to those who come and seek him. To many this sounds unbelievable; so much is received for the taking with no contribution to the cost. God is transcendent in his ways and thoughts. He is far more gracious than we can think or imagine (Ephesians 3:16-21) without ever allowing damage to his holiness.

The chapter exudes promises of great blessing likened to a great banquet with delectable food and fine wine. It is likened also to a garden flourishing like Eden, watered by the powerful Word of the Lord (51:3; 58:11; 61:11). The scene is one of great happiness in which all creation sings. All the joy of the good news behind this invitation to the world is centered in Christ, the promised Son of David. The Lord Jesus Christ will summon nations that have not known him, and just as 52:15 indicates, they will come; their kings will rise to greet him and their princes will bow down (49:7).

55:1, 2 Those invited to come are those in need (Luke 19:9, 10). Those who think they have no need will not take this invitation seriously. Those with false gods feed on ashes (44:20). This shows that God is kind to bring on early the painful consequences of sin, so that men may become alert to their plight. When the law of God creates guilt in the conscience, it makes men sense their thirst. Only those hardened in pride dare to say they have no need (Revelation 3:17, 18). Besides the needy, the poor are invited also. Those who cannot pay are welcome. This follows Isaiah 53, so we should know Christ has already paid. What is promised is not just water for thirst, but the richer provision of wine and milk. For their need, sinners will seek satisfaction in some way, but none of the substitutes for God's salvation are satisfying. God demands that his creatures listen to him, and he promises the poor and needy the delights of having Christ.

55:3-5 God offers more than waters; he now says, "Come to me." He presents himself in Christ as the true delight of the human soul. When God makes a covenant, he is God; those in covenant with him are his people. Because we are sinners, any covenant with God will lead to trouble for us. We would be exposed as covenant-breakers at the time of making the covenant. In fact, the night the new covenant was inaugurated, in spite of their promises all his disciples fled (Mark 14:50). The new covenant causes our obedience; it is not based on it. The other element needed is a Mediator to represent covenant breakers. Christ is promised in the line of David in an everlasting covenant. What was promised to David was a son to sit on his throne forever (Psalm 89 & 2Samuel 7:11-29). Jesus is that Son (Luke 1:29-33). As the Son of David, he is **king**, but to have a people to rule over, there must be a people who are not destroyed under God's wrath. A kingdom without people is not a kingdom. Psalm 110 says this king would also be a **priest**. He became a priest and offered himself (Hebrews 9:26). He saves them and makes people to become his happy subjects forever. All who will listen and come to the Lord will have the kindness of God shown to them. They will have Christ to rule over them and their souls shall live. This explains the joy and singing at the end of the chapter.

Isaiah also speaks of Christ as a **prophet**. He is a witness, calling the nations to himself (49:1). In his flesh he cried out to the thirsty to come and drink in John 7:37, 38. He calls weary souls, burdened by oppressors, to come to him and find rest (Matthew 11:28, 29). For relief and salvation, the people of the

world must recognize Christ as the Lord, the leader and commander God has appointed (Acts 4:12; 10:36; 17:29-31; John 8:24; 14:6; Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 8:6).

God calls on men to listen to him, that they may live; many will not do so. Our sin is so great we can ignore God. There is a general call: many are called but few are chosen (Matthew 22:14). And thankfully, there is also a summons so powerful it awakens to life (1 Corinthians 1:9). It is a call with such power that it brings to faith; it does not merely invite. God has promised the nations to Christ (Psalm 2:7-12). So when Christ summons, God ensures that those given to Christ will respond (John 6:37). On the night he was arrested to go to the cross, he looked to the Father that he might have the ones promised to him as his own (John 17:24). By his death he has secured their eternal life.

The Father spoke to men of his Son in vv. 3, 4; he speaks to the Son in v.5 and pledged to him the nations. The Father draws them (John 6:44) by making the beauty of Christ to be seen. When nations are made to see him, they will hasten to come, even though once he was the One they despised and rejected (53:2, 3). He will be the One adored by men, as the Father glorifies his Son (John 8:54; 13:32). Kings rise in honor, and princes bow (49:7); those who have never known will believe (52:15). This fits Revelation 7:9; those who come will be of every nation.

55:6, 7 A Call to Repent God may show kindness to sinners, but since he is holy, he will not permit fellowship with them. A return to God is another way to speak of repentance from sin. Jesus died for sins, not to allow sin to continue unpunished, but to save from it. It fits this part of Isaiah well for God to call for men to seek him, and call on him, forsaking wicked ways and thoughts. All who repent are promised the mercy of the Lord and a free pardon. It is free because we come as sinners, lacking moral improvements. We come in our sins to be forgiven for them and cleansed from them as we repent and believe.

55:8, 9 God can never be known by men unless he allows us to know him. He reveals what he chooses to reveal (Deuteronomy 29:29), thus we must accept his word. His ways are beyond us (Romans 11:33-36). No payment can be made to him by us, even though he is the One we have offended. No one would expect that a reconciliation at God's expense would grant a full pardon, with mercy promised to all who repent and seek him, no matter how great their sin. Never would we imagine that the justice of God would be satisfied in the death of his Son. Sin that the Lord Jesus did not commit was laid on him by the Father, and he was pierced for it (53:5-10). The gospel is filled with surprise and mystery, yet it is true. It is what God thinks, and wants, and announces. It is a horror to reject it or change it. It is a mercy we will never fully comprehend. As the heavens are higher than the earth and beyond the reach of man, so are the thoughts of God beyond ours.

55:10, 11 Rain and the Word of God Rain supports life on earth and is effective in doing so. In the same way, God's Word powerfully accomplishes all he pleases. By that Word God created the world (Hebrews 11:3). By it he calls for repentance; by his Word he succeeds in producing it. All who carry his Word should be very comforted that God is active in using his Word as his instrument. It is God who makes his Word effective, not us who preach or teach it. God has never failed to accomplish anything he desires, since he works everything in accordance with the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:11). He calls on men to repent, and as he pleases (Matthew 11:25-27; John 5:21) he grants life and repentance as a gift (Acts 5:31).

55:12, 13 These are the final words of this large section (Isaiah 38-55) on the work of Christ. Just as Isaiah 35 ended with the joy of the redeemed, joy and peace are the theme again in a fitting climax to the work of Christ. The transformation of creation is so great it includes mountains and hills. Nuisance plants will be replaced by beautiful ones, because God is the Redeemer of the entire earth. When people "go out", this is the language of liberation. The curse brought on by man's sin will be removed from the earth.

Nothing will be omitted in the scope of God's salvation; it will be like Eden again. In this way, God will show his fame. What he accomplishes will be the Name and the fame by which he is known. When Satan tempted man into sin and man rebelled, it appeared that God's work, the man he made, and the world man lived in had all been destroyed. Isaiah shows a full restoration, never to be destroyed again.