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EXEGETICAL PAPER:
ISAIAH 55

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Introduction to Isaiah

1. Historical Background

The book of Isaiah is a collection of prophetic oracles from God through His prophet Isaiah to Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah (Isaiah 1-39), and to God's people (Isaiah 40-66). The Assyrian empire was growing as a superpower. Therefore, many nations were afraid of Assyria, including Israel. Hill and Walton mention that "this was a time of fear and political uncertainty. The Assyrians terrorized the populace of the ancient Near East with an aggressive program of subjugation."¹ If any nation rose against Assyria, it would suffer territorial reductions, greater control, or exile. Faced with this situation, the kingdom of Judah had two paths: he could deal with Assyria or trust in God. King Ahaz, fearing an attack from Aram and the kingdom of Israel, decided to put his trust in Tiglath-Pileser III, king of Assyria, despite the warnings of Isaiah. However, this ally would not last long. After Judah became part of a coalition against Assyria, the next Assyrian king Sennacherib set out to assail Judah. The king of Judah at that time, Hezekiah, decided to trust God, and the outcome was in Judah's favor. After the destruction of Sennacherib's army, Assyria could not invade or destroy Jerusalem or depose Hezekiah.

Chapters 40-66 do not fit in the Assyria domination period. Walker and Martens point out that "chapters 40–55 seem to be offering hope to a people in exile, and chapters 56–66 appear to address a people who had returned from exile and faced both old and new problems."² The period of exile was during the Babylonian conquest of the kingdom of Judah. Babylon conquered the kingdom of Judah and took its leadership into captivity. In a third and final attack, Babylon destroyed Jerusalem. This exile lasted seventy years, and Israel felt vulnerable. Later, after the fall of Babylon at the hands of the Medo-Persian Empire, Cyrus II allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem. During this Medo-Persian period, the Jews returned and adapted to the new conditions in Jerusalem. This context fits into chapter 55, the focus chapter of this exegetical study.

2. Prevailing Conditions

The book of Isaiah states flatly that Isaiah, son of Amoz, is the sole author of its sixty-six chapters (Isaiah 1:1; 2:1). This statement should quell any speculation about other possible authors of the book. However, biblical scholars have argued for a more complex composition for Isaiah. Oswalt mentions that "scholars had long noted the absence of historical references after chapter 39. They had also noted certain stylistic and vocabulary differences between

¹ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 522.

² Larry L. Walker and Elmer A. Martens, *Cornerstone biblical commentary: Isaiah, Jeremiah, & Lamentations*, vol. 8 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005),

chapters 1–39 and 40–66. They had also commented on the announcement of the name of the Persian emperor Cyrus.”³ These observations have led to the creation of hypotheses about the authorship of Isaiah. Some scholars point out that a *Proto-Isaiah* wrote Isaiah 1-39, and a *Deutero-Isaiah* would have authored Isaiah 40-66. Also, some scholars have hypothesized the possibility of a *Trito-Isaiah*, author of Isaiah 56-66. In addition, others have postulated that, in antiquity, there was no *individual authorship* but *collective authorship* and have claimed that the book of Isaiah (and other books of the Bible) has been composed through joint authorship in different periods of history. Those who postulate these ideas assert the following:

- 1) From Isaiah 40 onwards, there is a change in the author's style. The book becomes more poetic and theoretical.
- 2) Isaiah 1-39 has a more condemnatory message, while Isaiah 40-66 has more conciliatory chapters.
- 3) Historical mentions of the period of Judah's monarchy (VIII B.C.) are scarce in these chapters.
- 4) The multiple authorship corresponds to a prophetic school in Israel.
- 5) The message in Isaiah 40-66 fits better for a people in exile (VI B.C.). It is a message of encouragement and encouragement to seek God despite adverse circumstances.
- 6) The Hebrew vocabulary and expressions in Isaiah 40-66 differ from Isaiah 1-39.⁴

However, some scholars have also proposed a single authorship for Isaiah. This proposal rests on the authority of the Bible, as a book inspired by God, to foretell the future through prophets. Some arguments that support single authorship for Isaiah state the following:

- 1) Jews have considered a single author for Isaiah since ancient times. The Qumran scrolls at the Dead Sea, the oldest copy of Isaiah to date, have the complete text of Isaiah 1-66.
- 2) In the New Testament, there are quotations from different parts of Isaiah. All of these quotations point to Isaiah as the sole author.
- 3) The book of Isaiah points out that its author is Isaiah, son of Amoz. There are other mentions of Isaiah throughout the book (Isaiah 2; 7; 13; 20; 37-39). Although there are no mentions of Isaiah by name in chapters 40-66, neither is there any in chapters 20-37.
- 4) There are unifying theological themes throughout Isaiah. Isaiah refers to God's sovereignty (6:1-13; 24:13, 23; 37:15-20; 43:8-11), His holiness (1:4; 5:16; 30:9-16; 37:23; 48:17-19; 57:15-21), among others.
- 5) The book presents a high-quality literary style in most of the chapters. The book employs literary devices such as assonance, chiasms, metaphor, and anthropomorphism. Isaiah uses some analogies: the

³ John N. Oswalt, Isaiah, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2003), 33.

⁴ Hill and Walton, 520-521.

burden bearer (1:4, 14,24; 46:1-4; 53:4; 11-12) and the sprout (4:2; 6:13; 11:1; 53:2). In addition, Isaiah uses common expressions such as "Holy One of Israel" (12 times in Isaiah 1-39 and 3 times in Isaiah 40-66) among other peculiarities.⁵

Above any human hypothesis and theory is God's will to reveal His will to His people through His prophet Isaiah. God has sovereignty over everything to show the future and eschatological events so His people will reflect on their ways and turn honestly to Him. Thus, it is possible to affirm Isaiah himself wrote Chapter 55.

3. Main Characters

3.1 Isaiah

The prophet Isaiah is a biblical character from the 8th century B.C. who gave oracles about future salvation for God's people. He prophesied about the return from Babylonian captivity and the return of the people to God. However, many of his prophecies point beyond Israel to fulfillment in an eschatological period. There is very little known about the person of Isaiah. The meaning of his name "יְשַׁעְיָהוּ" is "the salvation of the Lord."⁶ Some authors believe that Isaiah is the same Isaiah of 2 Chronicles 25:7-8.⁷ Furthermore, the book says that he was the son of Amoz (Isaiah 1:1; 2:1; 20:2) and that he married "the prophetess" (Isaiah 8:3). The book also says that Isaiah had two sons. Isaiah 7:3 mentions his son Shear-jashub, שְׁשׁוּב יָשׁוּב ("a remnant will return"), and Isaiah 8: 1, 3 mentions that the other son is Maher-shalal-hash-baz, מְהַר שְׁלַל חֶשֶׁל בַּז ("he hastens, the spoil"). The names of his sons have significance and prophetic purposes concerning Israel. Furthermore, chapter 1:1 also mentions that Isaiah prophesied during the reign of these four kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. However, Isaiah's prophetic message speaks to kings Ahaz and Hezekiah and their conflicts with Assyria and its kings Tiglath-Pileser III and Sennacherib. On the other hand, Micah 1:1 places the prophet Micah in the same period as Isaiah. Ridderbos mentions that "Isaiah's activity was preceded by that of Amos and Hosea (Amos 1:1; Hosea 1:1). Amos and Hosea prophesied mainly against the North tribes; Isaiah and Micah concentrated their prophecies mainly on Judah and Jerusalem."⁸ According to

⁵ Geoffrey W. Grogan, «Isaiah», in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs–Isaiah* (Revised Edition), ed. Tremper Longman III, Garland David E., vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 444–446.

⁶ M. G. Easton, *Illustrated Bible Dictionary and Treasury of Biblical History, Biography, Geography, Doctrine, and Literature* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 347.

⁷ Donald E. Hartley, "Isaiah the prophet", ed. John D. Barry et al. John D. Barry and others, *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), Isaiah.

⁸ N. H. Ridderbos, «Isaiah», ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 512.

the above information, it is possible to affirm that Isaiah would have written chapter 55 during Assyria's expansion.

3.2 God's people

The book of Isaiah addresses Judah or Israel expressly. In addition, there are also oracles regarding the other nations adjacent to Israel, such as Edom, Moab, Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, among others. Concerning Judah, Isaiah mentions the kings Ahaz and Hezekiah (Isaiah 7:3-13; 37:2-7) and the people in general. Israel was the people God chose to have a covenant with Him. The Pentateuch tells the story of Israel's election, deliverance, restoration, and placement in the Promised Land at the hands of God. In addition, the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Chronicles, narrate the conquest of Canaan, the establishment of a monarchy in Israel, and the division of the kingdom of Israel and Judah. Throughout these books, Israel breaks the covenant with God, worships false gods, and disobeys the commandments of God. So did the townspeople and the kings. This behavior exemplifies a state of frequent rebellion against God. This scenario illustrates the need for Isaiah's message to a nation of rebellious people and kings. However, God promises them a future revival, a remnant that will return to the land and their God after an earthly and spiritual exile. It is the starting point for chapter 55.

3.3 Judah's kings: Ahaz and Hezekiah

Isaiah refers to two kings of Judah, mainly Ahaz and Hezekiah. Regarding Ahaz, Silva, Douglas, and Tenney mention that "during his reign and as a result of his policies, the people of God became vassals of Assyria and never again did the throne of David exist in its fully sovereign right."⁹ Ahaz lived through a politically challenging time. The kingdom of Judah, the only one standing, became a vassal kingdom of Assyria and no longer had the power it had before. From the period of Ahaz until the time of Christ, the Israelites lived under foreign domination. Moreover, Ahaz symbolizes the denial of a nation that had rejected God. This behavior was a sign of the fall of the Davidic monarchy (Isaiah 7:9). Ahaz abandoned the way of faith and put his trust in humankind (Assyria). Instead, Ahaz's son, King Hezekiah, showed a different character than his father. Douglas mentions that "Hezekiah was a godly king, as all biblical accounts bear out (2 Kings 18–20; 2 Chron. 29–33; Is. 36–39). According to the author of Kings, there was no king like him either before or after him, because Hezekiah trusted in the LORD (2 Kings 18:5)."¹⁰ Not only the book of Isaiah but also Jeremiah 26:18-19 speaks about Hezekiah's faithfulness. In the face of Assyria's possible conquest of Jerusalem, Hezekiah

⁹ Moisés Silva, J. D. Douglas, and Merrill C. Tenney, eds., «Ahaz», *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 38.

¹⁰ Paul Douglas Gardner, *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Characters: The Complete Who's Who in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 241

seeks God, and destruction does not occur. Hezekiah is the counterpart of Ahaz: the spiritual and the carnal man.

3.4 Assyria, Babylon, and Persia

Assyria and Babylon were two ancient kingdoms of Mesopotamia. These nations shared a common Semitic language known as Assyrian-Babylonian or Akkadian.¹¹ They had a similar development, although Assyria was generally the leading power. During Isaiah's prophetic ministry, the Assyrian kings had contact with the kings of Judah. King Tiglath-Pileser III allied with Ahaz and made his kingdom a vassal state. A few years later, King Hezekiah had to deal with the interest of Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, who was about to capture Jerusalem in the 8th century B.C. (2 Kings 18:13-19:37; Isaiah 36-37).¹² Both nations were part of the oracles of Isaiah and other minor prophets. After the fall of the Assyrian Empire, Babylon positioned itself as a conquering power for a brief period. Later, the Medo-Persian Empire took control of the place after the fall of Babylon. Although Isaiah did not expressly mention Medo-Persian Empire, some scholars have placed the fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah 56-66 in this period. In addition, Isaiah refers to the Persian king Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28). These nations were not only the instrument God used to deal with His people but also the target of God's punishment for the wickedness they performed.

4. Argument

Isaiah's call to trust in God is grounded in His holy presence amid His people Israel. Hill and Walton mention that the Book of Isaiah "emphasizes that the Israelites are thereby in relationship with the sovereign God of the cosmos who holds history and the nations in his hands. The emphasis on the presence of God is especially explicit in the naming of Immanuel, 'God with us' in Isaiah 7:14, an idea that is fulfilled in the incarnation of Christ as God's presence came to earth in a remarkably innovative way."¹³

5. Purpose

The book of Isaiah has a general purpose: The Lord is worthy of all trust. In the first part of Isaiah (1-39), Ahaz does not trust God, follows his plans, and ignores Isaiah's advice. As a result, he pays the price for his actions. In contrast, Hezekiah trusts God, and Judah is saved from the Assyrians. In the

¹¹ Moisés Silva and Merrill Chapin Tenney, *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible, A-C* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 2009), 406.

¹² J. D. Douglas and Merrill Chapin Tenney, *New International Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 104.

¹³ Hill and Walton, 519-520.

second part (40-66), Isaiah calls for trust in God because of the future deliverance of God's people.

The purpose of Isaiah 55 is to call upon God's people to come and enjoy God's blessings (55:1-2) and to see what God will do for them (55:4-5). Furthermore, God calls them to turn to Him and receive His forgiveness (55:6-9). Then they will see God's promises (55:10-11) and return joyfully to an eternal relationship with God (55:12-13).¹⁴

6. Key Verse

You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.

Isaiah 55:12 (NIV11)

7. Major Themes

Redeemer
Holy One of Israel
Servant of the Lord
Judgement and Hope
Righteousness

Interpretation and Exposition

1. God's invitation to receive the gifts of grace 1-2

Isaiah 55 continues the message of celebration for the work of God's servant from chapter 54. Young mentions that “the blessings the servant has obtained for his people have been set forth abundantly (chap. 54), and now the invitation is extended to all that are in need to come and to partake of the salvation the Lord offers.”¹⁵ This first section is God's call to His people to hear and receive His gifts of grace. Verse 1 begins with a particle in Hebrew (וְ) that serves as a device to get the attention of the people. Isaiah used this same particle in other chapters to signal oracles of lament. Thus, this particle at the beginning of the verse denotes a call for attention in a tone of pity. This invitation from God is not an obligation but a conscious call to enjoy what God offers His people. This same idea fits the types of verbs used: imperatives (

¹⁴ Graham S. Ogden and Jan Sterk, *A Handbook on Isaiah*, ed. Paul Clarke et al., vol. 1 & 2, United Bible Societies' Handbooks (Reading, UK: United Bible Societies, 2011), 1555

¹⁵ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), Is 55:1–2.

לְקַח, וְאַלֶּלֶיךָ, וְשָׁבָרְךָ, לְקַח, וְשָׁבָרְךָ, לְקַח, וְשָׁבָרְךָ, לְקַח) and jussives (וְתִתְעַנֶּה). Oswalt points out that by these verbs, “the prophet *implores* Israel not to miss what God has for her.”¹⁶

In Isaiah 55:1a, the Lord calls the thirsty to come for water. Walker and Martens point out that “thirst can be of the body for water, of the mind for knowledge or culture, of the heart for affection, fellowship, or friends, or of the soul for spiritual satisfaction. The last seems to be the focus in this context.”¹⁷ It indicates a figurative sense of the word 'thirsty' and points toward people eager for a new relationship with God. Furthermore, water was a scarce commodity in the context of Israel. This water would spiritually refresh the one who obeyed the invitation. God's people would not need to pay for water or spiritual food. God would give it freely to all those who responded to His call.

Isaiah 55:1b also invites to buy wine and milk without money. Wine and milk were symbols of abundance and pleasure in Israel (Song of Songs 5:1) and are recurring figures in the Old Testament of God's blessing (Joel 3:18).¹⁸ Also, milk was a staple of Israel's diet. It generally came from the goat and was used in religious rituals.¹⁹ Like the water in the first part of this verse, both elements, wine or milk, symbolize God's grace. God would freely extend His grace upon all who came to Him. This grace was like water and food, essential for human survival.

Isaiah 55:2a introduces a question to make the reader reflect on his decisions. Young points out that, through the question, Isaiah “causes men to see the vanity of rejecting the free gift of salvation and seeking to labor to obtain it by their own efforts.”²⁰ Men and women go out of their way for material goods, but what they get in return for their wages is not genuine nourishment. However, the Lord is offering them food that is not perishable. The food that God offers them cannot be bought for any money. It is free for the one who responds to his invitation. Isaiah 55:2b insists on the invitation: keep on listening. God invites them to enjoy the finest food. In Hebrew, this last expression is “let your soul delight itself in fatness.”²¹ In Jewish culture, fat was considered a great treat. God called His guests to enjoy the banquet of spiritual blessings.

Young points out that this pericope “is equivalent to the divine imperative of the Gospel message, whereby men who are lost are commanded to come to

¹⁶ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 434.

¹⁷ Walker and Martens, 242.

¹⁸ Walker and Martens, 242.

¹⁹ John H. Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 173.

²⁰ Young, Is. 55:1-2.

²¹ Walker and Martens, 242.

Christ and in Him to find the blessings that they so desperately need and that He alone can give."²² Furthermore, these opening verses are reminiscent of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:6; Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. The Lord offers to freely satisfy the hunger and thirst of all those who listen to His voice and obey Him.

2. The promise of the restoration of the Davidic covenant and Israel's glorification before the nations 3-5

Verses 3, 4, and 5 deal with God's promise of a Davidic covenant renewal. 2 Samuel 7 tells how God established this covenant with David. In 2 Samuel 7:16, God promised him an eternally stable throne. Many Jews in exile felt that this covenant was irrevocably lost. However, God promised them a restoration of it. Now, the covenant would be with the entire nation of Israel and not only with the family of David.²³ Through this renewed covenant, God would honor Israel. The nations would witness this honor.

Isaiah 55:3 repeats the imperative verb "come" (וּלְכוּ) and links this verse with verses 1 and 2. However, the message is different from the previous one. The Lord asks them to 'incline your ears and listen.' This parallel form is a plea for people to come and hear what God has to say to them. The result of this attentive listening is believer's soul will live. The Hebrew word for soul, נַפְשׁ, has other meanings. It can mean appetite, throat, life, or soul.²⁴ Young notes that "the choice of this particular word may suggest the spiritual life."²⁵ Obeying God's voice brings people to real life and gives them abundant spiritual blessings.

Undoubtedly, God's promise of an everlasting covenant is what is most striking in this pericope. God has made eternal covenants with Noah (Genesis 9:8-17), Abraham (Genesis 17), the patriarchs, and the Davidic family (2 Samuel 7:8-16; 23:5).²⁶ Now, however, the covenant would be with the entire nation of Israel. As with the other covenants, God was taking the initiative to make it for the benefit of Israel and free of charge. This covenant would be in terms of David's steadfast mercies. The Hebrew expression referring to David (דָּוִד הַנְּאֻמָּיִם) includes the term חֶסֶד. 'Unfailing love,' 'unfailing love,' 'faithful mercies shown to David,' 'my steadfast, sure love for David,' and 'faithful love promised to David' are possible translations for that Hebrew expression.²⁷

²² Young, Is 55:1.

²³ Ogden and Sterk, 1560.

²⁴ Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 659.

²⁵ Young, Is. 55:3.

²⁶ Ogden and Sterk, 1561.

God's everlasting covenant with Israel is free and rests on a faithful, sure, and steadfast promise that will never fail.

Isaiah 55:4 does not specify the object of the verb 'I made him.' For this reason, it is difficult to determine to whom it refers in this verse. Ogden and Sterk²⁸ agree with Young²⁹ and point out that the object is David. David was probably a witness to the nations since his victories over the nations showed God's power and the benefit of being His anointed.³⁰ If the reference is to David, it fits with the second part of Isaiah 55:4. David would be the chief and teacher of the nations. The fulfillment of this statement does not seem to materialize in David fully. However, Jesus, The Messiah, a descendant of David, will fulfill the leadership and teaching role over all of Creation.

Isaiah 55:5 changes the pronoun of reference. Instead of referring to the third person singular, as in verse 55:4, it uses the second person singular. Thus, Isaiah refers, in this case, to the nation of Israel. However, Young points out that it specifically talks about "the seed of David."³¹ The verb call (קָרָא) refers to "to call effectually." As Israel's representative, David's descendant will call people He does not yet know as His own and who do not yet know Him. These nations of the world will run to Him to become His people. The architect of all is the God of Israel. The LORD, the Holy One of Israel, honored the descendant of David by making Him King over all people and all that exists (Ephesians 1:20-21).

3. Exhortation to Repentance and God's Guaranteed Promises 6-11

Isaiah exhorts God's people to repent of their wrongdoing to seek God and turn to Him. He will have mercy on the repentant and amply forgive them. Moreover, these verses state that God's plans do not come from a human head. If God promises to rescue humankind, He will do it. His word produces highly guaranteed results, and nothing can stand against it.

Isaiah 55:6-7 is an appeal to seek God and repentance. Oswalt warns that the sense of seeking relates to "a 'seeking' that is for the presence of God and his ways in one's life."³² Isaiah is encouraging Israel to seek God's presence and character. He is willing to be found. Furthermore, Isaiah is calling exiled Israel to abandon their life of sin that has led them into exile. Both structures of 55:7 are parallel, and the verbs of this verse are jussive. This

²⁷ Walker and Martens, 242.

²⁸ Ogden and Sterk, 1562.

²⁹ Young, Is. 55:4.

³⁰ Ogden and Sterk, 1562.

³¹ Young, Is. 55:5.

³² Oswalt, 442.

message also carries a tone of longing and is not simply a mandatory imperative. God longs for His rebellious and disobedient people to repent of their evil life (ways and thoughts) and return to Him for forgiveness. Oswalt points out that “when the wicked one and the man of iniquity turn to the Lord, the thing that they will find is not righteous anger and retributive justice. Instead, they will find compassion and multiplied pardon.”³³

Isaiah 55:8-9 shows a repetition of the words 'ways' and 'thoughts.' In the previous verse, these words refer to humankind's wrongdoing. However, in Isaiah 55:8-9, a contrast is made between this sinful human action and the action of God. Thus, forgiveness and mercy go beyond human understanding. For humankind, if a man commits any fault, he deserves irremediable punishment. Human justice does not perceive forgiveness as an escape route. Unjust judges absolve the harm or crime done. It is not synonymous with forgiveness. However, God is so great in mercy and love that He offers forgiveness and restoration rather than punishment or retribution. Where humankind sees caused losses, God extends grace and love because His thoughts are not like those of sinners. Human ways are as distant from God's as heaven is from the earth.

Verses 10-11 point to the effectiveness of God's Word and the grace that works through it.³⁴ Isaiah compares the Word of God to the rain and snow that fall from the sky. These elements fulfill the function of watering the earth, making plants germinate, and producing food for man and animals (Isaiah 55:10). Likewise, the Word fulfills the purpose for which God sends it. It will not return without accomplishing its ends, but God will work His will through that Word on behalf of whomever He wills. Young points out that these verses assert “the utter efficaciousness of God's word to accomplish the purpose for which He has sent it forth.”³⁵ Thus, the Word is efficacious for the salvation of believers and the condemnation of the ungodly.

4. The joy for the return of the People of God 12-13

Isaiah warns that the natural world celebrates the return of the people. Israel will not be forever in exile, but God will allow them to return to their land and settle there again. The re-establishment of Israel is not a sign of their repentance. God has kept a remnant by His mercy. However, as the previous passages anticipated, Israel must turn from their evil ways and thoughts and return to the Lord to find forgiveness.

Isaiah is a book that shows unity in its chapters. Ogden and Sterk point out that Isaiah 55 “closes with thoughts similar to those with which the book

³³ Oswalt, 444.

³⁴ Grogan, 813.

³⁵ Young, Is. 55:11.

began in 40:3-5, namely, a promise that the people will return to their own land."³⁶ The language in Isaiah 40 and 55 is very poetic. Although it does not use the same rhetorical figures, it does address the theme of the natural world celebrating the return of the people. The multitude is to rejoice and join nature 'in singing and clapping.'³⁷

Isaiah 55:12 begins with the Hebrew particle כִּי. Young states that this particle "is not causal but merely affirms what the Lord has said."³⁸ That is, verses 12 and 13 should not be understood as a logical connector but as an emphatic marker that introduces a climax for this pericope and chapters 40-55. A possible translation for that Hebrew particle is 'truly' or 'surely.' So, the emphasis falls on the words שמחה "joy" and שלום "peace." This description illustrates how God's people would return to their land during a happy and peaceful period. It introduces the idea that it would not be in a period of war and death. This statement fits with the remnant return to Israel in the Ezra-Nehemiah period. Furthermore, the personifications (singing mountains and clapping trees) used in Isaiah 55:12 fit the description of joy in the first part of the verse. Oswalt points out a further interpretation of the return from exile of the Jews. He mentions that "the return from exile is a part of that work of the Word, but the return only makes any sense in the light of the deeper, greater work. If deliverance from the guilt and the power of sin is not a real possibility, the return is only a mockery of human futility."³⁹ Under this idea, creation rejoices at the possibility of sinners being sanctified by the Word of God. This interpretation fits with the previous set of verses.

Isaiah 55:13 continues to use the imagery of the previous verse. Isaiah 55:12 says that the trees of the field were clapping their hands. Now, the leafy, green trees are taking the useless grass place. The cypress and myrtle are two types of evergreen trees.⁴⁰ The redemption of God's people will impact the creation that now suffers due to the fall (Romans 8:19-23). The change of the thornbush and the briers for leafy trees symbolizes the transformation of the wilderness into a forest. This change will occur due to the re-establishment of the People of God by the return from spiritual exile (repentance and forgiveness of sins). It will give great honor to the name of the Lord and will be a perpetual, indestructible sign. Monuments serve as reminders of the work of some king or authority. However, the work of God on behalf of His people has no parallel.

Young captures the essence of this truth in the following paragraph:

"No later king, however, will ever undo the deeds of Israel's King, nor will any later conqueror ever erase His words. He has redeemed His

³⁶ Ogden and Sterk, 1572.

³⁷ Watts, 819.

³⁸ Young, Is. 55:12.

³⁹ Oswalt, 448.

⁴⁰ Ogden and Sterk, 1574.

people, brought them out of the servitude and bondage of sin unto Himself, established them in the heavenly life, and brought about a new heaven and a new earth. His sign will never be cut off.”

Application

- 1 God's grace has its origin in His mercy and love. The Lord offers this grace freely to whoever will obey His holy invitation. God's people were undeserving of God's grace on their behalf. They had broken the covenant, practiced idolatry, disobeyed God's commandments, and lived in rebellion (Jeremiah 11:8-10). Nevertheless, God offers them undeserved grace and the salvation of a remnant that would return to the land of Canaan (Isaiah 10:20-21). This invitation to enjoy the gifts of grace is available today. We should heed His invitation and delight in the delicacies of God's grace in our lives.
- 2 God has established an everlasting covenant with Israel that fulfills in Christ. He is the Servant of God who reigns with power and glory over all. Moreover, He is the witness to the peoples and nations. Today, distant tribes bow down and worship Him. His redemptive sacrifice on the Cross has reached the people who did not know Him. He is honored today. However, in the end, every knee will worship Him, and every tongue will confess that He is Lord (Romans 14:11, Philippians 2:10-11). God has made us bearers of this message. Therefore, we must carry the good news of salvation, throughout our lives, as faithful witnesses to Him. As long as God can be found, we should show His salvation to the world.
- 3 Israel was to forsake their evil ways and thoughts and turn to God, who would forgive them. Moreover, Israel was to realize that God's plans and designs were incomparable. Nothing the wisest and most righteous Israelites could devise could compare with God's will. Under this truth, God's people must accept His workings and ways. Nowadays, we must embrace His redemptive plans for humankind.
- 4 The Word of God does not return void but accomplishes its purpose. Just as rain and snow come down from heaven and fulfill their objective, the Word of God achieves its plans on earth. Today's society considers eschatological prophecies to be fables or legends. They think God's message is part of ancient tales with no relevance today. However, we can live confidently in God's promises. He will work in His time and ways since His Word does not evaporate or go astray.
- 5 Creation delights in God's redemptive power. When God transforms humanity, creation will also be delivered from the corruption to which it was subjected by sin (Romans 8:19-23). On that day, humanity and creation will sing and clap their hands in gratitude to God for all His benefits. We must today trust in the promises of restoration and live under this certainty.

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