

HONOURING GOD

Last year, I drove to an evening meeting in inner Western Sydney, having memorised the map. My passenger, though, was confused and maybe a little disorientated, because it wasn't the way she normally went. Amidst our conversation, I was counting intersections, roundabouts and traffic lights. She was reliant on the GPS on her phone. We ultimately got to the right destination. However, in Prov 14:12 and 16:25, the writer talks about ways that 'seem right' to a person. The risk isn't just about possibly getting lost and arriving late, but that the consequence of going the wrong way will ultimately lead to death.

GETTING STARTED: Read the following words from Prov 3:5-8

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body."

- What does it mean to "acknowledge God" in "all your ways"? What does it mean to "be wise in your own eyes"? How can repentance and doing a U-turn in life bring healing and refreshment for us?

READ: ISAIAH 55:6-13

In the NRSV, Isaiah 55 has the heading: "An Invitation to Abundant Life". The call, which continues into chapter 56, is to a crowd of people, that is not restricted to people who are distinctively Jewish. It includes the "nations (55:5/34:1,2), peoples (56:7/34:1) and humankind (56:2/34:5)."¹

"The plural address and topic continue into 56:1 without a break, although here **YHWH's conditions for participation are being spelled out**. Justice, right and Sabbath are important. Ethnic origin or gender is not. **Commitment to YHWH (i.e. Yahweh, the LORD) and his ways is essential. These conditions apply to "all peoples"** (56:7)."²

In Study 2, we looked at Ps 67 and the plan of God to extend his blessings to the nations. Yet, the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel had obedience as a central requirement, particularly to the Ten Commandments. In Deut 28:1-2, we read that blessings were conditional on their obedience.

- Was God being fair and just, in requiring obedience? Or – given that God has given us freewill – shouldn't we be free to make moral choices and use our own discernment/ discretion about our own life choices, without incurring God's judgement?

Read Is 55:1-3a (below) This is an invitation for people (regardless of their background) to come and feast at God's table.

"Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have 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, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."

- What comment does it make about two different lives of those who do not follow the LORD?
- By contrast, what does it say about the life that God offers?
- What do the metaphors of water, wine, milk, bread and rich food imply about the nature and character of God?

Some commentators place Is 55, sometime after 522BC, when the Jews were resettling in their land after returning from captivity and were facing opposition. Even though the Jews did not have a proper 'king', God maintained his covenant with David by using a king from another nation to do his bidding. Darius the Persian not only responded to a letter from this remote group of Jews and decreed the construction of the new temple, but also ordered their enemies pay money to fund the temple works and anything needed for sacrifices (Ezra 5&6). While these verses may initially refer to Darius, they are ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

"I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you." (Is 55:3b-5)

- At some times in our lives, we face major obstacles and difficulties. We may question whether God is willing to come to our aid and where God is or whether God is at work in a situation. We may even try to resolve the situation by our own means and resources. How is it helpful for us to be reminded to "Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near."?

¹ Watts, J. D. W. (2005). *Isaiah 34–66* (Revised Edition, Vol. 25). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc. p815.

² Watts, J. D. W. (2005). *Isaiah 34–66* (Revised Edition, Vol. 25). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc. p816.

Because the newly settled exiles were struggling to live as they rebuilt their lives among the ruins of their once prosperous country, one group of people had rebelled against the rule of the Jewish governor. They couldn't see that God's promises were being fulfilled. All they felt they were experiencing was hardship.

"A particular group needs a special exhortation to come. Their "way" of life and thought, their "convictions," stand in the way. They oppose God's plans, resisting his announcement and invitations. This direct clash prevents communion and cooperation, but God's ways are set. They will not be changed. They, "the guilty," and, "the troublemaker" - who have resisted both YHWH's grace and his invitation, as well as that of the emperor, are implored to change their ways. These are probably the people who were guilty of rebellion in chap. 53 and who had received amnesty because of Zerubbabel's judicial murder, but they have not changed their convictions or their ways. The offer still stands: if they will repent, "turn to YHWH" and "to our God," he will receive them in love and "multiply pardon." The verse is a classic expression of God's open invitation to those who resist his call, determined to live their own way."³

- Read Is 55:7-9. What does it mean for us, that God says:
 - That the wicked are to forsake their way and return to the Lord?
 - That the unrighteous are to forsake their thoughts/ convictions? (e.g. does this mean we have to stop thinking or holding any strong opinions?)
 - "my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

When the people returned to Jerusalem and the surrounding land after the exile, they had to clear the land of weeds and thorns. They had to replant the crops and wait for them to grow. They had many years when life was tough. They were reliant on rain to water the ground, so they could have bread for the current season and seed, to be sown, to provide food for the next season. Isaiah uses this picture, to illustrate that God's word has a very important purpose. Like rain, it has both short- and long-term benefits. Even though we may not see what God is doing in the short term, "*it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*" (Is 55:11b)

- In what way does the word of God intended to produce:
 - Bread – that brings us nourishment, refreshment and energy?
 - Seed – that we are to 'sow' into the lives of others?
- Can the rain – in and of itself - produce bread or collect seed, without human co-operation? In the same way, can the word of God be effective to accomplish God's purposes, if we are only passive recipients of it? What are some implications re how we 'consume' and utilise the word of God?

Read Deut 8:2-3 and Matt 4:2-4 (Below)

*"Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that **man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.**" (Deut 8:2-3)*

*After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: '**Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.**'" (Matt 4:2-4)*

- Have you ever used 'fasting' as a spiritual discipline? In what way can hunger – and intentionally fasting for a short amount of time - help us focus on God's words and what God requires of us? [Please note: Jesus' fasting for forty days and nights is not meant to set a precedent for us]

In Is 51:11, Isaiah had prophesied that "*Those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*" Now, in Is 55:12-13, the promise is reiterated that even the mountains will celebrate. The curses on the land – of thorns and briars – will be replaced with (fruitful) trees in the field and enduring tall myrtle and cypress trees. God intended that those who returned to the land would flourish there and experience joy. He had plans to give them "a hope and a future". (Jer 29:11) If we give weight to God's words, we endeavour to be obedient to God and trust in God's promises, even in the hard times.

- What Biblical promise helps you persevere? What hope and confidence does it give you?

³ Watts, J. D. W. (2005). *Isaiah 34-66* (Revised Edition, Vol. 25). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc. p818.