

The Sure Word

Read: Isaiah 55.8-13.

Some people are “as good as their word”. Well, they would like to be and even intend to be, but what mere human being can give an absolute guarantee like that? At one point or another, we fail and disappoint.

There are other people whose intentions are never good. They speak with what we call “a forked tongue” – they promise in order to deceive. They may seem “a smooth operator”, but beware! They’re out to “get you”!

The Lord’s word isn’t like that. His thoughts and ways are always just and true.

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Is. 55.10-11).

God’s word always accomplishes his purposes. His invitation and call aren’t some malicious trick. We can depend on him ourselves and confidently commend the gospel message to others. “You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace” (v. 12).

Reflect:

- “Human beings sometimes have an uncanny knack of doing what is unnecessary, irrelevant and unhelpful in situations of great personal need – even when critical help is available and freely offered”. How can we more effectively reach our generation with the offer of God’s grace?
- Faith is voluntary. How do our lives express our confidence in the Word of the Lord and our trust in the Lord of the Word? In what ways can we encourage others to see faith as an option for the needs of our time?

Study 9 – The Spirit of the Lord. Reading: Isaiah 61

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Studies from the book of Isaiah

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8. Come to the Waters!

Reading: Isaiah 55

Human beings sometimes have an uncanny knack of doing what is unnecessary, irrelevant and unhelpful in situations of great personal need – even when critical help is available and freely offered. Of course, that is not always the case, and many examples can be given where someone has acted with great practical courage.

The accident victim who is critically injured and unconscious may not have much choice, but the person with a serious medical diagnosis may refuse treatment – perhaps believing the remedy is worse than the disease. The farmer on the verge of bankruptcy may refuse financial help – doesn’t want social security.

What is it? Embarrassment? fear? denial? pride? independence? autonomy? Maybe a combination of these and other factors. How desperate does it have to get for a person to seek and accept help?

Our civilisation has its ways of coping – challenged in recent times by the threat and reality of terrorism. We have assumed that, with resources, research and good management, there is no human problem we cannot solve. But is it really so?

Reflect:

- Name some of the “insolubles” faced by our civilisation today. To what extent is the problem caused by a lack of resources, research and good management?
- Ours is a “secular” age – we don’t bring God in to solve problems! What are the penalties we pay for our spiritual poverty and stubbornness?

Invitation

Read: Isaiah 55.1-7

This is an eloquent statement of the grace of God in the Old Testament. As noted in a previous study, it is important that the God who pronounces judgment is the same God who offers grace.

Our problem is that we play down the seriousness of sin and are therefore appalled at the very mention of judgment. Then we miss the significance of the suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 and want God's grace to be a blind and benevolent "niceness" – for whom terms like "sin", "judgment" and "salvation" are, in fact, quite irrelevant.

The persistent rebellion and sin of the Lord's people were so serious that the judgments came to pass. But to all who would hear it the grace is still offered on the basis of the suffering of the Servant of the Lord who took – not the exile in Babylon, but – "the iniquities of us all".

"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (55.1).

The reference here is to their aching need for spiritual resources. We recall the words of Jesus, "... the pagans run after all these things [food, drink, clothing], and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt 6.32-33). Jesus acknowledged our need for food, drink and clothing, but the central focus of our life is to be on God's kingdom and his righteousness.

Here too they are invited to "listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare" (Is. 55.2b). The Lord is the source of life. Our constant need is to live in an active relation with him, to draw on his life – freely available, freely offered. "Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live" (v. 3a). To have any other central focus is to "spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy" (v. 2a).

The Lord gave this message through Jeremiah, "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water" (Jer. 2.13).

That is our danger, too. We want a "cistern" of spiritual resources, rather than coming to the "spring of living water".

Reflect:

- We might speak of a "cracked tank". Just what are the cracked tanks that we or others of our time might try to use instead of coming to the Lord regularly for "living water"? Do we even have "Christian" cracked tanks?
- When God's grace is freely offered, freely available, why do we settle for a cracked tank instead of coming to the spring?

"Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon" (vv. 6-7).

God's free grace is offered to all. Even the so-called righteous remnant – the faithful believers of the day – aren't sinless. They can only be called "righteous" because of grace. The invitation was for "all who are thirsty". The call is for all to "seek the Lord" and "call on him".

Quoting Isaiah 49.8, Paul wrote, "now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6.2b). We live in the days of fulfilment, the era of grace. Now is the time of opportunity, but it will not extend for ever. Those who refuse grace will face judgment.

God expects true repentance – a two-fold turn away **from** wicked ways and evil thoughts and **to** him for mercy and pardon (Is. 55.7b).

Reflect:

- "Seek", "call", "turn". In what ways do these words help describe the steps for a person to come to faith?
- How can a secular person who believes that "the basic problems are caused by a lack of resources, research and good management" come to "seek", "call" and "turn"? Where is the greatest barrier to faith?