

Isaiah 56

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[0 : 00] Let me take you back to Isaiah 55. Isaiah 55 began with this amazing invitation, didn't it?!

To be a Christian is never portrayed in the Bible as a lone ranger activity.

The invitation to come to God, to come to Christ, is an invitation de facto to come to his people.

Here's how John Wesley expressed it. He said, holy solitaries is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers.

The gospel of Christ knows no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness. And so when God gathers us to himself, God gathers you to his people, to his church.

And today we begin the third major section of Isaiah, in chapter 56 to the end. And the question that this section addresses, what does that community look like?

[1 : 23] What are the characteristics of those who have come to be part of God's community? To be part of God's family? And to be part of God's church?

And Isaiah 56 comes right on the heels of Isaiah 55. That stunning invitation to a banquet that's like nowhere there. That would cost the guests no money because it's a banquet that's already been paid for.

And it's a picture of an invitation to the living God who made you. The only one who can satisfy the deepest needs of your life. And the only reason in chapter 55 that Isaiah can make that invitation is because of what he's already told us in chapter 53.

That the suffering servant, the Messiah Jesus, will come and he will pay the full price for sinners. He died in our place for our sins.

He paid the cost so that the banquet could be free to you and I. But it cost Jesus absolutely everything. And so in chapter 56 Isaiah moves on to what do the people look like who've accepted the invitation to the banquet.

[2 : 39] Isaiah is writing in the closing decades of the 8th century before Christ. The 8th century before Christ. And he's looking way into the future.

When the Messiah would come. And all of this would be reality. It's reality for us. We live 2,000 years later. Jesus Christ has come. He's paid the price for our sins.

And we are able to look at these verses and see what should the church look like. What should the church be like. And I think it's a shocking picture.

For us. At the start of the 21st century. Because how does Isaiah portray his gathered people?

Isaiah tells us that God's people.

Are Sabbath people. They are Sabbath people who are marked by inclusivity. They welcome in. And by exclusivity.

[3 : 38] At the same time. And that's our big theme for today. I want us to think in two parts. First of all an inclusive embrace. Of the gospel. And then secondly an exclusive commitment.

Of the Sabbath people. First of all the inclusive embrace. Look at verse 3. Isaiah speaks on behalf of the Lord. And he said. Let not the foreigner.

Who's joined himself to the Lord say. The Lord will surely separate me from his people. And let not the eunuch say.

Behold I am a dry tree. Isaiah mentions. There's two cast piece of people there. Two people who thought that they were forever outside.

Forever excluded from God's people. But Isaiah here announces. In no uncertain terms. In no uncertain terms. That the outsider is invited. And the outsider is welcomed into God's people.

[4 : 35] The first category is the foreigner. And it's worth pointing out. And it's worth pointing out. Even though God in the Old Testament. Reveals himself exclusively to one nation.

Namedly Israel. That didn't mean that foreigners could not come and be part of God's people. So you think of Ruth. And Ruth was a foreigner. She was an outsider. She was a Moabitess. And back then the Moabites. They were pagan worshippers. They worshipped the God of Shemosh. A God who demanded childhood sacrifice. But God. Through his delightful providence. Brought Ruth into his family. The outsider became the insider. So much that Ruth makes it into Jesus' family tree. In the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel. It's as if to say.

God has always been proud. Of the foreigners in his family. But nevertheless. Isaiah is pointing forward to a major shift in the future. That with the coming of the Messiah.

[5 : 34] God's people will no longer primarily be defined as one nation. But God's people will include. People of every nation. And every tribe.

And every town. All equal before God. Because God does not discriminate. On the basis of nationality.

He welcomes all. So Isaiah comes on to say. About foreigners. Listen to him. Verses 6 and 7. He says. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord. To minister to him.

To love the name of the Lord. And to be his servant. Everyone who keeps the Sabbath. And does not profane it. And holds fast to my covenant. These I will bring to my holy mountain. And I will make them joyful.

In my house of prayer. And their burnt offerings. And their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar. For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

[6 : 30] Isaiah uses old covenant language. To portray what is going to be the great reality in the new covenant. Since Jesus has come.

There's progression. Here the foreigners will be welcomed to the place where the Lord is to be found. My holy mountain. My presence. And my family.

And my house of prayer. To those sacrifices which will secure God's acceptance. And they will fellowship around me. And it's worth just noticing the intimacy of the language in verse 7.

Can you see that? It's my holy mountain. It's my house of prayer. And my altar. And my fellowship. Because it's not so much about a place. It's about a person. And it's about a relationship. And it's about being known by God.

[7 : 32] And this welcome that is offered to you is not a kind of concession. It's not plan B because plan A didn't work out. This is fulfillment. This is what God has been doing all along.

That his people would be of every tribe and tongue and nation. And it would all be achieved through the coming of Jesus Christ. And so here is this promise.

Of an exclusive embrace for foreigners. But notice who else is embraced. It's the eunuchs.

It's the eunuchs. I didn't meet with the children. I didn't explain what a eunuch was. We did have a children's talk once where the visiting creature explained horrifically what a eunuch was.

But a eunuch, it was not unusual in the ancient Near East, in pagan societies, for high ministers, for government officials, to be castrated.

[8 : 33] Because kings thought that they could be better trusted with kings' wives and concubines. It meant that a eunuch could be trusted not to mess about with your wife or daughter. And so they could be trusted with responsibilities.

The drastic downside is that the kings had chosen for you, if you were a eunuch, an aloneness, hadn't they? That there was an inability to have a family.

And in that world, your significance was linked to you having a family and being part of a family. Your meaning in life was largely wrapped up with having a family.

And so to not have children was absolutely devastating. And from a religious point of view, the news was even worse. Because according to the law, according to Deuteronomy 23 verse 1, no castrated man could ever enter into the assembly of the Lord.

That might seem really harsh to you. Because given that most eunuchs weren't so because they'd chosen to be, but God was making clear that that cruel mutilation was to be treated as abhorrent.

[9 : 43] It was to be hated among his people, Israel, as if nowhere else. But here we see that this exclusion was temporary. Look at verse 3.

Let not the eunuch say, behold I'm a dry tree. Now there is an inclusive embrace for the eunuch. And God announces that the eunuch, the person that couldn't have a family, will be like everyone else in his family. A family that is defined not by some sexual matter, but by something deeper.

Look at verses 4 and 5. For thus says, to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath, who choose the things that please me, and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name, better than sons and daughters.

I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. It's a play on words, isn't it? You see, instead of being on the outside, suddenly the eunuch is not inside.

[10:47] For the eunuch, who was cut off, is now no longer cut off. Exclusion is now inclusion.

So instead of being barren and childless, the eunuch is enriched with blessings far greater than anything that any large earthly family could have brought. And God says, I'm going to give you a name that is better than anything you would have received from your sons and daughters.

I'm going to give you an everlasting name that will endure forever. And that picks up on the end of chapter 55, doesn't it? Where God talks about gathering a people of all nations that he will make a name for himself that would not be cut off.

And now amazingly, God says to you and I, I want to share that name. I want to bring you into that name. I want to share the eternal, everlasting reality with those who were previously excluded, but now they're members of the family.

You were once far away, Ephesians 2, but now you've been brought near. And so that is the inclusive embrace of the gospel. It means this morning that there is nothing in your past.

[12:00] There is nothing in your past that excludes you from God's people. And there are some of us, we are wracked by guilt because of something in the past that we said or did. And some of us still tell ourselves, I can never forgive myself because of that or because of this.

And God announces to you this morning, there is nothing. There is nothing about who you are. And there is nothing about what you've done. Or what has been done to you that disqualifies you.

Nothing that has been done to you disqualifies you from becoming part of God's family. Absolutely nothing. The inclusive embrace of the gospel. Well, that's the part you love, isn't it?

But that's only half the chapter. Yes, God's love takes us exactly where we are. But he doesn't leave us there.

Because God's love wants to change us. And so having embraced everyone who will accept that invitation, God now demands an exclusive commitment from his people.

[13:08] And it actually makes complete sense if you think about it. Tim Keller writes in his book, *Prodigal God*, of a conversation that he had with a woman. Who started coming to his church in Manhattan, New York. And she said, I've never heard a message like this, which I'm hearing.

That we can be accepted by God. Not by our effort. Or by our hard work. Or by being good. We can be accepted by God. By sheer grace. Through the work of Christ. Regardless of anything we've done or do.

And she said, That is a scary idea. She said, It's a good scary, But it's a scary idea. And Tim Keller said, Why is that scary? And here's what he writes in his response.

Here's what she writes in her response. She says, If I was saved by my good works, Then there would be a limit to what God could put me through or ask of me. I would be a taxpayer. With rights. I would have done my duty. And now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But if it really, truly is that I am a sinner saved by sheer grace at God's infinite cost.

[14:08] Then there is nothing he cannot ask of me. And you see, when God embraces us as his people, He calls for an exclusive commitment to him.

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol. Because I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of Egypt. Who redeemed you. An exclusive commitment in Isaiah 56 is so shocking to us.

Because three times in the space of eight verses, He says, I want you to be exclusively committed to, Verse 2, Who keeps the Sabbath.

Blessed is the man who does this on the Son of Man who holds it fast. Who keeps the Sabbath not profaning it. And keeps his hand from doing any evil. Verse 4, For he says, For thus says the Lord to the eunuchs, Who keep my Sabbaths.

Who choose the things that please me. And hold fast my covenant. Verse 6. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord to minister to him, To love the name of the Lord, And to be a servant ever. And who keeps the Sabbath.

[15:14] And does not profane it. And holds fast my covenant. Verse 6. And God says through Isaiah that those he inclusively embraces are Sabbath people.

Who are exclusively committed to him. And we show that we're exclusively committed to him by keeping his Sabbath. Now I don't know what word Sabbath conjures up in your mind. Maybe it's legalism isn't it? Of what you can do or can't do. I told you about the guy who's on the Isle of Lewis on holiday. On a Sunday afternoon. And he's staying in a guest house. And he sees that there's a little rowing boat at the bottom of the garden. And he goes down and he starts to untie the rowing boat. And the lady who owns the bed and breakfast comes down in her Lewis accent and says, What do you think you're doing? And he says, I just thought I'd take the boat out for a little ride on the boat. And she says, you can't. It's the Sabbath. And the man says, but the Lord Jesus went out on a boat on the Sabbath. [16:25] Can't I? And the woman says, the Lord Jesus did Lynn Lewis. And the Sabbath, it's so negative isn't it?

You don't want to hear his sermons on the Sabbath. And so what does it mean? What can you do and can't you do? Is that what I'm going to preach on? But I want you to see that God here is defining the commitment of his people in this very way. Now how does that relate to you? In the New Covenant, the Lord Jesus has come, hasn't he? And when you turn to the New Testament, you do not find that remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy is explicit. It isn't explicit there. And to answer those questions, what we need to do this morning is we need to think hard, alright, on the significance of the Sabbath. Scott Heifman explains that from creation, right from the beginning to the end of creation, God has orchestrated a plan. [17:27] And in his plan, he wants to illustrate a number of things. And he specifically speaks about Israel in the Old Testament. And he says that God in everything he did wanted to demonstrate a number of things.

Number one, God wanted to demonstrate the depth of his love for his people. In everything God does, that's what he's doing. Number two, the trustworthiness of his commitments that God can be relied on. Number three, the necessity for flourishing. Of keeping his commands. You want to flourish, you go God's way. Number four, God wants to show in everything he does the disastrous consequences of idolatry.

We've seen that in Isaiah. And number five, he wants to show all through the Old Testament the shape of salvation that's going to come in the Lord Jesus. Everything he did was shaped to show and orchestrate those things.

But Heifman says that the central pillar of that plan was the Sabbath. Now think about that. The central theme of the Old Testament being the Sabbath.

[18:34] Think about the creation week. God rested on the seventh day. Why did God rest on the seventh day? Because he was tired? No, of course not.

Did God rest because he was worn out after making the world in six days? No, what is going on when God rests? God is declaring, isn't it, I'm satisfied.

My work is done. And God's rest on the seventh day of creation is not because he was tired, not because he was worn out, but because he approved of what he did, it was very, very good.

And then God institutes his Sabbath as a declaration of his goodness. Of God's provision for his people. And it is perfect. That he always meets their needs.

So the weekly Sabbath was and is to be God's constant reminder of these truths. His purpose in the Sabbath was to jog your memory week after week concerning God's sufficiency and God's provision.

[19:42] That God is the only true and satisfying source of life. The Sabbath was like a piece of string tied around Israel's finger that would never let them forget that the sovereign Lord is the only one who could be depended on to meet their needs.

And so God's people, in the Old Testament, they were to keep the Sabbath as a sign that they were trusting God's promises for the future.

Based on his provision in the past. So that they were willing to obey his commands in the present. What did the Sabbath say?

Let's summarise it. I can trust God in the future because he's been faithful to me in the past, which means I can obey him now. Every week.

I can trust God in the future because of what he's done in the past and so I can obey him today. And interestingly, God's commands that they would obey him doesn't just come in the Ten Commandments.

[20 : 54] So that's often the case, isn't it? Christ has come to fulfil the law. So we are done with the law. That's the kind of modern argument on the Sabbath. Christ fulfils the Sabbath. The problem with that is it misunderstands what the Sabbath was in the Old Testament.

So people think that the Sabbath commandment is kind of the one optional extra that you've got on the Ten Commandments. We don't need that today. But actually, do you know the Sabbath was the first commandment given to God's people?

Look at Exodus chapter 16. It's the first commandment. The Ten Commandments didn't come until Exodus 20. And the Sabbath commandment is the last commandment God gives Moses before he comes down the mountain in Exodus 31.

So the Sabbath command serves as a bookend. Because the Sabbath summarises God's demand for complete commitment.

And it summarises God's perfect provision for all their needs. Now that might seem like an ancient history. How does that work today? Does the command to keep the Sabbath day still apply in the New Covenant?

[21 : 59] Now that Jesus has come. And my answer to that is the answer of church history until about 40 years ago. The answer is yes. And a quite definite yes.

Though the specific command, remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, does not appear in the New Testament. It is wired into creation. And it is wired into God's people.

That he has written his law on our hearts. That he commands that we take one day rest in seven. But here is the point. Jesus has come to fulfil the Sabbath.

What did Jesus do on the Sabbath? He heals the sick. He gets corn to eat on the Sabbath. And the Pharisees say, how can you do that? That's not in our law book. And his answer is really fascinating.

Jesus does not say, oh, listen, I've arrived. All that Sabbath stuff is done with. He says, I am the Lord of the Sabbath. Don't mess with it. I am the Lord of the Sabbath. And he shows us what the Sabbath was meant to be.

[23 : 02] And so he uses his sovereign power to meet the needs of his people on the Sabbath. And we see, don't we, as we go through the New Testament, that we enter into God's rest, God's Sabbath rest, by trusting in Jesus.

So in Hebrews 4, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. We keep the Sabbath by resting in Christ.

We keep the Sabbath. We keep the Sabbath by resting in Christ. So does that mean that we don't have to keep a day? Isn't it just seeing that Christ fulfils the Sabbath and we fulfill the Sabbath by resting in Christ?

We're now free, aren't we, from having to keep a day? The problem with that is this. We're not at rest.

Are we? Well, yes, we are, but we're not at rest. Isn't that the movement of the New Testament? The kingdom has come, and yet it's not fully come.

[24 : 09] We are at rest, but we still await a rest. We are saved. We have been saved.

We are being saved, and yet we await salvation to come. We're not home yet. You are not home yet. And so do you remember what was the purpose of the Sabbath day?

Think, think, think. We trust God's promises for the future. Because we see how he's provided for us in the past, that he's always kept his promises.

And so we can boldly and confidently obey him in the present. That hasn't changed. That hasn't changed. Sunday is like a handkerchief round your finger.

The people in the Old Testament, they had a day where they looked forward to the promises that God will keep because of his basis of what he'd done in the past, and they obeyed him in the present.

[25 : 13] And so the argument that we are worse off in the New Testament, that we don't have to keep a day, is madness. Sunday is like a handkerchief round your finger.

Now you might say to me, well why don't we keep the Sabbath, why don't we keep Saturday? Sunday is like a Sabbath. And that will take a whole sermon in itself. But actually you see the

movement in the New Testament, don't you?

You see the movement from Sabbath to Lord's Day, that Christ is risen on the first day of the week. That the people of God meet on the first day of the week. They set aside their giving on the first day of the week.

The Lord appears to John in the book of Revelation on the Lord's Day. We look back to the first creation. But now new creation has come.

And so we move forward. And the pattern of change from Sabbath to the Lord's Day. It's a day every week that tells you God will keep his promise to take you home.

[26 : 11] On the basis of what he's done in the past. And you need it. It's a day that you need. It's a day that I need.

That we cease from our work. And we rest in Christ. And we rest from our work. And we spend the day with the Lord's people. And we rest.

And so what God is saying to Isaiah is that this commitment to the Lord's Day shows whether we are building our life around God.

That actually trusting God with this day that belongs to him is evidence that our lives are centred around God.

And so you don't have to work today. You don't have to study today. You don't have to do your homework today. It's the greatest blessing.

[27 : 14] And he says it to foreigners and to eunuchs who commit to me in this way. Who are sold out to God that we are to love God's day. He gives you three ways.

Look at what he says in verse 4. He says those who keep the Sabbath choose to do what pleases the Lord. Verse 4. For thus says the Lord to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath. Who choose the things that please me.

And I'll fast my covenant. And so the Sabbath is a great exercise. And can I trust God's day? Can I? Can I honor God's day? And you see the more that you trust that God is in control of your future.

And that he's going to keep his promises. Because of what he's done in the past. The more I can follow him. Those who choose the Sabbath please the Lord. Secondly verse 6. Those who choose the Sabbath love the Lord and please him.

Foreigners who bind themselves to him. To minister him. Love the name of the Lord. It's an incredible thing isn't it? That we can honestly say I love the Lord.

[28 : 28] That I have a day that I can spend. That God has given me with the Lord. And I love him. Not I do this for him. Not I do that for him. I love him. I love God.

Not just respect him. Not just acknowledge him. Do you love him? That's so important isn't it? Why do we keep the Sabbath? We've got to see this. We keep the Sabbath as a mark of love. Because that is the mark of a Sabbath people of God's family.

And the more that we see how committed God is to us. And what he's done for us in the past. Through the Lord Jesus. So we love him. And if you don't love him.

It's because you haven't seen what he is. And what he's done for you. You're blind to what he's done for you already. And the more you love him.

The more you long to do what pleases him. And obey him in every area of life. Those who love the Lord keep his Sabbath. Thirdly. Those who keep.

[29 : 31] The Sabbath verse 1. Live uprightly. Keep justice. And do righteousness. And again you have to work hard on what those words mean.

What does it mean? Well for those of us who are in house group. At the end of 2 Peter. The 2 Peter equivalent. Is 2 Peter 3 verses 11 and 12. Where it says since all of these things. Are thus to be dissolved.

What sort of people ought you to be. In lives of holiness and godliness. That's exactly the same as the root words of Isaiah 56. Because it's the way of blessing. It's the happy life.

God's people are a Sabbath people. Who are marked by inclusivity. You couldn't have a wider embrace. But they are people also who are exclusive. One last thing as we move forward.

What I really struggle with. As I studied this passage this week. Is these commands are given to people in exile. They are in the land. It's a command given to people.

[30 : 33] In a society like ours. Where everything is against keeping a day holy. And yet just notice what it says. It says keep the Sabbath.

Don't profane it. Hold fast. It's a command that's given to people like you and I. Now to grasp the full impact of this.

We've got to go to one of the coolest chapters in the Bible. And it's Acts chapter 8. So come with me to Acts chapter 8. And there's an Ethiopian. An Ethiopian government official. Can you go there? Wake the person up next to you.

Or nudge the grumpy person next to you. Acts chapter 8. And there's an Ethiopian government official. Who's travelling back from Jerusalem. To his home in Ethiopia. And he's gone.

To Jerusalem. To go to the temple. To worship the living God. The problem is he can't get in. Can he? Because the thing I didn't tell you about the Ethiopian official. Is that he's also a eunuch.

[31 : 32] And he was probably castrated. So he could be better trusted by the king. But it meant a life of aloneness and alienation. And that must have been a daily reality for him.

And that aloneness would have been an ever deeper reality. Since going to Jerusalem. To worship at the temple of the living God. Because when he got there. He would have discovered to his utter disappointment. That having travelled over a thousand miles.

Eunuchs were forbidden by the Lord. To enter into the temple. For him. The entrance to the temple. Was metaphorically marked with a massive no entry sign. And again.

It's so hard to fathom how he must have felt. So Luke tells us on his way home. The Ethiopian is reading the Isaiah scroll. And so imagine the curiosity. When he discovers these words.

That we've read this morning. Let no eunuch complain. I am only a dry tree. Amazing words.

[32 : 37] Imagine what he must have thought. Doesn't the Lord say that no eunuch can come in. He knew all about that sense of exclusion. Didn't he? He knew what it meant to be unclean. He knew what it meant to be a bit of a freak.

Of being childless. And now he reads something that must have perked his curiosity. And he says how?

How can this happen? What has changed? And so he hunts through the Isaiah scroll. Trying to find what momentous event could possibly have happened. To supersede Deuteronomy 23.

What would make a eunuch clean? And it just so happened that God has sent one of his people. Philip to that route. Which goes from Jerusalem to Ethiopia. And as Philip spots the Ethiopian chariot.

The Holy Spirit tells Philip to stay with it. You can picture it. Can't you? Philip running along with the chariot. Trying to keep up. And the Ethiopian reading aloud.

[33 : 37] As would have been the custom. And here's what he reads. For he was led like a sheep to the slaughter. And like a lamb before it she rose silent. So he did not open in his mouth.

And in his humiliation. He but justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth. And the eunuch must have been going crazy. Somebody without descendants. Do you see that?

Somebody humiliated like me. Someone who was cut off. Someone who became almost like a eunuch for me. And he looks up probably for the uppity time on his journey.

Trying to avoid chariot sickness on the bumpy road. And he spots this guy running alongside his chariot. And he's taken aback. He catches Philip's eye. And Philip asks him the question. Do you understand what you're reading?

And Philip gets the dream answer that every preacher longs for. How can I understand unless someone explains it to me? And Philip gets into the chariot. And here's what Luke writes.

[34 : 36] And the eunuch asks Philip. Please tell me who is the prophet talking about. Himself or someone else? And Philip began with that very passage of scripture. And told him the good news about Jesus.

It's goose bump stuff. Because you see the Ethiopian for the first time understood. The inclusive embrace of the gospel. And so we're told they come to some water.

And the Ethiopian says to Philip. I need to be baptized. Why? Because he understood that he needed to be marked with the sign that I exclusively belong to Jesus. And that my commitment now is exclusively to him.

And you know what the result of that was? Having been embraced and made that exclusive commitment. Luke tells us he went on his way rejoicing. Because that is what it brings.

It brings joy in your life. And that is what God intended in your life. But I want to say to you. That that joy will only come through being embraced by God.

[35 : 35] And you exclusively committing yourself to him. And saying I'll give up my gods. I'll give up my idols.

And I will live all out for you. And that's what it means to be a Sabbath person. And that's what it means to be a Christian. And my prayer is that is what it means to be part of this church.
Let's pray.