

God's Banquet

Isaiah 55

John Breon

This text comes from the time toward the end of Israel's exile in Babylon. It's God's invitation to the exiles to turn to him for deliverance and new life. In these words addressed to the ancient Jews, we can hear God's word of invitation and promise.

The opening lines invite all who are thirsty to come for water. In that desert region, water is often scarce and at times people would have to buy it. The call or invitation here sounds like the call of a street vendor. What people may have had to buy, God offers freely. Even wine and milk can be bought without money. This shows that God's gifts and blessings are freely given and abundant. There is plenty for everyone who hungers and thirsts.

A little girl from a large family was in the hospital and someone from the church was visiting her. The visitor saw that she hadn't drunk her milk and asked why. She said, "I was waiting for someone to tell me how far down I could drink." The person from church said, "You can drink it all! It's all yours! There's plenty."

The next verse suggests that what the people were spending their money and effort on is not what really satisfies. Israel's attempts to adapt to life in Babylon or their efforts to achieve their own deliverance may be in mind here. God calls them to give up their fascination with Babylonian power and Babylonian gods and to return to the free, gracious, and compassionate gift of the LORD, who will bring the exiles home (*The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible*). They couldn't be satisfied with anything less than worshiping the true God and experiencing God's salvation and deliverance.

What do we spend ourselves for? What do we give our time, money and labor for? What have we bought that turned out not to be bread? What have we worked for only to find that it doesn't satisfy?

When I was a kid, I read a lot of comic books. They used to have pages of ads for various kinds of novelties. I never ordered the X-ray glasses or trick chewing gum or "sea monkeys." But a pastor named Rob

Webber tells about ordering “sea monkeys” one time. The ad showed all these sea monkeys swimming around, smiling and playing. Rob did chores and saved up his quarters, then taped them to a card and mailed in his order. Then he waited...and waited...and waited. Finally, the package came from the sea monkey people. He took it inside, opened it and read the instructions. He had a glass fish bowl all ready and filled with water. He opened the packet with the sea monkeys and emptied it into the water. He watched it for hours, but no sea monkeys. Finally, he had to go to bed. First thing in the morning, he got up and checked his sea monkeys. He waited...and waited...and waited. Then, he saw something on the bottom of the bowl move. It twitched. Then it twitched again. Then a little piece broke away and floated up, twitching every so often. And that’s all that happened. Rob says he thought, “Is that all there is?” (*Beginnings: An Introduction to Christian Faith*, session 1 video).

How many people work and spend and accumulate money and possessions and stuff only to look at it and say, “Is that all there is?” Or we position ourselves and climb the ladders and gain the status that comes with success—but there’s a nagging question: “Is that all there is?”

We can do the same thing in our religious life, with our spirituality. We busy ourselves with church activities. We make all kinds of promises to God. We trudge along in our self-propelled discipleship. And we think, “Is that all there is?” Something’s missing. We feel empty. We keep searching for meaning. We remain in captivity.

The rock group U-2 sings, “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For.” They’ve been singing it for nearly thirty years and it still speaks for a lot of people. I want to say, “Here it is!” Here is just what you’re looking for! “Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?” God has something so much better for us. Listen to God—he invites us to his banquet. God offers the best food for us to delight in. If we come to God and listen to him, we will live, we will have life in its fullness.

God is what you are really looking for. All of our desires express something of our longing for God. The search for meaning, the attempts to fill the emptiness in our lives, trying to find something that really satisfies—these are all part of our search for God. “You have made us for yourself and

our hearts are restless till they rest in you" (Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 1, sec. 1).

And, you know, God is not hard to find. In fact, we find God because God is looking for us. God is longing to reveal himself to us. We don't have to beg God to come into our lives. If we would stop resisting him, he would rush into our hearts.

A vital, intimate relationship with God meets our deepest needs and satisfies our deepest longings. God offers himself and his blessings freely. God invites us to his banquet.

Bob Benson recalls the days of old fashioned Sunday school picnics:

It was before air-conditioning. They said, "We'll meet at Sycamore Lodge in Shelby Park at 4:30 Saturday. You bring your supper and we'll furnish the tea."

But you came home at the last minute and when you got ready to pack your lunch, all you could find in the refrigerator was one dried up piece of baloney and just enough mustard in the bottom of the jar so that you got it all over your knuckles trying to get to it. And there were just two stale pieces of bread. So you made your baloney sandwich and wrapped it in some brown bag and went to the picnic.

And when it came time to eat you sat at the end of a table and spread out your sandwich. But the folks next to you—the lady was a good cook and she had worked all day and she had fried chicken, and baked beans, and potato salad, and homemade rolls, and sliced tomatoes, and pickles, and olives, and celery, and topped it off with two big homemade chocolate pies.

And they spread it all out beside you and there you were with your baloney sandwich. But they said to you, "Why don't we put it all together?"

"No, I couldn't do that, I just couldn't even think of it," you murmured embarrassedly.

"Oh, come on, there's plenty of chicken and plenty of pie, and plenty of everything—and we just love baloney sandwiches. Let's just put it all together."

And so you did and there you sat—eating like a king when you came like a pauper. (Bob Benson, *Come Share the Being* 105-06)

The point is, God doesn't need our baloney, but we sure need his chicken!

You may be parched and dry and starving to death. God says, "Come on! I have plenty for you to eat and drink." Jesus says he can give living water (John 4:13, 14) and that he himself is the Bread of Life (Jn 6:35). It's in knowing Jesus that we have true life in all its fullness. And when we know him we see how meager all the things are we tried to fill ourselves with. E. Stanley Jones said that once he met Jesus he was forever spoiled for anything less.

God's offer is made before we realize our need for God. The history of God's dealings with his people is a history of covenants. God takes the initiative in making those agreements with his people. God made a covenant with David and promised faithful love and mercy to him. Now, the prophet says, that covenant and those promises are for all Israel. And it extends through Jesus to all people who will listen and come to him.

God's past promises and faithfulness to them give us confidence to trust God's gracious offer of life now.

Verse 5 of this chapter struck me: "Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations you do not know will come running to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor." Can we believe that people we don't even know yet will come to the Lord through our witness? Are we willing to go to people we don't know with God's invitation? Are we ready for people we don't know to come here—in the present building or in the new building—and come to know the Lord?

We receive what God has to offer, we respond to God's invitation, by turning to God—seeking God, calling on God. This means turning from all the other stuff we've used to try to satisfy ourselves—leaving behind that futile way of life. The way to true fulfillment is to stop chasing all the things we think will satisfy and to start pursuing God—God's ways and purposes. The word for this turning, this change in what we pursue, is repentance.

The time to do it is now. There's no reason to wait. To delay is to deny God and what he offers. Bob Tuttle tells about speaking at a youth rally. One young man said that he wanted to give his life to Christ, but he needed to wait until after Saturday night. Tuttle asked what was so special about Saturday night. He said, "That's the night my buddies and I go steal watermelons." Tuttle replied, "Give yourself to Jesus right now and those watermelons will take on a whole new perspective." He did go ahead and receive Christ—and forgot all about the watermelons.

How can we trust that what God wants to give is good? We find the guarantee that God's offer is good in God's greatness and God's word.

God is the only one we can turn to. His thoughts and ways are higher than ours. God's plans or designs are higher than ours. This is talking about God's purpose and how God carries it out. God's words through the prophet counter Israel's resignation and weariness. The prophet points to the boundless horizons of God's designs and ways, which are immeasurably greater than we can think. So he gives the people confidence. Though they can't believe it anymore, all things are possible with God (Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, The Old Testament Library). God's greatness and majesty soar above the best that we can imagine.

And God's word is effective. Not only does God keep his promises, he also sends his word to accomplish his purposes. God's word is personal. Here, it's like a messenger God sends out to do his will. The New Testament says that God's word is "alive and active" (Hebrews 4:12).

God is not silent. God speaks in the events of our lives. God speaks in Scripture. God speaks in his mighty deeds. God speaks fully and decisively in Jesus, "the Word made flesh" (Jn 1:14).

Real satisfaction comes in experiencing God's salvation and deliverance. For the Jewish exiles that meant release from captivity and restoration to their land. And then, even more, they would find the fullness of life with God. For us, it means God's saving work in Jesus Christ—releasing us from sin and restoring us to real life that is full and abundant in him.

That salvation eventually transforms all of life. Even nature joins in the celebration of God's great acts of deliverance. Mountains and hills would

sing and trees would clap their hands for the joy that comes when God delivers his people. God promised to turn the land's barrenness to fruitfulness. This great act of deliverance and transformation would be an everlasting sign for the Lord's renown. What God has done to deliver and restore his people will never be forgotten. The promise is still good—God offers life that really satisfies. The invitation still stands and it's open to everyone. "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!" And Jesus offers such an invitation when he says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).