

## RUF Bible Study – Attributes of God in Isaiah

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### Isaiah 55 – The Joy of God

*Isaiah 55: "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. 3 Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. 4 Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. 5 Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. 6 "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; 7 let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

*8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. 10 "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. 12 "For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. 13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."*

In looking at the book of Isaiah, we're also attempting to understand the text as a whole. This isn't easy with such an unfamiliar book and time as this, and its sheer length makes it difficult as well. But this chapter concludes the second main section of the book, usually denoted as chapters 40-55. In the next section, 56-66, Isaiah will show us the ongoing nature of faith as we look forward to the fullness of God's oncoming kingdom. In the first section, 1-39, we saw Isaiah's call and that call extended to Israel and the nations, yet falling on deaf ears. This middle section focuses on the Servant of the Lord and how and why he works for redemption for such a weak people.

Last week we looked at the Suffering Servant and saw his message of hope *through* weakness. Isaiah 55 calls us to respond to this Servant. It's a call to conversion that we shouldn't shrink from.

There are two schools of thought for dog training. The first is that a dog should obey you because you are the human and it is the canine. This establishes the power rankings, and you as the human use your superior intellect and strength to get it to submit. You use newspapers to swat the dog, harsh words to shame the dog, and whatever force necessary to get him to come to you when called. It must come or it will be punished.

The other method doesn't discount the superiority of humans, but takes into account the love relationship between human and dog. It praises obedience in the main. It seeks to make the "come" command fun and exciting, to make the dog want to come. Of course, there are times for stern words, and the goal is complete obedience toward the commands, but they are set in the context of the relationship between man and dog.

Which method do you think Isaiah 55 employs here? Is this the stern "come" command of a tyrant, of a mean god who will swat you if you don't? Or is this the loving command of a near God, one who loves you and seeks your best? Coming on the heels of Isaiah 53 and 54, it's difficult to think that a God who would send a servant to die for you despite your spitting in his face would be the kind that hits and beats you into submission.

Verse 6 says: "*Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near;*" This is redemptive language, this nearness. God is near, not far off. He is not distant. He is not absent. He is near. Isaiah want his audience to capture some very specific images. One of these is the next-of-kinship relation described between Ruth and Boaz. That is a book about nearness and farness. The idea of nearness is also found in Leviticus 25, where the ravages of poverty are set aright in the Year of Jubilee through the role of the *goel*, the redeemer. According to the Law, it is the proximity of relationship that determines the redeemer's moral obligation to redeem. In other words, the closer that relationship is, the greater the moral obligation.<sup>2</sup>

But we have broken the covenant with our Lord, and He is under no moral obligation to redeem us. Yet the picture that Isaiah gives us is this: The Lord is near, full of mercy, hearing our confession/repentance, pardoning the abundance of our sins against Him. There is a season of nearness when the Lord may be found, and the Scriptures speak of this season as the Year of God's favor. That season of nearness is now. The Lord is near, come. "Sinner, Come!" he cries. However, his calling is radical and unnatural and it may feel like it is undoing you at times. But it gives God a tremendous joy to see you come when called.

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For this series, I used commentaries on Isaiah from Meyer, Webb, Ortland, Oswalt and Motyer. I listened to sermons from Tim Keller, Fred Harrell and Bryan Chapell, and used notes from RUF campus minister Kevin Twit and seminary professor Dr. Jack Collins. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

<sup>2</sup> From Rev. Brad Anderson, pastor of Faith Covenant Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Kalispell, Montana.

### ***The Radical Call of Conversion***

Let's look first at what God through Isaiah is asking us to do. In verse 7, right after hearing of God's nearness, we read: "let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts;" God is telling you that to come to him you must recognize that you are among the wicked and stop doing your wicked ways. Your actions must change. You must change your behavior.

That isn't too hard to believe. We all think that good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell. We are so used to being judged for our behavior that we naturally fall into that role.

But then God pushes us farther. He says that the unrighteous man must forsake his thoughts. Whoa. That is a stretch. I can modify my behavior, but to modify my thoughts is much tougher. I remember talking to a youth group leader when I must have been in seventh grade. I told him that I sometimes thought bad words but didn't say them, and was proud at my self control and non-sinning-ness. He told me that thinking them but not saying them was still sin. I was aghast. How, then could I ever stop from sinning? To come to God you must forsake even your unrighteous thoughts. That's going to take some positive meditation, some affirmations, some counseling. But it is possible.

But there's something more, something even deeper, something nearer to impossibility. In verse 3, Isaiah writes: "Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live." The word there "soul" isn't talking about a body/spirit distinction. It's closer to our word "heart," which is another word that the Bible sometimes uses for the concept of your whole life. Everything about you finds itself in your heart or your soul. The completeness of you, instead of the fragmented parts.

So God is saying that you have to come to him or else you will die. Your soul, everything about you, is seeking after death. Isaiah pictures this for us in the metaphor of spending our money on bread that isn't actually bread and our labors on that which won't satisfy. Our money and our time on things that we think give us life, but actually give us death.

Some of those things are good things, but we just can't ever get enough of them, they aren't nourishing to our souls and bodies and we starve and die. Other things are actually poison, so we're eating poison into our system, smiling the whole time as we begin to die.

We all have these things, these soul-desires that we attempt to purchase to give us life. I've listed them off many times. Careers. Grade-point average. Number of friends on facebook.com. Looks. Style. Possessions. Sculpted body. Marriage. Right neighborhood. Orderly home with everything in its place. Achieving children. Virginity. Partying. Morality. Politics. Power. Sports achievements. Accolades. Control. Are these your bread and water? Are these your life?

The Bible says, God says, that none of these things ultimately will satisfy you. Many of those are good things, but you're placing way too much weight and emphasis on them because you crave something deeper, more substantial, but you just can't get it.

"To 'seek' the Lord is to stop dawdling and to become intentional about him, setting highest value on him, removing everything that keeps us from him, hearing his Word without back-talk, opening up to his will with no preconditions, budgeting our money for his cause first – the ever-widening circle is endless. Seeking the Lord is a whole-life realignment with Christ. We stop treating him as religious garnish on the side."<sup>3</sup> A superficial, technical righteousness has to go. Tolerating our sins will not work. As American Christians, we cannot merely tweak our American ways and our American thoughts and then call them righteous. "We can't join a certain church because it won't challenge our selfish lifestyle and think that's Christianity. Being nice, harmless, churchgoing people, with no repentance, no submission, no forsaking self, no pursuit of Christ – but all that covered over with a glaze of sentimental religion on Sunday mornings – that is not at all what God has in mind for us.... God is calling for a complete overhaul."

Wow. That's quite a message. Going from our actions, and our thoughts to our souls gets to the essence of who we are. Of whom you are. Of whom your friends are. There are so many students out there who could care less about the things of God, who pursue everything except him, but yet who think that they are Christians. That is a truly scary proposition.

If we look back over Isaiah and try to see the picture he paints of us, we come up with words like: filthy, lost, blind, deaf, wicked, rebels, sinful, evildoers, estranged, sick, faint, unsound, desolate, besieged, burdensome, unclean, unfaithful, a whore, unjust, murderous, bribers, idolatrous, forsaken, arrogant, godless, cowardly, needy, proud, drunkards, unwilling to hear, plunderers, looters, grasshoppers, like nothing, slaves, divorced, like sheep, wandering, transgressors, and full of iniquity.

That is not a pretty picture. And this is the church. The church. Whether or not these were actually Christians, true, regenerate Israelites we don't know. But they were people identifying themselves with Yahweh and his temple, just like you see all around us today. These are the people we're talking about. Like you. Like me. Not "them" out there. Us. And them too, but be careful in what you base your distinctions on, for we are in the same boat. We are sinners. We deserve nothing from God. We have offended him in every possible way. We are worse than we have ever thought, in every possible dimension, down to our very souls. And we have done this willingly, not under compulsion.

You have to change your desires, the things you seek, the way you conceive of everything – or else you will die. That is more than behavior modification, more than affirmations – how is it possible at all? Will you continue to starve yourself? Will you keep ingesting poison?

### ***The Radical Call of Conversion***

There is a call to conversion here. "Come!" I won't apologize for it.

This is what makes people in our day uncomfortable. People will tolerate the subjective nature of religion and its experiences, but if you spill over into any sort of objectiveness, they will go crazy. They will hate you. They will call you out.

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<sup>3</sup> Oswalt, 371

But they won't be sorry about their own hypocrisy. They fail to see that the position that says, "There is no objective truth to religion so all religions must be tolerated" is a religious conviction that is impossible to prove and is being asserted as truth to be converted to.

The truth is that we're all seeking to convert others to our worldviews. That is what advertising is about. That is what dating is about. That is what philosophy is about. That's what Christianity is about, but we're out front in stating it. I want to see conversions on campus, in our group and in our church because Christianity isn't just and only true for me – it is true.

The call to conversion is therefore a call to understand and know God, especially through the Scriptures. We are told that we must know his ways and thoughts, but that these are not translatable to our ways and thoughts. Then how can we know them? What rule has God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him? The word of God, which is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.<sup>4</sup>

The word, knowing God's thoughts and ways, is like rain and snow coming down from heaven. Here in Oklahoma, we know about drought. Not only do we have the images and stories told about the Dust Bowl days, but we just went through one of the driest times in the state's history. This led to untold acres scorched by brush fires that ranged all across the state. What did we need? Rain. We needed and prayed for rain.

But God's word isn't like the shaky proposition of rain seeding the clouds. No one really knows if that works or not. No, God says his word *will accomplish* its purposes. It shall not return empty when it goes out.

What does this mean? It means that if we are to understand the Bible, at least from the book of Isaiah, we have to look at things that are really uncomfortable for our postmodern 21<sup>st</sup> century society. We have to speak of prophecies and miracles, which smack into our naturalism. We have to speak of sin, which contradicts our self-assurance, self-image and self-esteem. We have to speak of a Suffering Servant, which bothers our triumphalism and our western view of what a savior is and does. We have to talk about the Scriptures as an authority, which contradicts our radical individualism.

And we have to talk about the call of God. Despite all we've said about our sinfulness and brokenness, he still wants us to come to eat with him. *"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.*

He tells us, if you are thirsty, to come and buy and drink and eat. There will be bread and wine and milk.

God tells us: *delight yourselves in rich food.* This is an extravagant meal set before us. It's no Pizza Shuttle buffet. It's not Lunchables popped open to keep the kids happy. It's not a PBJ.

It's Matt and Kathryn Howell's wedding reception – it was fabulous. They held it at the Memphis Country Club, a swanky place. They invited everyone who came to the wedding, nearly 400 people. They had one of the best live cover bands I have ever heard – they rocked. They had three open bars pouring drinks. And they had food everywhere – fine meats, a mashed potato bar where you put your eats into martini glasses, chicken quesadillas. We didn't want it to end.

Now, not all of us can afford such a wedding feast. But I am convinced that your reception should be as good as you can make it within the context of your life. Don't go into major debt for it. Don't blow all your money on three hours when you won't be able to pay your rent when you return. But if you've got it, the wedding reception is a good place to spend it. Sam and Laura's wedding didn't cost nearly as much as the Howell's and it was just as fun. Whether \$400 or \$40,000, it is a fine way to celebrate.

So it's a great party and you're invited. You're invited!

But isn't it strange that the text says that you have to buy and eat, even though you don't have money. It says it twice even, emphasizing that you have to buy without money and without price. Why is this?

Because the party cost a lot of time, money and energy. It wasn't free. It was very expensive. And you have to realize that or else you'll miss the whole thing.

In other words, you have to ask for help. You can't pay on your own, but in order to come you have to recognize your need and ask.

I see this phenomenon with RUF Summer Conference, which we hold every year in Panama City, Florida. The conference costs \$225 this year for five days on the beach, all bills paid once you get there. That is a tremendous price. There is no way you can find that price anywhere else. This is possible because RUF has a longstanding relationship with the facilities, and because a man comes in and does all the food preparation himself. This most likely saves each person about \$75.

But still, students often balk at the price. And I understand that. So there are scholarships. I give out \$100 scholarships – all you have to do is ask for one. That money comes from somewhere, but I think it's important, so I want to use it for this. If a student needs more than \$100 to go, we talk about that too.

Now, there are often two responses to this that I'd like to point out. The first is that sometime students don't really need the scholarships but want one and get one anyway. They selfishly take advantage of the gift. How do I know this? Because once they get down there, they start to rent go-carts and jet skis and drop \$75 for a parasailing trip. They don't understand grace. They need to repent and see that grace is costly and not to be taken advantage of.

But there is another group that knows about the scholarship, needs it, but won't ask for it. So they don't go to Summer Conference. They miss out on the whole thing because they won't ask. They see grace as costly, but insist on paying their own way. Thus, they don't understand grace. They need to repent and see that grace is costly and yet offered and available for those who see their need.

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<sup>4</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism, question and answer 2.

But that's just it. To those who see their need. That is who God is near to. Isaiah 57:15 says: *For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.*

The high and mighty God of Isaiah 40, the one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy, who dwells in a high and holy place, who has no reason to mess with crazy, broken, messed up people, says that is also dwells somewhere else. With the contrite and the lowly.

He will give everlasting water to those who know that they're thirsty. He will feed bread to those who know they're hungry. What did we say are the conditions to coming to know God? We said that we must forsake our wicked thoughts, ways and desires. But really that is dependent on something else.

In order to come to God, you must see your need of him. All you need is need. God is near the needy. You can see that all throughout the Bible – little Abraham, scrawny Jacob, small David, widow Ruth and on and on. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who *hunger and thirst* for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Are you thirsty?

Try to picture one of these images: dehydrated backpacking food, a dried up sponge, parched earth, a life that has never tasted spiritual refreshment. Each of these images depicts thirst, and from the moment you add water, there is re-creation. The dehydrated food expands and becomes edible; the dry sponge loses its stiffness; the water falling on parched earth disappears until only the rings of mud can be seen; and the life that has tasted the waters of spiritual refreshment pulsates with newness. You've seen this. I've seen this in some of you, even lately.

Verse 12-13 expresses how this satisfaction will be burst forth both in the life of an individual and throughout the whole of creation. *12 "For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. 13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."*

"For you will go out with joy, and be led forth with peace." Joy and peace give a two word summary of a spiritual thirst that is satisfied; joy depicting the freedom from guilt and sin; peace depicting a fullness of trust experienced through knowing God and being known by God. When you reflect on how the Lord satisfies your thirst, do you remember your first interaction with the Fountain of Living Water when joy flooded your heart and when peace was found?<sup>5</sup>

In John 4, we read of the woman at the well. The whole conversation is bound up in thirst. She's at the well getting water – alone. A Jewish man speaks to a Samaritan woman. It's all culturally wrong. But he still initiates with her, talking to her about theology and about her life.

Jesus says wild things. Crazy things. Isaiah 55 type things.

John 4:13-14 *3 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."*

And the woman was changed. She believed. She left her jug of water and went to tell everyone about this man Jesus.

Two chapters later, Jesus says wild and crazy things to another crowd.

John 6:35-40 *Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."*

And they grumbled. And they disputed among themselves. And 6:66 says: *After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.*

### ***The Motivation for the Mission and Message of the Radical Call of Conversion***

Let's look at one last thing. We have a mission – we are sent out, we are witnesses. Did you notice this in verse 4?: *Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples.* We are to be witnesses for God. We have a message – the Suffering Servant, found in Jesus Christ who invites and saves sinners. But do we have a motivation for this? Some of you think, I don't feel like this. I don't feel too excited about Easter at all.

Look at verse 3 again: *Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.* Notice the words, "everlasting covenant." The word covenant there speaks of a relationship between us and God. Therefore it is possible to have one. But on what terms?

If you read the Bible closely, you'll notice that the concept of a covenant with God runs throughout the whole book. But there is something confusing about it. At times, God says that his covenant is eternal, unbreakable and unconditional. Yet at other times, he says that it is temporary, breakable and conditional. Sometimes he will say this in the same paragraph. I will never leave you nor forsake you. Do these things and you shall live. The implication is that if you don't do them you won't live of course.

So which is it? Most of us try to resolve this tension by falling on one side of the other. Sure, God has a lot of rules and ways he wants you to live, but at the end of the day, his love is unconditional. That is the secular liberal approach. Or you go the other way: Sure, God's love is unconditional, but at the end of the day, you have to live according to his rules and ways. That is the traditional, moral, religious approach.<sup>6</sup> That is what Buddah taught. On his deathbed, he is reported to have said, "Strive without ceasing" or "strive on with diligence." Labor. Work to do good. Will that change you?

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<sup>5</sup> From Brad Anderson

<sup>6</sup> All of this comes from Tim Keller's message on this text. [www.redeemer.com](http://www.redeemer.com)

This is the tension that propels the narrative of the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup> What will it be? Will God give in to his people and allow them to live that way? But what about his holiness? Or will God give up on his people and let them go because they are too far gone? But what about his love? How can holiness and love fit together? Will he give in or give up?

Buddah's last words won't change you. Neither will the atheist or agnostic's – who knows or I hope God lets everyone in.

But Jesus' last words before he died were different. He said, "It is finished." Tetelesti, which means, "It has been completed." Or "It has been fulfilled." What has been completed or fulfilled? The conditions of the covenant have been completed. They have been finished. They have been fulfilled.

The conditions were met so that you can have unconditional love. The cost was so great, but it was paid by Jesus so that you could buy it without money. There is an everlasting covenant for you because Jesus has paid the cost.

And there is one more word in there: *Hesed*. *Hesed* comes from *my steadfast, sure love for David*. Steadfast, sure love. Lovingkindness. It's where justice and kindness meet. It's where holiness and love come together and kiss. That happens on the cross.

You need to be converted. Merely changing your behavior won't do it. You can get in a Christian group and clean up your life and stop cussing and sleeping around and start praying and coming to RUF... and you won't be converted.

You need to be changed. Radically changed from your heart. You need to see Jesus. The cost he paid for your entry to his banquet should stagger you this weekend. The reversal of fortune as you see your awfulness on him and his awesomeness on you.

And if you see this, you will not be offensive to others. You will have a mission and a message – but if you see that he loved you despite your sin, not because of your righteousness, then you will be humble. And if you see that he loved you because of his righteousness, you will be confident that he is the answer for others too. A humble confidence, that is what we're after. That is something that could transform our world. Bring personal transformation and cultural renewal.

Here is the call of God for you to feast with him. It's an amazing thing. It's so amazing that, if you'll turn to the last chapter of your Bible, to the last page of your Bible, to one of the very last paragraphs, you'll read this in Revelation 22:17 *The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.*

Sprite used to air a commercial that said "Obey your thirst." Don't drink the saltwater around you. You will die. See your need. Need your need. Come to him who offers everlasting water, the bread of life. These other things won't satisfy you. But Jesus will. He will undo you. He will restructure you and your desires. He will re-center you and your soul. And you will live. Seek him while he may be found. Seek him today. Do not tarry till your better, or you'll never come at all. All the fitness he requires is for you to feel your need of him. Come, without money, come to Jesus Christ and buy. Feel his delight and his joy at your response.

### ***Come Ye Sinners by Joseph Hart***

1. Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched,  
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;  
Jesus, ready, stands to save you,  
Full of pity, joined with power.  
He is able, He is able;  
He is willing; doubt no more.

2. Come ye needy, come, and welcome,  
God's free bounty glorify;  
True belief and true repentance,  
Every grace that brings you nigh.  
Without money, without money  
Come to Jesus Christ and buy.

3. Come, ye weary, heavy laden,  
Bruised and broken by the fall;  
If you tarry 'til you're better,  
You will never come at all.  
Not the righteous, not the righteous;  
Sinners Jesus came to call.

4. Let not conscience make you linger,  
Nor of fitness fondly dream;  
All the fitness He requireth  
Is to feel your need of Him.

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<sup>7</sup> That is a good English class phrase for you.

This He gives you, this He gives you,  
'Tis the Spirit's rising beam.

5. Lo! The Incarnate God, ascended;  
Pleads the merit of His blood.  
Venture on Him; venture wholly,  
Let no other trust intrude.  
None but Jesus, none but Jesus  
Can do helpless sinners good.

*Love Constraining to Obedience by William Cowper*

*Chorus:* To see the Law by Christ fulfilled,  
To hear His pardoning voice,  
Changes a slave into a child  
And duty into choice.

1. No strength of nature can suffice  
To serve the Lord aright  
And what she has, she misapplies,  
For want of clearer light.

2. How long beneath the Law I lay  
In bondage and distress  
I toiled the precept to obey,  
But toiled without success.

3. Then to abstain from outward sin  
Was more than I could do  
Now if I feel its power within  
I feel I hate it too.

4. Then all my servile works were done,  
A righteousness to raise  
Now, freely chosen in the Son,  
I freely choose His ways.