

Count on it

Living in the certainty of God's Word



BIBLE FOUNDATIONS

Background material to help with Sermon preparation on Isaiah 55:1–11

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The overall tone of Isaiah 40–55:- Apparently delivered towards the end of the 6th century BC to Israelite refugees in exile in Babylon. This exile had started nearly 50 years earlier, when the temple had been desecrated and severely damaged, and much of the city left in ruins. The Israelite leadership had been deported and they were now part of the work force.

Militarily, the Babylonians were now too weak to control their empire. The Persians are rising up and their commander, Cyrus (mentioned in Isaiah 45.1) has already achieved several notable victories. The prophet urges the people to trust in the God of Israel, Yahweh. Through Cyrus, God is setting his people free and offers them the chance to return to the Promised Land.

Standard scholarly dates for these events:

587 BC	Fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians
539 BC	Fall of Babylon to the Persians;
538 BC	Edict of Cyrus (Ezra 1) allowing Israelites to return to Jerusalem.
515 BC	Dedication of second temple.

EMOTIONAL CONTEXT

What sort of psychological state was Isaiah's audience in? This 50-year time gap means that the prophecy is delivered to the second or even the third generation of Israelites living in Babylon. Most people would have been born in Babylon and many would have had a confused sense of their identity. Were they still Israelite, or Babylonian? Should they continue to trust the God of Israel who had failed to protect them on home soil or turn to local gods?

Others will have remembered that the prophets warned repeatedly that the country would be overrun if they continued in their lack of faith (e.g. Isaiah 1.7–9, 7.17, 39.5–7). Daniel's attitudes demonstrated the actions of this believing group (Daniel 6.6–13).

So, a significant number of the Israelites are reluctant to leave Babylon, wary of trusting in the God they saw as the weak, minor tribal deity of their ancestors. They may have started out as unwilling victims of a war, but now they are rooted in Babylon and well enough established to be uninterested in starting a new life of hardship in the ruins of a pokey backwater of the Empire.

THE PROPHET'S CHALLENGE TO THE PEOPLE

This statement about God's Word is a reference to the message issued through the prophet. The Babylonian idols are simple blocks of wood (44.9–20) with no power to predict the future (41.21–23). The God of Israel, however, announces the future through his prophet. Through Cyrus and the Persians, He will liberate His people from their Babylonian captors and return them to the Promised Land (52.11–12, 55.12–13). He has spoken, so, it will therefore come to pass – they can count on it.



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BIBLE SUNDAY / TALK

Reading: Isaiah 55.1–11

AIM

To build our confidence in Scripture and unpack what God intends His Word to do – in His world and in followers.

INTRODUCTION:

In this celebration of *BIBLE SUNDAY* we want to remind ourselves that the Bible is something that we can rely on. Engaging with the text can be life-changing for us and it shows us we can be part of God's will for the world.

1. THE WORD IN QUESTION

Bringing an umbrella with you can illustrate how we seek help when we are uncertain what kind of weather we are going to experience. Some of us may not feel we can *trust* the weather or even the Bible, especially because of all the attacks on the Bible in recent years.

- We may find the Bible *confuses us* or uses *difficult language*, or is just *overwhelming* in places – try Leviticus!
- We may lack confidence just like the Israelites did in the days of Isaiah – there was little reason for hope.

But God did not disappoint – the Israelites were to be freed from their oppression...they had served their punishment...and God's (unlikely) chosen agent was King Cyrus. Isaiah told the people that God would liberate them from their current oppression (40.2, 10-11). They have served their punishment for going their own way. Now they are to be freed and leave Babylon (48.20–21, 52.11–12, 55.12–13).

It wasn't that God was too weak to stop the Babylonians, he was in control of things all along. He raised up the Babylonians to punish his people (Isaiah 40.1–2), but now he had raised up the Persians to free them. They could count on their God because what He said would happen and did happen.

2. THE WORD PROVED TRUE

The credibility of the Word of God, delivered through the prophet, was established by its accuracy. The curses of Deuteronomy 28 end with chilling words (verses 64–65) about the people of Israel being scattered into foreign lands. This had indeed happened, to both the Northern and Southern kingdoms (Israel and Judah). So for us, the Bible's credibility is established by the same things: accuracy of prediction and fulfilment. We can think of the prophecies about Jesus that were fulfilled - Isaiah 53 and at the start of Matthew and Luke. But the Bible's credibility is also seen in its diagnosis of our human situation - created in the image of God, but marred and distorted by sin. Throughout the centuries, Christians have experienced this truth and grown to trust the reliability of the Bible as a result.

Talk



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Talk

3. THE WORD THAT BRINGS CHANGE

Verses 10 – 11 compare God's Word to rain and snow and we are reminded that God's Word is intended to be a force of good in the world. God is extravagant even in the way that His Word and gifts are given to the world, but we also know that the water that falls on plants and trees doesn't get *into* the plant unless it is absorbed through its roots. If God's Word is going to change us, we will have to absorb its message.

Remind people that our God is a great God, but he wants our co-operation. The Israelites in exile were given the opportunity for liberation; the Persians arrived and their leader Cyrus issued an edict allowing them to go back to Jerusalem. But they had to choose to go back. God gave them the opportunity but he didn't give them a lift! They had to respond if they were to experience the results and benefits of God's Word for themselves.

Personal Testimony

Perhaps you have a story of a life being changed that you could use as an encouragement to your fellowship. Once we allow the Bible into our lives, and put its values and attitudes into practice, we will see it transform us and the situations we face.

4. THE WORD FOR TODAY

There is a problem: Sometimes, the Bible does not speak into the contemporary world without considerable work. The Old Testament comes from the world of 500BC to 2,000BC – very different from today.

Think of the different attitudes to food:

Then, food laws were strict about removing blood from meat. **Today**, anything goes – we buy food out of season and ship or fly it across the world. We eat whatever the supermarkets have in stock.

Back then, Jews were instructed not to wear a garment of two different types of fabric as it created a sense of disorder. **Today**, we buy anything based on price – usually at the cost of labourers in developing countries being paid a pittance for their work.

But there are some constants: the Bible also teaches us 'not to revile the deaf'. Today the rights of the disabled are much better protected, however, in our society there is still a deep seated sense of prejudice that regards a disabled person both to be less than equal and unfairly favoured if they receive special consideration.

Perhaps the most important thing to get from the Bible is an understanding of its overall message. It starts in a garden, with a pair of human beings revealing their weakness and sinfulness. It ends in a restored creation, sin forgiven through the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Following that story, and the way God related to his people, will give us a much clearer understanding of how God's Word waters and nourishes us, and does not return to him empty handed.

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5. CHANGING WITH THE WORD

If we want the Bible to do its work in us, then the starting point is that we have to get the Bible into us. How do we do that and what are the obstacles?

We can help each other in a number of ways:

- Mid-week study group in the church;
- Reading the text with a small group of friends at home;
- There are many books that will help us think through issues;
- There are Daily Bible notes to buy which help with a daily passage, or can be accessed free on-line by organisations such as Scripture Union;
- Local events that are known to you in your area.

These things can help us boost our understanding of the Bible and how to apply it in today's world as we listen for God to speak to us.

Have we lost the habit? Dedicate a time, even at lunchtime; listen to a recording as you walk or drive. We need to make the Bible a priority.

6. CONCLUSION: SOAK UP THE WORD

Perhaps it's time to throw away our umbrellas and allow ourselves to become saturated in the rain of God's love - like children enjoying the summer rain.

Let us come out from under the umbrella, open the book, and allow the Bible to refresh our spirits.

And set the Word free! In a world where nearly two billion people cannot read anything, where there are tens of millions of visually disabled people and millions are still waiting for their first Bible verses to be translated into their heart language, we have a responsibility to help place God's Word in their hands. If we as Christians fail to live up to that challenge, who will?

Response to the sermon

To help people remember the sermon, you might give each person a reminder in the form of a Bible reading plan (available from Bible Society) to encourage familiarity with key passages or to help them commit to a pattern of regular reading.

(Adapted from material prepared by Lindsay Shaw)

