

## A “Special” Beyond Comparison (and On-going Effects)

Isaiah 56:1-3b,6-9; Matthew 11:28  
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In the small county seat town of my growing up years in central Texas, the local weekly newspaper was published late Wednesday afternoon and was in mailboxes on Thursday so that the grocery ads were in subscribers’ hands before Friday afternoon and Saturday. The “specials” were advertised by Hollingsworth’s, Black’s, Chambers’, and Bauman’s, and the A&P grocery stores. But I never saw a “special” like the prophet Isaiah describes in chapter 55: Free prime rib? Free fine wine? Free pure water?

Someone today might say that the Prophet’s words of promise sound like “fake news,” like a ruse, a fantasy, a campaign promise on which no politician, no political body, and no entrepreneurial company can deliver. In my mind’s ear, I hear the words of my parents: “If it sounds too good to be true, it likely is too good to be true.” Yet the Prophet states with words which communicate confidence: “Let me tell you about God’s promise!”

On March 29, 1991, shortly after noon, the office secretary of First Presbyterian Church in Henderson, Texas, told me that a Mr. Bobby Graham was on the phone for me. I had met Bobby about 15 years earlier and our friendship had grown across those years. When I picked up the phone, he told me that his father had died suddenly earlier that morning, and he wondered if I could be part of the memorial service at First Presbyterian Church in Tyler in two days. He said, “If you can be over here, you’ll assist the new pastor at FPC-Tyler.” I told him I would do my best. Bobby then said, “Here’s the one part I’m going to try to do: I’m going to attempt to open the service with sentences from the first part of Isaiah, chapter 55, if I can. If I feel too overwhelmed, I’ll signal you from my seat with the family, and you step up and take that part of the service for me.”

While Bobby was still on the phone, I opened a Bible and read the first few verses of Isaiah, chapter 55. I asked, “Is there something special about these verses?” He replied, “My dad owned a small grocery store. The chains and franchises under-priced him out of business. They could sell cheaper due to greater volume. Dad often said that the only owner who can undersell the franchise and chain-grocers is God! The Prophet here believes God offers the highest quality at no price – giving the water, food, and wine away from generous love, even to those whose burdens like grief and guilt are heavy, and whose affliction has been unjust – because God is that way in relation to God’s people!”

Isaiah 55, verses 1,2, and 3, was the senior Mr. Graham’s statement of resistance against the world. He personally experienced how, often, we people are satisfied to pursue practices in the world and acquire the endorsements of the world, which are different from God’s love, when such love from God (Mr. Graham was convinced), would prevail over the practices and endorsements of the world. Now, 26 years later, when I consider what Bobby Graham told me about his father and Isaiah 55:1,2, and 3, I begin thinking about other “statements of resistance” from the Bible, some of which are veiled and some others of which seem veiled because so many years have passed and so many generations have passed since those statements were first spoken and written.

After the residents around Jerusalem were taken captive and hauled to Babylon just inside of 600 years before Jesus, they thought it would only be a matter of months before God would lead them back to their old homeland. The prophet Jeremiah, however, issues a statement of

resistance to their heartbreak's first reflex-reaction: "It won't be long before we can return with God's blessing." Jeremiah, though, counsels them: "Get used to being in Babylon. Unpack your suitcases; plant gardens; hang pictures on the walls. God's time for you to be there is not what you desire; and God wants you to seek the well-being of the nation where you are, putting aside what you wish was different. Seek the well-being of the city where you are, because in its well-being you will find your own well-being" (Jeremiah, chpt.29). A statement of resistance from God to natural human preferences desiring hardship to be only a brief time.

"Job" – as a story – is also a statement of resistance. Job's story resists all human inclinations presuming that sin is at the heart of tragedy, because there would be not tragedy (we tell ourselves) unless someone was sinning to provoke God's punishing them with tragedy. To the human inclination to presume sin is at the heart of tragedy, the story of Job argues back. Job resists such a rationalization and asserts that tragedy cannot automatically be explained as if there's a human cause, with sin at the heart of the cause, provoking God's punishment through horrific afflictions. A statement of resistance from God to human theological rationalizations in relation to tragedy.

The First Letter of John is also a statement of resistance. For the early church teacher to claim how "God is love" (1<sup>st</sup> John 4:8b) resists any and all understandings that God has power and impersonality as primary characteristics which outrank "deepest care" as the essence of all of God's relationships. To say, "God is love" is to resist any perception of God except that God has compassion, grace, and care as "love" in the heart of God's identity.

The day and hour of Bobby's dad's memorial service arrived. I took my seat in the chancel on the congregation's right. I had to crane my neck to see around a vase of flowers which was positioned between me and a clear view of the family pew. When the organist completed the prelude, I looked to see if Bobby was nodding or pointing at me. He never did. He rose from that pew, took several steps to stand behind the communion table, and said flawlessly from memory: "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy, and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."

The latter prophet Isaiah believed God offers a "special" greater than any other in human experience or human understanding. God offers the highest quality of love and care, exceeding relationally what anyone can dream, at no price – giving it away from God's own generous, vulnerable care and love, even to those whose burdens like grief and guilt are heavy, and whose affliction have been unjust. All of this, because God is this way in relation to God's people. The effects are on-going. God never abandons those pushed to the margins in life because God – rather than what's deeply personal – prefers depersonalized commercial chains and franchises. God, instead, resists depersonalization to lift up, nourish and give drink to all – from the great, free banquet of grace and care and love.

This is the one invariable exception to what my parents taught me, that "if it seems too good to be true, it likely is." Here this invitation unquestioningly seems too wild to be true; yet I'm betting that what sounds too good to be true is precisely what is true: God invites one and all with love, embodying deeply personal care. "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy, and eat and drink!" – All honor and praise be to God.