

Haftarat Va'yeilekh וילך

Torah: Deuteronomy 31:1–30

Haftarah: Isaiah 55:6–56:8

Seek the Lord

General Overview

This is the last haftarah reading for the annual study cycle taken from the book of Isaiah. As students of the Word, we will truly miss his writing!

This passage is actually semi-divided between two parts, with a sudden transition in between. The first part is a plea from the Lord to those who are estranged from Him and to those who are having a difficult time trusting His promises. God promised both blessing and curse. Mankind needs to be assured that both kinds of promises will be carried out; God's Word will stand effective.

The second part of the haftarah consists of a plea for God's people to faithfully serve Him. This passage specifically identifies some of those different kinds of God's people: the remnant from Israel, the remnant from the nations, and interestingly enough, eunuchs. All are invited and encouraged to participate in God's covenants.

Connection to the Parasha

The corresponding sidra to Haftarat Va'yeilekh is Deuteronomy chapter 31. In this section of the Torah, the Holy One is concluding His covenant business with the children of Israel. Amid the closing remarks, God told the Moshe to,

Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, in order that they may hear and learn and fear the Lord your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this Torah (Deuteronomy 31:12).

In essence, this is a summary of the thrust of this haftarah. Simply put, God was telling the children of Israel to be faithful to the covenant. Furthermore, Deuteronomy 31:12 mentions not just the Israelites, but the foreigners who were in their midst as well — just as the haftarah does. We are sure that the framers of the haftarah reading schedule had all of this in mind when they chose this section of Isaiah to be Va'yeilekh's haftarah.

Exposition

As we have already stated, this haftarah seems to be divided into two seemingly unrelated sections. In Isaiah 55:6–13, God pleads with people to listen to Him and let their thoughts be submitted to His thoughts so that they could trust Him. Then, in 56:1–8 there is a passage that encourages covenant faithfulness from the various people groups within Israel: the Israelites themselves, the eunuchs, and the foreigners. We will discuss any possible connection between the two main sections during the course of the commentary. With all of this in mind, it seems

that a good outline to help guide us through this haftarah consists of only two main points:

- I. Seek the Lord
- II. Serve the Lord

In this excerpt from Haftarat Va'yeilekh, we will focus on the section I, Seek the Lord.

I. Seek the Lord

A. The Invitation

It is important that we notice the opening command on this haftarah, found in 55:6. The beginning of this verse is a good example of what Hebrew scholars refer to as “synthetic parallelism.” This is a feature of Hebrew poetry where the thought of the second line builds on the thought of the first. In this case, God first tells the people to seek Him. But right after that, in the second line, not only are they to seek Him, but also in their search they are to call upon Him. Moreover, the verb that introduces both lines is written in the second person plural command form, denoting that this is not just a plea to an individual, although it would certainly apply to any individual. Rather, it is a plea to a nation.

There are actually at least three connected thoughts in this great invitation found in 55:6. The first thought is that God will not always be found. God’s gracious invitation is universal — everyone is invited to seek Him and call upon Him. But there comes a point when it will be too late for those who choose not to come to Him. That point is reached when one dies physically. There is no second chance. The Scripture is very clear when it states, “It is appointed for men to die once and after this, judgement” (Hebrews 9:27).

The second important point about this verse is that it needs to be taken in conjunction with the previous invitation given in 55:1. Therein, God called upon all to come to Him and to drink of the water freely; that is, to come to God and to receive His free offer of grace and mercy, which are depicted as life-giving water. Then, we read in 55:6 that for those who truly come, one of their characteristics will be that they will forsake their wicked ways and unrighteous thoughts. The order is important. Indeed,

In verses 6–7 it is made clear that the one who accepts this gracious invitation will be expected to leave his ungodly thoughts and change his ways. No man can do this in his own strength. The power promised in verses 1–2 is necessary first.¹

Third, notice the emphasis that this passage places on pardon for sins. The last clause of 55:7 reads, “For He [God] will abundantly pardon.” It is not just that God will forgive sins, but that He will abundantly forgive. There is, in reality, no sin that God will not forgive, nor any amount of sin that is beyond His abounding mercy. Moreover, as 55:7 indicates, God forgives all sin because of His compassion.

¹ Allan A. MacRae, *The Gospel of Isaiah*, p. 166.

Thus, in the opening verses of this haftarah, the prophet elaborates on the invitation of 55:1–2. He tells us that having God in our lives and living in a relationship with Him gives us the strength to forsake our wicked ways and ungodly thoughts.

For Isaiah's Own Generation

There is, however, a slightly different way of applying the glorious invitation of this passage. We need to remember that while Isaiah may have had the people who were in the exile or returning from it in his mind most of the time, he was nevertheless, still preaching to the people of his own generation. This invitation would have had special meaning for those people.

When Isaiah told them to seek the Lord while He may be found and to call upon Him while He was still near, Isaiah may have meant it in a very real sense. The people of his generation — from the leadership to the common folk — had strayed far from the Lord. They were in grave danger of national disaster. Already the northern tribes had been scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire. In less than 150 years, their own kingdom and capital city (Jerusalem) would be destroyed — and along with it — the Temple would also go up in flames.

The Temple was the residence of God's special presence on earth. His manifested and residing glory was called by the rabbis of later generations "the Shekinah," meaning, "residing glory." When people wanted to seek God's presence, they physically went to the Temple, the place where He could be found and where He was near. Accordingly, when Isaiah told the wayward people to seek God while He was near, perhaps he meant for them to repent of their covenant unfaithfulness before it was too late, "as long as His presence is still found in the Temple, before its destruction, for then He will withdraw His presence from you."²

We prefer the latter explanation. It seems to fit the context better. Moreover, it seems also to fit God's character. If we say that there might come a time when (before he dies) the sinner cannot find God, then we might not be doing justice to the grace and mercy of God. However, if we suggest that there might be a time when the physical presence of God — with all of its associated blessings — might not be among the people, then we are not precluding the power of His abundant grace and mercy toward needy sinners.

B. The Assurance

All throughout this passage, the word "thought," with its derivatives, both in English and Hebrew, is used five times. One would get the impression that God is interested in what people think. Indeed, that is most certainly true. The first use of the word "thought" is in 55:7 where we are told that the unrighteous man should forsake his thoughts. To which kind of thoughts would God be referring in this context? Is this a blanket statement governing all of the wicked man's thoughts? Or is there something more specific in God's mind?

² A. J. Rosenberg, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 2, p. 438.

On the one hand it goes without saying that an unrighteous man would desire to forsake his unrighteous thoughts when he comes to know God. Therefore, God's command in 55:7 is, in a sense, a blanket statement concerning all of a wicked man's even, humanistic, and ungodly thoughts. But, it seems from the overall context of Isaiah's prophecy, particularly the messages found in chapters 40–66, that Isaiah may have certain very specific thoughts in mind.

These chapters contain some of the most incredible promises that God has ever made. For the people of Isaiah's generation, there were promises that God was going to send them a redeemer, to make them righteous, and to assure them that some day there will be a righteous and godly ruler to sit on David's throne. For the people of a future generation, perhaps those who were exiled in Babylon, God gave wonderful promises. He would bring them back to their Land and rebuild their Temple. Moreover, to all of the peoples, in 55:7 God was giving a gracious promise to forgive all of their sin if they would but come to Him.

One thought that may have been running through their heads was "how do we know for certain that God will keep His promises?" "After all, they may have pondered, "man surely does not keep his word. Man sometimes makes promises that he either has no intention of keeping or lacks the power to carry out. Was their God like man?"

Perhaps these were the specific thoughts that God addresses in these verses. If so, God has an apt answer for man's doubts. There are two parts to God's answer. First, the Holy One instructs doubting man that he cannot judge God as if He were a mere man. The Lord says in Isaiah 55:8–9 that,

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," declares the Lord. "For [as] the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."

God does not operate either in His thoughts or in His actions by the same principles that man does. God's ways and thoughts are always righteous. Rabbi Rosenberg provides some helpful comments on this by referring to some of the classic Jewish commentators when he states,

Hence, God says that, unlike humans when He forgives, He forgives completely, leaving no trace of sin Not as you think, that I repay you with evil even if you repent, for My thoughts are not your thoughts, but My thoughts are to do good to you. Neither are your ways My ways, for My ways are straight ... you are intent upon rebelling against Me, whereas I am intent upon bringing you back.³

Thus, the Holy One first set their thinking straight about His ways and thoughts by appealing to them not to project their ideas and reasoning unto Him. He is distinct and different from them.

But God has a second thought for them. In addition to instructing them about His thinking, God also taught them about His Word. After all, it was the veracity of His

³ *Book of Isaiah*, p. 439.

Word that was on trial. If He said that He forgives, did He mean it? If He said that He would bring them back, could they count on His Word?

God had a beautifully poetic answer in 55:10–11. God used the image of rain to illustrate the effectiveness of His Word. He said that just as assuredly as rain and snow always accomplish their intended purposes, so also do His Words.

There are at least two important observations that we can make from this analogy. First, notice that God compares His Word with water. This is an important comparison. Remember that in 55:1, Isaiah invited all who are thirsty to come and drink. Now, in 55:10–11 He elaborates on this theme of spiritual thirst by defining God's Word as that water.

The Word of God has the same effect on the soul of man as the rain has on the earth. Only the Word of God has power to revive and to provide food for the hungry and fainting soul.⁴

The second important observation we can make about this analogy is that the precipitation that comes down from the heavens accomplishes many purposes, not just one. It does many things at once. For example, 55:10 says that the water helps the earth to sprout. The sprouts furnish seeds to the sower and, eventually, bread for the eater. In addition, we cannot forget that water quenches thirst.

It is the same way with God's Word. It accomplishes many different purposes, sometimes all at once. In the same passage, the sinner can be convicted, the righteous can be encouraged, the lost can find direction, and the ignorant can be taught. Moreover, God's words always accomplish God's purposes. This, after all, is the main reason that Isaiah uses this analogy. Just as assuredly as the rain accomplishes its multiple purposes here on earth, so also will God's Word do the same on the spiritual level. It is always efficacious. Because of this characteristic, the people can always count on God's Words doing their intended purposes. Hence, if God said that they would be forgiven — they most certainly will be completely forgiven. And, if God said He would bring them back to Himself and to their Land — they will most certainly be brought back.

⁴ Victor Buksbazen, *The Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 2, p. 431.