

Free meal: Isaiah 55:1-9

by [Peter L. Steinke](#) in the [February 20, 2007](#) issue

The prominent place of food and meals in the Bible may be surprising to us fast-food and take-out eaters. Back in biblical times, gathering and preparing food took time and occupied a significant part of Israel's life. The danger of famine (due to natural calamities or crop failure) gave special importance to food. Water was drawn from a well or spring, not a faucet or commercial bottle. Bread was baked from scratch, and beans and lentils simmered for hours.

Food was also a means of conveying spiritual significance. Half of the parables Jesus told concerned seeds and farmers, barns and banquets, wheat and figs. Meals were linked with the forming of covenants (Exod. 24:11), and food sacrifices with sacred worship. Having fasted for 40 days, the famished Jesus was tempted to turn "stones into bread." Then, teaching his disciples to pray, he said, "Give us this day our daily bread," meaning the bread to meet today's hunger as well as the future bread of the kingdom, when "many will come from east and west and sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Matt. 8:11). In the messianic kingdom, vineyards and gardens would flourish and there would be an abundance of food.

Isaiah captured the same nexus between meals and bonding. "All you who are thirsty, come to the water! . . . Come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk! . . . Heed me, and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare. . . . I will renew with you the everlasting covenant, the benefits assured to David" (Isa. 55:1-3). The prophet invited the Israelites, now in exile in Babylon, to come to a lavish meal and receive a renewal of covenantal blessings. Of course, the danger for the exiles was that of becoming obligated to their captors and present benefactors and adapting to the bread of Babylon. Being assimilated into a foreign way of life and forgetting their roots was a real temptation. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann sharply notes, "Whoever feed, owns." Food, he says, comes with a price. "Eat royal bread and think royal thoughts. Eat royal bread and embrace royal thoughts." Isaiah reminded the Israelites that who fed them and what they ate were no small matter. Why should they continue with food that did not nourish? The Israelites were a people of different bread, another way, a bread that came as a gift.

Isaiah also proclaimed good news: “‘For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you,’ says the Lord your Redeemer” (Isa. 54:7, 8).

Homecoming sounded good to the exiles, but the moment was unpromising. Some couldn’t see anything happening and doubted that anything would ever happen. But Isaiah reassured them that God’s “unfailing love” would not be shaken and God’s “covenant of peace would not be removed” (Isa. 54:10).

Centuries later another prophet declared: “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35).

Isaiah took up an issue that goes beyond exile and the pressure to acclimate to royal bread. It’s about our humanness—how we may succumb to any number of captivities. To run with the Babylonian pack is not the only conformity to which we are tempted to submit our lives—we are potentially subject to many tyrannies, both outside and within ourselves.

A professional athlete and his wife agonized for months over the death of their son. I had known the couple from contacts at our church, but I had moved away. About ten years later, the husband called to ask if I would come to visit his wife, whose anguish was unrelenting. Although friends had attempted to console her, nothing seemed to bolster her spirit.

I flew to the city of their residence and met with the woman for more than three hours. Nothing I said appeared to affect her, cognitively or emotionally. Besides the loss of her son, there was now strain between her husband and herself. Suffering has a way of isolating. We can become accustomed to our wounds and become captives of our despair. I left believing that I had done little to dent her shield of sorrow.

Several weeks later she sent me a note, thanking me for coming and listening. She admitted that she was looking for a settled answer, something that would remove the stinging hurt she felt. She also noted that her insistent yearning and questioning were based not only in the unexplainable death of her son but also in the deep trust she had always placed in God’s grace. “I search,” she concluded, “because of my pain, my need, my protest.”

I wrote back, saying that I believe God responds to announced hurt. I encouraged her to articulate her pain in public speech. Lamenting is not a sign of unbelief; the Bible itself devotes a whole book to it. I mentioned what Luther said about the Canaanite woman who pleaded for help for a sick daughter only to be rebuffed by Jesus' disciples. Insistent, she threw the sack of God's promises at Jesus' feet and, Luther asserted, wouldn't leave until he gave her a promise. I suggested that my grieving friend might want to keep "bugging" God.

God is not waiting for us to figure out everything, not hesitating to act until there is evidence that we will put our questions aside. "Love bears all things," even our questions and protests. God will come forward. We "wait and see," and in the meantime we "take and eat." The meal is free and holds the promise of freeing us from whatever holds us captive.