

The hunger that no meal satisfies

Isaiah 55 gives voice to the longing we can't quite name.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [February 14, 2018](#) issue



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At a crucial moment in the film *101 Dalmatians*, Pongo and Perdita and their 15 Dalmatian puppies are all watching TV, waiting for the right moment to escape from the wicked Cruella de Vil. One of the puppies, Rolly, despite being captivated by the film, says, “I’m hungry, Mother. I’m hungry.” Perdita says, “Now Rolly, you’ve just had your dinner.” Rolly insists, “But I *am*, just the same. I’m so hungry I could eat a . . . a whole elephant.”

There are two kinds of hunger. There's a hunger that has a name. It's a hunger where you know what you want but you haven't got it or can't have it: when you interviewed for a job, and you can't understand why they didn't appoint you; when you long with all your heart to have a baby, but it's not happening; where you're dying for something to eat, but the cupboard's bare; when you just want something, something in your life to go right for a change, but people keep letting you down. Such hunger can become all-consuming, transforming your temper, your relationships, your patience, your clarity of thought, your whole character. We are what we eat, they say. We're also capable of becoming contorted into the shape of what we hunger for.

But there's another kind of hunger. It's a hunger that lingers deep, disturbingly, in the bottom of your soul, but it doesn't have a name. There's no simple solution to it, no hot meal or job title or box ticket that will satisfy it. The Irish band U2 famously articulated this second kind of hunger when they sang with longing and bewilderment:

I have climbed the highest mountains
I have run through the fields
Only to be with you
Only to be with you.

I have run, I have crawled
I have scaled these city walls
These city walls
Only to be with you.

But I still haven't found
What I'm looking for.

Rather more vividly, the Rolling Stones, tired of the ordinary and weary of the wild, sang, "I can't get no satisfaction, 'cause I try and I try and I try and I try." The reason these songs stay in the memory decades after their release is that they identify a point deep in the gut where hunger lingers, the hunger that doesn't have a name, the restless, yearning, aching, gnawing, longing hunger that knows when it hasn't found what it's looking for, that knows when it's got no satisfaction.

The psychologist Abraham Maslow believed he could find a causal connection between these two kinds of hunger. In 1943 he published a paper explaining what he called the hierarchy of human needs. He made the point that we can't really engage with higher matters until our basic physiological needs are met. Above these lowest needs are our safety needs, and above those are our belonging needs; next come our esteem needs. Finally we get to this wonderful point where we can work on our self-actualization. (I hope you don't mind, but I'd be grateful if we could all keep working for the next few years on my esteem needs and then I'll let you know when I'm about ready to work on my self-actualization.)

The trouble is, even if we've never experienced near starvation, we can all express vividly what the first kind of hunger feels like—and what it's like to devour a meal when you've been waiting hours and are feeling faint and beginning to shake with longing for food. But the second kind of hunger—that's more difficult. How do you describe what it feels like to realize that you still haven't found what you're looking for?

Isaiah 55 is precisely about these two kinds of hunger and the difference between them. For 50 years in Babylonian exile, Israel was focused on the first kind of hunger—quite simply, “I want to go home.” Everything that was wrong was crystallized in one simple fact—Israel was a thousand miles from the Promised Land, and on any hierarchy of needs returning to the land of David and Solomon was foundational.

But Isaiah 55 marks a transition into the second kind of hunger. Because Israel did go home from Babylon. Israel did return to the Promised Land. Jerusalem was restored, the Temple rebuilt, the walls raised again. But when all that was done, Israel was still hungry. “I'm hungry, Mother. I'm hungry.” “Now Israel, you've just had your dinner.” “But I am, just the same. I'm so hungry I could eat a . . . a whole elephant.” It turned out going home wasn't all that Israel was hungry for.

“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” These are the resonant words of Isaiah to Israel. It's a question that points out the difference between the hunger that has a name and the hunger that doesn't have a name. Working out the difference between the two is the key to ministry and mission.

The 2004 film *The Chorus* is set in southeast France in 1949. A tyrannical headmaster, Monsieur Rachin, presides over a reform school for out-of-control boys, set in an old castle known as Fond de l'Etang (which translates as "Bottom of the Pond" or "Rock Bottom"). An out-of-work music teacher, Clement Mathieu, arrives to replace a teacher who's leaving because his arm has been savaged by a pupil. The headmaster's regime is simple: he seeks control through fear, and he gives the boys enough food to keep them healthy and strict discipline to keep them compliant. The new teacher, Monsieur Mathieu, faces a high level of hostility and studied aggravation, and his more lenient policy on punishment brings him into conflict with the censorious headmaster.

The story really begins when Monsieur Mathieu decides to teach the children to sing. All but one has some kind of serviceable voice, and most of the boys play along because choir is less demanding than the regular curriculum. The one boy, Pierre, who keeps aloof, is the wildest of them all. When his mother, out of her depth and unmarried, visits, Monsieur Mathieu lies to her and says Pierre is at the dentist when in fact he's being punished. This wins Pierre's trust, and Monsieur Mathieu begins to realize that the wild and suspicious Pierre has an astounding treble voice. Gradually, despite the headmaster's increasing anxiety and envy, the chorus of boys grows in skill and confidence, performing for the local countess.

But it cannot last. Part of the school burns down due to arson, Monsieur Mathieu is held responsible and fired, and he's forced to leave without saying good-bye. But then you see two men, 50 years later, leafing through the scrapbook Monsieur Mathieu wrote up about his time at Fond de l'Etang. One of these men looks familiar. And you remember the film started with a 62-year-old orchestral conductor at the height of his powers performing a Strauss waltz. And you realize this is that same man, and he is called Pierre, and he was the tearaway delinquent who became the treble soloist and is now the living embodiment that Monsieur Mathieu's work was not in vain but brought forth a hundredfold.

The Chorus is about the distinction between the hunger that has a name and the hunger that has no name. The boys know all about the first kind of hunger. They want food, they want some control over their lives, they want exercise, they want to make misery for anyone who tries to pin them down. But the real drama of the story is about the second kind of hunger. The boys are very, very angry. But most of them aren't exactly sure what they're angry about or whom they're angry with. They're hungry, but food and exercise go little or no distance to meeting their hunger.

On the surface, *The Chorus* is another inspiring-teacher story, like *Dead Poets Society* (or, for those who go back to 1967 and Sidney Poitier, *To Sir, with Love*). But the crucial point is that Monsieur Mathieu doesn't give the boys what they think they want. He doesn't meet the first kind of hunger in any significant way. He takes a huge gamble on reaching them in the hunger that they don't have a name for. And that's where the film becomes more than a heartwarming story and turns into an important analogy for Christian mission.

We often think of practical Christianity as striving to meet the hunger that has a name: for the starving, food; for the thirsty, water; for the naked, clothing; for the sick, medicine. All of which is good and right and true. But like U2 and the Rolling Stones, people want and need more than that. Almost always, what they want is something no one can give them. If they assume someone can give it to them, they generally leave behind them a trail of wreckage of those from or in whom they've failed to find the answer to their hunger.

Christianity isn't simply about satisfying people's hunger. It's a huge gamble on the hunch that what people are really hungry for is something they don't know the name of and wouldn't initially recognize even when they found it.

And what is that mysterious discovery, that extraordinary food? It's the wondrous truth that there's something even deeper, even more long-lasting, and even more insatiable than our hunger. And that's God's hunger for us. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts," we're told in Isaiah 55.

God's hunger is greater than ours. But God knows what that hunger is for. It's for us. And discovering that is for us like discovering choral music was for the boys in that reform school. For some of us, like Pierre, it unearths a gift that was longing to get out. For others, it's a realization that together we can make something beautiful we could never make alone, that there's a place for all shapes and sizes and voices and energies in a song that takes all our energies to make but comes from a force much bigger than us. Bigger than a whole elephant.

Are you hungry? Does your hunger have a name, like a yearning for a job or a partner or a home or a new start? Or is your hunger deeper and more insatiable than that, something that even gaining those precious things won't assuage? "Listen carefully to me," says Monsieur Mathieu, and says Isaiah, "and eat what is good, and

delight yourselves in rich food.” “Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” It’s free but not cheap—it’s priceless but for everybody. If you’re hungry—deeply, deeply hungry—hear the good news, the news that you’ve been waiting all this time for: God’s hungry. Hungry for you.

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