

# Explore the Bible Series for May 14: Everyone needs hope, encouragement

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**Explore the Bible Series for May 14**

## Everyone needs hope, encouragement

• Isaiah 54:1-57:21

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The chapters in Isaiah under consideration this week are set in the late exilic and early postexilic period, during the last half of the sixth century B.C. It was a time of great excitement and great disappointment, a period of high hopes and harsh realities. The Jews in exile heard a message of deliverance, but the situation in the land of their ancestors was not quite what they had expected.

How can we as believers reconcile the great confidence we have in God with the mundane or even discouraging aspects of life in the real world? How can we explain why our daily experiences don't live up to our high expectations? These are some of the questions the oracles from these chapters of Isaiah attempt to address.

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### **Isaiah 54:1-17**

After Hurricane Katrina drove the population of New Orleans from their homes last summer, politicians and community leaders, began making plans for cleanup and return. “It will take hard work,” they told displaced New Orleanians, “but we will rebuild the city.” However, despite these optimistic predictions, only about half the people have returned. The city that was loved by its inhabitants is no more, and many have abandoned the idea of moving back. For others, though, hope remains, and a rebuilt, re-imagined city is something to strive for.

Isaiah 54 paints an idealized picture of Jerusalem, one whose population growth would require the city to be enlarged. The disaster that had overtaken it at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar was past, and a great future lay ahead. Jerusalem would be so wealthy its foundations, towers and gates would be made of precious stones. The reality at the time, of course, was Jerusalem was a ruin, without protecting walls or settled inhabitants. Would the people return from exile and see the current reality, or would they see the potential the prophet described?

### **Isaiah 55:1-5**

Several times a day, if I have my e-mail filters turned off, I get messages from people I don't know offering to let me in on a secret means of making fabulous amounts of money. If I will just transfer some money from my bank account, or contact an exiled African leader, or invest in the latest scheme, I can get rich in no time. Get rich quick schemes are nothing new, but they continue to attract people who long to live a life of ease, where all their needs are met.

The prophet offers the people something for nothing, but in this case it is not material gain but perpetual security. He lets the people in on a secret: God has not forgotten the covenant with David, and God has not abandoned Judah. Temporal wealth comes and goes, but God's covenant faithfulness lasts forever.

### **Isaiah 55:6-9**

From time to time, I find myself wishing I were in charge of the world. I would right all wrongs, alleviate poverty, clean up the environment and make sure every child had an equal opportunity to succeed in life. Of course, I would also take care of myself, and my family and friends.

Fortunately for all concerned, including myself, I am not God. I am not remotely qualified for even a portion of the job, not just because I don't have the power, but because I don't have the wisdom. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways," says the Lord. It is not just that God is smarter than we are, God's understanding of the universe is qualitatively different from our own. There are many things in the world that humans can and should change, but in the end we must remember the saying, "Man proposes, but God disposes."

## **Isaiah 56:1-8**

A popular political comedy show ends every episode with a segment called “New Rules,” and that is exactly what these verses from Isaiah 56 propose. Some people in the postexilic community believed the Jewish people could survive only by adopting restrictive membership policies, requiring citizens to trace their ancestry back to one of the Israelite tribes. Others believed in more of a big tent policy.

This passage clearly puts the prophet in the big tent camp. Whereas some people interpreted the restrictions in Deuteronomy 23:1-8 as permanently excluding eunuchs or Ammonites, for example, from the community, the prophet says God welcomes all who are willing to adopt the community’s standards and worship the Lord. God’s kingdom is inclusive, not exclusive, and God may be found by all who seek him, regardless of their background.

## **Discussion questions**

- How do we personally reconcile our high hopes with the harsh realities of life that we face? Do we see our difficulties as God’s punishment or simply as challenges to be overcome through faith?
- How can we overcome the persistent drive of our Western society toward the accumulation of wealth? What values do we possess as Christians that would lead us to have different goals from many of those around us?
- How do we strike a balance between wanting to change the world on the one hand, and being complacent in the face of evil and problems on the other hand? What are the respective roles that God and humans play?
- Are there certain groups of people who should be permanently excluded from the church on the basis of either background, belief system or

lifestyle? How do we minister to people in need when we disapprove of some aspect of their life?



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