

Come to the Waters

Isaiah 54-55 • Leader Preparation Guide

SESSION OVERVIEW

DISCOVERY AIM

Participants answer last week's planted question, who are the offspring of the man who died childless?, when chapter 54 opens with a barren woman commanded to sing over children she never bore, and they discover Paul naming her: the Jerusalem above, our mother, whom the Church has always understood of herself. Then chapter 55 throws open the doors of an economy with no cash registers: wine and milk without money and without price, an everlasting covenant, a word that never returns empty. They find the invitation still standing, taken up almost word for word, in the Bible's final chapter, and they face the sola gratia objection at full strength: is free grace something Rome forgot?

CATHOLIC TOUCHSTONE

The absolute gratuity of grace (CCC 1996-1998) and the Eucharistic banquet (CCC 1384): the feast glimpsed on the mountain in Session 5 gets its street address tonight. Also the Church as fruitful mother: the Servant's offspring, born of his travail.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Read canonically, chapter 54 answers 53:10's riddle before the ink dries. The Servant, cut off childless, *"shall see his offspring"*; turn the page and a barren woman is commanded to *"Sing... For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married"* (54:1). Enlarge the tent, lengthen the cords: the family is about to outgrow the house. Zion the abandoned wife is remarried to her Maker: *"For your Maker is your husband... For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you"* (54:5-7), sealed with an oath modeled on Noah's: as God swore the flood waters would never return, so *"my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed"* (54:9-10). Paul reads the riddle's answer aloud in Galatians 4:26-27: the barren woman who sings is *"the Jerusalem above... our mother"*, whom the Church has always understood of herself, teeming with children born of the Servant's travail. The exile's most private grief, barrenness, becomes the image of the world's largest family.

Chapter 55 is the invitation to the table: *"Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!... wine and milk without money and without price"* (55:1). Note the paradox held in one verse: *buy*, real goods, really received, and *without price*, no currency accepted. Then the aching diagnosis of every consumer economy since: *"Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"* (55:2). The feast connects backward and forward: rich food on the mountain for all peoples (25:6), and the study should now say aloud what Session 5 left hanging: the Church has always recognized this table; the Eucharist is the banquet where the poor buy without money (CCC 1384). Verse 3 anchors the meal in covenant: *"I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David"*, which Paul, in his synagogue sermon at Antioch,

quotes as fulfilled in the Resurrection: the *“holy and sure blessings of David”* given when God raised Jesus never to see corruption (Acts 13:34): the everlasting covenant requires a living David.

Then the summons and the physics of the word: *“Seek the LORD while he may be found”* (55:6), with real urgency and real mercy, *“for he will abundantly pardon”*; the transcendence clause, *“my thoughts are not your thoughts”* (55:8-9), aimed in its immediate context at mercy beyond our pettiness, whatever wider uses it also bears: we would not pardon abundantly; he does. And 55:10-11 closes the Book of Consolation's great inclusio: the word that goes out of God's mouth *“shall not return to me empty”*, rain and snow that water the earth. Chapter 40 opened the section: the word of our God will stand forever; chapter 55 closes it: and it works. Everything between was that word, working.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Roots. The barren woman gathers Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah: every empty womb God ever opened, now nationalized. The Noah oath (54:9) makes the new covenant flood-proof. *Sure love for David* is 2 Samuel 7 again, the oath beneath the whole book. The feast recalls Wisdom's banquet: *“Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine I have mixed”* (Proverbs 9:5).

Fulfillment. Galatians 4:26-27 quotes 54:1 of the Church, our mother. Acts 13:34 quotes 55:3 of the Resurrection. Jesus stands up at the feast and personalizes 55:1: *“If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink”* (John 7:37), and *“I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger”* (John 6:35). And the Bible's last chapter renews Isaiah's invitation almost in his own words: *“let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price”* (Revelation 22:17): Scripture's closing invitation takes up tonight's verse.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Ambrose • *On the Mysteries*

Leading the newly baptized from font to altar, St. Ambrose narrates their arrival at the altar: the sacraments you receive are richer than the manna your fathers ate, for here is the true bread and the cup that gladdens. What the prophet cried in the street, come, buy without money, the Church performs at every liturgy: the connection is this study's to draw, and the poorest communicant leaves the altar wealthier than kings.

St. Augustine • *Confessions*

The first page of the Confessions is Isaiah 55:2 turned into autobiography: you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. Augustine spent his money and labor on everything that is not bread, pleasure, ambition, philosophy, and found each purse emptied and each hunger intact. The restlessness, he learned, was not a defect but an address label: the heart is shaped like the feast.

St. Ephrem the Syrian • *Hymns*

The deacon-poet of Syria sang of the Eucharist as the Medicine of Life: the bread of the table that heals the eaters, the cup in which immortality is mixed for mortals. Where merchants sell what perishes to those who perish, the Physician, in Ephrem's image, sets out the one food that cures the disease of death itself; that it stands free of charge is Isaiah's own addition to the signage. He would

have recognized chapter 55 at once.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 1996-1998.** Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help God gives us; our justification comes from grace, and this vocation to eternal life is supernatural, depending entirely on God's gratuitous initiative. *Without money and without price* is the Church's own doctrine, stated by the Church herself.
- **CCC 2007-2009.** With regard to God, there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man; between God and us the disproportion is infinite. Even our merits are God's gifts: the free feast is not contradicted by the Christian life; it funds it.
- **CCC 1384.** The Lord addresses an invitation to us, urging us to receive him in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Isaiah's street-cry has a liturgical address.

THREAD WATCH

THREADS TONIGHT

The Servant's offspring: resolved. 53:10's riddle answered by 54:1's singing barren woman, named by Paul as our mother the Church. Let a participant make the page-turn connection first.

The banquet: resolved and named. 25:6's mountain feast and 55:1's free market meet at the altar (CCC 1384). Session 5's held question, what kind of meal defeats death?, is answered aloud tonight.

The word: resolved. 40:8 (it stands forever) closes with 55:11 (it does not return empty): the Book of Consolation's frame.

Zion the mother: advancing; her final portrait, nursing and comforting, waits in Session 14. Do not preview.

SESSION GOALS

1. Resolve the offspring riddle: 53:10 into 54:1, and discover Galatians 4:26-27.
2. Preach the flood-proof covenant of 54:7-10 to everyone who fears God's brief-moment absences.
3. Open the free market of 55:1-3, diagnose the not-bread economy, and name the Eucharistic address (CCC 1384).
4. Run the sola gratia steelman at full strength and answer with the Church's own doctrine of gratuitous grace and grace-funded merit.
5. Close the word inclusio (40:8 with 55:10-11) and send everyone out in joy (55:12).

TIME NOTE (90 MINUTES)

SUGGESTED CLOCK

Gather and opening prayer, 5 min. Win, 10 min. Build, 55 min. Send, 10 min. Live It, memory verse,

Take-Home, closing prayer, 10 min.

Pre-chosen cuts if running long: cut Question 6 (55:8-9, thoughts and ways) first; compress Question 2 (the Noah oath) second. Never cut the offspring resolution, the free market, the steelman, or the word inclusio.

Come to the Waters

Isaiah 54-55 • Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, we come thirsty, and some of us come broke: no currency, no leverage, no case. Which, tonight we learn, is exactly the dress code.

Seat us at the table your Servant's travail set. Teach us to stop spending ourselves on what is not bread. And let your word do in this room what you promised: not return to you empty.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN • OPENING QUESTIONS

1. What is the best free thing anyone ever gave you, and why was receiving it harder or easier than paying would have been?
2. Fill in honestly: the thing I keep spending money, time, or energy on that never quite satisfies is ____.

BUILD • INDUCTIVE STUDY

The Barren Woman Sings (Isaiah 54:1-10)

1. Last week ended with a riddle: the Servant died childless, yet “*he shall see his offspring*” (53:10). Now read Isaiah 54:1-3. Who is commanded to sing, about what, and what construction order follows? What has this to do with last week's riddle?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

A barren woman, the ancient world's deepest private grief, is commanded to *sing*, because “*the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married.*” The construction order: enlarge the tent, lengthen the cords, strengthen the stakes; the family is about to outgrow the house, spreading to possess the nations. And read whole, the placement is the answer: the page after the Servant pours out his soul and yet *sees offspring*, a childless woman is buried in children. His travail (53:11) is her labor; the offspring of the man who died childless are the children of the woman who never bore. The riddle has become a birth announcement, and the delivery room is a tomb.

LIVE DISCOVERY

Paul quotes tonight's opening verse and names the barren woman outright: who she is, and whose mother she is. Find it in Galatians 4, near the end of the chapter. Pairs, 3 minutes.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Galatians 4:26-27: “*the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother,*” and Paul proves it by quoting Isaiah 54:1: “*Rejoice, O barren one.*” The singing barren woman, in the reading the Church has always made of Paul's words, is the Church: Zion reborn from above, mother of everyone baptized

into the Servant. Which lands two truths at once. First, you are the offspring of 53:10: the fruit the dying Servant was promised he would live to see is sitting around this table. Second, the Church is not an institution you use but a mother who bore you; the ancient Fathers said it plainly, and Session 14 will let one of them say it. Enlarge the tent is now the family business: evangelization is helping mother set more places.

2. Read Isaiah 54:7-10. God speaks with startling honesty about the exile: what does he admit, what does he promise, and what natural disaster does he use as the model for the new covenant's security?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

He admits the abandonment was real: *"For a brief moment I forsook you... in overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face."* No gaslighting; the exile happened. But the proportions are the point: a moment, versus *"with everlasting love I will have compassion on you."* Then the Noah oath: as God swore the flood waters would never again cover the earth, *"so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you"*; mountains may depart and hills be removed, *"but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed."* The new covenant is flood-proofed: geology is negotiable; the covenant is not. For anyone at the table living through a hidden-face moment, this paragraph is the exchange rate: moments of absence, everlasting compassion, and an oath older than the mountains under your feet.

The Free Market (Isaiah 55:1-3)

3. Read Isaiah 55:1-2 aloud like the street-vendor's cry it is. Who is invited, what is on sale, what currencies are accepted, and what is the question of verse 2 asking you, personally, this year?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Invited: *"every one who thirsts"* and *"he who has no money"*: thirst and bankruptcy are the entire admission criteria. On sale: water, wine, milk, bread, staples and luxuries, survival and joy. Currencies accepted: none: *"without money and without price,"* and yet the verb is *buy*, twice: real goods, really transferred, really owned, just not paid for by the buyer. Someone paid; the invoice was last week's chapter.

Verse 2 is the most contemporary sentence in Isaiah: *"Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"* St. Augustine turned it into the most famous autobiography ever written: our heart is restless until it rests in you; he spent everything at every other stall first. The question is not rhetorical for anyone with a bank statement and a calendar: name the not-bread. Then hear the alternative: *"eat what is good, and delight yourselves in fatness... hear, that your soul may live"* (vv. 2-3). And say the address aloud, because Session 5 left it hanging over the mountain feast: the Church has always known where this table is set. The Eucharist is the banquet where the penniless buy: the Lord himself urging the invitation (CCC 1384), St. Ambrose walking the newly baptized from the font straight to it, St. Ephrem calling what is served there the Medicine of Life. The feast that swallows death (25:6-8), the Servant's self-offering (53:10), and the free market of 55:1 are one table, and you are on the guest list under the only qualification printed: thirsty.

STEELMAN • BUILD IT AT FULL STRENGTH

Now a chapter the Reformers loved, argued the way your Protestant friends would argue it, and they argue it from love of grace. Full strength:

Isaiah 55 is the Protestant Reformation in one verse, and Rome forgot it. Salvation is *without money and without price*: free, sola gratia, sola fide. Now audit Catholicism against that verse: indulgences, which were literally sold by Tetzel until Luther objected; Mass stipends and offering envelopes; penances assigned like invoices; merit accumulated like a wage; purgatory as a debtor's prison for the insufficiently paid-up. A system of priests, obligations, and works has been built on top of a free gift, exactly the not-bread economy Isaiah mocks. The Reformation happened because somebody reread Isaiah 55 and noticed the price tag Rome had attached. Grace plus anything is not grace.

Say it with a Reformer's fire. Then audit it against the actual books.

4. Answer with the Church's own doctrine on the table: (a) what does the Catechism actually teach about the gratuity of grace and about merit (CCC 1996-1998, 2007-2009); (b) what happened historically with the indulgence abuses, and who condemned them; (c) what does the verse's own paradox, *buy without price*, teach about how free gifts are received; (d) what is the honest difference that remains?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

(a) Read the Church's own words, because the steelman argues against a Catholicism that does not exist on paper: grace is *free and undeserved*; justification *comes from grace* and depends entirely on *God's gratuitous initiative* (CCC 1996-1998). On merit: *with regard to God, there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man*; the disproportion between us and God is infinite; and our merits themselves *are God's gifts* (CCC 2007-2009). Trent, the very council that answered Luther, opened its decree on justification by teaching that nothing before justification, neither faith nor works, merits it. Sola gratia, in the sense that grace is the free, unearned source of the whole Christian life, is not the Reformation's discovery; it is the Church's constant teaching, and Isaiah 55 has been read at her lecterns for two millennia.

(b) Be honest, because honesty is the apologetic: the indulgence *abuses* were real, Tetzel-style preaching was a scandal, and the Catholic Church herself condemned it: Trent ordered the evil traffic in indulgences abolished (Session 25, Decree on Indulgences), and St. Pius V afterward suppressed the sales outright. A doctrine's corruption is not the doctrine: an indulgence was never the purchase of forgiveness (forgiveness is God's free gift, ordinarily received for grave sin in the sacrament of Reconciliation); Mass stipends support a priest and buy nothing from God; assigned penances are medicine for the forgiven, not fees for forgiveness. Where churchmen sold what God gives freely, they sinned against this very chapter, and the Church said so.

(c) Now the verse's own paradox, which answers the deeper question: *buy... without money*. Free is not the same as automatic. A feast freely spread must still be come to, eaten, digested: "*come... buy... eat... hear, that your soul may live.*" A cascade of imperatives: the gift is free and the receiving is active. That is the whole Catholic grammar the steelman mistakes for a price list: sacraments are how the free feast is eaten; faith working through love is what nourished people do; merit is the strength the food gives, credited by a Father's generosity (CCC 2008-2009), not a wage that funds the meal. Nobody calls eating the price of dinner.

(d) The honest remaining difference is real but smaller than the steelman thinks: not *whether* salvation is free, both confess it is, but whether justification itself transforms from within, grace making our actions really good and really ours, or is a forensic declaration with real renewal following as its fruit, as classical Protestants hold. The Catholic claim is the more radical grace: God gives so freely that he even makes our cooperation his gift inside us. Then end where the chapter ends the argument for you: the Bible's final page renews Isaiah's invitation almost in his own words, "*let him who desires take the water of life without price*" (Revelation 22:17), written within the apostolic Church, canonized by her, and answered at her altar every morning.

The Word That Comes Back Full (Isaiah 55:6-13)

5. (Optional, first cut for time.) Read Isaiah 55:6-9. What is urgent in verses 6-7, what is the promise attached to returning, and what, in context, are the *thoughts* of verses 8-9 actually about?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Urgency: "*Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near*": the invitation has a while-supplies-last clause, not because mercy expires but because seekers do; hearts harden, as Session 2 warned. The promise: let the wicked return, "*for he will abundantly pardon*", abundantly, the same overflowing measure as the feast. And verses 8-9 in their immediate context aim first at mercy, whatever wider applications they also bear: the reason given for *my thoughts are not your thoughts* is the abundant pardon of verse 7. We would not forgive like that; our thoughts keep score. His do not. The transcendence of God, in this chapter, is measured in forgiveness.

6. Read Isaiah 55:10-11, and set it beside the verse this whole section opened with, 40:8. What is the word compared to, what is guaranteed about it, and what does the pairing of 40:8 and 55:11 say about everything you have read between them?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Rain and snow: they do not bounce off the earth back to heaven; they soak in, water, germinate, "*giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater*." So God's word: "*it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose*." 40:8 opened the Book of Consolation: the word of our God will stand forever. 55:11 closes it: and it works. Durability and efficacy: the frame around chapters 40-55, and everything between them, comfort, the Servant, the arm, the feast, was that word, working. Application in two directions: every promise this study has read is rain already in the ground of your life, on schedule whether you feel germination or not; and every seed of the word you plant in someone else, the Ethiopians and the exiles you know, carries the same guarantee. Sowers are not responsible for the harvest's timing; the Sender has underwritten the seed. And so the chapter ends with the recession: "*You shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace*" (55:12), mountains singing, trees applauding: creation itself cheering the exiles home.

SEND • TAKING IT OUT

1. Name your not-bread, specifically: the purchase, scroll, pursuit, or performance you keep feeding money and labor for a satisfaction that never arrives. What would it look like to take that exact hunger to the actual table, starting with this Sunday's Communion received on purpose?

2. Enlarge the tent is the family business: mother is setting more places. Who is one person you could bring, literally, physically, to the feast: to Mass, to this study's next cycle, to a meal at your table where grace is said? Name them and pick the date.

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- Receive Communion this Sunday with Isaiah 55:1-2 prayed in the pew beforehand: come thirsty, come broke, and buy without money.
- Fast once this week from your chief not-bread, one day, one app, one habit, and give the reclaimed time or money to someone hungry for actual bread.
- Plant one seed of the word deliberately, a verse shared, an invitation made, and then release the harvest schedule: 55:11 has underwritten it.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near."

Isaiah 55:6 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Father, you have admitted the moment and sworn the everlasting: mountains may move; your covenant of peace will not.

We bring you our thirst and our empty wallets, the only tickets your feast requires. Feed us with what is bread. Wean us from what is not. And send your word through us like rain, guaranteed not to return empty.

We go out in joy; lead us forth in peace. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Before next session: read Isaiah 56:1-8 and 58:1-12. One promise in chapter 56 keeps a debt this study incurred two sessions ago. See if you can spot the creditor.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used tonight, in order

Primary Text

- Isaiah 54:1-3 (the barren one sings; enlarge the tent)
- Isaiah 54:5-10 (your Maker is your husband; the brief moment; the Noah oath)
- Isaiah 55:1-3 (the free market; not-bread; the everlasting covenant, sure love for David)
- Isaiah 55:6-9 (seek while he may be found; abundant pardon; thoughts and ways; optional)
- Isaiah 55:10-13 (rain, snow, the word that returns full; going out in joy)

Live Discovery Target

- Galatians 4:26-27 (the Jerusalem above, our mother, quoting 54:1)

Supporting Passages

- Isaiah 53:10-11 (the offspring riddle; last session's plant)
- Genesis 9:11 (the Noah oath modeled)
- 2 Samuel 7 (sure love for David); Acts 13:34 (55:3 quoted of the Resurrection)
- Proverbs 9:5 (Wisdom's banquet invitation)
- John 6:35; 7:37 (Jesus personalizes the invitation)
- Revelation 22:17 (the Bible's closing invitation: without price)

Catechism

- CCC 1996-1998 (grace free and undeserved; God's gratuitous initiative)
- CCC 2007-2009 (no strict right to merit; merits are God's gifts)
- CCC 1384 (the Lord's invitation to the Eucharist)

Memory Verse

- Isaiah 55:6 (RSV2CE)