

TGC

— *Word-Filled* —
WOMEN'S MINISTRY



LOVING AND
— SERVING —
THE CHURCH

**GLORIA FURMAN &
KATHLEEN B. NIELSON**

— EDITORS —

“Out of both biblical conviction and years of experience, these women think seriously about discipleship, evangelism, intergenerational mentoring, and compassion. Their strength is evident, their commitment to Scripture robust, their joy in the gospel intoxicating, their anticipation of the consummation providing a lodestar to their lives and service. Although this is a book by women to foster “Word-filled women’s ministry,” much of it will be read with equal profit by men. I hope that some of those men will be pastors who in consequence reflect on what they can do encourage such ministry in their own churches.”

D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Women’s ministry is ultimately not about women. Nor is it about programs. It’s about the glory of God and the health of his church. *Word-Filled Women’s Ministry* is a much-needed resource for both men and women to consider the necessity of ministry among women as well as the centrality of the Word for cultivating a church in which women flourish.”

Melissa B. Kruger, Women’s Ministry Coordinator, Uptown Church;
author, *The Envy of Eve*

“There is no question that the women in your churches will be discipled. The only question is whether they will be discipled by the world or the Word. That’s why I’m so excited about *Word-Filled Women’s Ministry*. It’s more than a book. These contributors represent a movement of teachers guiding women to find hope and freedom and salvation in the gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in his Word. I couldn’t more highly esteem these writers, and I pray that you will take up their charge to take up the Word.”

Collin Hansen, Editorial Director, The Gospel Coalition;
author, *Blind Spots*

“Here is a book that focuses on the possibilities and not just the problems of ministry among women. It is written by women from a wide range of ministry contexts, but all with hearts that beat with a common gospel rhythm. Every chapter is grounded in Scripture and wonderfully practical. Women and men of the Word, read it and be encouraged by all the gospel possibilities.”

Jenny Salt, Dean of Students, Sydney Missionary and Bible College

“A marvelous resource for thoughtful Christians, male and female, who long to see the power of the gospel unleashed in their own lives, in the church, and throughout world.”

Colin Smith, Senior Pastor, The Orchard, Arlington Heights, Illinois

“This is a significant subject that I have long been interested in, and the voices of my sisters in this book are as edifying as they are encouraging. Pastors, teachers, elders, and women’s ministry leaders alike will benefit from this Bible-based, gospel-centered, local church-focused work. I so resonate with their central thesis—“Profitable ministry among women is grounded in God’s Word, grows in the context of God’s people, and aims for the glory of Christ”—that I anticipate with joy the flourishing of this vision in the churches.”

J. Ligon Duncan III, Chancellor and CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi

“*Word-Filled Women’s Ministry* is written for the bustling daughters of Christ, who need God’s Word to train and sustain them in their various labors. It acknowledges the vast diversity of women’s ministries in different churches while calling them to a unified commitment to God’s Word. Women grow best as they learn from Scripture, first as it is preached to the gathered church and then as it is explored and explained in the company of other godly women. This book is an incentive to the latter, casting a vision for what can and ought to happen when the Bible takes its rightful place at the center of women’s ministry.”

Megan Hill, pastor’s wife; blogger, *Sunday Women*

“Full of careful biblical teaching and many helpful applications, this book is an invaluable aid for all Christian women to think through their own ministry possibilities. But it is also a highly useful tool for pastors and elders to understand and then activate much-needed biblical opportunities for every ministry in the local church. I hope it will be on the must-read list of every church leader.”

David Jackman, Former President, Proclamation Trust, London, England

“Gloria Furman and Kathleen Nielson, along with a host of other talented writers, help us explore a vision-guided practice of our theology. Too often in church ministry, gender is received as a problem to be solved rather than as a beautiful gift from God to be explored. This book is a marvelous map to enjoy God, lead in God’s church, and explore God’s world, whether a woman is stepping into ministry for the first time or is a seasoned veteran.”

Daniel Montgomery, Pastor, Sojourn Community Church, Louisville, Kentucky; Founder, Sojourn Network; author, *Faithmapping* and *Proof*

Word-Filled Women's Ministry

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— *Word-Filled* —
WOMEN'S MINISTRY



GLORIA FURMAN &
KATHLEEN B. NIELSON

— E D I T O R S —

■ ■ CROSSWAY
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Word-Filled Women's Ministry: Loving and Serving the Church

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We dedicate this book to the Word-filled women
who have taught us and shown us
the love of Jesus Christ.

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Foreword

Of the various components that make up the ministry of The Gospel Coalition, one of the most vibrant is the Women's Conference. This has served, among other things, to bring together a remarkable group of women who have studied Scripture and shared their experiences and then branched out into a growing list of shared projects. Not a few of these have been tied to writing and publishing.

In this book, ten of these women attractively encourage a broad range of ministries—ministries that are grounded in Scripture but that never forget there are real people out there. The title and subtitle hold up their twin foci: Word-filled ministry and the centrality of the local church. But what is most attractive about these essays is that they are wonderfully outward looking. They are thoughtful, but there is no trace of the kind of introspection that is essentially self-consuming. Out of both biblical conviction and years of experience, these women think seriously about discipleship, evangelism, inter-generational mentoring, and compassion. Their strength is evident; their commitment to Scripture robust; their joy in the gospel intoxicating; their anticipation of the consummation providing a lodestar to their lives and service.

Although this is a book by women to foster Word-filled women's ministry, much of it will be read with equal profit by men. I

Foreword

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Don Carson

Introduction

Profitable ministry among women is grounded in God's Word, grows in the context of God's people, and aims for the glory of Christ. That's the premise of this book in a nutshell. It seems plain. And yet we have many questions to ask and much progress to make.

Ever since Eve, it has been our human tendency to distance ourselves from God's Word. No ministry in the church is exempt from the temptation to focus more on human desires and needs than on God's provision in his revelation of himself to us. Women's ministry in particular can so easily be all about women rather than being all about women together hearing and following God's voice, revealed in his Word.

The basic fact of God's creation of us as male and female lies at the heart of some of the greatest happiness and the greatest perversions of our human existence. How we flourish as male and female either clarifies or distorts the image of God in us and the glory of Christ we're meant to shine forth with joy. The subject of ministry among women, then, is not all about meeting women's needs; it's ultimately about God's glory.

Until we see that glory face-to-face, it is revealed to us in the Scriptures. This book starts and ends with affirmation of God's living and active Word as the lamp that lights every step in all of life—including in women's ministry. If the God of the universe does

indeed speak to us in his Word, then our lives must be centered on hearing and living that Word—including in women’s ministry. The Word shows us Jesus from beginning to end; so women’s ministry must be from start to finish all about exalting Christ, our redeemer and Lord. In this book we will take time to establish this Word-based foundation in Christ, showing that women’s ministry on this foundation not only helps women know and serve women, but most basically it helps women together know and serve the triune God.

The Bible calls believers to live within a particular context: that of God’s people, known in the flesh through local congregations with local leaders. Many today, and certainly women today, confront ever-increasing temptations to minister to one another and alongside one another apart from this context. It can be a lot less messy just to do it ourselves. And we can actually do a really good job of it. Many of the chapters in this book—not just the one directly treating this topic—somehow find a way to bring up the importance of the church, the body of Christ in which God calls his people to find their identity and root their service. Even as we celebrate all sorts of old and new ways for ministry to happen among women, we must do our celebrating within the body of God’s worshipping people and their carefully appointed leaders.

Increased separation from physical leadership has come matched with increased separation from biblical teaching, including teaching about men’s and women’s roles in the church and in the home; such separation threatens to tear women’s ministry from a clear biblical context. The danger here is not just that we might get our doctrine wrong. The danger is that we might dim the image of God and the glory of Christ we’re meant to shine forth with joy, in all our various pathways. The *opportunity* here is that we get to spur one another on in joyful obedience to the Word, for the sake of the gospel.

What better voices to add to the ongoing conversation on these issues than those of biblically committed women! How better to

address not just the problems but also the possibilities of ministry among women than with the testimonies of those who are in the thick of it. The women represented in this volume (both the ones writing and the ones interviewed) speak from experience in studying and teaching the Word with women—and from a whole variety of contexts in which they love and serve the church. They know personally the issues addressed in these chapters. They have actively sought a place of flourishing within the church as leaders themselves who embrace the leadership of ordained men: the book explores women’s ministry in what is often referred to as a *complementarian* context (as explained in chapter 2)—although we trust the book can benefit multiple contexts. These women come from various age groups, denominations, personal situations, and parts of the world, but they love and serve the same Jesus. They care about his glory more than anything, and so they care for women in the eternally best way—not each the same way, and none perfectly or without struggle, to be sure, but all for their Savior’s sake.

These women’s voices weave together richly—in part 1 (three chapters) focusing on the Word at the heart of women’s ministry; in part 2 (three chapters) focusing on contexts for women’s ministry, starting with the local church and reaching out to the world; in part 3 (three chapters) focusing on specific issues related to women’s ministry. The concluding chapter reminds us what we’re ultimately aiming for, as we minister. You’ll hear these voices landing on certain key themes, weaving together strands of similar colors. We’ve relished bringing together these voices, each so distinct and yet all in harmony because of hearts that beat with a common gospel rhythm.

This book offers not an exhaustive but an accelerated discussion of women’s ministry—through making public some voices of women involved in doing it. It offers not a formula but rather a solid set of biblical markers for the road ahead in ministry among women. The Word tells us that along this road of ministry we can

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expect to find all the nations of the world streaming to Christ. Our goal is to encourage women to join that stream and help it grow. Our ultimate goal in ministry among women is the glory of Jesus Christ.

Gloria Furman
Kathleen Nielson

— PART 1 —



THE HEART
OF WOMEN'S
MINISTRY

The Word at the Center

Hearing God Speak

Kathleen Nielson

What pictures do the words “women’s ministry” bring to mind? We come from different contexts, all of us. Some will picture a small circle of jean-clad women gathered at a friend’s kitchen table or maybe sitting on folding chairs in a church meeting room. Others will recall crucial conversations one-to-one at a local coffee shop. Others will think of regular visits by a younger woman to an older one too feeble to leave her cramped, old-photo-filled apartment. Others will be carried back to times of crisis, with a few women gathered in a friend’s living room, prayers and tears flowing. Others will see lovely teas with flowers on tablecloths and perfumed women dressed in colors that match the flowers. For some, the scene may be a church kitchen, where women with flushed, focused faces are wearing oven mitts to handle steaming pans. Others may envision classrooms, with

women leaning over chattering children in little chairs around low tables, or auditoriums filled with rows of attentive women listening to a woman up front standing behind a podium. And others will have entirely different sets of pictures—these are just a few from my set!

How can we gather all our varied pictures into one album we might legitimately title “women’s ministry”? There would never be enough pages—or gigabytes. And that is a good thing. This book addresses women’s ministry not simply as specific ministry *programs* but also as an ongoing flow of ministry happening in diverse ways among women in local church congregations. Our question: How can we encourage that flow to be strong and full of life—and how can we begin to talk about that flow in any way coherently? How? Only through a central focus on the Word of God.

All our various snapshots will come together if we see each of these scenes as a place where Word work is happening. Might we imagine each of these pictures of women (and many more) superimposed on a background page filled with the words of Scripture? Women’s ministry must be first and foremost grounded in the Word. We must not start with the needs of women—although we must get to those needs. As in the case of any church ministry, in women’s ministry we must start with the Word of God at the heart of everything we do.

To talk about the Scriptures as central, I will start with and keep returning to Isaiah 55, for that chapter tells us why we need God’s Word. This will not be a thorough exposition, but as we move through the sections of Isaiah 55, my aim is to let its powerful words point us to basic truths about God’s Word that must shape all our lives and ministries, as followers of Jesus Christ.

GOD’S WORD IS GOD SPEAKING

Let’s start at the center of the chapter. I don’t think there are any more beautiful verses than Isaiah 55:10–11 to help us grasp the

foundational truth that *the Bible is God speaking to us*. It might seem hard to believe, when we think about it: here we are in Isaiah listening to a prophet who brought God's Word to God's people more than seven hundred years before Christ, in a divided kingdom that was in decline and heading for disaster. These words are thousands of years old, written down by a prophet who is long gone. And yet we believers claim to stake our lives on these words and others like them, putting our hope in the clear central message of Isaiah's book: *the Lord saves his people*. How do we so trust these ancient words? Here is God's Word on God's word:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
(Isa. 55:10–11)

The first truth to affirm about the Bible is that *it is God speaking*. It's not just a book about God. What's the picture Isaiah uses for God's Word? It's a picture of rain and snow coming down from heaven, giving life to the earth and making things grow. It's a picture of a heavenly gift—a gift that comes, remarkably enough, *from God's mouth*.

Isaiah's picture corrects a lot of misconceptions. So many voices these days tell us that in order to get at truth, we have to look deep inside ourselves, or at least we have to start there. But this picture shows us something originating from far outside ourselves—like precipitation from the sky, something we desperately need but don't have in ourselves—so that we're called not to look

inward to receive it but to look outward, to look *up* and hold out our hands.

Many reading this book may be noticing a growing general tendency these days to focus on our own personal experience in our thinking and in our speaking—and even in our Bible study. That tendency, of course, is as old as Eve, who was attracted by the tantalizing taste of that fruit in her mouth, the delight of that fruit right in front of her eyes, and the allure of that fruit that would make her wise (see Gen. 3:6). Eve was drawn by the Serpent into evil through a focus on her own sensations, desires, and self-perceptions—as opposed to a focus on the clear word of God that he had spoken.

Certain kinds of phrases float regularly by women in particular these days, calling women to *pay attention to who they are, release their God-given potential, listen to their longings for significance, embrace their doubts, dream the dreams in their hearts*, and so forth. Such inner journeys can sometimes be good and necessary. It is perhaps important to say that such an emphasis might represent a pent-up reaction to older generations' overemphasis on outward propriety as opposed to inward transparency and transformation.

The call not to neglect our inner experience is a valid one, but everything turns on the question of whose voice is directing us, whether it be our own or the voices around us or the voice of God given to us in his Word. In our thirst for deeply personal meaning, we can forget how deeply personal are the Scriptures. Sometimes the voices around us talk about the Bible as a textbook for theological formulas that we have to learn, as if for a test in school. And so we might think of taking in the Scriptures as a dry, academic thing—and we'd really rather do something warm and personal.

This is a perennial struggle in women's Bible study circles. Two distinct sorts of camps seem to develop: Shall we be warm and welcoming and personal, or shall we be academic and study the text? What an unfortunate distinction! Here's the question: What could

be more personal than feeling the very breath of God—actually hearing him speak? According to 2 Timothy 3:16, all Scripture is inspired, or *breathed out*, by God. Isaiah, in delivering God’s word, proclaimed this very truth about the very word he was delivering: it *goes out from God’s mouth* (55:11). Indeed, all the words of the collected canonical texts are the very breath of God’s mouth—breathed by his Spirit through the minds and imaginations of the authors who wrote them, who “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21). This is about as personal as it gets: the very breath of God from the mouth of God, received by the people of God. In the Old Testament the very same Hebrew word is translated both “breath” and “spirit.” God’s word is alive with his breath, his very Spirit.

I love the way respected theologian John Frame puts it at the start of his theologically weighty work called *The Doctrine of the Word of God*. To understand how the Bible works, according to Dr. Frame, you should imagine God standing at the foot of your bed at night talking to you.¹ Imagine—the God of the universe speaking right to you. It’s that personal.

Our God is a speaking God. How did God create the world? By speaking. He said, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), and there was light, not after but *in the speaking of the words*. God’s word gave form and shape to the earth; his word holds everything together—including us. You and I were made to take in God’s breath, through his Word, and so to live in relationship with him. That relationship was broken in the fall—as sin came in and separated us from our holy creator God. But he restores that relationship by giving us his Word, ultimately his Word made flesh; we’ll see Isaiah 55 pointing us toward that restoration found only in Jesus Christ.

Why does Isaiah use all these pictures like rain, snow, seeds, and bread? This is not abstract theology, is it? This living Word is as real as the bread we enjoy for breakfast and through which our bodies

are energized. This is personal truth—as personal as feeling someone’s breath on your face, or looking up into a pelt of snowflakes from the clouds, or watching the rain fall on your wilting flowers and seeing them straighten up and stretch toward the sky. These vivid pictures communicate the wonder of the way God speaks to us from heaven, sending his own word from outside us, in order to give us life we do not have within ourselves.

If the Bible really is God speaking, then it follows that each of us human beings needs more than anything else in the world to look up and receive this Word, every day of our lives. This is our logical response and our most basic need, both as individuals and as God’s people together. We need to stand under the preaching and teaching of the Word like the parched earth waiting under the heavens for rain to come down. It is beautiful to look over a church congregation attentively listening to a sermon and to sense the life-giving watering that is happening as the Word is preached and people’s souls start straightening up and stretching toward heaven. Ideally, this process of watering happens in every part of church life: in small groups, classes, one-to-one conversations and counseling—at the heart of all the various ministries of a congregation of people who acknowledge the Bible as God’s Word that comes from God’s mouth. This is an urgent truth, that God’s Word is God speaking. This truth must shape the lives and ministries of God’s people.

GOD’S WORD IS POWERFUL

The second truth to affirm about the Bible is that *it is powerful*. It must be, if it is the very breath of God, the breath that made the whole world. This is what Isaiah 55:11 is talking about when it says that God’s word will not return to him empty but will accomplish that which he purposes; it will do everything God intends it to do. Unlike our words, God’s words are always linked with actual reality; in fact, they make happen everything that happens. Many of

us memorized the apostle Paul's words to Timothy, in 2 Timothy 3:16, where first we hear that "all Scripture is breathed out by God," and then right away we find the most amazing claims about all the areas to which God applies the power of his Word: teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness—making the man of God competent, equipped for every—think of it, *every* good work! God's Word is powerful enough to be comprehensively equipping; this is his intention, and he will accomplish it. On that truth we can build our ministries in the church.

But we need to read the previous verse as well, 2 Timothy 3:15, where Paul makes the huge claim that the sacred writings God inspired are "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." God's words actually call us from death to life, first of all; they have that much power, as God's Spirit applies them. This makes me think of the words of Jesus to his friend Lazarus who had died. Do you recall the scene, as Jesus stood before the tomb of Lazarus and said two little words: "Come out!" (John 11:43)? And Lazarus came out, from death to life. That's how God's Word works. It accomplishes what he purposes. It succeeds in the thing for which he sends it. It calls people to life in Christ and then trains them, comprehensively, how to live in Christ.

If this Word is that powerful, then it follows that we can trust it. We can trust this powerful Word to do its work among God's people. This means we will make our plans based on the fact that this Word is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword." We will not sheathe this sword in the various ministries of our churches, but we will draw it eagerly, exposing young and old to those sharp edges that pierce "to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, . . . discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). We have no such power in ourselves; we need "the sword of the Spirit" (Eph. 6:17), whose cut is life-saving and life-sustaining.

What might it mean to *sheathe* (cover, put away) this sword among God's people? Perhaps this happens most often when we simply don't take time to hear and study its words or to help others do so. Maybe we're just talking about its principles, or simply using various texts as jumping-off points to talk about our own ideas or about what we think the people we're addressing need to hear. Maybe we're spending more time together reading books about the Bible than reading the Bible itself. Maybe we think a lively video will draw people more regularly than the live teaching of the Word. We often simply do not trust the power of God's breathed-out Word to bring people to life, lead people to healing and hope, and train them comprehensively for godly living.

What will it mean, more positively, to unsheathe this sword? How can we draw it out into the open and let it shine and do its work, as we minister to and along with others? We know we must trust that by his Spirit, through his Word, God will accomplish his purposes without fail. Our trust must certainly be a *respectful* trust—like we have for a powerful weapon such as a sharp, two-edged sword that we'd better learn how to handle rightly. We have to learn how it works. For the Bible, that means learning how it speaks—in whole books, from Genesis to Revelation, and in distinct genres, from narrative to poetry to prophecy to apocalyptic. The penetration of the Word surely happens most deeply when we allow it to speak in the form in which it has been given to us, rather than dicing it up and extracting segments or bending it to our own purposes. Not only from the pulpit but in every area of church life and ministry we can aim to let the Word have its full say as we listen fully, not neglecting any part of all the Spirit-inspired Scriptures.

Do we think our youth need to learn about marriage and sex from a biblical perspective? Well, then, of course it is fine and good to have topical seminars and invite in expert speakers on the subject. But how crucial to address such issues in the context of a

steady, purposeful teaching through the books of God's Word. Our youth will be better prepared through receiving not just answers to certain hard issues but a way of dealing biblically with hard issues, as we spread out the fabric of biblical thinking and see all the issues of our lives as threads in the Bible's story of redemption centered in Christ. If the Word is a dry set of propositions we have to enliven, then of course this will not work. If the Word is God speaking to us personally and powerfully, then of course this will not only work but will be our only reasonable course of action.

For women, it is good indeed to have studies and seminars on all sorts of topics related to sex and marriage and womanhood and roles of men and women in the church and on and on. But how crucial to be addressing these important topics also in the context of a steady, purposeful teaching through the books of God's Word. If that kind of teaching happens on every level of a church congregation, then we dense human beings (I address myself!) might begin to get it—to get the way the sword of the Word penetrates deeply into all of life. We will begin to understand the Bible's teaching about women and men as part of a whole story of God's redeeming a people for himself in Christ. We will understand Titus's instruction about older women teaching younger in the context of a unified epistle celebrating the necessary connection in the church between good doctrine and good works. We will take in the Word more comprehensively as we hear it prayed and taught and studied in the voices of not just pastors but also other men and women and children.

GOD'S WORD IS FOR EVERYONE

This brings us to the third truth to be affirmed about the Word: *it is for everyone*. Not especially for certain ones but for everyone. Sometimes the voices around us will make us think that maybe just the really smart people can really understand the Bible, or the

pastors or those with extensive theological education, or the people who've been good or who grew up in nice Christian families, or maybe the men who are called to lead their families. We might even think of such things as a kind of down payment, in order to qualify—and some people seem richer than others.

The people of Israel back in Isaiah's day tended to think like this as well: they were God's chosen people; God had given *them* his Word and his promises of great blessing, even of a great king in the line of David who would rule forever. In Isaiah 54, the chapter before the one we're considering, God makes amazing promises to his people, promises of unfailing love and a shining city and blessed children and safety from all enemies (vv. 9–14). That surely made the people of Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital city, feel pretty special. The prophet Isaiah *is* indeed bringing God's word to Judah, which will go through terrible destruction but which will be wonderfully reestablished. But these verses also reach out into layers of fulfillment, as Isaiah, carried along by the Spirit, speaks out to an audience much wider than he knew—in fact, as wide as the whole earth, which will be renewed for God's people from all the nations.

We started in the center of Isaiah 55, but let's notice how that chapter begins—with a call to come *drink*, and come *eat* (see vv. 1–3a). But to whom does this call go out, in the opening verse? To Judah? No—to “everyone who thirsts.” The only explicit qualification here is to be thirsty. The only other qualification seems to be that you mustn't have money to pay for what you're supposed to buy. This sounds totally illogical. It doesn't make sense to come buy food and drink if you have no money. But Isaiah is emphatic that those with lots of money are buying all the wrong things.

Isaiah loves pictures, and this poetry is full of them. How does this one work? The food and drink give us a picture of *what*? Isaiah tells us, after he's captured our attention with this dramatic call. He gives us God's own words, there in the middle of verse 2: “*Listen*

diligently to me, and eat what is good.” Verse 3: “*Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live.*” We can’t help but notice the repeated commands: *Listen . . . incline your ear . . . hear.* In other words, eating is a picture of listening to God, and food and drink picture God’s Word that we take in. It’s the sustenance each one of us needs. His Word is the living water and the bread of life, delivered through the Spirit. It’s not for those who think they have some standing before God by being smart or good or rich or in the right family or anything else; it’s for every thirsty one who realizes the complete lack of any ability to pay for the life God pours out in us, only by his grace. The rain of God’s Word falls down in all the cracks and crevices, and on every plant and every blade of grass—calling *everyone* who’s thirsty.

Because God calls every thirsty one to hear, then he must intend for every thirsty one to be able to understand. And we’ve seen that God’s Word accomplishes all that he intends. So it follows that we can expect understanding of this Word! Not completely, of course—but more and more, the more any one of us studies and listens and learns and prays. The more we look up and hold out our hands. This is a lifelong activity. It can be hard work. In the end, understanding depends not on us but on God’s Spirit, who inspired the words to begin with. The beauty is that as we listen, and as preachers preach and teachers teach and thirsty people help each other come drink, by the help of the Spirit, the Bible doesn’t hide its truth; no—it lights up!

The reformers of the 1500s based their lives and work on this truth, which they called the “perspicuity” of Scripture, meaning the understandability of Scripture. Men like Martin Luther and William Tyndale believed that God’s Word should be read and studied by all, translated into the common language, available to every person to hear and learn—not just held in the hands of an elite group who would interpret it for everybody else. The perspicuity of Scripture is a beautiful doctrine, one that people have fought and died for,

and one that should give us hope, both as we read and study the Bible and as we share it with others—others in our own culture and others all over the world. The Word of God speaks clearly into the whole world he made.

GOD’S WORD IS ALL ABOUT JESUS

We’ve said that the Bible is God speaking, that it is powerful, and that it is for everyone. But we’re left with a question here in Isaiah 55. How are we told to “buy” this food and drink? How can it be bought without money? What, then, is the payment, and who pays? Verse 3 of Isaiah 55 continues with the best news of the whole chapter. It’s the news we’re called to hear and eat. It’s that which God purposes, the thing for which he sends his word. It’s the news about God’s covenant promise given through King David.

All through the Old Testament, as far back as Adam and Eve, God doesn’t stop talking to us. He doesn’t leave us alone in our sin, as we deserve. No, he comes, and he speaks. He makes promises and covenants that unfold—from Adam and Eve through Abraham down through King David—promises of a seed that would bring blessing to the whole earth. To King David, God promised a great, eternal king to come in his line (2 Sam. 7:8–17). The prophet Isaiah talks a lot about these promises, and chapter 55 offers a vivid example. In these next verses we hear God himself speaking of his promises to his people, first referring to his covenant with King David. But as God talks about David, something amazing happens: attention turns from the human King David, who received the covenant, to the son of David promised by the covenant. By verse 5, God in effect turns and actually speaks to the promised Son of David, his own Son:

And I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.

Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know,
and a nation that did not know you shall run to you,
because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you. (vv. 3b–5)

The fourth truth is the truth of the whole Scripture: it's that *the Bible is all about Jesus*. Here we are in this Old Testament prophecy to the nation of Judah, and what's Isaiah doing? He's calling everybody who's thirsty to come and hear the good news of God's everlasting covenant with David. David here prefigures, or points ahead to, the promised king to come in his line—the one who will indeed be a witness and a leader and commander (v. 4) not just for a people but for “the peoples,” *many* peoples, in fact all the nations of the earth. Verse 5 declares to this promised one that he will call a foreign nation, one Israel does not know and that does not know Israel. We're reading here a confirmation of the promise to Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed through his seed (Gen. 12:3). The promises came *through* Israel, but they didn't come only *to* Israel; they came through Israel to the whole wide earth—just as God promised. And all God's promises pointed to his Son, Jesus Christ, born of the seed of Abraham, in the line of David.

These verses are just one example of the way Isaiah's prophecy reaches forward to Jesus the Messiah, promised king descended from David. We tend to quote Isaiah's more well-known prophecies, those of the suffering servant—which actually come in the chapters leading right up to this one. Many of us treasure those poignant prophecies of the suffering servant from Isaiah 53, the one who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows (v. 4). That suffering servant *is* the promised king we're reading about here just two chapters later, in this climactic chapter of Isaiah's middle section. The promised servant came, suffered God's judgment in our place

on the cross, paid the price for our salvation, and then rose from the dead and ascended in glory to reign and to draw all the nations to himself. This is the *glorified* one prophetically addressed in verse 5. He is the answer to the question of how this food and drink are bought: not *by us* who have no money but *for us*, by the one who paid the price for us. Jesus is the answer to the thirst that Isaiah 55 talks about—and it's the same thirst Jesus himself was talking about when he told the Samaritan woman at the well that he would give her living water so that she'd never be thirsty again (John 4:14). Jesus has always been the source of this living water.

If we are thinking about Word-based ministry, we are thinking about ministry that opens up for people the big story of the Scriptures with Jesus at the center, so that they can understand the stories of their own lives as centered in the story and the glory of Jesus. It revolutionizes our perspective to take in the overarching storyline of the Scriptures, starting in the beginning and seeing there in the beginning the Word that was with God and in fact was God—this Word through whom all things were created (John 1:1–3). What a story, which begins with this God creating the heavens and the earth and ends with God *re-creating*, making a *new* heaven and a *new* earth. The story holds together from beginning to end. It begins in a beautiful place where the tree of life grows and where human beings live in communion with God—a place quickly lost, as sin breaks that communion. But then the promised Christ finally comes to restore that communion, as through his death God redeems a people for himself from all the nations of the earth. The Bible even lets us glimpse the finale, that new heaven and earth, again with the tree of life, where God again dwells with his people, with the risen Christ at the center, the Lamb on the throne.

Each one of us would like to make the story all about “me.” Indeed, many voices around encourage us to see ourselves as the center of the narrative. That's why, when we go to the Scriptures,

we tend to ask first what the text means to us—how it makes us feel, how it can help us. When we shape a ministry, we tend to ask first how that ministry can meet the needs of the particular group involved. That is not a bad question. But what if, instead of starting with that question, we started by asking how that group can best be taking in the Scriptures so that they can understand their own stories in light of the big story of God’s creating a people for himself through his Son? According to the Scriptures, how can that group be all about the story and the glory of Christ, who shines through the Scriptures from beginning to end?

The voices out there will ask: “Can’t we just be all about loving and serving Jesus in our ministry?” Yes, but what does it mean to love and serve Jesus? Who is Jesus? How do we best love and serve him? There will be as many different answers to these questions as there are groups of people until we take our questions to the Word of God. The Scriptures tell us clearly who Jesus is, and it’s a quite different description from the various ones floating around in the culture, even the evangelical culture. To get the whole story of Jesus, we must be regularly reading and teaching the whole book—New Testament and Old, narrative, poetry, Gospels, apocalyptic, Epistles, Wisdom Literature, prophecy—all of it! All the parts work together, in God’s providence, to feed us fully on this one who comes and tells us that he is the living water and the bread of life.

GOD’S WORD IS A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

What comes next in Isaiah 55 is important. Without these verses we could believe all the rest of the chapter, but we wouldn’t have to do anything about it. Verses 6–9 tell us that *the Word is a matter of life and death*. They are kind of like the altar call of Isaiah 55:

Seek the LORD while he may be found;
call upon him while he is near;

let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the LORD, that he may have
compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
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. (vv. 6–9)

There's a life-and-death urgency here. Time will run out. It's clear that this opportunity to hear is offered only while God "may be found," or "while he is near." It's clear that the offer involves not just being happy or prosperous; we've already heard (back in v. 3) that the life of our souls is at stake. The opposite of pardon (v. 7) is condemnation. And we're in a desperate position, because the word we need is so high we can't reach it. Verses 8 and 9 make clear that God and we exist in two different realms, and God's is too high for us. Verse 9 leaves us hopelessly cut off: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Now that we've worked our way from the beginning of the chapter to those magnificent verses with which we began, we can see why verse 10 begins with the word "For." It's continuing the "For" of verse 9 and the "For" of verse 8, and the huge, growing point is that we by ourselves cannot get at this desperately needed word; we have to receive it from heaven. Seeing verses 8 and 9, we grasp even more of the wonder of verses 10 and 11, that God's words, from which we're cut off, should come down to us like the rain and snow from heaven to give us life as opposed to death. How amazing. How merciful.

All the other religions of the world involve a reaching up to

heaven, in order to attain a higher level of righteousness, a raising up of ourselves. The Bible reveals a God who comes near to us as he bids us come and who sends down from heaven his word—ultimately the Word made flesh, his very Son. We Christians indeed have good news, urgent news, life-and-death news to receive and to offer through this Word, which has come down to us. If the Word is what it says it is, then as it rains into our lives we believers should surely be brimming with the urgency of hearing and sharing its merciful good news in these last days while the Lord may still be found.

It follows, then, that in our lives and ministries, we will be actively responding to and calling others to respond to God's Word. Such active response involves, first of all, a more integrated evangelistic thrust to our ministries than we perhaps routinely imagine. Chapter 5 of this book addresses this topic specifically, but in many of the chapters comes a repeated challenge to think of ministry among women not as a program that holds an evangelistic event from time to time, but rather as a network of relationships that is always reaching out by means of the living Word—in our Bible studies, our friendships and mentoring, all our gatherings—always reaching out to help others receive the life-giving Word from which we would all be cut off had it not come down to us. If a ministry is filled with focused study and teaching of the Word, then it's actually difficult for this *not* to happen, because God's Word is both sufficient and effective for our salvation and sanctification.

Active response to the Word involves not just receiving and sharing the gospel but also living it out more and more faithfully. The good news, which is a matter of life and death, is news that comprehensively transforms life as God's people are conformed to the image of his Son. Notice that this passage speaks of both *thoughts* and *ways* (v. 9). Isaiah combines the taking in of God's Word with the doing of it. The four verbs in verses 6 and 7 offer a progression of imperatives, or commands, which are almost like a trail

of footsteps to follow. In verse 6, “seek” and “call” command a response to God’s Word that first turns toward him (*seek*) and then speaks back to him with our own words (*call*). He’s a God of words, and he made us creatures of words in his own image, so that we can actually answer his words and connect to him with ours.

The next two commands, “forsake” and “return” (v. 7), call for a turning away from evil and turning to the Lord himself, who pardons that evil when we repent. This call echoes loudly both for unbelievers, who must repent, and for believers, who have heard God’s voice and repented but have not perfectly followed that voice (as none of us will, until we see Jesus face-to-face). To *seek* and *call* and *forsake* and *return* are actions we must take initially, as we respond in faith to God’s regenerating call on our hearts—but also continually, as the Spirit keeps applying the Word to our hearts.

These verses keep speaking to all of us. They call us to turn *from* our own thoughts and ways *to* God’s thoughts and ways. This is what the Word teaches us to do as we listen to it, taking in its life and being changed in both our thoughts and our ways. We study and teach the Bible throughout our various ministries not just in order to become knowledgeable but to have our lives transformed and ever in the process of being transformed—until we die or Jesus comes again and the process is complete. What will this look like in our ministries as, by the Spirit through the Word, we actively respond and help others to respond in life-changing ways? Hopefully these next chapters will begin to answer that question in relation to women’s ministries. At the least we know it will mean a lot of seeking and calling upon the Lord and a lot of forsaking wicked ways and returning to the Lord.

What makes these actions good is not we who perform them but God, who both commands them and also enables them and who then responds to them. What a mercy to read that our God of *compassion* will not just pardon but *abundantly pardon* (v. 7). The

rain does not just trickle; it pours out pardon on our dry and needy souls. This is good news indeed. Our places of ministry should be places where people are finding life—new life, and growing abundant life—because in his mercy the God of our salvation has come near. He has poured out life from himself in his Son by his Spirit through his Word.

GOD'S WORD IS BEAUTIFUL

Let's notice one more truth: *God's Word is beautiful*. Consider: just through this one chapter our minds have been filled with pictures and sensations of wine and milk and the most delightful rich food and rain and snow and healthy green plants and seeds and bread and on and on! God clearly aims to penetrate us with his Word not just through our minds but also through our imaginations and our emotions and our senses—through our whole beings. No part of the Bible is just bare propositional truth; all its words are, as the writer of Ecclesiastes says, weighed, shaped, and arranged with great care so that they are not just words of truth but also words of delight (12:9–10). The truth of God is beautiful. A grammatically complex sentence written by the apostle Paul is like a winding path with many branches, endlessly pleasing in the relation of all its different parts that lead us through the richness of gospel truth. We have been reading magnificent poetry in these words given to us by Isaiah, rich unfolding parallel lines full of images that show us God's amazing gift of gospel grace. *Every* kind of literature in the Bible has its own shape and beauty that call forth our notice and delight.

How can we mark our ministries not just with clear teaching of the Word but with delight in the Word? Actually, the clearer and more faithful our handling of the Scriptures, the more that handling *will* be characterized by delight. When we pay the closest attention to these God-breathed words, we will be noticing how they are put

together. We will be distinguishing the diverse kinds of literature crafted by the various human writers who were carried along by the Holy Spirit to speak from God in their unique voices and contexts. We will be understanding more fully the Bible's ways of speaking and inevitably marveling at its beauty.

But its beauty is not simply the beauty of form in addition to content. Its beauty is the beauty of form and content so wonderfully wedded that when we diagram one of those complex Pauline sentences or unpack two parallel poetic lines, we will be delighting in the meaning, through the process of receiving it with an ultimately satisfying submission to the text. We will have listened diligently to the inspired words. It's a matter of opening our hands wide to receive the rich food or relish the life-giving rain. Of course, the more we delight in the Word, the more others will be drawn to hold out their hands as well. Coming together with delight around God's Word grows and builds up God's people in amazing ways.

The final verses of Isaiah 55 bring this chapter to a remarkably beautiful climax, picturing the results of all God's people and in fact all the earth fully receiving and celebrating God's Word:

For you shall go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall make a name for the LORD,
an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. (vv. 12–13)

The *sprouting* we saw back in verse 10 bursts here into full and glorious bloom. These are results that we glimpse even now, in the body of Christ, but we know we'll see them fully and finally when

Jesus comes again and the story is complete. That's the goal to which these verses point, and so we learn here what should be the direction, the *momentum*, of our ministries, all of which form part of the flow of these last days heading toward Christ's appearing.

The book's final chapter will land us on this point, but it's good to affirm it from the start: our ministries exist not simply for the purpose of helping people live well now; our ministries, like our whole lives, must aim for the end, when we'll see Jesus face-to-face. The glorious pictures in Isaiah 55 all climax in one end: to "make a name for the LORD, / an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off" (v. 13). That name is the name of Jesus, to whom God has given "the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (Phil. 2:9-10).

Even now, along the way, our ministries can be sprouting more and more with fruitful life as they find their center in the Word that mercifully rains down on us. We have nothing else on which we can eternally depend. That album of women's ministry with its varied pictures can become increasingly colorful and beautiful as it shows the process of opening ourselves to words from the very mouth of God, coming down to us like rain and snow from heaven, watering the earth, bringing forth life, accomplishing all that God purposes for the glory of his name.



THE GOSPEL COALITION

The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We desire to champion the gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines. We yearn to work with all who, in addition to embracing our confession and theological vision for ministry, seek the lordship of Christ over the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures.

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MINISTRY