

God's Word Does Not Return Void *When Used Properly*

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Grace Evangelical Society Regional Conference

Omaha, NE

July 27–28, 2007

Introduction

God's word does not return void. We are all familiar with this biblical pronouncement. The reference is Isaiah 55:11:

So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; **It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.**

This verse is not a blanket promise, but has an important stipulation—a stipulation that we must not ignore. God's word is guaranteed to accomplish what He pleases and to prosper in the thing for which God sent it. It may not accomplish what we please or the purpose for which we use it. In other words, God's Word accomplishes God's purpose. For this reason, we must closely heed purpose statements within Scripture.

Let us take a little closer look at this verse in its context. The passage sharply distinguishes God's thoughts from man's thoughts and God's purposes (which He accomplishes) from man's purposes (which may remain unaccomplished).

Isaiah 55⁸“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD. ⁹“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, And do not return there, But water the earth, And make it bring forth and bud, That it may give seed to the sower And bread to the eater, ¹¹So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.

What promise, specifically, is the promise within Isaiah 55 that God will accomplish? He promised to establish the nation within what is known as the Millennium.

Isaiah 55¹²For you shall go out with joy, And be led out with peace; The mountains and the hills Shall break forth into singing before you, And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. ¹³Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress tree, And instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree; **And it shall be to the LORD for a name, For an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.**”

As important as the certainty that Israel is guaranteed a glorious future, there is more to this passage than God's faithfulness to Israel. It tells us something about God's word in general.

The Point of Isaiah 55:11: A Clue for Evangelism

Isaiah 55:11 particularizes a general truth of God's Word. In particular, God will not fail to establish Israel in the Millennium. Isaiah appeals to a general truth: God's word is designed by Almighty God to accomplish the purpose for which it is written.

John's Gospel addresses unbelievers. Note John 20:31: *But these [the eight signs]¹ are written **that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.*** It is clear that the intended readers are unbelievers, because John seeks for the readers (*you*) to receive life by believing in Christ. His gospel seeks to persuade unbelieving readers of the message of life, for the purpose that they receive everlasting life. Every other book of the New Testament addresses believers. John is unique in terms of his audience and in terms of his purpose.

This is wonderful, but that is not all. The fact that John is God's word to the unbeliever means that it does not return to God void without accomplishing what God sent it to do. How might we illustrate this? If we were to look at a dollar bill of the United States of America, we will find the following statement: *This note is legal tender for all debts public and private.* What this means is that the Federal Reserve System guarantees it as currency for exchange for paying bills in the United States. It is acceptable for paying public debts (like taxes) or private debts (like mortgage payments).

Similarly, the government of Australia guarantees its monetary system. Australian dollars are readily accepted in Australia. On the other hand, few merchants in Omaha would accept a perfectly good Australian dollar in payment for goods and services here. What is the difference? The United States government guarantees its monetary system within the U.S.A., the Australian government guarantees its monetary system within Australia. Foreign money has not guaranteed for exchange within the United States. Only American money has such a guarantee.

Does that imply that Australian money is worthless in the United States? Absolutely not! One of the reasons that financial pages of newspapers list Currency Exchange Rates is that investors buy and sell foreign currency (as they also buy and sell stocks and bonds). Banks also buy and sell foreign currency. Furthermore, demand for Australian currency exists among travelers to Australia.

Both Australian and American money have value. Even though the Australian dollar has value, few merchants accept it here. Let us imagine that you just ate a wonderful meal at a local restaurant. It would be rather inconvenient to find that you had no credit cards, no checkbook, but a wallet filled with Australian money only.

Similarly, when it comes to communicating with an unbeliever, we can use other New Testament books, tracts, or a personal testimony. Yes, people have come to believe Christ for His guarantee of everlasting life through hearing a message from tracts. Yes, people have come to believe Christ for His guarantee of everlasting life through hearing a message from other New Testament books. Yes, people have come to believe Christ for His guarantee of everlasting life through hearing a message from personal testimonies.

¹ 1. Turning water into wine (John 2:1–12); 2. Healing the nobleman's son (4:46–54); 3. Healing a lame man (5:1–15); 4. Feeding the 5000 (6:1–14); 5. Walking on the water (6:15–21); 6. Healing the man born blind (9:1–12); 7. Raising Lazarus (11:38–44); 8. Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection (19–20; cf. 2:18–19).

However, our personal testimony does not have the guarantee that our word will not return to us void without accomplishing the thing for which we sent it. A personal testimony may be wonderful in many respects, but we are impeachable witnesses, so it lacks the authority of “Thus says the Lord.”

Neither does a tract have the guarantee that our word will not return to us void without accomplishing the thing for which we sent it. Even the most accurate of tracts devotes much space to the words of man, rather than upon God’s word for the unbeliever.

Someone might say, though, “When I tell unbelievers the gospel, I use God’s word, but I do not make John’s Gospel my focus. Isaiah 55:11 tells me that God’s word will not return to Him void.” Yes, indeed, Isaiah 55:11 applies to all Scripture. However, Isaiah 55:11 guarantees that His word will accomplish what God sent it to do. Does God guarantee to accomplish—through His word—what we hope for when we use a passage for a different purpose than God’s original purpose? No. Is it possible that God will accomplish our purpose through a passage designed for a different purpose? Yes, but there is no guarantee.

Like the shopper in Omaha who achieves greater success with American dollars than with Australian dollars, I would rather use a tool that God designed for evangelism than a humanly designed tool (personal testimony or tract). I would also rather use a tool that God designed for evangelism than a tool that God designed for a different purpose.

Illustrating the Point

Ephesians 2:8–9

Imagine using Ephesians 2:8–9 for evangelism. It is a wonderful passage telling believers what happened to them when they believed. That is its purpose. The Ephesians to whom Paul wrote were already believers. It does not have an evangelistic purpose.

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹not of works, lest anyone should boast.

What this passage contributes is wonderful. It clearly indicates that salvation comes through faith alone. It clearly excludes works.

However, it does not say anything about the content of faith. It does not even say that the content concerns Jesus Christ. Someone using Ephesians 2:8–9 evangelistically must supply what the content of faith is. On the other hand, Paul could safely assume that the Ephesian believers already knew the content of faith. Therefore, audience issues made it safe for him to mention faith without specifying the content of that faith.

If, on the other hand, we use Ephesians 2:8–9 evangelistically, our audience is a person who probably has no idea of that the content of faith should be. If we give a person a piece of paper with Ephesians 2:8–9 on it (or even with the whole book of Ephesians), how would the unbeliever supply the content of faith?

Hence, we observe that God does not provide the same guarantee that would apply to using an evangelistic passage evangelistically.

Acts 16:31

If an unbeliever read it in context, he/she may or may not conclude that verse 31 speaks of eternal salvation. Assume that the reader concludes that it is eternal salvation, verse 31b might cause confusion. If it does not, the reference to baptism in verse 33 might lead to confusion.

16²⁵But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed. ²⁷And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. ²⁸But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here." ²⁹Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³²Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized.

Paul made the message clear to the jailer, but Luke has not recorded for us everything that was said that night. Note verse 32. The point is that, even relatively clear passages in Acts, such as Acts 16:31—require a lot of explanation. They were not designed as evangelistic passages. God accomplishes His purpose (of edifying believers) when believers study Acts. However, God did not design Acts as an evangelistic book. Isaiah 55:11 does not guarantee that all the information has been given that an unbeliever would need.

John's Gospel

On the other hand, John 20:30–31 make it clear that John gave sufficient evidence for a message sufficient to give life to the reader who believes Jesus' message as recorded by John.

³⁰And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹but these [8 signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

John had much evidence from which to select, but the eight signs are sufficient evidence. Verse 31 declares John's Gospel to be sufficient to take someone from death to life. Isaiah 55:11 stands behind John. God will not fail to provide a sufficient message through the book designed to take someone from death to life. Note the simple, but complete, message in John 3:15–18.

¹⁵ . . . whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁶For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. ¹⁸He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.