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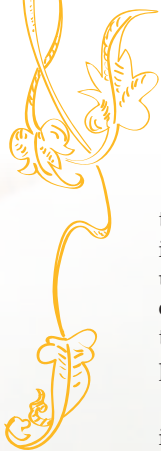
## *Israel Teaching Letter*

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# God's Invitations

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**T**here is something very powerful about an invitation. Knowing that someone cares enough about us as individuals to desire our presence and, further, to seek us out and request our presence, can have a profound effect on how we view ourselves. As a matter of fact, there are few things that are as affirming as receiving a personal invitation to an important event.

Of course, not all invitations are created equal. An invite to a friend's wedding, an important luncheon, or to take a promotion makes us feel wanted and appreciated, welcomed, and included. However, an invitation to jury duty, to chaperone a group of energetic teenagers, or take over a difficult Sunday school class may not have the same effect. We've been noticed, we obviously are wanted, but somehow the result is not the same.

Even more difficult, however, are those times when the longed-for invitation does not come. We have all experienced the pain of being the one, or having a loved one, who didn't make the team, didn't get invited to the party, was overlooked for the promotion, or was in some way left out or left behind because the invitation just never arrived. Such an experience can have a devastating emotional impact that may take years to overcome.

And then there is the quandary we can find ourselves in when we are the ones doing the inviting. Who should be on the list when there are only so many seats to fill or so many places at the table? What do you do at holiday time about the relative that is at odds with other members of the family or the neighbors next door who aren't speaking to the family across the street? Having to choose who to invite, which really means deciding who will be left out, can take the joy out of an otherwise fun and exciting time.





## The Perfect Invitation— Every Time

Although we often fail to realize it, as believers in the God of the Universe, we are the recipients of a constant flow of invitations: from those that fill the pages of the Bible to those whispered to us by that still small Voice. And they are perfect because He is perfect. He never has to decide who to include and who to leave out; His invitations cross every cultural, ethnic, and economic boundary and are only limited by our willingness to hear and respond. Some are very general, extended to anyone who has ears to hear and eyes to see, while others are very specific and personal, even intimate.

But make no mistake, the God who invited mankind to take part in His creation, who invited humanity to be in personal relationship with Him, who invited Israel to be His treasured possession and the nations to worship at His throne is still inviting today. And while some of those invitations fill us with joy and excitement, making us feel treasured and even adored, others are met with trepidation as we recognize them as opportunities to be stretched and to grow. But regardless of the accompanying emotion, they are all extended from a Heart of perfect love. And they all require an RSVP.

## The Meaning of the Word

*Zimun* is the ancient Hebrew word for invitation, while in modern Hebrew, it is *hazmanah*. The root of both terms is the same: *z'man* which means “time,” “preparing,” and to “designate for a purpose.” We find *z'man* in such places as the *Shehecheyanu*, an ancient Jewish prayer that is translated, “Blessed

are You, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has granted us life, sustained us and enabled us to reach this time [*z'man*].” It is recited at the birth of a child, on purchasing a new home, when seeing a friend you haven’t seen in a long time, eating a fruit you haven’t eaten all year, or generally, when doing something special that you don’t often do. *Z'man* is also used in the well-known phrase from the book of Esther, “for such a time as this [*laz'man hazeh*].”

*Zimun* and *hazmanah* are natural outgrowths of *z'man*, as the original, biblical meaning of the term was a “set” time—everything and every purpose under heaven has an appointed time (*z'man*), based on Ecclesiastes 3:1. In modern Hebrew, *hazmanah* corresponds more to our current understanding of being invited. It is a notice saying you are welcome at a specified place and time. It implies, however, that you are free to decide whether or not you will be there.

Conversely, when *zimun* is translated “appointment,” it indicates a firm temporal arrangement. When an ancient Hebrew extended an invitation, he was, in fact, setting a time, not inquiring as to whether or not you might drop by. *Zimun* is only used in modern Hebrew when presence is required, such as the notice of a court appearance. *Hazmanah* may be arbitrary, but *zimun* does not expect to be disregarded.

*Zimun* is used throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, often in conjunction with the word *moed*, which means “appointed time,” and the concept is clear. When God set a time, when He extended an invitation, when He welcomed His people to participate with

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*love.*





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Him, He expected to be taken seriously. Unlike today when our likelihood of accepting an invitation is based primarily on how convenient it might be for us, God's invitations are meant to take precedence.

It would be impossible even in one volume, let alone one teaching letter, to give appropriate attention to all of the invitations we find in the Bible. In this article, we will look at just five.

## An Invitation to Wait

For some of us, the most difficult aspect of our lives is waiting. In her book *Invitations from God*, Adele Calhoun calls waiting "God's most sweeping invitation." Virtually every important character in the Scriptures spent some time waiting. Noah waited 40 days in the ark during the storm and then 150 days to disembark when the rain stopped. Moses waited 40 years in Midian and 40 years in the desert. Israel waited 400 years to be delivered from Egypt. David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Gideon, Elijah, Paul, Peter, and countless other biblical heroes had their characters forged in the crucible we call waiting.

For many of us, this is an invitation we would just as soon ignore. It requires us

to let go of our need to control people and circumstances and really trust God. It demands that we lay down our own agendas, our things, our unrealistic expectations, and believe that God is in control and His timing is far superior to ours.

We live in a world that is governed by an addiction to hurry. Fast food, fast lines, fast lanes, fast conversations, quick meals, speedy prayers, short communications, fast meetings—it all seems efficient and productive. And technology, which really has provided an easier life for this generation than any other, has only compounded our obsession with instantaneous results. We have been rendered incapable of waiting, a society whose hallmark is impatience. Former priest and author Henri Nouwen said, "Impatient people are always expecting the real thing to happen somewhere else. Therefore, they always want to go elsewhere. Going somewhere is much easier than staying where they are and waiting."

But God continually reminds us that it is in quietness and confidence in Him (Isa. 30:15), waiting and trusting, that we will find our true strength. The Christian Scriptures tell us that patience is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, cultivated and nurtured in our hearts through a willingness to surrender our chaotic lives and wait. For many of

us, Psalm 69:3 describes our impatient experience, *"I am weary with my crying; my throat is dry; my eyes fail while I wait for my God."* But authentic faith knows that the real thing is going to happen right here where I am with my God if only I am willing to wait for it. Psalm 62:5 says, *"My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him."*

## An Invitation to Worship

Worship is actually one of the most important and widely expressed concepts in the Bible. God invites all who are called by His name to worship Him in spirit and in truth. At bible.org, the following definition of worship is provided: "Worship is the humble response of men to the self-disclosure of the Most High God. It is based upon the work of God. It is achieved through the activity of God. It is directed to God. It is expressed by the lips in praise and by the life in service." This definition makes it clear that worship happens at the invitation, instigation, and empowerment of God Himself. In various forms, it is mentioned hundreds of times in the Scriptures.

It is important to note, however, that the Bible dedicates almost as much space to false worship as to true. In the first chapters of the Bible, Cain's sacrifice was rejected by God because it was false worship (Gen. 4:5). Three thousand people died in one day because of the false worship of the golden calf fashioned by Aaron (Exod. 32). The kingdom of Israel was divided because of the idolatry and false worship of the nation (1 Kings 11:31–33). The fall of Jerusalem was directly attributable to the apostasy and false worship of the nation (Jer. 1:16; 16:11; 22:9). Clearly, misdirected worship was the cause of untold hardship and suffering for the Israelites.

In the Christian Scriptures, Paul wrote that God was justified in condemning man because he worshiped in error: *"who*

*exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen"* (Rom. 1:25). The Christian Scriptures also clearly express the importance that God places on worship of the right kind: *"But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers"* (John 4:23, NASB).

God is inviting men and women to be worshipers, true worshipers, who through surrendered and obedient lives are worshipping Him in spirit and in truth. There are several words in both Greek and Hebrew that are translated as worship. Bible.org lists several pairs as follows:

The word most frequently used for "worship" in both the Old and New Testaments is one which means to bow down. The Hebrew word is *shaha*, and the Greek word is *proskuneo*. Both words denote the act of bowing or prostrating oneself in submissiveness and veneration. In both instances, the outward posture reflect an inner attitude of humility and respect. As the words relate to worship, they denote a high view of God and a condescending opinion of self, viewing God in His perfection and man in his imperfection.



*"My soul,  
wait silently  
for God  
alone, for my  
expectation  
is from Him."*

*Psalm 62:5*



Photo by Johnathan Liedtke



Following  
requires true  
humility.



Another pair of terms underscores the attitude of reverence. The Hebrew word is *yare*, and the Greek term is *sebomai*. The idea of both the Greek and the Hebrew is that of fearing God in the sense of wonder and awe at the splendor and greatness of His infinite majesty.

The third pair of terms employed for worship in the Bible emphasizes service. The Hebrew term *avodah*, and its Greek counterpart, *latreuo*, denote the ideas of work, labor, and service. In the Hebrew Scriptures, this most often referred to priestly service. In the Christian Scriptures, however, we are told that, as believers, we are all members of the priesthood of God (1 Pet. 2:5, 9), so that this term does not apply only to the service of a few, but of the entire congregation.

As is required of those who wait, God is imploring His people to turn from their busy lives, recognize His absolute otherness and approach Him with total reverence and devotion. He is inviting them to come humbly yet confidently into His presence and allow every word and action to express their love and gratitude.

## An Invitation to Follow

In *Invitations from God*, Calhoun tells of her experience in following another car to a destination. Although the idea seemed simple enough, she quickly discovered that following is not for the faint of heart. Forced through yellow lights, running a few red ones, trailing behind, losing sight of the lead car, she determined that following can be more difficult than leading. Following requires true humility, sharp attention, a

willingness to take risks. She realized that everything in her resisted trailing behind someone else, especially when she was sure she could have made her own way just fine. But following required that she let go of her own way and trail the leader.

Calhoun further points out that a lot of attention is placed on leadership today. Bookstore shelves are laden with leadership books, and leadership seminars and networks abound. We are told that we are all leaders in our own spheres of influence. We all have leadership potential at some level. Certainly, good leadership is essential in the Church and in the world. But in a culture obsessed with leaders, no one wants to follow. Leadership comes with control, power, status, and attention. Who would want to be told, she asks, that they have great follower-ship potential?

And yet that is exactly what God is looking for as He invites us to come and follow Him. When we accept that invitation, we are allowing Him to begin the work of building our character and shaping our hearts. We are no longer the rugged individualists, doing what we want when we want. We must now take up the challenge of following, turning where He turns, stopping when He stops, detouring where He detours, loving whom He loves and serving whom He serves.

And service is of critical importance to the true follower of the Lord. There are over 1,400 references in the Scripture to people who serve. Some are slaves, but some are those whom God calls "friend," such as Abraham and Moses. The likes of Isaac and Jacob, Joseph and Joshua, Caleb

and Samuel, David and Solomon, Isaiah, Daniel, Zechariah, Paul, Timothy, and dozens of others are referred to as servants and serve as examples of what God Himself finds praiseworthy. Laying down their lives in total, joyful submission, they accepted His invitation to humble themselves and follow.

We are told several times in the books of Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua that Caleb followed the Lord fully and that he wholly followed the God of Israel. He served the Lord with great courage, willing to fight the giants in the land as well as stand against his fellow Israelites who brought a negative report. From his youth until his old age, his life exemplified God's admonition to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with his God. For it, the Lord rewarded him richly.

## *An* Invitation to Bear His Image

Judaism and Christianity share a belief that man was created in the image of God. In that respect, man was unique in all of creation, and not just that he was created in the image of God, but also that attendant to that creation was a blessing. Genesis 1:27–28 tell us: *“So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him;*

*male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it...’”* So the sages say, God filled the Earth with life, and by virtue of this blessing, man is to further emulate Him by continually replenishing the Earth and by seeking justice and righteousness.

It is also for this reason that every individual has an inherent right to be treated with dignity and respect. Since the image of God is stamped on every human being, the taking of a human life diminishes God and works to destroy the world.

In Genesis 1:27, the sages tell us, the word “in” can also be translated “as.” That would render the verse, “God created man *as* His own image,” which adds an additional dimension based on the ancient concept of image-bearing. Historically, conquering emperors erected monuments of themselves in distant lands that they subdued as a tactic to maintain control. These monuments bore the actual image of the emperor and had an inherent political function. Their presence was to serve as a constant reminder to all who lived in the land as to who was really in charge. The follower of God, sages say, serves this same function as an image-bearer: he is inherently a signpost to God's governing authority, reminding all who look upon his image of Who is really in control.



“Be fruitful  
and multiply;  
fill the earth and  
subdue it...”  
*G*enesis 1:28



“Come unto  
me...and I will  
give you rest.”

*M*att. 11:28

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In Exodus 33, Moses expresses his desire to see more of the Lord. “Show me,” he says, “let me see your glory.” The Lord grants Moses’s request and reveals Himself, proclaiming, “*The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...*” (Exod. 34:6–7a). That same God invites you and I to bear His image, reflecting His grace and goodness to all we encounter, a signpost for the world that a God of forgiveness and mercy is in control. There is no greater privilege imaginable.

## An Invitation to Come

Finally, one of God’s most beautiful and irresistible invitations is simply to come. “Come to Me,” He invites us, “and I will give you the desires of your heart.” Come and I will protect and deliver you, take away your sins and wash you whiter than snow. He invites the thirsty to come and drink, the hungry to come and eat, the weary to come and rest, the blind to come and receive sight, the deaf to come and receive hearing. He invites the lame to come and receive restoration, the sick to come and receive healing.

Come, He says, and be filled with My goodness, be satisfied with the fatness of My house; come and be forgiven, cleansed, and redeemed. All we need do is respond. In the Christian Scriptures, a similar invitation is found in Matthew 11:28: “*Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.*”

Such invitations are found throughout all of Scripture, and in all of them, God has one clear purpose—to lead us out of the darkness of self and into the light of His love, so that we can joyfully say with the psalmist: “*How precious is your lovingkindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Your wings; They are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of Your house and You give them drink from the river of Your pleasures. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light*” (Ps. 36:7–9).

By Rev. Cheryl Hauer  
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Calhoun, Adele. *Invitations from God*. IVP Books: Downers Grove, IL., 2011.  
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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

