

WILDERNESS WATER

John 7:37-39

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37 Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. 38 He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'" 39 But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Several years ago, while backpacking in the wilderness of Big Bend National Park, the group I was with ran short on water. When we found the spring located on the map, we had only a locked box on that dry hole in the ground. No water was in sight. When we finally spotted some, it was the brown, insect filled remains of a horse trough. We took one look at that water and looked at each other and thought, "Are we doing this?"

There are different kinds of thirst. There's need for a drink, and then there's the kind of thirst you find in the wilderness – the kind of thirst that starts to cloud out your better judgment. Have you ever known a thirst like that?

Wilderness Water

God's people knew that kind of thirst. In one of the most remarkable stories of provision in the Old Testament, we find the Israelites wandering in the wilderness and struggling with thirst. We find it in Exodus 17.

"Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water that we may drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" 3 But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, "Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

In the midst of the wilderness, thirst has led the people to forget that the God they depend on has already moved water to set them free. When they didn't think they could take any more, God steps in and provides an answer.

So Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, "What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me." 5 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6 Behold,

I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.”

Water was always a big part of the Israelite story. But, so was thirst.

On the one hand, it is the most basic of human experiences. On the other hand, it is also one of the deepest and most complex experiences in the history of God’s people. In our passage today, Jesus draws on this, the simple but profound experience of thirst in the life of Israel, to make his simple yet profound statement about the life he offers to the world.

Waiting for a River

Today’s text comes near the end of Jesus’ visit to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Tabernacles, or the Feast of Booths. It was one of the three big annual festivals. Passover (also known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread) took place in March/April. Pentecost (also known as the Feast of Weeks) took place in May/June. We’re more familiar with these other two events, for which adult Jewish males were expected to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The synoptic gospels tell us about Jesus and these other festivals, but only John records Jesus’ encounter with this one.

Back at the beginning of chapter 7, Jesus’ brothers suggest that the Festival of Tabernacles in Jerusalem might be a chance to perform some miracles and make himself known. Jesus rejects their suggestion because his time has not yet come. His mission was not to gain fame or popularity. In fact, Jesus says that his mission will cause the **opposite**, hatred from the world.¹

After Jesus has made his point to his brothers, Jesus does go in secret to Jerusalem. The city is full, and the Temple is busy. It was originally a harvest celebration – an ingathering celebration day for the fall harvest. By the time of Jesus, the festival had also taken on the significance of remembering God’s provision for the people of Israel during their wilderness wanderings. It lasts seven days with a holy convocation on the eighth day (Leviticus 23:36).

These tabernacles, or booths, were originally the temporary dwellings in which farmers would live during harvesting. These were walled structures covered with branches. In Leviticus, this grows to reminisce the type of fragile dwellings in which the Israelites lived during their 40 years of travel in the desert wilderness after the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. Throughout the holiday, meals are eaten there, and families would look up at the stars and remember the God who led them by fire at night.

Nothing was more central to God’s provision in the wilderness than His willingness to quench the thirst of His people. This is why the drawing and pouring out of water became one of the

central moments in each day of the Festival of Tabernacles. It was an annual reenactment of the water-giving miracle of Moses' rock.

Each day, the priests would go down to the pool of Siloam (the main water source for Jerusalem) followed by the masses. The priests, robed in white, would fill a golden pitcher with the water. They would carry it down a path lined with people in those packed city streets. The people would sing songs from words of Isaiah:

"With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." (Isaiah 12:2-3)

Then, they would go up to the temple, through the Water Gate, with all kinds of music and fanfare. This parade of priests would lead the water all the way to the altar, and then, they would pour the water so that it flowed over the altar. This was to begin the prayers for God's provision of rain (water) and rejoicing for the expectation of God to provide.

There was so much celebration involved that Jewish texts say, "He who has not seen the rejoicing at the place of the water-drawing has never seen rejoicing in his life."ⁱⁱ

There were so many candles lit in celebration in the evening that they say, "there was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that was not illumined by the light of the place of the water-drawing. Men of piety and good deeds used to dance before them with lighted torches in their hands, and sing songs and praises. And Levites without number with harps, lyres, cymbals and trumpets and other musical instruments were there upon the fifteen steps leading down from the court of the Israelites to the court of the women, corresponding to the fifteen songs of ascents in the psalms."ⁱⁱⁱ

It was a water ceremony centered on the way that God provides wilderness water. He gives the rain that brings the harvest, the water that quenches thirst, the water that flowed from the rock of the Exodus.

When this text begins (v.37) by locating Jesus' words on the last day, the greatest day, of the feast, these are not just details for chronological accounting. They're presented to us to bring out the deep symbolism rooted in this moment at the Temple. It would have been a day filled with anticipation by everyone in attendance. ^{iv}

An Invitation to Drink

It was in this context, in a moment hard to fathom, that Jesus stood up and cried out. Teachers taught, in his day, sitting down. Jesus often sat to teach, but not now. In a moment of total interruption, he stands and cries out.

“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink.”

It would be as if someone cried out in the middle of a wedding or stood in the midst of our worship service and started making announcements. On a day when they’ve gathered to parade the pitcher up to the altar and pour it out over and over again, as if to say “we remember the God who brought water from the rock,” Jesus is saying “He has provided for you again.”

All their attention is focused on prayer for the future. They’re acting out their hope in the words of Ezekiel who prophesied that someday a river would flow from the temple and everywhere that river goes everything will come life. In that moment, Jesus cries out “It’s me!”

“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink.”

Many have missed the simplicity of the gospel announcement. Jesus won’t let it get cluttered. He says the good news of new life in him is for anyone who thirsts. It’s not for the ones who understand it all in advance. It’s not for the ones whose past record meets the standard. He doesn’t say I’m yours if you come dressed the right way. The invitation is not for those who will never mess up again. The only qualification is that you recognize your thirst.^v

The Psalmist writes in Psalm 42: *“As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”*

What quenches your thirst?

Maybe in days of difficulty you just work a little harder, put in more hours than usual. Maybe when things are tougher, you narrow in on those around you and tried to get your family just right. Maybe you fall into the lie that in order for you to have significance your family has to be perceived in a certain way. It could be that you’re a teenager who’s feeling a need to have everything perfect at school or in your sport or hobby.

We get thirsty in our souls, and if we aren’t careful, like the Israelites, we can so quickly forget the provision of God and start going toward other things. Jesus invites you to come and drink from the only true source of life.

The only requirement is that you thirst. Yet, so many of us are busy filling our souls with the sands of self-importance. We’re stuffing our mouths with the mud of materialism. We’re taking bite after bite of whatever the world tells us we need next. Jesus has shown us the one place

that living water truly resides, and its through His Spirit in those who believe. Jesus makes this promise, a promise that no one else can make: If you thirst, you can come and drink of Him.

“He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.’”

Water for the World

The other side of the promise is that Christ in you can become a source of life to others. He says, “I am the great source and I will make you a source for others. I’m going to fill you with living water and I want you to overflow that others may have my life too.” When we fail to bring our thirst to the living water we also forfeit the fountain of living water intended to flow from us.

Jesus says that if you would come, you could have *rivers*. It’s plural - more than one, in abundance - wave after wave of living water coming from him through you to the world.

Jesus became what you are that you might become like He is. Jesus knew the thirst of being human and the life that comes from the fountain of the Lord. The one who cries from the cross “I thirst,” allows water to flow from him that all who come after him might believe and receive living water. John tells us that when Jesus’ side was pierced blood and water flowed. When that great living stone was pierced blood, when the Rock of Ages was struck, water flowed out for all who thirst in the wilderness.

A few years ago, A 29-year-old New Jersey man joined 11 others on an adventure hike in the wilderness in the Utah desert.^{vi} His name was Dave. Their group was a part of a Colorado-based training school that prided themselves on helping to push people beyond their limits. He and 11 other hikers were being led by 3 expert guides on a wilderness-survival adventure designed to test their physical and mental toughness.

During the 28-day survival course, campers are required to hike for miles and drink what they can find from natural sources. Campers are equipped with only a knife, water cup, blanket and poncho, and are even warned they could lose 20 pounds or more.

On the second day, the group set out around sunrise and stopped about 8:30 a.m. to dip their cups into Deer Creek in what turned out to be the only water until evening. Dave drank what would be his last water of the day. As the heat increased and two attempts to dig for water failed, Dave’s condition grew serious.

"Every time [Buschow] would fall or lie down, it took a huge amount of effort to pick him back up," a camper wrote. "His speech was thick and his mouth swollen. Every time he continued, he'd rush ahead, often in the wrong direction and so exhausting himself even more," the camper wrote.^{vii} The sun was described as blazing, inescapable.

After going roughly 10 hours without a drink in the 100-degree heat, Dave finally fell for the last time, crippled by thirst, face down in the dirt, less than 100 yards from the goal: a cave with a pool of water.

It's tragic that he was so close to making it to the water source. But what became truly heartbreaking was when the group learned that the 3 guides carried emergency water in their packs.

Can you imagine letting someone become crippled by thirst while you carry water beside them?

"From the one who believes will flow rivers of living water."

ⁱ Elizabeth Johnson, "Commentary on John 7:37-39," workingpreacher.com, June 8, 2014.

ⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sukkah 51a and 51b

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Edward Klink, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016)

^v Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2012)

^{vi} Associated Press, "Hiker Dies of Thirst With Water All Around," May 3, 2007 (accessed 4/1/2022)
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hiker-dies-of-thirst-with-water-all-around/>

^{vii} Ibid.