

Rivers of Living Water

John 7:37-52

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Seeing Our Need

In America, billions of dollars are spent every year to create perceived need in people's lives. Advertisers know they must first get us to feel that we need something before we'll be ready to buy what they're selling, which promises to meet the need they just created in our minds. That's the interesting thing about human need: Sometimes we're deeply unaware of real needs while keenly aware of false needs, created needs. So there's a disconnect between felt needs and actual needs.

When I haven't had enough sleep, my body often responds by telling me it's hungry. Do I need more food? No, what I really need is sleep, but my body and brain get confused and look to food to provide the energy I should have gotten from a good night's sleep.

Our souls have needs, just as surely as our bodies. And just as can sometimes happen with our bodies, our souls will often mistake one need for another. Our souls' greatest need is for God. We were made for Him. As Augustine of Hippo famously said in his Confessions, "You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in You."

A. An Opportune Time, v. 37

Our text begins by telling us "*On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out . . .*" Jesus' earlier interactions with the Jewish leaders, the crowds, and the people of Jerusalem took place earlier, in the middle of the Feast of Tabernacles, or Feast of Booths. Now, Jesus has waited until the last day of the feast, the great day, to stand up and call out with His invitation. The last day of the Feast of Booths, the great day, was intentionally chosen by Jesus for a specific reason.

Each day during the Feast of Booths, the priests would lead a water-pouring ceremony around the altar. During the night before the beginning of the Feast of Booths, the priests went and filled up a

large water vessel with water from the Pool of Siloam. (Jesus will later heal a man born blind at this pool.) Each day during the feast, the priests would lead a procession around the altar, singing the Hallel Psalms, Psalms 113-118, and then they would pour the water onto the altar and it would gather around the base of the altar. On the last day of the 7-day feast, the priests would march around the altar seven times, just like Joshua at Jericho, before pouring out the water.

This water-pouring ceremony looked back at God's provision in the past, even as it looked forward in hope to God's provision for the future. The past provision was primarily the provision of water in the desert wilderness, the time when God's people lived in tents or tabernacles or booths. The water God provided flowed from a rock, a rock which somehow followed the Israelites throughout their desert journey. The Apostle Paul, who had trained as a Pharisee under Israel's most famous rabbi, wrote about that desert generation in 1 Corinthians 10:1-3 -

For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3 and all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. (ESV)

And so the ceremony looked back, but it also looked ahead. In Ezekiel 47, the prophet Ezekiel has a vision of a magnificent Temple, and water flows out from the threshold of the Temple to all the nations of the world. This is just one of the visions of water in the prophets, which were all associated with the glorious future that would come in the age of the Messiah.

Isaiah 12:3-4 says: "*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day:*

*"Give thanks to the Lord,
call upon his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples,
proclaim that his name is exalted." (ESV)*

So, it was on this last day, this great day of the Feast, that Jesus stood up in the Temple, just as the last of the water was being poured out and the people were hushed in silent anticipation:

B. A Powerful Call, vv. 37-39

"If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'"

1. Invitation

The invitation is extended to anyone who thirsts. Jesus has been publicly challenged, mocked, rejected and questioned. People who have begun to believe have been intimidated into silence. But Jesus loudly proclaims His invitation to everyone in the Temple -priests, Levites, Pharisees, people of Jerusalem, visiting crowds from far away: If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

Jesus extends this same invitation today. The only requirement is that you feel your thirst, that you know your need. Thirsty people come to the offer of water. Those who see their need come to the call of Jesus.

What does it mean to be thirsty? It is to know and feel your lack, your insufficiency, your need for something you can never provide for yourself. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*" Jesus offers real drink to those who truly thirst.

The real drink that Jesus offers is Himself: Come to me and drink. What does it mean to come to Jesus and drink? It means to believe in Him, which is what He says Himself - "If anyone believes in me . . ."

This message is the same as the message Jesus gave months earlier to a crowd in Galilee, in John 6, when He said, "*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*"

2. Promise

Then, here in John 7, Jesus makes a promise: *Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'* John then explains His promise by saying "Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."

First, Jesus' promise means that the indwelling Holy Spirit will be to the believer rivers of living water. Many rivers of living water to satisfy all the thirsting of our souls:

Are we feeling the weight of the burden of our guilt and thirsting for forgiveness? The Holy Spirit applies the redemption purchased by Christ to our hearts and reassures us that we have full, complete forgiveness.

Do we feel lonely and thirst for love and belonging? The Holy Spirit unites us to Christ as the Spirit of Adoption and reassures us of God's love for us as our Heavenly Father.

Do we feel afraid or overwhelmed? The Holy Spirit strengthens and empowers us with courage and boldness in the Lord.

Do we feel anxious? The Holy Spirit leads us in prayer as we cast all of our anxieties on Him, and then gives us the gift of peace that surpasses understanding.

Are we longing for truth and feeling the thirst of our ignorance? The Holy Spirit comes as the Spirit of Truth to teach us all truth.

Do we long for our heavenly home and feel the thirst of living in a fallen and sin-scarred world? The Holy Spirit is the down-payment of our eternal inheritance and reassures us of our eternal home, even as He helps us continue to long for it.

As I said before, sometimes we misunderstand these longings, these needs of our soul, and so we'll think we need more money, more possessions, more earthly pleasures, more distractions and entertainments. But of these deep soul thirsts indicate a longing for something only God can give us, and the Holy Spirit comes to satisfy those thirsts in Christ, who is our rock and our living water.

But this is not an individualistic experience. Jesus says "Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." The living water flows out from the heart of the believer to those around him or her. If we take the imagery of Ezekiel's Temple vision and combine it with Jesus' words here and Paul and Peter's later teachings that we are the living stones in God's Holy Temple, we get a beautiful and compelling picture of how the grace of salvation flows.

God saves us and unites us to Christ. He is the Chief Cornerstone of the living Temple of God, and we are stones being built into that Temple. From the Temple flows a river of living water to flow forth to the nations. The water flows out of the heart of individual believers to one another within the church and then overflowing to the world.

This means that, for us to share in an experience God's full refreshment, we need to be connected to one another, so we can each share with each other the refreshing water of life God has given us. We then need to be engaged with the world, so that water can flow from us to a world in need. This means we need true Christian community within the church, so we can life and share the water of life together, as well as true engagement with the world, so the thirsty may come and drink of the water of life.

Now, what does John mean when he says that the Holy Spirit had not yet come, because Jesus had not yet been glorified? Didn't the Holy Spirit come upon people in the Old Testament? Didn't believers share in salvation in the Old Testament. Well, yes, but not in the same way as believers do now. Everyone who has ever been saved has been saved by grace alone through faith alone as the Holy Spirit has caused them to be born again and to receive the gift of eternal life.

But the Old Testament saints lived in an age of anticipation, of longing and looking ahead to what Messiah would do. They did not experience the fullness of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the same way as those of us who live under the reign of the risen and exalted Jesus.

Romans 8:14-17 says: "*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*"

Galatians 4:4-7 says: "*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. 6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7 So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.*"

There is a deeper assurance of adoption as the children of God, a stronger sense of liberation and of the presence of God, now that Christ has secured our redemption and is reigning forever as our redeemer. To think of it another way: The Holy Spirit came upon the prophets, priests and kings in the Old Testament, to anoint and empower them for their ministry. In Christ, our Great Prophet, Priest and King, every believer is now a prophet, called to speak the word of God to one another and to the world. Every believer is also a priest, to intercede for others and minister the grace of God to one another and to the world. And every believer is also a king, called to serve under King Jesus and exercise godly dominion over His world. So we are all anointed with the Holy Spirit, as adopted children of God and as prophets, priests and kings of God.

C. A Mixed Response, vv. 40-52

So, how did the people respond to this powerful invitation and this wonderful promise? Did they flock to Jesus' feet and cry out to Him, "Lord, we are thirsty, give us the water of life!" Not quite! The response was very mixed -

1. Wonder and Joy, vv. 40-41

The first response we read is one of wonder and joy - *40 When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet."* *41 Others said, "This is the Christ."* Some people were convinced that Jesus was the Prophet who was to come into the world. In Deuteronomy 18:18, God told Moses, "*I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.*" So, for almost 1,500 years, God's people had longed for this Prophet to arise. Now they thought He finally had, in Jesus.

Others were now convinced that He was the Christ, the Messiah, the long-awaited Anointed One, the great and glorious King over God's people, who would bring them salvation. Of course, they were both right, but probably not as they thought. Still, these responses do seem to indicate some level of true faith and joy.

2. Confusion, vv. 41-43

Yet others were confused and asked, "*Is the Christ to come from Galilee?*" *42 Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?*" *43 So there was a division among the people over him.*

These people knew enough Scripture to know that Micah had said the Messiah would come from Bethlehem. They thought Jesus had come from Galilee, and so they were confused. This confusion led to division and ultimately to hostility . . .

3. Hostility, vv. 44-52

44 Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

But even among those who were seeking to arrest and destroy Jesus, division arose over this remarkable man:

45 The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" 46 The officers answered, "No one ever spoke like this man!" 47 The Pharisees answered them, "Have you also been deceived? 48 Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? 49 But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed." 50 Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, 51 "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" 52 They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee."

The officers were Levites, men of the Tribe of Levi, charged with guarding the Temple. They were supposed to remove false teachers and protect the people from being led astray. But they had never heard anyone speak like this man! No one had ever spoken with such majesty, such beauty, such clarity, such authority!

The Pharisees will have none of it: "Have you also been deceived? What's wrong with you Levites? Instead of removing this false teacher, you've been taken in by him, you fools! None of us leaders believes, only the cursed lawless crowd!" Here we see how corrupt spiritual leaders can become so arrogant and so cold-hearted that they not only despise the Gentiles, whose worship space they had filled with animals and money-changers, but they also despise their own Jewish brothers, accusing them of being a bunch of cursed ignoramuses!

Finally, Nicodemus himself, the member of the Sanhedrin known as the Teacher of Israel, reminds the leadership of the very law they claim they know so well: "Does our Law judge a man without a hearing?" This is too much! They now have a traitor within their very midst, and so they lash out at Nicodemus: "*Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.*"

Here their prejudice and ignorance comes into full view. The prophet Jonah came from Galilee, not far from Nazareth, in fact. The truth is that the Scriptures don't say where most prophets come from. They are angry and full of hatred, and this has blinded them to their own Scriptures.

Are You Thirsty? Will You Come?

From joy and wonder, to confusion and chaos, to division and outright hostility, people respond to Jesus in different ways. What about you? Are you thirsty? Do you feel your real need? Do you know that this prophet from Galilee is the Christ, that He is the Son of God? Do you hear His call and do you know that His words are always true? Are you thirsty? Will you come to Him for eternal life?