

OUR SAVIOR'S THIRST

by

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I can't tell you what an incredible privilege it is for me to have been asked to speak again, to fill in for Pastor Erik while he is away on the Youth Mission Trip. I know we wish them all the riches of God's blessings and safe travels for this trip.

Pastor Erik blessed me late last year by asking me to co-author the Lenten Devotionals for this year. I wish I'd have had more time to write than I actually did but to do so at all was an enormous blessing for me.

In the Providence of God, I wrote the devotionals for the fourth and fifth of Christ's seven distinct "words" from the cross. And the fifth "word" is the subject of today's message.

I have to tell you that as I first started writing the devotionals, I was a little surprised by the intensity I felt to write these two particular devotionals. A couple of weeks or so later, Bob Hoogendam pulled me aside after church and asked me if I would preach today.

Providential timing is wonderful, isn't it? So, thank you very much, Bob.

Anyway, the specific text for today's message is John 19:28-30, but I'd like us to hear the entire text in John's gospel of the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ.

Would you please stand, if you're able, to hear the reading of the Word of Almighty God?

John 19:16-37

Text read out loud

The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. Please be seated.

As I studied and prepared for today's message, I became acutely aware that something was missing. I read article after article about the physical sufferings of Christ and every one of them left me feeling profoundly dissatisfied.

It reminded me that I felt very much the same after watching Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion" several years ago. I just couldn't get over the sense that something was missing.

I read commentaries, relevant chapters in several books, listened to a few other messages, and I still felt generally dissatisfied.

But after stepping back to ponder and pray, I realized what the problem was. This entire event needs to be seen as a whole, not as a piece here and a part over there. It's the completeness of it – the whole picture.

Listen again to today's specific text:

John 19:28-30

"...and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I thirst'".

It never ceases to amaze me just how much of the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New. The gospel writers literally go out of their way to spell it out, don't they? In particular, they show us a concentration of the fulfillment of Scripture at the beginning and at the end of Jesus' life.

You'll notice, for example, that during the narratives of the incarnation, we see it stated again and again. For example:

- "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child...'"
- And: "So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: 'He will be called a Nazarene'"

And now here in John's gospel in the crucifixion narrative, he says it three times that the Scripture might be fulfilled:

- Verse 24: Jesus' clothing being divided by lot "this happened that the scripture might be fulfilled..."
- Verse 28: today's reading
- Verse 36: Jesus' death prevented the soldiers breaking His legs and used a spear in Jesus' side "these things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled"

Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus was acutely conscious of, and laser focused in His mission. Doing things that often confounded, even perplexed, His disciples because they didn't understand.

Do you remember in Mark 1, after Jesus performed many healings, He took off into the desert to be alone and to pray. When His disciples found Him they complain saying "Everyone's

looking for you". And Jesus' simple reply was that they were to go off to nearby villages "...so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." (Mark 1:35-38)

He knew exactly what He was about, what His purpose and mission was, and stood firmly against efforts to distract Him from it. Peter quickly found that out, didn't he, when he tried to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem to suffer: "get behind me Satan!" ...not exactly a riveting compliment, was it?

Along with the incarnation, the virgin birth, the wilderness temptations, the resurrection, and the ascension of Christ, the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ **was** His mission. It was by design from before the creation of the world. And He was in full control of it, including the point at which He would give up His spirit and die on the cross...

If you don't mind, I'd like us to hold that thought for a few minutes, place it on "pause" while we step back and just take a walk through the events that took place from the Garden of Gethsemane up until Jesus died.

It's not a pretty picture, but if you'll bear with me, let's join the pieces of the picture together.

Jesus took three of His disciples with Him to the Garden of Gethsemane, specifically to pray while He went off by Himself to pray. Three times, we are told, Jesus went off to pray. You know the story – He pleaded with God to take away the cup, but if not, then "Thy will be done". In Luke's gospel, he tells us that Jesus prayed so earnestly that His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

Let's consider that for just a moment. As Christians, we believe Jesus was God incarnate. In His person, He had a fully divine nature and a fully human nature. Complicated and mysterious to be sure, but as Christians we accept it as theologically sound and true based on the teaching of the Bible. It's not the point of this message to elaborate on that, just to mention it as integral to really understanding this text.

In His human nature, Jesus ate, drank, felt physical pain, cried...and bled. And here we have Jesus experiencing emotional anguish so severe that it caused His body to have a reaction few others ever experience. It's actually a rare medical phenomenon called "hematidrosis" in which capillaries in the sweat glands burst and the sweat becomes bloody. The skin also becomes very tender to the touch.

It's the beginning of Jesus' physical suffering before He was crucified and died.

But the bigger picture is "why"? Why was His emotional anguish so severe?

Jesus had had perfect intimacy with the Father – throughout eternity in His divine nature and for 30 plus years in His human nature. His fellowship with the Father was about to be broken. And as our divinely appointed Scapegoat, in His sinless human nature, He was about to take on humanity's sin and come face-to-face with the curse of God.

That is, He knew He was about to experience the full wrath of Almighty God in judgment against sin – and it terrified Him. I believe this was the greatest temptation Jesus ever faced. He knew what was coming. The Bible speaks several times in the Old Testament (e.g. Isaiah 51) and again in the book of Revelation (Ch 14) about the cup of divine wrath, and it's this cup He wanted removed.

Jesus knew exactly what it was, and in His humanity, He didn't want to face it. But to fulfill His mission, He was willing – “Not my will, but thine be done”!

In the book of Hebrews, chapter 12, we are told:

“...for the joy set before Him, He endured the cross”

He was looking past the events of the cross wasn't He? Isn't this what the angel who attended Him in the Garden was doing? Giving Him a renewed vision of what was coming after the cross at that moment in time when He was so completely focused on the cup of divine wrath? It wasn't sin on His part. At that moment, in His humanity, He was focused entirely on the cup and needed to be strengthened.

Just as we need to be whenever we are tempted.

We read in Hebrews 12:4

“In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood”.

Jesus did though, didn't He? He resisted the temptation to sin with every fiber of His being – even to the point of shedding His blood...literally. And He succeeded: He was tempted in every way we are, but was without sin.

Back to the story...

After being betrayed by Judas, He was summarily hauled before Caiaphas, the high priest; before the Chief Priests and the Sanhedrin; before King Herod; and before Pontius Pilate. He was physically assaulted and insulted. And then, as things escalated, Pilate agreed to have Jesus crucified.

First, though, Pilate handed Jesus over to the soldiers for Him to be flogged. After which, the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head. They then put a staff in His hands, clothed Him in a purple robe, and mocked Him saying: “Hail, King of the Jews”. Then they proceeded to spit on Him and beat Him over the head again and again. After this, they took off the robe, and led Him away to be crucified.

Before looking at the actual crucifixion, we need to consider the serious impact of Jesus’ flogging.

The scourger or flogger used an instrument called a flagrum. It was made of several leather straps with lead balls tied to the ends and often had bone fragments tied into the leather. It was an instrument of unbelievably cruel torture. Each whipping would tear into the flesh, ripping some away. Again and again. And so blood loss was severe.

In fact, it was known that criminals who were first severely flogged didn’t last very long after being crucified, so by restricting the number of blows in the flogging, the length of time on the cross could be extended.

After the soldiers put a purple robe on Jesus, His blood would have soaked into the fabric and clotted. Can you imagine the pain He must have felt when it was pulled off, opening up the wounds again as the bleeding started afresh?

It was standard practice for the victim to carry the crossbeam – which weighed about 75-110 pounds – to the place of his crucifixion while the vertical post was already in place. He would have had his hands tied or nailed to the crossbeam and then the victim and crossbeam together were lifted up and placed on the vertical post. After this, the feet would be nailed together on a foot rest located on the front of the vertical post or nailed individually through the heels into the side of it.

For this reason, the actual shape of the cross was more of a letter T – called a “Tau” cross – rather than the Latin crucifix we are so familiar with. The criminal would then have a notice nailed above his head announcing to the world what crimes he was guilty of.

Jesus’ criminal notice read: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”

What’s amazing is that the amount of actual blood loss due to the act of crucifixion was actually pretty small. It was a method of prolonged torture intended to humiliate, agonize, and ultimately kill the victim.

But the sheer agony of it was indescribable. It was – well – excruciating. Fascinating, isn't it – a word we use today to describe agonizing pain, "excruciating", gets its root from the word "cross".

A couple of months ago, I had a root canal that got infected and caused an abscess in the bone of my upper jaw. Unbelievably painful to me at the time, even when numbed down with modern medications.

But nothing even remotely close to the truly excruciating pain Jesus felt during His flogging and crucifixion.

The cause of death of the crucified victim was usually suffocation. The position of the person on the cross made passive breathing impossible. Inhaling wasn't the problem – exhaling was. The chest was expanded by the arms pulling the chest wide, so taking a breath in was easy.

Breathing out, though, required the victim to push the body up with the legs in order to shrink the size of the chest cavity and exhale. So his entire body weight would push down against the nail in his feet. And to top that off, the flogged skin would rub up and down the rough wood of the cross.

I don't think any one of us can possibly imagine how painful that would have been.

But without doing this, the victim would suffocate to death. Which is why when the Jews wanted to hasten the death of Jesus and the criminals next to Him, they asked that the soldiers break their legs. With broken legs, they wouldn't be able to push up and exhale and so would quickly suffocate.

By the time Jesus was nailed to the cross, He had been brutally flogged, cruelly beaten and was wearing a crown of thorns that dug deeply into His scalp. He was exhausted, had had a night without sleep, was already experiencing an incredible amount physical pain, and was severely dehydrated from loss of blood.

In fact, Jesus had been so severely flogged; He didn't have the physical strength to carry the crossbeam of His cross out of the city to crucifixion site at Golgotha. So Simon of Cyrene was called on to help Him carry it.

After being nailed to the cross, Jesus hung on it for 6 hours. He was crucified at the 3rd hour – 9:00am – and hung in that state as a humiliated spectacle in the sight of all the people. Then at the 6th hour – noon – God turned out the lights and Jesus began bearing the wrath of God against sin and at the 9th hour – 3:00pm, Jesus cried out "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me"?

As the lights come back on, and the debt we owe has been paid in full, Jesus knows that all was now complete. And so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, He says:

“I thirst”

As the Servant of Lord, He had fulfilled His mission. He knows Scripture better than any of ever will – He IS the Word and the Scripture is as natural to Him as breathing.

And while John doesn't tell us specifically what Scripture is being fulfilled, there are at least a couple of them that are plainly obvious – Psalm 22 and 69 in particular.

But there's very likely a reflection back on His High Priestly prayer from the Upper Room the previous evening:

“I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do”.
...v 4, John 17

In Psalm 22:14-15, we read:

I am poured out like water,
And all my joints are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
It has melted away within me.
My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
And my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
You lay me in the dust of death.

And in Psalm 69:21 ...

They put gall in my food
and gave me vinegar for my thirst.

And that's precisely what they gave Him – wine vinegar.

It was sour wine that had turned to vinegar and was used by the soldiers to quench their personal thirst in the grueling heat of the day. It was called “posca”, made by diluting cheap sour wine vinegar with water. It had no alcohol in it; it was considered more thirst quenching than water alone; it killed harmful bacteria in the water; it made bad water taste better; and it actually helped to prevent scurvy. All over the Roman Empire, posca was the soldier's drink of choice.

Jesus says “I’m thirsty” and a soldier – in a moment of compassion – gives Him a drink from his personal supply.

John tells us pointedly that the drink Jesus received was given to him from a sponge on the stalk of the hyssop plant. He’s clearly pointing us back to well-known Old Testament story of the night before the Israelite’s Exodus from Egypt, isn’t he?

The Israelites in Egypt were instructed by God to use hyssop and dip it in the blood of the slain lamb and then sprinkle the blood over their door posts so that the Angel of Death would pass over them and not judge them – hence “Passover”.

And now we see the ultimate Sacrificial Lamb giving up His life, spilling His own blood, and thus truly fulfilling the meaning of Passover – for all who put their personal trust and faith in Him, and in Him alone, will have the wrath of God pass over them.

Those who did not have the blood of the lamb on the doorpost were subject to the Angel of Death; likewise, those who refuse to put their faith in Christ will have to deal with the wrath of God that is to come.

Sobering, isn’t it?

So we see in Jesus’ fifth “word” from the cross a fulfillment of Scripture.

I’m convinced a second reason He took the drink was because He was about to shout out His declaration of victory: “It is finished”! It wasn’t going to be a quiet mumble – it was a deliberate victory cry followed by His giving up His spirit...in complete control to the end. But that’s next week’s sermon...

But with a level of physical dehydration reaching staggering proportions – with His tongue literally sticking to the roof of His mouth, He knew He needed a small drink to enable His body to make that victory cry. It wasn’t intended to rehydrate His dying body.

So we see that Jesus’ thirst, first of all on the physical level, is really indicative that His body was dying. Secondly, we see it’s a fulfillment of the Scripture. But there’s also a third and much more significant meaning to His thirst – His spiritual thirst.

Remember that before the crucifixion, Jesus had had perfect communion with the Father. His was a relationship with the Father like none other. And it was that relationship that was broken while He took on the divine curse against sin.

And so the spiritual thirst of Christ on the cross was profound and very real.

The verb “thirst” is found 5 times in John’s gospel in addition to its use here from the cross. And all five refer to spiritual thirst. Three of them are found in Jesus’ discussion with the woman at the well. You know the story – Jesus offers Himself to her as the One Who can give her living water to drink:

“...whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” ...Jn 4:14

Then in John 6:35, Jesus declared:

“I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” ...v 35

And again in John 7:37-38, Jesus says:

“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from him.”

And in verse 39: “By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.”

It’s not difficult to see – is it? – that these are metaphors for the spiritual condition of the soul.

A spiritual craving for God. A longing that operates deep within the heart of every human being created in the image of God.

St. Augustine said it well, didn’t he?

“You have made us for yourself and our hearts find no rest until they find it in You.”

Unfortunately, we’re all masters at creating idols for ourselves aren’t we? We all have a “god-void” in our souls and are driven to have that void filled. It’s why we hunger and thirst after all kinds of things in this passing world:

- Material prosperity
- Power, popularity or position
- Sex or other physical passions
- And so on...

Every single one of us has something that we place in priority before God. It's the sin that so easily entangles or ensnares us...the thing in our lives that's really amounts to nothing more than a broken cistern that cannot hold water.

But only God can truly satisfy the deepest longings of our souls, and anything other than the living God simply will not do and will never satisfy.

That's what Jesus was thirsting for: a restoration of His perfect communion with the Father. After spending His entire life in perfect communion with the Father except for the previous three hours, He wanted it back more than anything.

We see the nature of this thirst vividly described in the psalms, don't we?

Psalm 63:1

“O God, you are my God
Earnestly I seek you;
My soul thirsts for you,
My body longs for you,
In a dry and weary land
Where there is no water.”

Psalm 42:1-2

“As the deer pants for streams of water,
So my soul pants for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God,
When can I go and meet with God”

Psalm 143:6

“I spread out my hands to you;
My soul thirsts for you like a parched land.”

Jesus' physical thirst is beyond question, but surely this is the deeper spiritual thirst Jesus was experiencing from the cross. A soul thirst to a degree that none of us have ever experienced.

But we have to ask: is this really the language of our souls?

My soul thirsts for you...my body longs for you, in a dry a weary land where nothing else satisfies.

As a deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God...

We see it in our hymns as well, don't we...

"O for a closer walk with Thee".

"O for a thousand tongues to sing."

That's not a thousand people – it's a thousand tongues that I may sing the praises of God.

Again, is that truly the language of **our** souls? Especially on an ongoing and moment-by-moment basis? Beyond the occasional mountain top experience, that is, where we may feel particularly close to God. But what about in a dry and weary land where there is no water, when life is falling apart all around us?

The Psalmist's cry was that when life is falling apart, He wanted the living God. And that's precisely what Jesus wanted when He said "I thirst"...my soul thirsts for You, my body longs for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

We need to see, though, that while genuine physical thirst is something we should want to avoid, spiritual thirst is a blessing we should all greatly desire. Indeed, Jesus pronounces His blessing on all those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, doesn't He? (Matthew 5:6)

Too many Christians, I fear, know all too little of genuine spiritual thirst because they deprive themselves of the bread of life.

We know this experientially, don't we? When we want to lose weight, we cut back on how much we eat and our appetite for food shrinks so that we no longer want to eat as much as we did previously. And the opposite is true – when we continually eat more, our appetite grows.

And it's the same when we deprive ourselves of feasting on the Word of God and communing with God in prayer – we find our appetite for God shrinks.

So if we genuinely want to grow our appetite for God, we need to feed regularly and deeply on the living Word and commune with Him in prayer.

It's not magic. It's a discipline. But that's what disciples do.

I'll never forget that during my years of commuting to Seattle and back, I'd be listening to the news, or to novels, to talk-radio, or sometimes to nothing. None of it satisfied.

But when I came back to listening to the Bible on tape, various theology conference messages, and sermons, it wasn't long and a hunger and thirst for more of it just gushed up from within.

I'd starved myself except for coming to church once a week and then I couldn't get enough. My appetite and thirst for the things of God grew and continues to grow. Thanks be to God!

To the people, Jesus said – and still says – “if anyone is thirsty, let him come to me...and streams of living water will flow from within him”

He also says:

“Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”
Mt 11:28-30

Come to Him. Believe on Him. For the first time, or for the thousandth. And streams of living water – the Holy Spirit – will produce a deep and blessed thirst for God that He really will satisfy.

Just as God promised Abram thousands of years ago:

“Do not be afraid Abram.
I am your shield,
Your very great reward” Gen 15:1

God Himself IS our very great reward.

And that's why Jesus died – to bring us to God.

He suffered a level of physical agony that is truly beyond description; it was excruciating. He endured the wrath of God against our sin and was separated from the Father while under the curse. And He willingly gave up His life as the ultimate Sacrificial Lamb so we could be blessed.

Not just to forgive our sin, not just to pay our debt – but to bring us to God. Paying our debt and forgiving our sin was the means to the end, not the end in themselves.

And that was the joy that was set before Him so He could endure the cross – to bring glory to God by bringing us to Him.

To God alone be all the glory. Amen.

Let's pray:

Our Father,
Thank You for all of Your blessings.
Thank You for Your Word.
And thank You for sending Your Son
 to take Your wrath that we so richly deserve
Thank You for forgiving us of our sin,
 for paying that debt that we can never repay.
So that we can be with You throughout all eternity.
Please, Lord, give each one of us a soul thirst for You
 that You alone can – and will – satisfy.
To You be all the glory.
Amen.