

IF ANYONE THIRSTS

John 7:37-39

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On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink." (Jn. 7:37).

In the Bible, the week is a most important unit of time. God created the world in seven days, and God has given us the week as the basic structure for our lives, with six days for work and one day for rest. Weeks are also important in John's account of Jesus' life and ministry. Chapters 1 and 2 presented the dramatic first week of Jesus' ministry, beginning with John the Baptist's testimony and concluding with the miracle at the wedding of Cana. At the end of John's Gospel is the week of Christ's Passion, culminating with the cross and resurrection.

Beginning in chapter 7, John recounts another important week in Jesus' ministry, his final celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast marked the end of the harvest season and was regarded as the Jews' chief festival. This occasion, along with its aftermath, provides the setting for the important events of chapters seven through nine, and probably the first half of chapter ten. Perhaps most dramatic was an event recorded only briefly by John: "On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink'" (Jn. 7:37).

A GREAT CLAIM

When John refers to "the last day of the feast, the great day," he probably means the eighth day, the special Sunday sabbath after the feast, established by Leviticus 23:36 as a "holy convocation" and "solemn assembly."

This places Jesus' action on the first day of the week, the day that fits his theme of the coming Holy Spirit. The coming of the Spirit is tied to the resurrection, which occurred on Sunday, as did the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost. We may see these three events – all of which took place during the three great feasts of Jesus' last year – as linked in a sequence. On the eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit, on the eighth day of the Feast of Passover, his resurrection inaugurated the age of the Spirit, and on the eighth day of the Feast of Pentecost, Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on his church. This is why Christians worship not on the seventh day but on first day of the week. We worship and live not in the old seven days but in the first day of the New Testament Sabbath that fulfills the hope of the Old Testament feasts.

During the Feast of Tabernacles, the crowds assembled in the temple court for a daily ritual. The priests processed from the nearby pool of Siloam, bearing a golden flagon filled with water, their arrival sounded by the blast of trumpets. Once at the temple, the priests marched around the altar as the temple choir sang the *Hallel* (Psalms 113-118). At the conclusion, all the men in the crowd took up a sheaf in the right hand and a piece of fruit in the left – signifying the gathered harvest – and cried out “Give thanks to the LORD!” three times. At this moment, the water was poured by the priests upon the altar.

This ceremony made three points. First, it recalled the exodus, when God provided for Israel by making water flow from a rock. Secondly, the ritual thanked God for the harvest and petitioned him for abundant rains in the year to come. Lastly, the ritual looked forward to the coming age of the Messiah, recalling Isaiah's promise, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (Isa. 12:3).

By the eighth day, the rituals were over. The pilgrims dismantled the booths in which they had stayed during the feast and enjoyed a day of psalm singing. It was on this day, as the festival rites faded into memory, that Jesus stood forward to proclaim their true meaning. “If anyone thirsts,” he cried, “let him come to me and drink” (Jn. 7:37).

John's Gospel is famous for Jesus' many “I am” sayings. During the previous Passover, we heard him teach, “I am the bread of life” (Jn. 6:35). In John 8:12, Jesus adds another great claim: “I am the light of

the world” (Jn. 8:12). Although John 7:37 does not employ the “I am” formula, we should understand this as another of Jesus’ great claims. With the memory of the temple ritual close to people’s minds, he declared “that He is the true fountain of life, the supplier of all spiritual necessities, the reliever of all spiritual wants.”¹

A GREAT INVITATION

As with all of his “I am” sayings, Jesus followed this great claim with a great invitation: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink” (Jn. 7:37). The very fact that Jesus would give an invitation is remarkable. Jesus had come to a city that was largely against him, the leaders of which were known to be seeking his life. But still he rises in the midst of the people, and John tells us that he cried out from the passion of his soul. Charles Spurgeon writes, “Whereas his custom was to sit and teach the people who gathered in a ring around him, on this closing day he now sought a prominent place... and there he stood, conspicuous before them all... Behold, he stands and pleads!... I think I see the Master’s face beaming with holy affection, and his eyes streaming with tears, as he pleads as for his life with the throng which is so soon to melt away.”²

This invitation – one of the great ones in the Bible – is directed to particular persons. Jesus began, “If anyone thirsts.” Thirst is the most powerful of all human sensations of need. The pain of hunger may be endured, but the pain of thirst is a desperate one.

Once in my Army days, I was commanding a reconnaissance unit in a scalding desert, with temperatures in excess of 130 degrees. We were operating far forward of our own lines, which made it hard to get supplies. On one occasion our resupply did not arrive and we went without water for most of a day. I attempted to radio for help, but my tongue was so swollen that my speech could not be understood. Fortunately, one of my enterprising sergeants was returning from having his vehicle repaired in the rear areas. He overheard my radio call, raced over to a supply unit, hitched a “water buffalo” to the back of his tank, and within a couple of hours brought our desperately

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:45.

² Charles H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 63 vols. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1973), 31:674.

needed relief, possibly saving our lives. It is to needs of this severity that Jesus spoke, when he cried, “If anyone thirsts.”

According to Spurgeon, thirst “is the absence of a necessary.” “Thirst is a painful need... an emptiness... Thirst is conscious need, conscious to a painful degree... a salutary warning that something very important is wanted.”³ Jesus was of course speaking of a thirst of the soul. He calls to those deeply conscious of their need to be cleansed of sin, be renewed in spirit, and find acceptance with God. Do you thirst in this way? Then Jesus’ invitation is addressed to you.

Jesus invites all who thirst: “let him come to me and drink.” What is this but an offer to meet your need and satisfy what you lack and desire? Anyone who has truly been thirsty has nothing more pressing upon his mind than to drink. And this is what Jesus offers to the parched souls of this world. Jesus sets himself forth as the one and only fountain who can satisfy our great need. “If anyone thirsts,” he cries, “let him come to me and drink.”

This is what Christianity offers to this world: if anyone is thirsty, come and drink. Ryle points out: “The saints of God in every age have been men and women who drank of this fountain by faith and were relieved. They felt their guilt and emptiness, and thirsted for deliverance. They heard of a full supply of pardon, mercy, and grace in Christ crucified for all penitent believers. They believed the good news and acted upon it.”⁴ Jesus promises to all who thirst: “Let him freely take from Me everything that his soul wants, -- mercy, grace, pardon, peace, strength. I am the Fountain of Life.”⁵

This raises an all-important question: How might a thirsty soul receive this drink that Jesus offers? Is there some quest to perform? Must we accumulate a certain number of good deeds? Can a check written out to the church gain entrance? Is there some ritual to perform? The answer is No! Jesus puts it simply – and here is the heart of his gospel – “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me.”

Jesus means that we must believe in him; we come to him not with our feet but with our faith. Just as we dip into a fountain with a cup,

³ Ibid., 31:678.

⁴ Ryle, 2:46.

⁵ Ibid., 2:51.

our faith receives the grace of Christ and we drink it in our souls. Coming to Jesus means believing his claim to be the only Savior of the world; it means receiving him as our own Savior and trusting ourselves to his care. It means bringing our sins to his cross, where his blood was shed for forgiveness. And it means walking with him, our thirsty souls drinking from the salvation he daily gives, receiving peace and purity and power.

But faith is not just receiving; it is yielding to Jesus. This is ably depicted in C.S. Lewis's children's novel *The Silver Chair*. The book's heroine, Jill, sees a lion and flees into a deep forest. She is soon worn out and becomes so thirsty she thinks herself about to die. Just then, she hears the gurgling of a brook in the distance and staggers towards it. But as she draws near to the water, she sees the lion crouched before it. "If you are thirsty," says the lion, "come and drink." Jill does not move. "Are you not thirsty?" the Lion asks. "I'm dying of thirst," said Jill. "Then drink," said the Lion. "May I – could I – would you mind going away while I do?" said Jill. The Lion answered with a low growl, and Jill realized that he would not move away.

"Will you promise not to – do anything to me, if I do come?" said Jill. "I make no promise," said the Lion. Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer. . . "I daren't come and drink," said Jill. "Then you will die of thirst," said the Lion. "Oh dear!" said Jill, coming another step nearer. "I suppose I must go and look for another stream then." "There is no other stream," said the Lion.

Lewis makes a vital point. Jesus invites you to come, but only on his terms. You must come yielding yourself to him, taking him not only as Savior but also as Lord. Jesus does not promise not to do anything to you! Jesus is not a tame lion, and the petty priorities of our lives are not safe in his hands. Jesus intends to revolutionize our lives with the priorities of his holy kingdom. But how loving and good he is! When finally Jill knelt down and drank from the Lion's waters, she found "it was the coldest, most refreshing water she had ever tasted."⁶ So it is with the Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory and Lion of Judah.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: Harper Collins, 1953), 21-23.

A GREAT PROMISE

What does Jesus intend for those who drink from his fountain of life? The answer is found in John 7:38, which adds a great promise: “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

John is the most theological of the Gospel writers; wanting us to grasp Jesus’ meaning, he adds: “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” (Jn. 7:39).

Jesus was speaking of his sending the Holy Spirit upon his followers as the result of his glorification. This reminds us that the cross was not the end of Jesus’ work. Likewise, the forgiveness of our sins and our justification before God is not end of our salvation; in an important sense, our forgiveness is a means to a greater end, just as the cross was followed by Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus saves us *from* our sins and *to* eternal life with God. The goal of our salvation is that God should come to live in us by his Spirit as we live to his glory forever.

In John’s Gospel, the time of Jesus’ glorification is that of his cross. When Jesus entered Jerusalem for his final time to take up the cross, he exclaimed, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (Jn. 12:23). When Judas departed the Last Supper to betray him, Jesus said: “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him” (Jn. 13:31). So it is out of his own death that Jesus supplies the Holy Spirit. This is why John records that one of the soldiers pierced the side of Jesus’ dead body “and at once there came out blood and water” (Jn. 19:34). The blood is the sacrifice for our sin, and the water is the sign of the Spirit who flows from Jesus’ blessed wounds.

So when John says that the Spirit had not yet been given because Jesus had not yet been glorified, he has the cross in mind. It is after our sins have been put away that the life of God can enter into our souls. Spiritual renewal can only occur after we have confessed our sins and brought them to the cross to be forgiven.

What happens when we believe in Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit? Perhaps the greatest description of the indwelling Holy Spirit is the one given by Jesus here: “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture

has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (Jn. 7:38). As a river flows to bring life and refreshment to the weary land, so the Holy Spirit flows in the believer’s life, to satisfy and refresh the needy soul. The Holy Spirit is not a sip of medicine we drink just once, but a river of living water that Christ plants within us, a bestower of blessings that have no end.

Notice that Jesus speaks in the plural – “rivers” of living water. He offers an abundance of blessings to meet our every spiritual need.

Jesus offers us *peace* for the soul. What peace it is to know that your sins are all forgiven, that the debt of your guilt has been paid once for all by the blood of Christ! What peace there is in knowing Jesus’ shepherding care! When the disciples’ boat was beset by the storm, Jesus commanded the winds and the waves, “Peace, be still!” (Mk. 4:39). He gives peace to our hearts when we call on him in prayer.

Jesus also gives *purity* to those who drink from him. How wearied we are with the corruption of our sinful nature. We are beset with impure thoughts, unclean lips, and a heart defiled with corruption. But Jesus causes a river to flow within us to cleanse our minds and hearts with the holiness of his Spirit.

What else does the Spirit bring? There is a river of *growth* and *fruitfulness*, as the Spirit makes God’s Word come alive in our hearts. This is why a thirst for God’s Word is one of the clearest signs of the Spirit’s presence. Psalm 1 says of the man who drinks by faith from the water of God’s Word: “He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields it fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers” (Ps. 1:3).

Another river brings *power* to endure under trials. Spurgeon writes, “Find thy strength to stand, and thine ability to endure, in him alone. If any man thirst for anything that is really desirable, let him come to Jesus, in whom all right desires are provided for. All for sinners and all for saints will be found in Jesus our Lord, who is all in all.”⁷

⁷ Spurgeon, 31:680.

A GREAT PURPOSE

Those who drink from Jesus find a fountain of blessing not merely for themselves, but also for others. We become springs of life for the world. Notice that it is not merely *in* our hearts, but Jesus says, “Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” (Jn. 7:38).

Jesus states that this will happen “as the Scripture has said.” Scholars are uncertain about his reference. One possibility is Isaiah 58:11: “You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.” This is what Jesus wants for us: as we are well watered by him, we serve as a spring of spiritual refreshment for others. Believers are not the source of living water, but a spring through which blessings flow from Jesus and his gospel to the world.

Another verse is even more likely, especially since it was one of the Scripture readings during the Feast of Tabernacles. Zechariah 14:8 says, “On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem.” Jerusalem, of course, has no river, so the prophet was speaking of the outflowing of the Spirit of God in the gospel. F. F. Bruce explains, “It is from no earthly Jerusalem that the living waters go forth; it is from the dwelling-place of God in lives that are consecrated to him, in believing hearts where Christ has taken up abode.”⁸

This is the story of Christians in the world. Donald Barnhouse writes that when you are filled with God’s Spirit, “people will instinctively come to you for help. In your school, in your office, in your hospital, you should so live Christ that others will approach you in their times of trouble, and then you can flow Christ to them.”⁹ Is this the influence you have in the world? If not, then drink from Christ and ask him to make you a spring of his blessing to others. If you will simply yield your life to Jesus and drink deeply from his spiritual fountain, your life will necessarily overflow with waters of life for the world.

There are two great inland seas in Palestine. One is lush and life-giving: the Sea of Galilee, near which so many of Jesus’ miracles were performed. The other is the Dead Sea, a stagnant, uninhabited

⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 182.

⁹ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Illustrating the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Fleming Revell, 1973), 111.

place surrounded by deserts, and where Jesus is never recorded as having gone. What is the difference between these two seas? Why is one alive and the other dead? The difference is that the Sea of Galilee not only receives but it gives. It receives the mountain waters from on high, and from it flows the Jordan River. But the Dead Sea only receives; no waters flow out from it. Likewise those who thrive in the Spirit are those who give what they have received, who not only drink the living waters but are a spring for the world.

THE GREAT BLESSING OF THIRST

Jesus' great invitation is extended to everyone, but only on one condition. "If anyone thirsts," he cries. The problem is that so few thirst for the life that Jesus gives. People think they will miss out on life if they come to Jesus, when the opposite is true. They do not thirst because they are filled with the dead waters of this world – its entertainments, pleasures, achievements, and petty glories. Do you thirst for more than these? What a blessing it is to have a thirst for heavenly life, a thirst that will draw you to Jesus and his living water.

Jesus stands pleading still, through the preaching of his Word today. How astonishing that he should be the one pleading, when we ought to be on our knees before him. Yet the masses ignore his call, satiated by the polluted waters of earthly pleasure, and feeling no thirst for an entrance into heaven, even as eternity races near.

What about you? If you are a stranger to Jesus, do you not feel the needs of your soul? "If anyone thirsts," Jesus says, "let him come to me and drink." And if you already know Jesus, if you have taken the cup of his forgiveness into your hands, are you coming back to him for more? Do you know the peace, the purity, the power, and the purpose that flows from him? If you still thirst, then come regularly to Jesus through his Word and through prayer. How great is the blessing of thirst for the waters which Jesus invites us to drink!

Come to the waters, whoever is thirsty
Drink from the fountain that never runs dry.
Jesus, the Living One, offers you mercy,
Life more abundant in boundless supply.¹⁰

¹⁰ James M. Boice, "Come to the Waters," *Hymns for a Modern Reformation* (Philadelphia: Tenth Presbyterian Church, 2000), no. 7.