

Spiritual Thirst

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[0 : 01] A few weeks ago, I was eating lunch with my family, and I started to feel this twinge in my side, and at first I thought it was a cramp or something, and so I didn't really pay much attention to it.

And as the afternoon progressed, I didn't want to kind of ruin the day, and so I just ignored it and pretended like it wasn't there, but it got worse and worse and worse. By about 7.30, 8 o'clock that evening, I was in absolutely excruciating pain.

And so finally, my wife said, I think that you need to go to the hospital, but where we were at the time, the nearest hospital was a 45-minute drive away, so we all got in the car, and my wife and kids and I, and they drove me 45 minutes to the hospital, and I went into the ER, and turns out I had a kidney stone.

I don't know how many people have ever had a kidney stone. This was my first run-in with this particular condition. I have never given birth, and that's a different sermon.

I've never given birth. I'm told that this is the closest a man can get to experiencing birth pain. I don't know if that's true, and I don't know how close it is, and I'm not here to argue that, but I will say it is hands down the worst pain I've ever experienced.

[1 : 28] I would say the outcome is not nearly as joyous, but I never, ever, ever want to experience again. And so I was very interested in what causes this and how to make sure it doesn't happen again, and it turns out that the most common culprit behind kidney stones is dehydration.

And not just talking about, you know, being dehydrated for a day or two, more of a lifestyle of dehydration, where you just sort of live week in and week out, never drinking enough water.

And you may not know it, but your body is basically constantly thirsty. You're just sort of living in this constant state of thirst, and over time, that can actually do a lot of bad things to your body, including kidney stones.

So pro tip, word to the wise, drink enough water. Keep drinking water. I was obviously thinking about that as I was reading that passage that we just read in John chapter 4, as bad as this condition was for me, and as much as I don't want to ever have to experience that again, John chapter 4 reveals to us a condition that is actually far more dangerous, far more dangerous.

Not necessarily physical thirst, but spiritual thirst. And so as we learn about this woman, we're going to learn about this condition of spiritual thirst that we live in day in and day out.

[2 : 56] It's going to show us the symptoms of spiritual thirst, how to recognize it in our lives, the underlying cause of spiritual thirst, and then the cure for spiritual thirst. So let's pray, and then we'll open God's Word together.

Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You for all of the prayers and songs, Lord, all of this language around our thirst and our need for You.

And I pray that as we open Your Word together, You would open our hearts to receive it, that we would recognize in ourselves our need for You, and that Your Word would be a way that You speak to that need.

We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen. So first of all, I want to look at the symptoms of spiritual thirst. John chapter 4 introduces us to this woman who ends up playing a very significant role in John's gospel.

For me and for probably many of us here who are familiar with the story, it's one of my favorite characters in the entire New Testament. The first thing we learn about this woman is that she's a Samaritan. And the Jews considered Samaritans to be racially impure.

[4 : 07] They had, centuries earlier, intermingled with other people groups like the Persians, and so they were considered to be half-breeds. They also had major religious differences.

They only believed in the first five books of the Old Testament. They rejected everything else. And they didn't believe that worship should happen in Jerusalem. They believed that it should happen on Mount Gerizim.

And so major religious differences, they were considered to be heretics. We also learn about this woman that she has been with at least five different men and that she's currently living with a man who's not her husband.

We'll come back to that. Third thing we learn is that she has come to gather water at the sixth hour, which according to our clock would be around noon, middle of the day.

Now, depending on who you are, you're going to key in on different aspects of this story. Some people, some people who particularly come out of a traditional, religious, moralistic society like this first century Jewish society that this is happening in, some people hearing this story are going to focus in on this woman's immorality.

[5 : 19] They're going to say, this is a story about a woman who has been immoral. She has been sexually unfaithful. She's been adulterous. She is maybe even a prostitute of some kind.

And they're going to key in on the fact that she came to get water at noon. They're going to say, well, clearly this is related to her immorality because in this culture, women would typically be the ones to gather the water and they would typically go either in the early morning or they would go in the late afternoon, early evening when it wasn't nearly as hot.

And they saw this as an opportunity to socialize because women weren't often outside of the home, nor did they have many opportunities to socialize. And so this would be one of the opportunities for the women to get together and to talk around the well.

And so the fact that this woman comes at noon is an indicator that she lives in social isolation. She's been identified in the village as a woman of ill repute. And so she has come when no one else is around to gather water at the hottest hour of the day.

All right, so some people are going to key in on those details. But there's also a social or what we might call structural dimension to this story.

[6 : 29] And other people are going to key in on that. In this culture, men controlled divorce. By and large, men were the ones who had the right to divorce their wives.

Men were the ones who decided whether or not divorce would happen. And so it's very likely that this woman's predicament is actually not entirely her fault. It could very well be that she has suffered injustice at the hands of one or more of these men.

And so some people would key in on that and say, this woman isn't necessarily immoral. She's actually a victim. She's a victim of a system that has done her an injustice. And it might be tempting to read this story and to think in either or terms.

Either she is a victim or she is immoral. Or she is a victim of a victim or a victim of a victim or a victim or a victim or a victim or a victim or a victim or a victim or a victim or a victim or what is wrong with the world.

Right? There are two sort of competing ideologies or perspectives that we use to explain things like poverty or homelessness or the breakdown of marriage and family or addiction or mass incarceration.

[7 : 40] Some people really focus on issues of immorality. And they say, well, if we really want to fix what's wrong in the world and if we really want to fix society, we need to focus on moral reform.

We need to focus on character development. We need to focus on getting people to take personal responsibility for their lives. That's the only way change is going to happen. The other camp sort of focuses in on society.

They say, well, we don't really talk much about or, you know, like to focus on things like sin and personal responsibility. Really, these are systemic and structural issues. And these people are victims of a system that is wired against them.

And what we need is not necessarily moral reform. We need social reform. We need political reform. And so in our society, that tends to be a bit of a binary. But this passage doesn't really give any indication which it might be.

In fact, I would say this passage seems to allow for both to be true, for both dimensions to actually apply. And I think that's actually much closer to our own life experience.

[8 : 48] Most people are a little bit of both, right? Most people are sinners in active ways. We've done things that we know are wrong.

There are things that we're personally responsible for. And yet many people have also been victims of circumstances outside of our control. And one of the reasons the Bible doesn't make a distinction, is it one or the other, is because the Bible actually says that both of these things are secondary, right?

Our immorality and our systemic brokenness, both of those things are actually symptoms of something far deeper. And the focus of this story is on that deeper truth.

So if personal immorality and systemic brokenness, if those are both symptoms of something, then what are they symptoms of? Well, they're symptoms of spiritual thirst.

And so we now turn our attention to that which is the focus of this passage. What we need to see here is that the way Jesus treats this woman absolutely defies expectations.

[9 : 56] Jesus is a Jewish rabbi. If you know anything about Jesus' teaching, you know that Jesus not only upheld all of the Old Testament standards for marriage and sexuality, He actually intensified them.

Jesus taught that if someone even thinks about another person lustfully, they have committed adultery. So Jesus' standards are very clear.

And normally in this society, a rabbi like Jesus, a respected teacher of the law, would never be associated with a woman like this, wouldn't even be seen near a woman like this.

And yet Jesus goes out of His way to find this woman. In fact, she is likely the reason that He came to Samaria. Most Jews traveling this way would not go by way of Samaria.

They had a different route that they would go. So the fact that He even goes to Samaria is very odd, and it's very likely that this is the reason. Moreover, Jews and Samaritans didn't speak to each other.

[11 : 02] Men and women didn't speak to each other for that matter. Even husbands and wives rarely really spoke to each other in many contexts. And yet this is the longest private conversation that we have between Jesus and anyone in the entire New Testament.

It's the longest recorded private conversation. And all throughout, He treats her with tremendous kindness and tenderness and even respect. He even asks her for a drink of water, which would have been unheard of.

So we read all of these details, and they don't make sense. And we say, well, how do we make sense of this? And the answer is because Jesus sees the heart of the issue in a way that no one else can.

Jesus sees very clearly the problem with this woman is not just immorality. It's not just a broken society. The problem is spiritual thirst. He's keying in on that.

And we see that after He asks this woman for a drink of water. He says, if you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, give me a drink, you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water.

[12 : 12] And we begin to see that the entire purpose of this encounter is not that Jesus is thirsty, although He is, it's that this woman is thirsty.

She has a much deeper kind of thirst. So what does this mean? The phrase living water takes us back to the Old Testament, and it takes us back to a passage in Jeremiah chapter 2 verse 13, where this is a place where God is stating the truth about the human condition.

God's people at this point in history are crying out, wondering what's happening to our society, why is everything breaking down? And this is a series of sermons where God preaches through Jeremiah to help people understand what is happening.

Why are things falling apart? So here He states the truth about the human condition. For my people have done two evil things. They have abandoned me, the fountain of living water, and they have dug for themselves cracked cisterns that can hold no water at all.

They're denying God and they're digging broken cracked cisterns in other places. So God designed us to draw life directly from Him because He's the source of life.

[13 : 33] We're designed to draw life directly from Him. And God is saying that the root of all evil is not just immorality. It's not just systemic brokenness. The root of all evil is the fact that we deny our need for God and that we dig our own cracked cisterns, meaning we find other ways to try to siphon off spiritual sustenance.

But this is actually saying that that's impossible because think about the difference between a fountain and a cistern. A fountain by design taps into an underground water source.

You have a fountain up here and it taps down into this underground source of water. A cistern is essentially a hole in the ground. It doesn't tap into any source of water.

A cistern is just a container. All it can do is gather water from the surface like rainwater. But this is not just a cistern. It's a cracked cistern, which is completely useless because a cracked cistern can't even hold the water that it collects.

So what does this actually look like in our lives? Well, just to give a couple of examples, one of the places that I think we're very tempted to build broken cisterns is in our relationships.

[14 : 51] Right? You can do this in a friendship. You can do this with your spouse, with the person that you're dating. You can also do this with your kids.

You can dig a broken cistern into that relationship. What that means is you take this person in your life and you begin to look to that person or to look to that relationship to satisfy you, to meet your deepest needs.

And, you know, we can do this with somebody that we're in love with. You can do this with, you know, some of us grew up with parents who looked to us for satisfaction. Some of us are tempted to do this with our kids.

This is really where I tap that sense of meaning and fulfillment in my life. Right? And the problem is when we begin to do that, it actually starts to damage the relationship because you can't really love and accept someone as they are if you're trying to siphon off satisfaction from them.

What happens is you end up criticizing them. You end up demanding perfection from them. You end up holding them to expectations they can never meet because the relationship is actually based on your need to siphon something from them that they can't actually give you.

[16 : 14] Right? Some of us have relationships right now where we have done this. And what we have to realize is that this person can't fill us up. We're expecting this person to give us things only God can give us.

Only when you let them go, only when you tear out that cistern and stop looking there for satisfaction, only then are you free to love that person with all their imperfections.

We can also do this in our work. Right? We can start to dig broken cisterns into our careers and we try to suck self-worth and fulfillment out of our jobs.

That's why some of us overwork. That's why we work all the time. That's why some of us, no matter what job we're in, you're sort of never really settled and you're always kind of thinking about making a move or some change that you might make.

You've sort of got one eye on the horizon all the time because you're not getting the satisfaction that you think that you should get out of the work that you're doing. And, you know, that's why for many of us, our emotional well-being hinges on our performance in our jobs.

[17 : 24] You know, when things are going really well and we're successful, it puffs us up. We immediately, you know, at least for a little while, start to feel really good about ourselves. Right? It never lasts because it's a cracked cistern.

But there's a little hit that we get. When we fail or when we lose our jobs, it's not just hard, but it crushes us. It demolishes us because it cuts off our source of self-worth.

Right? If those things are happening, you realize, I might have built a cracked cistern in this place in my life. Work is meant to be a way to serve God and to serve other people.

And what you find is that when you're finding satisfaction in God, instead of your work, it actually sets you free to work in a more balanced way and to remain even keeled and weather the ups and the downs of your career.

Right? So some of us have built broken cisterns in places in our lives, and that's the thing that sits under all of the havoc that we're experiencing. I read a guy named Christopher West.

[18 : 31] He talked about going back to the relationships for a second. He said the best thing that ever happened in their marriage between him and his wife is when they were sitting at a table one day, and they said, why have things improved so much in our marriage?

And they had this mutual realization. It's because I realized that you can't satisfy me. And some of us need to look at our spouse and say, you can't satisfy me. Now, that sounds like you're about to get a divorce.

That sounds like things are not going well. Right? A lot of people sitting around you are like, wow, they're really having a hard time. That could be the most freeing realization you have. You might need to look at your job and say, you can't satisfy me.

It'll set you free. So real change starts with admitting our need for God. Right? Whether your focus tends to be on moral reform or your focus tends to be on social and political reform, the deepest problem of the world is actually spiritual thirst.

It's the fact that we build cracked cisterns apart from God and try to siphon meaning and satisfaction in places that were never meant to find it.

[19 : 40] It's interesting to look at what was being written in the late 1800s in the West. If you look at kind of people's view of the world and where things were headed, there was tremendous optimism. Just before the beginning of the 20th century.

Tremendous optimism. People thought society had really moved past the need for God, that we had moved past our need for religion. With all of our advancements and our technology and our new forms of government, we were poised for this utopian 20th century.

So people were looking to the 20th century saying, there's going to be no more war, no more poverty. It's going to be a new age of man. And one of those optimists was a woman named Beatrice Webb.

She's considered to be the architect of Britain's modern welfare state. And in her diary, in around 1890, she wrote this sentence. She wrote 1890, I have staked all on the essential goodness of human nature.

I've staked all on the essential goodness of human nature. That was the belief that undergirded all of this optimism. Thirty-five years later, well into the 20th century, she's writing and she reflects back on that line in her diary.

[20 : 50] And here's what she writes. I realize how permanent are the evil impulses and evil instincts in man and how little you can count on changing them.

Like the greed for wealth or power. No amount of knowledge or science will be of any avail unless we can curb the bad impulses of the human heart.

So what does she realize? No matter how advanced we become in our philosophy, in our technology, in our politics, in our programs, as long as people are going after things like wealth or power, in other words, as long as people are building cracked cisterns, brokenness is going to remain.

And so unless you can satisfy that core problem, brokenness is going to remain. And this is why Jesus came. This is why Jesus came.

Jesus tells this woman, the water that I offer becomes a spring of water inside you, welling up to eternal life.

[21 : 56] In other words, He's saying, no more broken cisterns. You won't need them anymore. It's not just a hole in the ground. It's a fountain. It's a fountain of spiritual life inside you that flows directly from the source, God Himself.

And it's funny. At first, the woman doesn't understand what He's talking about. You know, and it's very funny if you read it and you think about what she says. You know, when He first mentions living water, she says, well, that sounds great, but how are you going to draw it up?

And I would love to have that water because then I wouldn't need to come back every day. And, you know, and hump it up this hill. That would be really nice. And she totally misunderstands what He's saying. And so then what does Jesus do?

She's curious about the water. Her interest is piqued. And then Jesus brings up the subject of the men in her life. Now, why would He do that? Is He shaming her?

Now, there's no hint of condemnation in the way that He says it. Jesus is gently exposing that truth in her life the way a skilled surgeon might gently expose a wound that has become infected.

[23 : 11] He's gently uncovering this infected wound because it very much needs to be cleaned. And she begins to realize that He's talking about much more than water.

It's at that point that she begins to realize He's talking about spiritual renewal. He's talking about a deep kind of healing. That's why she asks about one of the biggest differences between the Jews and the Samaritans, right?

She says, oh, you're talking about spiritual healing, spiritual renewal. Well, then we really need to resolve this. Where should we worship? All right, if you're talking about me reconnecting with God, then which is it?

Is it Jerusalem or is it Mount Gerizim? Which one? And what Jesus says is amazing. He says, listen, very, very soon, none of that's going to matter anymore.

None of it's going to matter. You're not going to have to go to a temple. You're not going to have to go to a mountain. You're not going to have to go to any place to meet God.

[24 : 16] People are going to be able to worship God wherever they are because they're going to worship Him in spirit and truth. He's saying not only are people going to worship according to the truth that God has revealed, but the day is coming when God's Spirit will be inside them, empowering their worship, connecting them directly to God wherever they are.

So wherever you are in the world, God's Spirit is in you. And so whenever you lift your hands in worship, that worship is empowered by God's very presence in you.

And this really is the answer to the spiritual thirst of the world. It is worshiping God in spirit and truth, worshiping God according to His truth, worshiping God empowered by His presence.

And she essentially says only the Messiah could offer something like this. And Jesus says, I who speak to you am He.

And by the way, I said at the beginning that this woman ends up playing a very significant role in the life of or in the story of John's gospel. This is it. This is the first time in John's gospel that Jesus clearly proclaims that He is the Messiah.

[25 : 39] He's been around people like Nicodemus and all of these people who should have recognized Him. No, nobody gets what this woman gets. This Samaritan woman has the honor of being the first person that Jesus fully discloses His identity and His mission to her.

It's this great honor that He bestows on her. And what we're meant to see from this, I believe, is that for all of us who desire renewal, for all of us who labor for renewal, whether it's renewal in our own lives, renewal in our relationships, in our marriages, in our friendships, in our families, or renewal on a more social and political level, people who work for renewal in the city or all around the world, whatever kind of renewal you are laboring for, whatever you're seeking, worship is ground zero for renewal.

Worship is ground zero for renewal. Jesus did not come merely to give a new standard of morality to live by, nor did Jesus come merely to overturn unjust social structures.

Jesus came, as He makes clear here, to satisfy spiritual thirst, to offer living water. And what this shows us is that by faith in Him, we can once again tap into that source of spiritual life, God Himself.

No more broken cisterns. And what we find is that every time we gather for worship, every time we turn our hearts to worship in our homes or where we work, every time we do that, every time we seek to worship God in spirit and truth, we are pulling away from those cracked cisterns, where we're licking at the puddles in the dust, in the mud, on the ground, and we're drinking from the fountain.

[27 : 29] And the thing about our hearts is we need to do that again, and again, and again. We need to be reminded again, and again, and again, that there's no life to be found in this cracked hole in the ground, that we have to come to the fountain again, and again, and again.

But that's the thing that over time begins to set us free. And here's what we then see. When our worship is fueled by God's very presence, His living and active spirit within us, and when our worship is anchored by God's truth, on the one hand, that actually gives us the resources we need for personal renewal and change, right?

It gives us the resources that we need to admit our sin, to take responsibility for the things that we need to own in our lives, to be honest about ways that we are at fault, to strive for change in ourselves.

And it also compels us to go out into the world to do the work of renewal, to do the work of evangelism, and mercy, and justice, because this living water is meant for the healing of the nations.

We have this beautiful image that was evoked in some of our singing and praying earlier, this image that we have in the book of Revelation, of God's great new creation city, the new Jerusalem, and this river of living water, right, flowing in that city, this living water of God's spirit.

[28 : 56] And that's what we're meant to see here and now, that from the church, that out of the church, we flow like that river, bringing living water to the nations.

And that's exactly what we see with this woman. It's amazing. She gets this taste of life that Jesus offers, and the first thing she does is to go back to her town and to tell everybody she knows about Jesus.

It's the first thing that she does. And, you know, as we are celebrating the first, or the one-year anniversary of the home campaign, and so it's been a good opportunity for us to come back to the reasons why this matters to us.

And I read this story, and I think, well, this is what I would desire for that space that we are seeking. This well, this well that Jacob dug becomes a place where this woman has an opportunity to meet Jesus.

She comes seeking one thing, and she ends up leaving with something much more precious and valuable. And that's how I would think about the kind of home we want in the city, a place where people can come and meet Jesus, the living water, right?

[30 : 15] A place from which the living water can flow into the neighborhoods and streets of the city and through it the world. A place where people can have the courage to forego the cracked cisterns in their lives and to learn what it means to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for this living water that we all so desperately need. And I think about myself so many times, Lord, on my face, trying to siphon moisture out of the sand, Lord, and your fountain is on offer.

And I pray, Lord, I pray that we would, this morning, have eyes to see where we have dug cisterns, that we would have the courage to let them go, and that we would turn and embrace and drink deeply from the water that you offer.

We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen.