

Spiritual Hunger (Harvest)

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[0 : 0 0] There's an old saying that the Bible is not a human book about God. It's God's book about what it is to be human.

One of the reasons why I find the Bible in general, and the words of Jesus in particular, so compelling, has to do with the way in which they describe and put their finger on what it is to be a human being.

I think that's exemplified here in the words of Jesus, as he says something that is as simple as it is profound, and it is a universal truth.

As human beings, we are spiritually hungry. There is something within us that is restless.

Something within us that is not satisfied, that is not content, that is hungry, and that can only be met by Jesus himself, the bread of life.

[1 : 2 0] The thing is, is that when we get hungry, we eat food, but then eventually we become hungry again. Confession time.

I absolutely love Indian food. That's not the confession bit. The confession bit is that you put me at a table where there is Indian food set out, whether that's a restaurant or whether that's a takeaway.

I won't leave that table until it's gone. I'm that bloke at the end of the meal when everybody else is sat back and they cannot possibly eat anymore. I can't bear to leave the table and I will reach over and say, pointing out the last, I don't know, remaining boona or half onion barji, you're going to finish that.

And it seems that no matter how many times this happens, I don't learn from that experience that there's a reason why everybody else has stopped eating. And the times that I've lost count of the times when I've insisted that I will clear the last bit and then minutes later I'm regretting what I've done.

And it's painful. And then try and get up from the table and within moments realising how silly I have become. And it's at those moments when we have eaten to the point where we are literally about to burst, where it's painful, it seems impossible to imagine ever being hungry again.

[3 : 0 5] Yet we are. And that is a universal principle that we may eat, no matter how much we may fill ourselves, eventually hunger returns.

When Jesus refers to himself as the bread of life, he is putting his finger on something that is fundamentally true of what it is to be a human being.

He is not talking about the physical sense of hunger that I've just described, but that deep spiritual yearning to be satisfied.

You see, there is a God-shaped hole in every human heart. And we can try and fill that God-shaped hole with all sorts of things other than God.

And for a while we might feel that we've actually satisfied ourselves, but sooner or later that spiritual hunger will re-manifest itself.

[4 : 14] The thing is, is that we're surrounded by the message all the time, that however much you've got, you need more. In some ways our culture is a culture of continual dissatisfaction.

Advertising depends on making us feel unsatisfied. If only you have this thing that you currently haven't got, then you will be satisfied. But of course the moment comes when we actually feel satisfied, then anybody trying to advertise can no longer advertise.

So therefore we're hit with the message all of the time. That old saying, the grass is greener on the other side. I read about somebody that tried to literally test out why that was.

They could never understand why their next door neighbour's lawn always looked better than theirs. It always somehow looked healthier, brighter, less weeds. And one day they couldn't hold back anymore.

So they actually managed to sneak in an invitation next door. They went round for coffee. And whilst they were sat in the garden, their next door neighbour popped inside of the kitchen to get something.

[5 : 29] So at that point, they went and had a closer look at the lawn. They think, what is going on here? And actually couldn't see anything that special about it at all. They then looked over the fence back to their own garden and thought, hang on a second, my grass looks so much better than theirs.

And they couldn't work out why this was. So they wrote into this magazine, I can't remember which one it was, to this columnist and explained the problem. And the columnist said this, grass always looks greener on the other side because you're not close enough to see the dirt and the imperfections.

You see, the reality is, the closer we get to anything, and indeed anyone, then the closer we become to those imperfections.

And we can try to fill our lives with all sorts of things, but that God-shaped hole will always remain. And whilst we may need to be satisfied in other areas of our lives, none of them will ever substitute that one thing that we need.

You know, we can say that of ambition. If only I can accomplish this or that or whatever, then that'll be it. It's a story about somebody who, all his life, he wanted to be a pilot, wanted to fly planes.

[6 : 59] Eventually, he grew up, he was able to realise that dream. He trains to be a pilot. And after he'd been a pilot for about 10 years, he's flying a plane over this, it was a regular trip that he made across particular mountains.

And he always seemed to be working with a particular co-pilot. One day, the co-pilot said to him, he said, I noticed that every time we pass over this particular spot of the flight, you happen to look down at a particular stream.

And you've always got a look on your face that I can't understand, but you always look down wistfully, longingly. What's going on? The pilot looked at him and said, well, you're right, actually, I do always look past, look down at that spot.

He said, because down below us at that spot, there's a stream and there's a rock on that stream. And when I was a boy, I used to go there and I used to fish. And I just longed to be a pilot. And every time a plane came over, I would look up and just long, one day, I might fly planes.

I've been doing this now for over 10 years. The thing is, every time I fly over that spot, I look down, I see the forest, I see the stream, I see the rock.

[8 : 20] And I just longed to sit on that rock and fish. See, ambition is important. We need to be driven by things.

But if we think that we can fill that God-shaped hole with ambition, we're kidding ourselves. And of course, the closer we get to that ambition and live with that ambition fulfilled, the closer we see it to imperfections as well.

There is a God-shaped hole in every life that only God can fill. We can try to fill it, of course, with money, with possessions.

There's a story about an ancient Persian farmer. And he was extremely wealthy. He had vast amount of land.

Crops, grains, livestock. He had vineyards. There was everything he had. Or so he thought. So one day, he was hosting a guest.

[9 : 28] And the guest said to him, do you know about diamonds? He went on to tell him about, if you really wanted to be wealthy, you needed to own diamond mines. For the first time in his life, that farmer went to bed that night poor.

He hadn't lost anything, except internally. All he could think about was not what he had, but what he didn't have. He couldn't get diamonds out of his head.

Eventually, he decided he was not going to be satisfied until he had a diamond mine. He sold his farm. And with his fortune, he went travelling in search of a diamond mine.

As he travelled the world, he couldn't find any suitable land with such a mine. Eventually, after a long, long time, he spent everything he had. And he died a broken, frustrated, disappointed, and in fact, impoverished man.

Several years passed, and one day, the man who had bought the farm off him was leading his camel through a field to a stream one day. As the camel was being watered, so there was something shiny.

[10 : 44] He just caught the shimmer of light. The farmer looked down, and among the rocks, he found a diamond. And it turned out that there, right in the heart of that estate, was an enormous, rich supply of diamonds.

The thing is, the one thing that that man was searching, he was actually there all along. But it doesn't matter how much stuff surrounds us, as long as that lack of satisfaction exists within us, we're impoverished.

There is a God-shaped hole in every heart that neither ambition nor wealth will ever fill. And so we might try and fill that hole with relationships.

Relationships are important. You know, we long, we need, as human beings, to flourish as human beings. We need to love and to be loved. Whether we are talking about marriage or whether we're talking about family life, whether we are talking about friends, whatever it is, whatever form it takes, we need that connection, that love with other human beings.

But we, we fool ourselves even there if we think that that itself, as vital as it is, will ultimately fill that God-shaped hole.

[12 : 16] Why? Because no human relationship, no matter how wonderful it is, will ever be perfect. And that's not because relationships don't matter, of course they do, but it is because no human being is perfect.

And because no human being is perfect, then no human relationship, no matter how wonderful it is, can ever quite be perfect. And again, come back to that analogy with the grass, the closer we become to those that we love, the more we are exposed to those imperfections.

Perhaps that is why, that those that we are most likely as human beings to argue with most and most openly are those that we love most. But no matter how amazing a relationship will be, it will never be perfect.

There's a story about a couple who have been married for over 50 years. They were, by a notch, pretty happy. In fact, they were very happy. They really did love one another. However, he was a very quiet man, a very quiet husband, and one of the things that frustrated his wife was that, as amazing as their marriage was, he never really told her, verbalised, that he loved her.

One day, one day she decided to corner him on this, and she said, look, I'm not unhappy, but it would bring me so much more happiness if you could just tell me that you loved me.

[13 : 55] Well, there was a long pause. He was a quiet man. And he said, nothing. But she knew he was thinking. So she waited, and she waited, and she waited, and she waited.

And eventually, after a very long, very thoughtful breath, he said this, on the day that we got married and we went into the church and we made our vows, our promises, in front of the congregation and in front of the minister, he said, do you remember how through those words that we said, I told you that I loved you?

She said, yes, I do remember that. Long pause. He said, if that ever changes, I'll let you know.

No matter how much love there is in a relationship, whether we're talking marriage, whether we're talking a family, whether we're talking friends, and it's all important, it's never going to be perfect.

And that's realistic because we're not perfect as human beings. No one is. You know, it's important that we do fill our lives with love and relationships in the same way that ambition matters and, of course, financial security is important.

[15 : 27] But none of those things will ever fill that God-shaped hole. And so, we turn to what we might call religion.

You know, wherever you go in the world, at any time in history, in any culture, any place, there will always be religion or spirituality of some kind. We see it in art, we see it in music, we see it in the way we live our lives.

but even religion as that human activity by which we try to connect with the divine, the spiritual, whatever we call it, that sense of innate human reality by which we reach out and we aspire to higher, greater, bigger things, deeper things.

We may not even believe in God, but somehow we have that sense of the spiritual and we try to connect with it, whether that's through saying prayers, whether it's through music, whether it's through kneeling or standing or closing our eyes or opening them, covering our heads, uncovering our heads, whether it's through the clothes that we put on at a particular point, whether it's through ceremonies that we engage in, whether it's through rituals that we practice, whether it's through coming to a place of worship, whether it's in our own home, whether it is in the name of an institutionalised religion or whether it is something that is very, very informal.

Whatever it may be, those things may matter to us, but they will not in themselves fill that God-shaped hole.

[17 : 06] Why? Because they're human. And the only thing, the only one that will ever fill that God-shaped hole is Jesus Christ.

No matter how much effort we may put into it, no matter how hard we try, only he will satisfy, which is why he says, I, I am the bread of life.

And only when you come to me will you never be hungry. C.S. Lewis said this, or wrote this, in Pilgrim's Regress.

Listen really carefully because these words can very easily pass by. Lewis said this, what does not satisfy when we find it was not the thing that we were looking for.

Think about that. what does not satisfy when we find it was not the thing that we were looking for.

[18 : 42] We may have thought it was, but no. At the very depth of our being, we are all, all searching for just one thing.

Only one thing. other things may be important, but there is only one thing that can fill that God shaped hole.

Jesus said, I am the bread of life. He is saying this just after he's fed on the previous day 5,000 odd people with bread and fish, a few bits of, and walked on water and brought people back from a storm.

And understandably, people are searching after him, wanting to hear what he has to say. But they're wrapped up on the things that he's done in the signs that he has worked, the miracles.

And the word sign is a recurring theme in John's Gospel. When we read about the miracles, the things that Jesus does, whether he's walking on water, whether he's feeding 5,000 people, whether he's healing somebody, whether he's raising the dead, the word that John uses over and over again is a sign.

[19 : 56] Now a sign is something that points beyond itself. The miracle itself is amazing, but it always points beyond itself to a greater, deeper reality.

You know, there is an old ancient Buddhist proverb that says that when the finger points to the moon, the fool looks at the finger. When we see our own hunger, when we see our own dissatisfaction, when we see that yearning within ourselves, whether it is expressed through anxiety, through frustration, through dissatisfaction, through discontent, whatever it may be, more positively when it is expressed through expectation, through anticipation and through hope, or whether negatively through fear and through worry, whatever it may be, let's harness that and let's look at the direction in which it points to the one and the only one who can ever truly fill that God shaped hole.

Let's pray together as we do that right now. in the stillness of this moment, let's just spend some time reflecting on whatever it is that represents that yearning for us right now.

Whether it be worry over something that lies ahead, whether it's a sense of dissatisfaction or disappointment right now, whether it's a sense of frustration, allow that thing to point to Jesus as the one who says, come to me for I am the bread of life.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you come to us and that you meet us in our place of spiritual hunger, in the searching, in the yearning, in the questioning, in the craving, in a way that perhaps most of the time we tend not to recognise or to pay much attention to.

[22 : 30] But you are there and you are there as the one who can and will and does fill that God-shaped hole. Lord, we pray that right now and each day in these coming days, whenever we sense any kind of yearning for anything, that that yearning would point us to you.

so Lord, feed us now, each day of our lives and through all eternity. In your name, Amen.