

# I THIRST

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## CrossWords Series (Part 5)

Text: John 19:18-29

### I

I don't know how you think of God, but I will confess that I am somewhat prone to regarding God as a disembodied Perfection. In the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism -- one of the greatest of the Christian Creeds -- the God I think of is: "*a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable; in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.*" In other words, He never has to shave or do His hair. God never stubs a toe or gets wrinkles with age. He doesn't sit at home going stir crazy as many of us are right now. He doesn't get eye-burn or back ache from staring at a screen all day. God never worries about having enough money to pay the bills, or slices his tee shot, or overcooks a meal. God is above all that. He is perfect in and unto Himself. And that's all true.

It just isn't the *whole* truth. The whole truth is what Jesus shows us. Jesus once said that "**whoever has seen me has seen the Father.**" (John 14:9) And what Jesus shows us about God is the side of Him that, in spite of His absolute perfection, nonetheless *thirsts*. I don't mean God longs for a comforting beverage at the end of a hard day, as if God were simply some *larger* version of you and me. The reality is that we aren't even a *smaller* version of Him. Though we have God's fingerprints on us, we are entirely different sorts of beings. We are finite and God is eternal. Even in heaven we will still be the creatures and God will still be the Creator.

And, yet, the words that rasp from the parched throat of Jesus on the cross in our text for today give us an insight into the *longing* of God. On one level and in the plainest sense of this text, we are being given evidence here that, through the person of his Son, God knows what it is to experience physical pangs like we do.

I talked this week with someone suffering with the coronavirus and heard how awful the pains and pangs are with this illness, how her whole body aches, and is racked by coughing, and how sore her throat and head had become. The cross tells us that Jesus understands what she is going through. Are you sick right now? Are you struggling with an appetite you can't satisfy? Are you experiencing any form of physical ache or agony for which you feel desperate for relief. Jesus understands you. As the prophet Isaiah said of the Christ, "**He is familiar with pain**" (Isa 53:3).

### II

There is, perhaps, also another level of meaning to the words of Jesus on the cross here. Over the centuries, theologians have suggested that Christ's *physical* thirst for

water is also a pointer to the far greater *spiritual* thirst of God for communion with humanity. Now, before I go further with that idea, let me be quick to qualify what I am saying. Sometimes I hear people describe God as if he was like some smitten sophomore sitting at home on a Saturday night, crippled with insecurity, wishing that the object of his desire would call or text or like his posts. They speak as if God can't get along without you or me – they he created humanity so he'd have company. Even Not close. Within the mystery of the Trinity, I repeat, God was and is complete in and of Godself. He's probably the only being in the universe who could do this whole shelter-at-home thing forever and be just fine. BUT, having chosen out of His awesome grace to create us out of the nothingness... having chosen to give us breath and unique identity... God does now pay a price. God feels for what He has made.

I gained a simple insight into this reality on the day that our first son, Rush, learned to walk. One minute he was crawling around; the next he was taking staggering steps across the room from Amy's arms to mine. We were fumbling with the video, gushing to make you sick, absolutely over the moon with excitement. On our own micro-level, Amy and I also felt for what we had made!

A few minutes later, Amy went into the kitchen for some reason and -- not wanting to lose the moment, I helped Rush to his faltering feet and gave him a little push in the direction of the sofa just a few yards away. Rush took about four steps out into the center of the room and stopped. For a second he just stood there, swaying back and forth on pudgy feet like a drunken sailor. I just knew that he'd fall and need me to pick him up. And then, as I moved to catch him before he toppled, our child made a quarter-turn, and walked out the door.

It was a defining moment for him and for me. A surge of pride at his achievement and independence swept over me. And, almost simultaneously, I was awash in feelings of grief I still find it hard to describe. Suddenly, I could see the price of the freedom we'd helped him to gain. I could see him as a middle schooler, telling me I was full of it, and storming out of the room. I could see him going off to college and not calling daily -- God forbid! I could see him striking off on his own, hanging out with friends I wouldn't have chosen for him, making decisions I wish he hadn't, experiencing pains I couldn't protect him from, and losing touch with dear old dad. The kid lives in Boston now! He's a Red Sox fan!?

Now, I know I'm not saying anything new to alot of you; but as I felt my throat tighten and tears well-up in my eyes that day, I suspected I had been given a tiny insight into the cosmic thirsting of God after an eternal connection with His children. For a split second, I saw something of the awesome agony of a God who loves His children enough to let them choose their own way, hoping against hope that there will come a day when they will *choose* to come back to Him, and the bond will be even more perfect than when they were young... than at the Beginning.

### III

But what if they don't? What if the children don't come back? The great Catholic preacher, Fulton Sheen, says that in the fourth words of Jesus from the cross -- *the cry of forsakenness* -- we encounter the **suffering** of a man without God. But in the fifth words -- *the cry of thirst* -- we meet the **suffering** of God without man. We encounter a God who has literally poured himself out for the sake of His children. Think about that. God has poured out his creative power to fashion a Universe in which they might live; He has poured out His Word to guide them through life; He has poured out His grace to lift them up each time they fell; He has poured out even some aspects of His divinity in order to meet them in the flesh. And there on that Cross, God poured out his very life's blood in love for His children... to wash away their sins.

Have you ever poured yourself out completely... in childbirth... in an athletic event... in some other way? I bet at, some point afterward, you said – as Jesus did from that cross, **I am thirsty (John 19:28)**. No surprise! How can one pour out so much and not have your very being rasp for replenishment? Psychologist, Erich Fromm, once wrote that there are two kinds of love that must be carefully distinguished. There is a form of IMMATURE love that says: "*I love you because I need you.*" In other words, my love is conditioned by whether you meet my needs. But MATURE love says: "*I need you because I love you.*" My need for you grows out of the fact that I love you so.

Sometimes I think we are afraid to be that vulnerable with one another. We often hide our deepest longings and needs from the people with whom we work, play, or live. Maybe we're worried that if we confessed our THIRST, they would see us as weak, or it would make them uncomfortable, or we'd merely be stating what they should already know. But if God Himself could say "**I am thirsty,**" can't we?

If you are with someone else right now, turn and tell them something that you thirst for. Or call up someone close to you this week and tell them about a longing you wish could be satisfied. Or turn to God in prayer and tell him about the need you feel for a good that has not yet been met. Tell someone that because you love and admire them so much, you really NEED their unique gifts, you THIRST after their counsel, you LONG for their encouragement. Is there any better way to affirm the beauty and worth of another, or to open the door to a deeper communion with them, than to say to what God has already said to you and me: "I need you, because I love you so"?

### IV

In those words of Jesus from the Cross we gain an awesome insight into the nature of God – we discover how much He thirsts after relationship with us. We find, secondly, a vivid illustration of a means by which we can deepen communion with the precious people in our lives -- by expressing a vulnerability that says "I need you." But the final blessing is that we are given an invitation here to respond to the thirst of God.

When Jesus confessed his thirst that day, it was not a rhetorical remark. He didn't say it for effect. Jesus cried out in the hope that someone would help. The Bible says that **a jar of wine vinegar was there, so [one of the Roman soldiers] soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips (John 19:29)**. Some students of this passage say that this action was simply a further attempt to torment Jesus -- that He would hate the cheap-tasting stuff. But I think that's the thinking of people who've grown too accustomed to good wine, or who just can't imagine how thirsty somebody gets when they're hanging on a cross.

The way I reckon it, the average soldiers' pay and palate just haven't changed that much over the centuries. Those Roman soldiers didn't keep cheap wine around to torture criminals with; they kept the bargain stuff handy to drink for themselves!<sup>1</sup> The scriptures go on to say that at least one of these guys recognized by the end that Jesus was in fact the Son of God. I don't think that elevated sponge was an act of contempt. I think it was an act of mercy. Confronted with the thirst of God's Messiah, at least one of those soldiers tried to satisfy it with the best that he had.

How about YOU? Do you know that it is within your power too to respond to the thirst of God? What He wants more than anything else in the world is the liquid of your life. If you've never given Jesus your heart before, let this be the day that you respond to His invitation, and then contact me or one of our other pastors so that we can suggest the next step.

If you've already made that commitment, then raise to Christ's lips something else that will refresh His hope. Jesus once said: **Whatever you do for one of the least of my brothers or sisters, you do for me. (Mat 25:40)** So, forgive someone who's done you wrong, or speak the truth in love to someone who's wandering down the wrong road. Refuse to be part of an activity you know is against the will of God, or dedicate yourself to something that you know truly is. Recommit yourself to excellence in your job as an act of service to God, or really pay attention to the people your family over the next few days. Tell someone how much Christ means to you, or invite him or her to watch this broadcast or next week's. Here's the Action Step: Soak the sponge of your soul with something life-giving, and offer it up to Him or someone He loves. You discover that as you satisfy the thirst of God and others, He satisfies YOURS.

*Please pray with me... Great Lord our God, we sit in awe this day that You who have made the vast oceans of earth and sky should yet thirst for relationship with us. Keep us from ever forgetting that within each soul their lies a longing to love and be loved. Give to us the capacity to bless others with expressions of our need of them, and so deepen the bonds of friendship and love. Then grant, O God, that we may return to You -- who has poured out the very wine of heaven for us -- some refreshing moisture from the raised sponge of our lives this week. For this we pray in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Expositor's Commentary*, Volume 9, p.184.