

Words from the Cross
The Fifth Word of Jesus ~ Need

“I Thirst” – John 19:28

Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty."



Sermon by Lyndon Perry

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We need a new coffee maker. We've had it almost 9 years and it's starting to leak. We need to replace it because we use it practically every day, can't live without it. Needless to say, we are avid coffee drinkers. Not just Starbucks, either. We buy the flavored gourmet style beans: Mocha Almond Java, Chocolate Irish Cream, Vanilla Cookie Wafer. Coffee flavors are getting about as ridiculous as ice cream varieties. Double Peanut Butter Brickle Fudge Brownie. At any rate, we need a new coffee maker if we're going to continue this admittedly extreme habit.

What do you need? A new washer, dryer, refrigerator, furniture, carpets, curtains, car, trailer, apartment, house? Or are your needs less tangible, more qualitative? Like friendship, family, companionship, care, understanding, acceptance, love and forgiveness. These are basic needs, to be sure. Emotional and spiritual needs.

Yet for many in the world, there are physical needs which are even more basic. Items, events that we take for granted. A night free from bombing, a day released from terror, shelter, clothing, food and water. Millions of people live without these most basic needs. But not for long. Some survive, many do not.

Hmm. I guess by way of contrast we don't really *need* a coffee maker. We can live without it. You don't need a micro-wave, mini-blinds or a new mattress. Not that these things are wrong to have. Just realize they don't fall into the category of needs. Wants, wishes, or wise purchases, maybe, but not necessities. Strip away all the packaging and we begin to realize that there are actually very few things that humans need.

We mentioned a few already. Friendship, acceptance, forgiveness, meaning. Shelter, sleep, food, water. Basic human needs. Every person who has ever lived has acknowledged these necessities. It may or may not surprise you, then, that Jesus had needs - physical, emotional, and spiritual needs because he was completely human. Yes, completely divine as well. But don't let that throw you. Jesus knew what it meant to be stomach-grumbling hungry, dog-tired and emotionally drained.

And thirsty?! Jesus knew thirst. Probably the most fundamental ingredient in the recipe called survival. Water. H₂O. Wet, refreshing, life-giving water. So important to our existence, it has become, for many, the symbol of life. To an alien race, water might even symbolize humanity. In one episode of "Star Trek, The Next Generation" (a science fiction TV series that used to rank in my top 5 need-to-watch list) humans were described as "ugly bags of mostly water." It's true. I don't know about the ugly part, but 70% of our body is water. A 5% loss results in fuzzy thinking; a 10% loss leads to death.

Jesus knew thirst. After a brutal beating and whipping which broke open the skin - that thin layered bag that holds our vital liquids inside - Jesus' body was an ugly mass of mostly water, blood-dripping, life-giving water. It's no wonder, then, that he speaks this fifth word from the cross. "*I thirst.*"

I'm thirsty. Has there ever been a more poignant statement of need - of human, physical need. It compliments, and may help explain, the word of anguish we heard last week, "My God, why have you forsaken me." While that fourth word from the cross spoke of spiritual alienation and abandonment due to the world's sin that Christ took upon himself, this phrase, "I am so thirsty," shouts out loud and clear that the divine Son of Man had needs.

Don't doubt it, friends. Jesus was fully human. Some early Christians, in order to protect Christ's divinity, were tempted to think of him as mere spirit in a phantom body. Some claimed that when he walked he never left any footprints. Balderdash. In John 8 we see him scrunch down and scribble in the dust. Can a phantom do that? No. Jesus had a body and it was subject to the every day bodily functions that mark us all. He ate, drank, burped, used the privy. He slept, cried, was tired, and was thirsty.

This should encourage us. It puts a stamp of approval on all that is truly human. It is not wrong to be in need, to hurt, to emote, to feel pain, depression, anguish, or thirst. Just as it is not wrong for us to exult, shout with joy, or soar to great heights. Humanness is good. In Genesis 1 God pronounces his blessing upon all of creation, especially his masterpiece, Adam, Man, Humankind.

It is not our humanity that gets us into trouble. It is the inhuman sin nature that infests and corrupts God's good earth that is the problem. Our sin nature, that hideous birth mark which we've adopted and fed and treated as something precious, that sin nature which has taken over our flesh needs to be rejected, destroyed, cleansed, and forgiven.

That is the reason for the cross. Jesus, the God-Man, hangs between earth and heaven as a space-time portal to filter out the parasite of sin so that all who enter will be pure and holy. And one day, one day we will experience our humanness as it was meant to be experienced, free from sin and death, free from pain and suffering. True humanity in resurrection bodies.

But on this side of heaven, there is need. Physical, emotional, spiritual need, which, although not wrong to have, nevertheless, by its very presence points to a future time and place where all needs will be met. Why did Jesus cry out, "I thirst?" Because he had a physical need. And the message from the cross: If it is okay for God the Son to be human and in need, then it is okay for us as well.

This passage in John gives another reason why Jesus said, "I thirst." John 19:28, "Knowing that all was now completed . . . so that the Scripture would be fulfilled." Here, once again, we see that Jesus is not a victim of circumstance. He chooses to speak these words because of who he is and what he is doing. He is fulfilling Scripture, in this final act he decides when the curtain is dropped.

But the question arises, what Scripture is Jesus fulfilling? The exact words, "I thirst," appear here alone in the Bible. So we aren't looking for an exact quotation. There are, however, a few possible references that Jesus may have had in mind. He could have been reflecting on Psalm 63:1, "O God, I earnestly seek you; my soul thirsts for you. . . ." If so, then his longing seems to be more spiritual rather than physical. Or, it could be that Jesus is thinking of Psalm 69:21, "They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst" – which soon happens.

Both of these verses are possibilities. Yet I have a sneaking suspicion that Jesus is still meditating on Psalm 22. As we discovered last week, this Psalm begins in human anguish and concludes in divine victory. So did Christ's day on the cross. After nearly 6 hours of agonizing silence, Jesus nears the end of his life and cries out "My God, my God, why have you left me?" This is a direct reference to Psalm 22:1.

The Roman guards, however, would not know Hebrew poetry, they would miss the allusion to Sacred Scripture. Instead, they thought Jesus cried out for Elijah. "Eli, eli" – which means "my God, my God" – sounds like the shortened name of Elias which is the Hebrew word for Elijah. That is why, in Matthew 27:48, when one of the guards ran and got a sponge, soaked it in cheap wine and lifted it to Jesus' lips, the rest of the crew said, "Leave him alone, let's see if Elijah comes."

Everyone knew the popular myth of Elijah's return. It was commonly held that, during times of great personal distress and need, Elijah would appear and comfort the one going through trial and tribulation. It was a fable, but this Jesus, he was special somehow. Maybe, the Roman guards thought, Elijah just might make a showing for him. So the kind, thoughtful soldier who was going to give Jesus a drink lowers the stick and sponge and puts it back in the bucket of wine.

I can picture Jesus ready to receive the drink, he leans forward just a bit, and then this guy turns around. "Hey, I'm thirsty." An expression of need. A fulfillment of the Psalms, maybe from the 22nd Psalm, verse 15, "My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth." So yes, Jesus fulfills prophecy. But I get the feeling that since no one text is clearly quoted, Jesus is fulfilling more than a piece of poetry. Jesus is fulfilling the whole thrust of the Old Testament.

Jesus is fulfilling his mission as God in the flesh. This mission is referred to throughout the Law and the Prophets – that the Messiah would come and save Israel, indeed save the whole world and bring about God's reign on earth. But to bring about this salvation the Messiah had to die a suffering servant's death. He had to drink a bitter cup of pain and sorrow.

That is why Jesus rebuked Peter the previous night when the temple police came to arrest him. Peter wants to prevent an ugly scene, but instead creates one by taking his sword and chopping off the ear of an innocent bystander. Jesus performs his last pre-resurrection miracle by healing that ear. He then says to Peter, "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"

Shouldering the sin of the world is that cup, and Jesus knows that drinking it is the only way to reconcile the Holy Creator with sinful creation. And so Jesus, "knowing that all was now completed" (John 19:28) says, "I'm thirsty." Give me that cup, I'll drink the dregs down to the bitter last drop. No more, let sin or sorrow reign, no more. It's over. The Scripture is fulfilled. The Messiah has come. The Suffering Servant has endured. God is glorified. Humanity is free.

So this guard turns back around with a sponge-full of cheap sour wine, drawn from the same barrel the Roman soldiers dip into as they watch the criminals die. This man holds the reed up to Jesus' lips and lets our Savior taste and swallow his last. It's not Ernest and Julio Gallo, but it will do.

By the way, this drink was not the wine mixed with myrrh offered to Jesus right before they drove nails through his feet and hands. That was a drug intended to deaden the pain. Jesus refused that drink, he wanted to die with an unclouded mind. In fact, the vinegar-like liquid Jesus did drink revived him. It cleared his mind for one last shout. But before we hear that shout, let's look closely at something we might have missed.

Notice in verse 29, the soldier soaked a sponge in wine vinegar and put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant. Did you catch that? A reed, a sprig of hyssop. The same type of plant used during the original Passover when the blood of a sacrificial lamb was used to mark the doors of the families who placed their trust in God. The Angel of Death would then pass over that house because of the blood of the lamb, painted on the doorframe with a brush of hyssop. You can read it for yourself in Exodus 12:21-23.

The Apostle John knew what he was writing when he describes this scene. He wants us to see the connection between the stalk of hyssop and Jesus, the Passover Lamb. Jesus, self described as the door to heaven, a doorway marked with blood, sacrificed for the world so that eternal death would pass over those who place their trust in him.

That is why Jesus cried, "I thirst." Knowing that all was now completed and so that the thrust of Scripture would be fulfilled, so that his saving mission as God in the flesh would come to an end, Jesus said, give me that cup, I'll drink it all. And with a renewed clarity of mind, finally shouts out, "It is finished." It's accomplished. Completed. The Sacrificial Passover Lamb of God has been given up on behalf of sinful, prideful people whom God wants to save.

It's a victory for the divine Son of Man. No doubt about it, Jesus leaves this world with a smile on his lips. And it wasn't the wine. He lays his head back, as we'll see next week, with a contentment of mind and soul knowing that he triumphed over his most bitter enemies, sin and death. He also smiled because that victory extends to us. It is our triumph as well. We share in the win.

Remember in 1994 when Bonnie Blair stood upon the top of that three-tiered stand at Lillehammer? Twice she took the gold. All the training and time and patience resulted in victory. But it wasn't just her victory. Her family, that large crew from Champaign, Illinois, shared in the joy as well. They danced and laughed as if they'd won the gold themselves. And well they might have, after all they were intimately wrapped up in Bonnie's life and success. When Bonnie won, so did they.

But not just her family, either. Blair's speed skating victory was our victory, too. All of America took the gold when she did. On that platform, when our flag was raised and the national anthem was played, we stood with her, a medal around our necks. And so it is with every Olympian. He or she represents his or her country. Their triumph is their people's joy.

And so it is with Christ. His triumph over sin and death extends to us. Christ drank the bitter cup and shouted, "Done." No more Sin, no more Death, no more Suffering, no more Thirst. Yes, we still have examples of lower case sin, death, suffering, thirsting. But these are residual effects, leftover scars from Satan's real yet ultimately unsuccessful attack on God's good creation. When Jesus died and rose again, he sent Satan home defeated.

And when Jesus comes again all these lower case expressions of corruption will be completely erased. Erased and replaced with a renewed creation, resurrected bodies, healed souls. A great substitution will occur, we will exchange, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, our perishable selves for the imperishable. We share in the victory now, but one day we'll wear the gold ourselves. Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, the perfect substitute for us, won the victory so that we could stand with him before the Father as victors ourselves. Won't you trust in that triumph? Won't you accept him as your Conqueror and Lord?