FCCOE; 10/28/18; Psalm 63; Rev. T. Ziegenhals

“Praying Our Thirst”

Introduction: You have no doubt noticed that there are a number of rich images that are played out across the chapters and books of the Old and New Testaments. Sheep and shepherd, King and kingdom, thirsting and drinking, are all favorites. Our focus will be on the latter pair this morning as we turn to Psalm 63 in our collection of prayers to help us think about praying our thirst. When it comes to praying our thirst, we’re not talking about wondering where the next bottle of cold water will come from on a hot and sticky night of VBS volunteering! Rather, we want to use that external image to help us think about the internal spiritual thirst that each of us has deep within us, a thirst that can only be satisfied by the living God. If it’s not, we’ll eventually end up feeling frustrated, despondent, or just plain unfulfilled.

What is the essence of our thirst? How can we begin to satisfy that thirst?

I. Recognizing Our Thirst

 A. If a sticky July night gets us thinking about thirst, then for David and his contemporaries it was living on the edge of a desert. This desert, known as the Judean desert, was located just east of the city of Jerusalem. Leave the city on its east side and stroll up to the Mt. of Olives and you’ll see some amazing sunsets looking back, westward, across the city. But look to the east and it’s truly a no-man’s land that stretches out before you. It’s not unlike stretches of Utah our family drove through a number of years ago, survivable only because we had air conditioning and plenty of bottled of water on hand.

 B. David uses this nearby Judean desert, around which has had to wander in the past, and the physical thirst that it brings, to describe his spiritual thirst for God: “. . . I earnestly search for you. My soul thirsts for you; my whole body longs for you in this parched and weary land where there is no water.” Such thirst is also expressed in a couple of other psalms. “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (42:1). “I spread out my hands to you; I thirst for you like a parched land” (143:6).

 C. So what are the parched and weary lands that cause our thirst to surface? A few pictures:

- There’s the person who has a wonderful job, a loving spouse, a healthy family, and a roomy house, but who still experiences a kind of sad, sorrowful place in the inner wall of his or her soul. This person often lies awake at night staring at the ceiling and trying to figure out what’s missing, why they not really all that happy. Thirsty, in a parched and weary land.

- There’s the person who knows all the answers to the Bible quizzes, who’s been baptized, become a member of a church, and serves on several committees, but still yearns for something more. This person actually surfaces in the George Barna research poll which discovered that over one-third of the 75 million people who attend church each Sunday say they’ve never really experienced God’s presence. Thirsty, in a parched and weary land.

- There’s the person who constantly pours into their life one new experience after another, from relationships to jobs to hobbies to vacations, but still hasn’t found what they’re looking for. Or the person who’s attempted to load their life with spirituality, mixing together a scoop of new age, with a tablespoon from the self-help section at Borders, with a handful of favorite Bible verses, but still does not feel quenched. Thirsty, in a parched and weary land.

- There’s the person whose life has been disrupted by an unexpected illness, or a wayward child, or the loss of a job, or the struggle with a marriage, or the latest perplexing happening on the evening news, and nothing seems to be going as they had thought it would, and should, be. Thirsty, in a parched and weary land.

 D. The Bible describes these as “wilderness times.” When we find ourselves in them, we need to recognize that we are not alone. All of the great figures in the Bible, from Abraham to Moses, from Ruth to David, from Elijah to Esther, and from John to Jesus, spent time in the wilderness. But what we see is that this place can be particularly illuminating and clarifying if, when we find ourselves there, we can come to understand that what we are truly thirsting for is a deepening relationship with the living God.

Illustration: Jesus sought to make this clear to a woman he met while she was drawing water from a well. As she was hauling up her bucket he mysteriously remarked, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give the will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of living water welling up to eternal life” (Jn. 4:13-14). You’d think the woman might have taken Jesus for some kind of nut, or smart aleck, and turned her bucket upside down on his head! But she continued the conversation and as it went on, it turns out that she had gone through five husbands and was now hanging out with man number six. What Jesus was offering for her consideration was that, although there is nothing wrong with a husband, the steadfast love she was looking for male affection to provide could only be found in a relationship with Jesus. Once secure in that, a fulfilling and lasting relationship with a man would be possible.

Looking in the wrong place is a heads-up God gave his people long ago, again, using the image of water and thirst: “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water” (Jer. 2:13).

II. Satisfying Our Thirst

 A. So, if the thirst we sense is for a relationship with the living, loving God, how might we satisfy that? How can we make sure that, like those thirsty athletes on the sidelines who are always reaching for Gatorade bottles, or those marathon runners who are grabbing cups of some special mix from a table as they race by, that we are reaching out for the all-satisfying God when we get thirsty?

 B. Looking back at our psalm, how does David direct us to satisfy our thirst? Two observations.

1. First, David begins by having his soul drink in what we might call a rich “cocktail,” or mixture of word and worship. It’s a mixture we’ve seen before in the psalms, one these ancient prayers return to often. David, now away from the Temple in Jerusalem, remembers the power and glory and unfailing love he experienced of God when at worship in the Temple. He remembers how this felt better than life itself. He also recalls, as he lies on his bed at night, meditating of the past acts of God, how God has been there for him, helping him, and for his people as they’ve journeyed through life. At these acts of remembering, David breaks out into worship, into praise and prayer and songs of joy. It is a remembering and a worship that begins to meet his thirst.

Illustration: There is an old French proverb that states, “the appetite grows with eating.” Now, that may not necessarily be a good thing in terms of our food intake, but it is a helpful truth when it comes to our spiritual life. For if we get out of the habit of worshipping God or reading his word, seeking to satisfy our thirst by worshipping and reading other things, even no more seemingly benign than our couch and the Sunday paper, we will ultimately not be satisfied. It will start to feel like we’re living without water. Sometimes, we need to make something a habit so that it grows into an appetite. Regular remembering from God’s word and worship with God’s people is the mixture that will begin to quench our thirst.

2. Into this mixture, David drops what we might think to be an ingredient that will spoil everything but it’s really a significant one. It’s the ingredient of justice (vv. 9-12). These are actually words that anchor David’s need for the thirst-quenching satisfaction of God in the nitty gritty struggles of life. He is experiencing, or has recently experienced, severe injustice. As it comes to mind, he rests in the truth that the God of unfailing love is also a God of justice and that despite present conditions, this God will eventually and ultimately make things come out right. Such an understanding can actually remove our thirst for revenge, placing whatever right that needs to be brought about in God’s capable, knowing, and powerful hands.

Now, we may say that we’re not experiencing, or have never experienced such an injustice. This raises the important point that as we’re praying through the psalms, some parts of a psalm we might simply need to appreciate from a distance. But at the same time, they can also serve as a window on the reality being experienced by others, either those I may know personally, or those whose stories of injustice I hear and see on the nightly news. Most recently I find myself thinking about the thousands of people that have left their homes and are walking the hundreds and hundreds of miles toward our southern borders, not because they want to make our lives miserable, but because their lives have been made miserable by extreme injustice and they have no other option but to leave home and seek safe shelter elsewhere. The psalm makes me ask, as I pray, how can I be a part of the solution for the injustices these poor folks have been suffering?

III. Pointers to Prayer

Commenting, then, on this thirsting image from Psalm 63 and elsewhere, writer James Sire observes that it raises a paradox. “If I really did long for the living God as a deer pants for streams of water,” he writes, “God would be present to my consciousness far more than he is” (*Learning to Pray through the Psalms*, 88). How does this psalm help us to pray?

1. Have you been feeling thirsty lately? What’s that been like?

2. Where have you been looking for satisfaction?

3. How might you look to Jesus for the living water he offers?

“*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them*. By this he meant the Spirit . . .” (Jn. 7:37-39; cf. Lk. 11:1-13).