

I Thirst (Jn. 19.28)

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Introduction

It is interesting to reflect on the fact that the gospel narratives do not dramatize the crucifixion of Christ. Remarkably, not only do they not dramatize but also they appear to understate the suffering of Christ greatly.

In this regard, consider the record in John 19:

So he [Pilate] delivered him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus, ¹⁷ and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called the place of a skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. ¹⁸ There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. ¹⁹ Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." ²⁰ Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. ²¹ So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but rather, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" ²² Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." ²³ When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, ²⁴ so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfill the Scripture which says, "They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots." So the soldiers did these things, ²⁵ but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. ²⁸ After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst."

We have wonder if there is *any* attention to His suffering in this narrative. Perhaps we may find it in the fifth saying from the cross (v. 28), which is our topic for communion remembering today. Extreme unquenched thirst can be tormenting and surely, a person dying on a cross would experience terribly tormenting thirst. However, the Gospel writer uses none of these modifiers (extreme, tormenting, terrible). He does not tell us of terrible torments of thirst or horribly tormenting thirst. He sticks with what Christ said ("I thirst") without accenting the idea of suffering along these lines. Verse 28 does not say something to this effect, "Suffering dehydration, Jesus cried out in pain with the painful words, 'I thirst.'" Jesus states the fact of His thirst with no elaboration. John records this saying with no accent on the suffering of Christ.

Therefore, we have to ask, why did John record this particular saying? What is there in this idea of thirst to merit recording it for the Christian church down through the ages? We ask the question because it just does not seem to be that important of a fact, and it definitely stands there on the pages of Scripture with very little context. However, it did happen and John did record it. It must have a profound importance; it must have

some distinct significance. It comes to us in this way for our meditation.

Consequently, we must ask the question in another way. Consider the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. Dying there is a paramount expression of His entire mission as God incarnate on earth. Now we ask, why does *He* say, "I thirst"? Why does *God the Son*, the *Lord from heaven* say this while dying on the cross? As part of this introduction, let me give a general answer to this question and then for today's message, I will present two things about Christ that this saying from the cross teaches. These things will help us remember the Lord Jesus along the lines of God's reminding here in the Gospel of John.

In general, Jesus spoke these words for us not for Himself, not for His physical refreshment. Of course, anyone in this circumstance would be literally "dying with thirst." He does actually thirst, but He tells us of His thirst for our benefit not His in a way that transcends the physical need of the moment. For just how much relief would there be from a few drops of water when one is withering away on a Roman cross? In other words, *Jesus does not say this in order to satisfy His need for liquid* and by that to preserve His life.

Let us put His thirst into perspective. Immediately before the crucifixion, Jesus refused to drink wine mixed with gall (Mat. 27.34; Mk. 15.23). This wine is usually thought of as a mild drug that has a numbing effect and may reduce the suffering somewhat. That Jesus does not take; He is completely sober in facing this horrible manner of dying. His resolve is such that He will suffer with His "wits about Him" and fully conscious of everything. It seems that His determination is such that His suffering does not overwhelm Him; it does not control Him, instead, He controls it. However, according to John 19, when Jesus stated His thirst, He did drink some sour wine *just before He died* (v. 30, **When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit**). Again, quenching His physical thirst can hardly be the point since the words, "I thirst," occur just minutes before His death. Therefore, this saying from the cross may give us insight into the suffering of Christ but not the way we might first expect. It does not accent His physical thirst. The context makes us look in another direction to understand His words. In this light, our focus will be on what these words teach us about the Lord Jesus (about His obedient life and about His longing heart).

1A. These words teach us about His obedient life

We can get at this point by a series of questions.

1) What is Jesus thinking?

Jesus spoke these words out of reflection on something that He knew, He made this statement **knowing that all was now finished**" (v. 28a). Here we have insight into the subjective state of mind of our Lord in contrast to the very objective character of the narrative. We might think that this is where we will have expressions of passion, pain and anguish but that is not the case. His emotion, fear and pain do not overwhelm His thinking.

When we get a look inside the mind of Christ while He dies on the cross, the text points us to what He knew. It tells us what He knew about the point in time to which He had **how** come. The fountain from which the words, "I thirst" flow is the knowledge that **"all was now finished."** In other words, Jesus reflects on His accomplishment. Because of that reflection, He speaks of His thirst.

The knowledge of Christ is the subjective side of an objective fact. It is not just an intellectual grasp of information. This is experiential knowledge about something that was complete while other things remain incomplete. In effect, we have this in the text: when Jesus realized that He finished all that He had to do up to this point in time, He said, "I thirst." In other words, because He knew that something specific was

accomplished in its entirety (*all* of it), He could now go on to further accomplishment. In short, He thirsted for obedience.

2) What is Jesus intending in this obedience?

He spoke these words directly to fulfill Scripture (v. 28b). That is, He has the goal of fulfilling Psalm 69.21, "**They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.**" The apostle Paul quotes from this Psalm and applies it directly to Christ, though its context deals with the experience of the suffering king of Israel: **For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me"** (Rom. 15.3, citing Ps. 69.9). Thus, the consequences of the reproaches against God (i.e. severe penalties) fell on God's king, the greater David.

3) What do these things imply?

Therefore, these words take us back to the three hours of darkness and to the work He did there as high priest and priestly sacrifice. They take us back to His forsakenness as the Lamb of God, the sacrifice we need before the justice of God. Thus, He endured the wrath of God for our forgiveness. He was forsaken so that we would not be forsaken. The reproaches that should fall on us fell on Him. He suffered alone in outer darkness that we may have light and life in the new covenant family. He did not seek to please Himself; indeed, He sought our pleasure, our good, our ultimate well-being.

Obviously then, the statement of thirst is not an expression of weakness and desperation due to His suffering. It is not just a reaction to physical pain. Other things drive these words; they arise from knowledge, contemplation, obedience, and purpose. He has a focus and a determination that conditions His suffering. He looks back per this context in the Gospel of John to His words to Mary and John. He honored Mary according to the fifth commandment **honor your father and your mother**, Ex. 20). That was part of His work in fulfilling the mission given to Him by the Father. He thus submits to the Father's will *and to Scripture*. His sacrifice and priestly intercession includes both His obedient life as well as His obedience in death. He paid the penalty of our sin in His obedience unto death but He also secured our righteousness as His gift *by His obedience to Scripture*. Both the experience of thirst and His statement of thirst were aspects of His obedience to Scripture and to the eternal covenant of redemption in saving sinners for the glory of God.

Doing the will of God remains His food and drink, even on the cross. Knowing by experience that the suffering of God-forsakenness was over and with all the major things accomplished, He goes on hungering and thirsting to finish off the remaining details. The obedience of the Lord Jesus is so critical and so complete!

2A. These words teach us about the longing of Christ (about the longing of His heart)

His comment about thirst presupposes His suffering because it arises from His knowledge, obedience and purpose. It arises from His clear grasp of what is going on, His obedience to the mission given to Him by the Father, and His resolve to fulfill Scripture. Therefore, without denying the reality of physical thirst, these words carry a message that reaches beyond physical thirst. It is more akin to our Lord's many statements about drinking and never thirsting again. It is more like a once for all quenching of one's thirst. It is a spiritual thirst.

What is the message then? The message is that Jesus longs for the Father. In the darkness on the cross, the Father left Him alone. It was a deprivation in a dry and thirsty land, in a desert alone. It tells us that the suffering is in the past; the darkness came, and went.

It tells us that His suffering left Him burning with thirst, empty and depleted in heart, soul and body. The

deepest stroke had pierced Him in a whirlwind of divine wrath in the place of sinners. Now all is calm and thirst consumes Christ in the entirety of His being. He longs to do the Father's will, to fulfill Scripture and in a profound sense *to make His way again into the house of God*. He has come up from the abyss. He has come back from the desert and the parched earth. These words are filled with relief, health, purpose, and longing. Jesus has gone through the refiner's fire. Now He is burning with thirst in the wholeness of His being. Now He pants for the Father like the deer after the water brooks. This is a confession of faith, need, desire, love, longing, yearning and devotion *to God the Father*.

"Father, my soul pants after you. My soul thirsts for the living God. When shall I come and appear before you? Now the time has come for my restoration to the glory that I had with you before the creation of the world. I am about to come home. I thirst. I long for the Father. I yearn for my delight in life. O God my Father you are my delight in life. To lose you is to die ten thousand deaths, even tens of billions of deaths. To have you is to live. Hear me all you saints of the Lord, I am about to go home to quench my thirst; I pant for the Father like a deer for the water brooks."

On one hand, "I thirst" does point us back to Christ's suffering, particularly, to the suffering He experienced when deprived of the Father. On the other hand, it points us ahead to our Lord's return to the Father. The fifth saying from the cross shows us that the way by which Jesus gives us justification (Isa. 53) is by the loss of the thirst-quenching waters of fellowship and delight in the presence of His Father. He went through that dry land of famine and drought to bring us into fellowship with the Father in heaven. No wonder we sing, "Fairest Lord Jesus."

What then do we say in response to the voice of God?

Therefore, in very personal terms, we must all say at least the following three things as we come to partake of the bread and wine that represents the body and blood of Christ:

- 1) I definitely need Him. I need His desert experience. I need the one who gave up His highest and greatest delight in order to save sinners and to give them the Father as their portion and delight. He did this to save us, to save me. In the place of wrath, Jesus gives us delight. His thirst shows us where He went on our behalf and the joy and rejoicing that He secured for us there. His thirst shows us that judgment is in the past and refreshing waters are now in front of Him and us. I must be in tune with the Psalmist and say, "I thirst for my God like a deer for the water brooks. O Lord, I long for you my Savior, brother and friend."
- 2) I own Him as my prophet, priest and king. I must learn from Him, cling to Him, and serve Him with all my might. O Lord Jesus, I own you as my prophet, priest and king. I commit myself in complete surrender to your will.
- 3) Finally, I must own His people as my family as the new covenant community that He purchased in the wilderness. He suffered the just for the unjust that He might bring us to God. He brings us to God as a family, one body in Him. O Lord I own your people as my family and delight because they are your delight and are safe and secure in your love.

Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen

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