

John 4:7-15

Psalms 42 & 43

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Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

A Summer in the Psalms

THIRSTY FOR GOD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

We take clean, drinkable water for granted — at least until it's hard to come by. Then we realize just how valuable and precious water really is for life. We are so used to having safe water at our command, it's hard for us to imagine **not** having water readily available.

I found out first hand that it's possible to make do with a lot less water than we think we need. When Pat Barrow and I shared a room in a home in Tabasco, Mexico back in January 2006, the shower stall in the bathroom had two 5-gallon buckets. One day I turned on the faucet and nothing came out. Fortunately, the two buckets had already been filled up. Since I didn't want to use up all of the water in the buckets so Pat would have some to wash with, I discovered it's possible to get clean with about two gallons of water.

When I finished bathing and was getting dressed, Pat went in to clean up. Soon I heard the water running in the shower. It turns out I had not turned the faucet the right way. Oh well! I learned a valuable lesson that day.

We know water is essential for life, second only to oxygen for our survival. The rule of thumb is a human being can survive about three days without water. Survival and emergency planning guides suggest at least two quarts of water a day to drink and another two quarts for cooking and sanitation. On average, the human body is made up of about 62% water.

There's nothing quite like a glass of good, clean, cold, refreshing water to quench your thirst. Soft drinks and sweet tea taste good, but when you're hot and thirsty, they don't really satisfy in the long run. The sugar can make you even thirstier. We know what it's like to be thirsty and we know what it's like to have our thirst satisfied. We also know what someone means when he says, "I've hit a dry spell" or she says, "I've run dry."

So, we can relate to the psalmist who wrote, "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." Perhaps you remember the King James Version: "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God."

The picture is of a deer that has been running hard — maybe trying to escape from the hunters — and is now exhausted and thirsty and in need of refreshment. The panting, thirsty deer looking for water is a good description of the human soul longing for God’s refreshing presence. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson puts it this way: “A white-tailed deer drinks from the creek; I want to drink God, deep draughts of God. I’m thirsty for God-alive. I wonder, ‘Will I ever make it — arrive and drink in God’s presence?’ I’m on a diet of tears — tears for breakfast, tears for supper. All day long people knock at my door, pestering, ‘Where is this God of yours?’”

The book of Psalms is divided into five books. Psalm 42 begins Book II. Actually, Psalms 42 & 43 make up one psalm, which is why we heard them both together today. Sometimes it’s hard to understand why Bible verses and chapters are put where they are. One story has it that the man first responsible for dividing the scriptures into chapter and verse was riding a horse as he worked. Whenever he hit a small bump, there was a new verse. Whenever he hit a big bump, there was another chapter. Sometimes that seems to be as good an explanation as any!

If you read and hear the two psalms carefully, you will hear a song with three stanzas with this chorus or refrain: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.” The psalm is about a faithful follower of God who can’t make the trip to Jerusalem to worship God in the Temple, perhaps because of some kind of illness. Sick and far from the Temple, surrounded and heckled by people who think his illness is proof that God has abandoned him, the person cries out to God, “O God, I’m like a thirsty deer who needs to find some life-giving water.”

Maybe you can identify with this believer. Maybe you feel trapped, hemmed in, overwhelmed by life, spiritually “dry.” Ironically, in the psalms, a common image for life’s overwhelming troubles is the flood — even in Psalm 42: “Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.” What an interesting paradox — while the troubles of life can sometimes overwhelm us like floodwaters, even in the midst of the waves we can find ourselves spiritually parched. “Water, water, every where, And all the boards did shrink; Water, water, every where, Nor any drop to drink.”

That persistent longing and dissatisfaction in life is our thirst for God. In the introduction to his *Confessions*, the 4th century Christian writer and theologian, Augustine of Hippo, begins with these words about our longing and restlessness: “Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you thwart the proud. But still, since he is part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.” As our bodies cannot long survive without water, so our souls cannot long survive without God. Just as we know our lives depend on water, so our faith teaches us our lives depend on God, on the living God who cleanses, refreshes, quenches, and satisfies us.

There is something for which we long in life that this world just cannot supply. Perhaps you've tried to fill that void in your life by chasing after the things of this world, only to find that the more you get, the thirstier you become. That was Augustine's experience. He sought knowledge and pleasure in all sorts of adventures, but was never satisfied until his thirst was quenched by God's presence in his life.

In our gospel lesson from John 4, Jesus broke all of the social conventions and rules of his day. He spoke with a Samaritan woman at noon in the middle of town at the village well. We heard just a portion of the long, extended conversation between Jesus and woman at the well. But we heard enough to get the gist of what they were talking about and to realize that Jesus and the woman were using the same words but were talking about two different things:

“Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?”

“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

“Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

John doesn't put it this way, but he could have used one of his famous “I am” sayings at this point — “Woman, I am that living water.” The Samaritan woman didn't want to have to keep coming to the town well once or twice a day and lug the water jars back to her house. Jesus offered her something more than she could imagine — living water that quenched a thirst the woman might not have even known she had. But once she tasted the living water, and shared the good news with her neighbors in her village, we can assume she was never spiritually parched again. As one person has put it, “Water from the well — the everlasting one — still remains a necessary ingredient for life worth living.”

The Bible is full of verses about being thirsty and finding refreshment. Maybe it's because the Bible was written by people who lived in a land where water is scarce. Maybe it's because being thirsty is such a pressing concern in our lives. Listen to just a few of them:

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (Matthew 5:6)

Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (John 6:35)

To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. (Revelation 21:6)

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer him, I the God of Israel will not forsake them. (Isaiah 41:17)

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. (Isaiah 55:1)

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. (Psalm 63:1-2)

I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land. (Psalm 143:6)

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.” (John 7:37-38)

One of the most familiar Bible verses of all uses the same picture of God providing the cleansing, refreshing, living waters that our souls need: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.” (Psalm 23:1-2) In a book of poems called “Praying With the Early Christians,” Eugene Peterson offers this version of the opening verses of Psalm 42: “As pants the deer for cooling streams When heated in the chase, So longs my soul, O God, for Thee And Thy refreshing grace. For Thee my God, the living God, My thirsty soul doth pine, O when shall I behold Thy face, Thou Majesty divine!”

We get spiritually parched. We hit dry spells in our lives of faith. Life circumstances and people around us say, “Where is your God?” We feel tapped out, dried up toward God.

The psalmist shows us how to go to God in those times, to seek refreshment and restoration. Even when the believer was cast down and his soul was restless because he couldn’t travel to Jerusalem to worship God, he remembered the days when he used to lead the procession into Jerusalem. He praised God as the source of life, just as water is essential to our physical lives. The psalmist prayed for the day when his soul would be restored so he could worship and praise God once again, “for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.”

When we get thirsty, we naturally want something to drink so we’ll feel better. When we’re spiritually dry, we want to be refreshed with the living waters that gush up to eternal life. Our refreshment is not just for our personal comfort, enjoyment, and peace of mind, however. God refreshes us, nourishes us, fills us up so we can worship and serve him and our neighbors.

Fill my cup, let it overflow; Fill my cup, let it overflow;
Fill my cup, let it overflow; let it overflow with love.
Lord, let me be Your instrument, Spreading sunshine in the land;
Let people see Your works in me; Help me live the best I can.
It’s my desire to live for You And to always walk upright;
Give me the strength to face each day; Stay with me through each dark night.
Fill my cup, let it overflow; Fill my cup, let it overflow;
Fill my cup, let it overflow; let it overflow with love.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, give us the living water that will become in us a spring of water gushing up to eternal life, that we may never be thirsty. Amen.