The Gospel of John: *For Those Who Thirst*
John 7:37-39

We find ourselves once again in the 7th chapter of John’s Gospel. I had anticipated completing the seventh chapter in April, and here we are on the fourth Sunday in May, and there remain not one, but two passages to be addressed in John 7! So be it…we are not in a hurry, and we would do well to carefully consider only three verses this morning: John 7:37-39.

37 On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” 39 Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

My message is entitled, *For Those Who Thirst*, and it will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Hoshana Rabbah; 2) For Those Who Thirst; 3) Come and Drink.

I. The Hoshana Rabbah

It is no small thing that John records the occasion and the day when Jesus stands up and cries out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink!” The historical and biblical context of this moment is rich with meaning, but we will have to go to school here for a bit to flesh it out.

First of all, let us recall which “feast” John is referring to here in John 7. If you recall, Jesus has come to Jerusalem and He has been teaching in the temple midway through the Feast of Tabernacles. Now, I covered some of this ground a few weeks ago, but let me remind you that the Feast of Tabernacles, commonly referred to as Sukkot by the Jews, was the last of seven feasts observed by the Jews every year. The feast began every year on the 15th day of the 7th month known as Tishrei, which was generally in October according to our calendars. The feast was to last seven days, although by the first century, an eighth day was added as a solemn day of Sabbath observance.

Like all Jewish feasts, the Feast of Tabernacles had a double significance. First, it had an historical significance. In Leviticus 23 God instructed the Israelites to celebrate the feast by leaving their homes and living in hand-constructed shelters as a means of remembering those days when they were homeless wanderers…those days when God provided for their needs with food from heaven and water from the rock. The shelters were made of branches and fronds. They had to be such that they would give protection from the weather but not shut out the sun. The roof had to be thatched, but the thatching had to be wide enough for the stars to be seen at night (Barclay, 246). So, in this respect, the festival was one of remembrance and thanksgiving for all that the Lord had done.

The festival also had an agricultural meaning, for it was a celebration of the harvest, taking place after the wheat, barley and grapes had been harvested. Scholars agree that it was the most popular of all the festivals, and the people referred to it as “the season of our gladness.” It was not only thanksgiving for one harvest; it was glad thanksgiving for all the bounty of nature which made life possible and living happy (Ibid, 248). The Jewish historian Josephus called it “the holiest and the greatest festival among the Jews (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 3:10:4). A Jewish
resource entitled, *Supplement for Festivals*, published by the Rabbinical Assembly, also observes that Sukkot is the beginning of the rainy season in the Land of Israel and the time when ‘the world was judged regarding water.’ It is this judgment regarding water that we must now keep in our minds as we enter into the Temple and observe the worshippers.

John reports that it is the last day of the feast, the “great day.” We should assume he is referring to day seven of the feast, which was known as *Hoshana Rabbah*. Hoshana Rabbah was the culmination of the feast, and on that day a very special ceremony would take place. The worshippers would enter the temple courts with palms and willow branches, and they would walk around the altar seven times. Their palms and branches would form a kind of screen or roof as they marched around the altar. At the same time, a priest would arrive with a golden pitcher holding two pints of water from the Pool of Siloam, and as he arrived through the Water Gate, the people would recite Isaiah 12:3, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” The water was carried up to the Temple altar and poured out as an offering to God. While this was being done, the *Hallel*—that is, Psalms 113-118—was sung to the accompaniment of flutes by the Levite choir. The worshippers would shout and wave their palm branches toward the altar.

William Barclay writes: The whole dramatic ceremony was a vivid thanksgiving for God’s good gift of water and an acted prayer for rain, and a memory of the water which sprang from the rock when they travelled through the wilderness.

According to the *Supplement for Festivals*, a series of prayers were offered during the ceremony. One of the prayers consisted of these words (translated from Hebrew into English):

*Adonai, my sole source of salvation, I was brought low, but you have delivered me. Help those who hope in You. Provide water for every shrub. Condemn not the earth to infertility; withhold not Your blessing of rain. Satisfy Your thirsting creatures, all those who call upon You. Help us now. (Supplement for Festivals, 207).*

The second to last prayer included these words:

*Bless with rain those who pour out their hearts like water. Help us for the sake of Abraham who went through fire and water. Bless those who have inherited the Torah as life-giving water. For the sake of your servants who served you with libations of water, for the sake of Moses who, with your help, gave his people water, let us prosper. Open the earth to Your blessing of water. Save us, God, our stronghold. Have compassion, forgive our sin, save us. (Ibid, 210).*

The final prayer is a Messianic poem that includes these lines: *Turn to Me and be saved—Today if you will hearken to My voice!* Do you see why the context is important? Now…can you picture the worshippers? Can you hear the music and the prayers? Can you imagine this scene in your mind’s eye? Thousands would be assembled in the Temple courts to observe this sacred ceremony. As these prayers were being said aloud by the worshippers, as the priest was pouring the water upon the altar, Jesus stands up in the assembly and cries out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink! Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” Do you see how His words come to life in a whole new way within the context of Hoshana Rabbah? Can you see how Jesus has waited for this precise moment, this *kairos* moment, to declare who He is and to offer Himself to the world? And can you imagine the awkward hush; the astonished looks; and the murmuring of the crowds? This was a pivotal moment in the life of Jesus…one that was not soon forgotten. We’ll look at how people
responded to Jesus next week, but for now, let us consider what Jesus just said. That leads us to my second subheading…

II. For Those Who Thirst

Jesus begins by saying, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.” Before we apply this saying to our lives, we must first observe how Jesus is pointing to Himself as the fulfillment of scripture…again. Let’s recall a few other examples in John’s Gospel where Jesus points to Himself in the OT, and then we’ll see how He is doing it again here in John 7.

If you recall, in His conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, Jesus said, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.” Jesus was pointing to Numbers 21, when the Israelites grumbled against God, and God punished the Israelites by allowing poisonous snakes to bite the people. If you remember that story, many people were dying due to the snake venom, and they cried out to God. Then God told Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and place it upon a pole and raise it up high over the Israelites, and He promised that all who looked upon the bronze serpent on the pole would be healed. So, in John 3, Jesus essentially says, “That bronze serpent was pointing to me. I am the One, who when lifted up on a cross, will bring healing to all who look upon me!”

Then, in John 6, Jesus again refers to the wilderness in vs. 32 when He says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” Again, Jesus is saying, “That whole bread thing from heaven…that was pointing to me! I am the Bread of Life…so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.”

Now, once again, here in John 7, as the Jews at the Festival remember their trials in the wilderness, Jesus appeals to those who thirst. The very word “thirst” would remind the Jewish listeners of Exodus 17 where we find the most dramatic story of thirst. If you recall, the Israelites were in the Desert of Sin, and they can find no water. Exodus 17:2ff states: Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water to drink.’ And Moses said to them, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?’ But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock, with thirst?’

It’s an intense scene. By the way, this complaint of the Israelites is the same complaint that will eventually lead to the snake attack on another day; but on this occasion, God demonstrates tremendous grace and mercy towards the Israelites. God instructs Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.”

Can you see it? Jesus is once again pointing back to the well-known narrative of the Israelites, and He is saying, “For those who thirst, come to me. I am the ROCK that will be struck so that all who thirst can be satisfied.”
Church, it is appropriate for us to see Jesus in the Old Testament precisely because Jesus constantly pointed back to the Old Testament and said, “that was ME!” Pretty amazing, right?

Now, let us consider what Jesus is saying about the human condition. Jesus cries out, “If anyone thirsts...” Quick question: who are the people who thirst? EVERYBODY, right? Every person ever born knows what it means to thirst. Jesus is appealing to the universal condition of humanity: we are those who thirst. We all thirst physically, but we also have a deeper thirst.

Alexander Maclaren captures our thirst so appropriately...here is what he writes:

This is the world—a congregation of thirsty men raging in their pangs, and not knowing where to find solace or slaking for their thirst. I do not need to go over all the dominant desires that surge up in men’s souls, the mind craving for knowledge, the heart calling out for love, the whole nature feeling blindly and often desperately after something external to itself, which it can grasp, and in which it can feel satisfied. You know them; we all know them. Like some plant growing in a cellar and with feeble and blanched tendrils, feeling towards the light which is so far away, every man carries about within himself a whole host of longing desires, which need to find something round which they may twine, and in which they can be at rest. The misery of man is great upon him, because, having these desires, he misreads so many of them, and stifles, ignores, atrophies to so large an extent the noblest of them.

I was profoundly convicted by Maclaren’s words. We all can relate with this deep, profound thirst that makes us keep trying something new...a new job, a new spouse, a new drug, a new car, a new house, a new religion...we are constantly reaching blindly for that which we hope will satisfy our thirst, right? But here’s what Maclaren is saying: there is a thirst that is noble and deep...it is our thirst for God. There is nothing wrong with that kind of thirst, because it means we are missing that which we were made for. If we experience no thirst for the infinite, we will not seek out our ultimate end, and that is to be reunited with our Maker. Some thirst is good. However, many of us “misread” our thirst. We think our thirst is due to our job, so we quit our job. We think our thirst is due to our marriage, so we quit our marriage. We think our thirst is due to a lack of pleasure, so we seek pleasure in the carnal appetites, somehow convincing ourselves that momentary pleasures will satisfy the thirst of our souls...but we are sadly mistaken, right?

So, there are those who thirst...who know that they thirst, and often this group of people...if they are honest...will confess that their efforts to quench their thirst have failed miserably. These are souls who may hear the words of Jesus in John 7 and tear up without even knowing why. But we know the reason, right? Jesus just articulated your thirst...He knows. And He just invited you to come and to drink and be satisfied! To those who know they thirst, Jesus says, “Come to ME and drink!”

Now...not everybody thirsts for the infinite. Maclaren points out that there are some who so misread their thirst...they so indulge in the carnal pleasures of this world...they so ignore the thirst of the soul...that the noblest thirst within them atrophies. Over time, these souls convince themselves that they have everything they need. They busy themselves with work and routine, hobbies and pleasure, families and politics, and eventually they become altogether unaware of the thirst for their Creator. They no longer look longingly into the heavens with a desire to hear from God...the lower desires and preoccupations of life crowd out the nobler desires like weeds
that overcome the garden. And as such, there is much to see in the garden, but little that bears fruit.
Maclaren’s sermon to his congregation well over 100 years ago featured this question, and I will ask it of you this morning:

Brethren, before we can come to the Rock that yields the water, there must be the sense of need. Do you know what you want? Have you any desire after righteousness and purity and nobleness and the vision of God flaming in upon the pettiness and commonplaces of this life which is sound and fury, signifying nothing, and is trivial in all its pretended greatness unless you have learned that you need God most of all, and [that you] will never be at rest till you have Him?

Friends…do you know what you want? Do you thirst for Him? Hear the words of our Lord: If anyone thirsts…

III. Come to Me and Drink

Church, I hope you can appreciate how scandalous these words are if Jesus is not the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. If Jesus is just a good teacher; if He is just an ordinary man like any other man; if He is just a shining example of how good people should behave…what He says here in John 7 is nothing short of absurd. Jesus appeals to the universal thirst in every human soul then and now, and He says, “Come to ME…” He doesn’t direct people to God’s law as the source of “living water” as we saw in the Sukkah prayer. He doesn’t point to church membership or an ethical code or any finer points of religion. Jesus says, “Come to ME…I will satisfy your thirst. I am the deepest longing of your soul. I am the ROCK, the One who, when struck, will yield life-giving water for those who thirst.” Come to ME…and DRINK.

Once again, the invitation to drink is an invitation to take Him in…to appropriate Jesus…to have Him for ourselves. This is the action of faith; and it is more than intellectual agreement or even admiration. It is the act of taking in Jesus as the unique and exclusive satisfaction for the thirst of our souls. It is not a sip, it is a gulp! It is not a bite; He is the whole meal! It is not enough to come and to see that Jesus is good; it is to taste and see that He is good…it is to drink!

Imagine the absurdity of this scenario: the thirsty Israelites, upon seeing the crystal, clear water ushering from the Rock, find it both appropriate and satisfying to write books about the water from the Rock…to attend lectures about the water from the Rock…to paint pictures of the water from the Rock…and all the while fail to DRINK the water from the Rock! Who could imagine such absurdity…and yet is that not what we observe every day, even within the church?

So many thirsty souls admire Jesus from afar; they enjoy the songs that feature His name; they attend classes and even listen to sermons because they find this Jesus person to be quite interesting…and all the time they are, ever so slowly, dying of thirst…yet they refuse to drink. And why? Perhaps they have not yet finished their “wine testing…” Unlike the Israelites in the desert, so many of us are tempted by so many choices of drinks; so many competing products that claim to satisfy this aching thirst; so many flavors to choose from.
But listen to Jesus…listen closely to what He just said. He is the only One who ever said, “Come to ME and drink!” Jesus is not selling a product; He is not promoting a philosophy; He is not organizing a religion…He offers HIMSELF as the only satisfaction for the thirst that is deep within us.

Jesus states in vs. 38, “38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

Once again Jesus articulates the end goal; that all would believe in the Sent One. To believe in Jesus is to take Him in; to come and drink; to taste and see; to feed on Him; to look upon Him as the only cure to our snake-bit condition. The message through the Gospel of John has been consistent: “…that whosoever would believe in Him should not perish but have the life everlasting.”

Here the eternal-kind-of-life is presented as rivers of living water that flow out from the believer. The imagery is rich and appropriate for the occasion of Hoshana Rabbah. As the Israelites pray for life sustaining rain for the thirsty ground, Jesus offers a river of living water for thirsting souls. The “scripture” that Jesus is quoting likely Isaiah 58:11: And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. Jesus is fulfilling this prophecy. All who believe in Him will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

Now, I have a quick bone to pick with our ESV translation of vs. 38 that reads, “…out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” Humor me for a minute. In the old King James Version, vs. 38 reads this way: He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. Did you hear the difference? The ESV says “out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water,” and the KJV reads, “out of his belly…”

It’s time for…the Geek with the Greek! The Greek word koilia that the KJV translates as “belly” is used only two other times in the entire NT. The first is in Matthew 12:40 when Jesus refers to Jonah spending three days and three nights in the “belly” of the whale. The second is Philippians 3:19 where Paul describes the enemies of Christ. He writes: “Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”

I love the ESV on most days, but I think the KJV may have captured the correct translation here. The Greek word for heart is cardia, and it is 99.9% always cardia that is employed wherever we find the word “heart” in the NT. This reference in John 7 would be the ONLY occasion where we should think to translate koilia as anything but belly…and it’s quite a jump to go from “belly” to “heart” right? Now, I know it sounds strange to our ears for the verse to read “…out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water…” but I would simply point out that THIRST is not a matter of the heart…it is a matter of the belly, right? Thirst is a dimension of our appetite. In the Greek speaking-world the heart was thought to be the center of our convictions, but the belly was the center of our appetites. So, consider the promise that Jesus just made: Out of the belly of the one who believes in me shall flow rivers of living water. Out of the place of one’s deepest appetite and thirst will flow forth rivers…not one river…but many rivers of living water that
nourish who? Certainly, the rivers of living water would nourish the believer; but rivers that flow through the believer also flow out to nourish others as well, right?

Church, the Christian life is not that of a pond. We are not called to accumulate the promises of God; to pool up the hope of eternal life; where all that God has given to us sits and stagnates over time. Instead, the picture of the Christian life is that of a channel. The living water channels through us and out of us to serve a thirsty and dying world, amen?

Let me ask you a question Church? What flows out of your appetites? Are you those who HUNGER for righteousness? Jesus said in Matthew 5:6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Do you hunger for justice? Do you have an appetite to reach lost and dying souls with the Gospel? Do you have an appetite that actually brings blessing and hope to the world in the name of Jesus? Or do your appetites serve you and you alone? Do your appetites lead you to sin against God?

I think the whole concept of “belly” transformation is pretty powerful, and I’m not talking about liposuction! Listen: not only does Jesus satisfy our thirst, but He transforms our appetite, right? He transforms our belly, such that we actually desire, hunger, and thirst for His joy, His glory, His righteousness, His Kingdom, and His glory! Are there rivers of living water flowing out of you? Would anyone claim to have been blessed and ministered to by that which flows out of your life? Here’s what Jesus said: “He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.” If we are believers…if we are those who have come to Him…if we are those who drink deeply of His grace like those starving in a desert who find cool water from The Rock, there should be an outflow that blesses the world in His name. I suspect many who bless others with the outflow of living water would be hard-pressed to see it. Those closest to Jesus are often so conscious of their sin that they fail to see the amazing outflow of blessings that usher forth from their lives. So, later today I want you to ask a trusted friend: “Do rivers of living water flow out of my life?” Do people find refreshment in Christ from that which my life produces? It is a sobering question to ask…but if Christ is in us, the result should be a life that blesses others in His name, amen?

Now, should we not ask the same question about our church? If we are the Body of Christ…if we are those who drink deeply of the Living Water who is Christ, should not rivers of living water pour out of us and bring blessings to the world? Church…by the power of the Holy Spirit, and to the glory of our Father, I am blessed this morning to observe rivers of living water that are flowing out of you, our Lord’s church! Jesus has fulfilled the promise in us that He made here in John 7:38, and even now hundreds of families, churches, and church leaders in our city are thanking God for the rivers of living water that have blessed them in Jesus’ name…rivers that poured out of your hearts…and your bellies! Thanks be to God!

As we return to the text, no doubt the crowds in the Temple that day were shocked and blown away by what Jesus just said. We’ll see next week that some heard our Lord’s words and believed, while others heard His words and were offended. Clearly Jesus made a claim that begs an explanation for “HOW” He satisfies the thirst of the world, and the Apostle John gives us a quick explanation here at the end of our text. John writes in vs. 39

39 Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.
Now, don’t be confused by what John just said. The Holy Spirit has always been and will always be. The Holy Spirit was active in creation, and the Holy Spirit was active throughout the Old Testament. However, when Jesus is resurrected from the dead and ascends to the Father, the Holy Spirit becomes the SENT ONE…sent by Jesus, that all believers might be empowered and indwelled with the very presence of God in them! I will unpack the work of the Holy Spirit in greater detail as we encounter Him in John’s gospel, but John reveals here in vs. 39 that there is a “before the ascension status” and an “after the ascension status,” and on this day in Jerusalem, those who heard Jesus were in the BEFORE status. We, on the other hand, are those fortunate to live in the “after ascension status!” Those who believe, even today, are those who are promised Living Water through the indwelling of God’s Holy Spirit! Thanks be to God, amen! We will pick up here next Sunday and I hope to finally conclude John 7.

For now, let me close with an invitation. Are you thirsty? Does your soul thirst for home; to be reunited with your Maker? Does your soul thirst for redemption…are you starving for the forgiveness that only Jesus offers? Come to Jesus, and drink…come and take of the Living Water…and here’s what Jesus said to the thirsty woman at the well in John 4: You shall never be thirsty again.

Will you pray with me?