

Word of Suffering

Dear friends in Christ, for whom our Lord poured out his holy and precious blood: This evening, in our continuing series of meditations on the Words of Christ from the cross, we've come to an important turning point. Up until now, we have been increasing the tension as we have been probing more deeply the various physical and spiritual aspects of Jesus' suffering for our redemption. We have reviewed the terrors of his death by crucifixion, and we have tried to imagine (in some small way) what anguish of soul he must have experienced. It came to a climax last week as we reflected upon the meaning of his cry, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" We saw in these words the very peak of his passion: how for three seemingly eternal hours, Jesus Christ, both as man and God, was separated from his Father's love, and felt only his all-consuming wrath and hatred directed against sin and those who rebel against him. We saw that this plunge into spiritual darkness that Jesus endured was very real—how that during this time he was truly lost, *he was in hell*, and how he felt helpless, crying out to ... the God he knew was out there, but who had shut him out ... who didn't seem to hear his cries; no, worse, who answered his cries for help only with more fury and punishment. And it had to be that way for Jesus Christ to atone for the sins of the world. He had to take upon himself the judgment we deserve in order to save us from it.

But now, having borne the full weight of the crushing load of all mankind's sin for these three fearful hours, he finally approaches the end of it. Though the storm of God's righteous wrath has not yet begun to abate, he knows that sin's punishment is drawing to its end. And so, it is at this point, about three in the afternoon on Good Friday, St. John tells us, "*Knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I thirst.'*"

"*I thirst*" ... it's a rather remarkable statement under the circumstances. Not that there's reason to doubt it—I'm sure he was thirsty; but when you consider all the horrendous things our Lord is right in the middle of suffering, it seems strange that the one (and only) thing he mentions when he finally opens his mouth to describe his discomfort, is his *thirst*. Somehow, I have to believe that if I were being crucified, I'd have a lot more to complain about than that. But again, as with all the Words of Jesus from the cross, we anticipate that this word, as succinct and understated as it is, is heavy with meaning. So, let's reflect together for a few moments on this great thirst of which Jesus speaks.

First, as I stated before, it's safe to assume that his thirst was natural. It's likely that the last time Jesus had had anything to drink was at supper the evening before, approximately twenty hours earlier. That was when he was celebrating the Passover with his disciples, and also when he instituted the Lord's Supper. And if you recall the story, even then he declined to drink with his disciples from the last cup of wine that marks the end of the Passover feast. He could not share with them the Cup of Thanksgiving for he was not yet finished with the Cup of Redemption. From their supper in the upper room he went with his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. There he prayed fervently, sweating great drops of perspiration mixed with blood as he prepared for what was to come. Meanwhile his disciples slept: their bellies full and their heads light from wine.

At around midnight Jesus was arrested, and his hands were tied; so, if he did have anything to drink after that, someone who was being kind to him would have given it to him—

and there weren't many people doing that. Instead people seemed to delight in seeing him suffer. He was roughly handled and taken to Annas and then to Caiaphas for a couple illegal trials during the small hours of the morning. At sunrise he appeared before Pilate, then to Herod, and finally to Pilate again all before eight or eight-thirty in the morning. Meanwhile he was beaten several times by the guards, whipped once when Pilate was still trying to arrange his release, and then again with a different kind of whip (one designed to remove all the skin from his back) prior to being marched out to the site of crucifixion. All this before nine in the morning when he was crucified.

Now, it's true that he was offered a drink of drugged wine before he was nailed to the cross; but if you recall, he declined to drink it. Some have tried to interpret this offered sedative as an act of mercy to make things easier on the condemned prisoners; but that wasn't what it was for. Rome had a vested interest in keeping this ritual as frightening as possible. No comforts were provided. The true purpose in giving this short-duration painkiller was to make a prisoner easier to hold while nails were being driven through him. It's hard to hit the head of a nail if it's a moving target. The Romans were practical, not compassionate. And that Jesus declined this drink speaks volumes about his willingness to cooperate with his executioners. Jesus freely surrendered his life. He did not resist in any way.

So, he was suspended from the cross at about nine, and since then he has been working hard just to capture each breath. Remember that a person crucified is laboring fiercely—it's not at all like the peaceful scenes you see in the movies. No, each breath is a major effort. So, between the time involved, the beatings, the loss of blood and sweat, and six hours of hard work in the hot sun, we expect that Jesus would have been extremely thirsty.

And thirst can be a desperate need. It's different than the sensation of hunger. Short term anyway, our strongest sensations of hunger tend to come within the first twelve hours or so of having eaten. People who fast will tell you that after a while those pangs subside. Not so with thirst. The sensation continues to intensify and becomes more and more pressing a need the longer it remains unquenched. You may remember the story Jesus told of the rich man and poor man who both died and went to their respective places in the afterlife. Recall how the rich man, finding himself in the flames of hell, asked that someone be allowed to dip his finger in water and touch it to his tongue. He was so thirsty that this tiny bit of relief seemed something wonderful. And I believe that Jesus, who was also experiencing the terrors of hell, felt the same intense longing when he said, "*I thirst.*"

St John tells us that one of the soldiers on duty heard him, soaked a sponge in some vinegar they'd brought along, put it on staff, and held it up for Jesus to drink. And some have tried to find an act of compassion here too. But as soldiers performing a duty that may have lasted several days, they certainly would have had water handy that he *could* have used. And if you've been told that the soldier here was being merciful, I challenge you to try this experiment: next time you've been working outside in the hot sun and you're really thirsty, pour yourself a little shot of vinegar and see if it helps or hurts. I'm sure you'll come to agree that this is just another act of calculated cruelty—one that fulfills the prophecy in the Psalm we read earlier: "*for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.*" It only made the natural thirst of Jesus that much more intense.

But if we considered only the natural thirst of Jesus in our meditation upon this message from the cross, I think we will have missed the main point. When he says, "*I thirst*", he isn't speaking so much of his natural, bodily longing for moisture as he is of a much

deeper thirst in his soul. He's speaking of a *supernatural* thirst: a thirst for God the Father, for his love, and for a sign of his favor. That is what he longs for ... and just a drop of it on the tip of a finger would be enough to satisfy him—but even that is denied him while he makes atonement for our sin.

The Scripture often uses the image of water to picture a proper relationship with God. And it's a fitting representation because water, like God, is all around us all the time: it's inside of us, and in the air, and in the ground ... we're completely surrounded by it. And that's good because it is absolutely essential for life. Without water, life is not possible: you need a steady supply of it—and so it is with our relationship with God: if you have the Lord in your life, you are alive; if not, you are dead even while you live. We see this connection between water and a relationship with God in the very first verses of the Bible. When God begins to interact with his creation, he locates himself over the *water*: that's where we find the Spirit of God. The same is true of the beginning of the Christian life. We are dead in sin until God comes to establish a relationship with us through *water* and his Spirit. Through the water of Baptism, he gives us rebirth and new life in him.

Now, we need to understand that sin breaks the relationship with God. That's what sin is: a rebellion against him. What should be together and in harmony is separated and at odds. That's why sin and death go together: to be separate from God is to be cut off from the source of life. That's why our life in sin is often pictured biblically as a life of wandering in a dry desert wasteland.

That is the desert Jesus finds himself in now. Because God has laid on him all the world's sin and has made him *the sinner*, he has been cut off from the water of life—or rather, it's being poured out of him. The relationship his Father has with him is spilling out for us. Like the rock in the desert from which the Israelites drank, God here strikes the Rock of our salvation to allow the water of life to flow out of him so that we can drink and have a proper relationship with God. We get to drink from the cool, fresh spring and quiet waters. Flowing from the cross is the fountain that becomes in us a spring welling up to eternal life—water that if we drink, we need never thirst again.

Meanwhile, our Lord Jesus has come to the end of his suffering: he's poured out, and left dry and desiccated. There is not a drop of water left for him. That is why Jesus thirsts; and that is why we can say:

*I came to Jesus and I drank of that life-giving stream.
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
And now I live in him.*

Soli Deo Gloria!