

Purposefully Parched

John 19:28, 29

²⁸ Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." ²⁹ A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. - John 19:28, 29

In 1986, two Israeli fishermen, brothers who lived near the Sea of Galilee noticed something covered with mud glistening in the sun. Archeologists determined that what the brothers had found was a fishing boat dating back to the time of Jesus. The only reason the artifact was discovered was because of a three-year drought that had produced an unusually low water level for the lake. There is nothing pleasant about a shortage of water, but in this instance, the result was a discovery of fabulous value. In like manner, there was nothing overtly pleasant about the image of Jesus hanging on a cross expressing His physical thirst, but that particular thirst revealed a precious truth. God really had identified Himself with the human condition.

Jesus spoke seven times from His cross. At first glance, it may appear that He said six truly significant things and one that we are simply obliged to address because it was Jesus said it. Are we justified in placing the words "I am thirsty" alongside the other six utterances? Are they really of comparable worth and substance? And, why does John record these words when he says nothing of the darkness, the tearing of the temple veil or the earthquake that accompanied the death of Christ?

John wrote several decades after Matthew, Mark and Luke wrote their accounts of the crucifixion. John must have had his reasons to not simply want to retell the story, but rather, to provide additional details. A new need had arisen, a need to unambiguously assure believers in Jesus that He really does know the pain that is often involved with being a human being. Were we to take the story of the cross to the silver screen, I doubt that the words, "I am thirsty" would convey the same sense of tension and drama as some of the other things Jesus said, but they should invoke awe in us in their own right.

I. Jesus' Thirst Firmly Established His Essential Humiliation

A. What Is Meant by the Humiliation of Christ?

Humiliation is something more than embarrassment, particularly as the term is applied to the willing "self-humiliation" of Jesus. But, humiliation by any definition involves a sense of despair as one loses his or her dignity (or in the case of Jesus, surrenders it) and the reputation is destroyed.

When scholars speak of the humiliation of Jesus, they have in mind more than the fact that He humbled Himself to become a man. Jesus could have become a man by being born in a palace and raised as an aristocrat. He could have situated Himself in the trappings of power and influence. Instead, He was laid in a manger as an infant, because the local inn was booked. Still a small child, He was driven into Egypt by a jealous old king. He was raised in the unimpressive town of Nazareth, and even they rejected Him as a prophet. He was tried falsely and illegally by Jewish authorities. He was mocked mercilessly and crucified, a mode of execution so barbaric and cruel that it was illegal for magistrates to impose it on any Roman citizen, no matter how severe the crime.

We explored the meaning of the strange darkness that fell over the land on the day Christ died. It reflected the Father's displeasure as He appeared to turn His face away from His Son, Who was momentarily suspended in a wilderness of darkness, filling the role of scapegoat by bearing the guilt of all humanity's sin. He cried out, "My, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). For the first time in His life, Jesus felt the intense spiritual thirst of a man utterly estranged from God.

"Christ not only condescended to die; he accepted death in a form and with accompanying circumstances which rendered it something more than death. His death was sacrificial, and he shrank from nothing that could contribute to make him 'perfect through suffering.'" - T. Croskery

B. To Confess Thirst was a Conscious Fulfillment of the Humiliation His Father Required

Earlier, Jesus addressed the relationship between His work and the Old Testament Law and prophets:

¹⁷"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.
- Matthew 5:17, 18

The cry, "My, my God, why have you forsaken me?" seems to have been the actual climax of the crisis of the cross. After this, the anguish seemed to have settled down a bit. John's language indicates that Jesus was reviewing all that needed to be done. One prophecy remained to be satisfied. In Psalm 69:21, these words appear: "They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst." Wine vinegar was on hand, probably part of the supplies of the soldiers who had crucified Jesus. Earlier in the ordeal, He had been offered a mixture of myrrh and wine that might have relieved some of His suffering. He refused that. Now, He had endured the required agony. He asked for a drink.

C. Christ's Humiliation Is Evidenced When We Consider to Whom He Made His Appeal

Jesus asked for a drink, and someone lifted a sponge on a hyssop stalk to His lips. Strange - Jesus was the Creator, but He made Himself less than any sinful creature standing there. It is amazing when you think about it. He turned water into wine. He walked on water. He told a woman that He could give her "living water." Now, He asked mankind for a drink. When He fed a multitude, He told them that He is the "Bread of Life." He tells us that He is "the Way and the Truth and the Life" When He was arrested in the garden, He announced that "twelve legions of angels" were standing by to affect His release. All He had to do was call. Now, He placed Himself at the mercy of men.

Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of those who crucified Him. A thief asked for grace, and Jesus promised him paradise. As an oldest son, Jesus was responsible for the care of His widowed mother and He took care of that remaining piece of earthly business. Finally, in darkness, He endured apparent abandonment by His Father as God's righteous judgment upon sin, and He had done so on behalf of every man, woman and child who had ever lived and who ever will live. Only now, with no needs of others remaining unattended, did He address His Own need - "I am thirsty."

I've addressed these spiritual and prophetic matters because they are valid causes for Jesus to have spoken of His thirst. But, let us not overlook the most obvious reason. Jesus said, "I am thirsty" because He *was* thirsty. Still, there is rich meaning behind the simple physical character of His thirst.

II. Jesus' Thirst Firmly Established His Essential Humanity

A. Jesus Was Thirsty

Jesus had shared a meal with His disciples at what we call His Last Supper. It is doubtful that He had enjoyed much, if anything, to drink since. In Gethsemane, He agonized in prayer. *Luke* records that His sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood. He was arrested and marched all over Jerusalem to stand before the Sanhedrin, before Pilate, before Herod, and back before Pilate again. In the meantime, Jesus had been brutally mistreated. His back was shredded from Roman scourging. A crown of thorns had been thrust upon His head. His many open wounds were exposed to the open air.

Finally, came the order from Pilate that Jesus be crucified. It began with a trek through the streets as He bore His own heavy cross. His hands and feet were affixed to the cross with huge spikes and He was suspended in an unnatural position for six hours. If His crucifixion was typical, Jesus had to push against a footrest with His feet to lift His body just so that He could inhale breath, and that was His pattern for breathing throughout the entire ordeal. That, coupled with the mental anguish, the exposure to the elements and the loss of blood must have produced a raging thirst. Jesus was thirsty because any human being under similar circumstances would have been thirsty. He had to be like us.

There is something innate about us that longs to know that those who would step in to help us do so because they care. They really do understand our need. They really do empathize with our pain.

It is generally accepted that for a doctor to behave in a sensitive and empathetic manner actually aids the healing process. This past Friday, *HealthDay News* addressed this. It's a bit troublesome.

“To kindle feelings of empathy for their patients, physicians should study the same acting techniques practiced by film legends Al Pacino, Robert De Niro and the late Marlon Brando ...

“... if dredging up genuine feelings of empathy seems impossible, doctors can do the next best thing: fake it ...

“To help doctors master the softer side of healing, (Dr. Eric B.) Larson proposes that medical schools teach “deep acting” (or method acting) ... “With deep acting, you try to feel what your patient is feeling ...

“Doctors also may use ‘surface acting’ to fake empathy for patients by forging their facial expressions, for example, or changing their posture. While ‘deep acting’ is preferred, any effort to show empathy is better than none at all,’ Larson reasoned.”

I wonder if any medical schools promote anything “really out there” such as authentic empathy.

B. For Jesus, Empathy Was No Act

John was written to prove that Jesus' empathy for the human condition was real. The first century was drawing to a close when John felt a burden to write another record of the life of Christ. The gospel records of *Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke* had been around for several decades, but they did not address the burning need John now faced. He was determined to establish that Jesus was God in the flesh. John wrote against the backdrop of a heresy called “Gnosticism,” which held to a doctrine called “dualism,” the idea that anything spiritual in nature is always good and that which is material in nature is always evil. A full-blown development of such thinking would do violence to the notion that Jesus was both fully God and fully man. In Gnostic circles, never the two shall meet.

The Gnostics produced two theories about the nature of Jesus. One was that He was a mere man who was adopted by God to fulfill a divine mission. The other theory was that He was never really a man at all, but an apparition, a phantom, a ghost. He played a role, but He could not fully identify with human suffering because He wasn't really human. When Jesus appeared to suffer on a cross, He did not really feel pain. Some Gnostics got so carried away with this idea that they speculated that Jesus did not leave footprints when He walked. Just think of all those plaques, posters and bookmarks that would have to go back to the Christian bookstore if Jesus didn't leave *Footprints in the Sand*.

It is possible that these Gnostics were trying to revere Jesus by distancing Him from humanity, but all they were really doing was destroying Him in His role as the Redeemer of mankind. If Jesus was to really take our punishment for us, it was essential that He truly endure it. Anything less would be a charade. John wrote to demonstrate that Jesus was in every respect a man and in every respect God. This theme cannot be missed throughout John's entire Gospel. In the first chapter, Jesus is the Word of God Who was Creator God and Who became flesh and lived among us for a while.

What John does not record about the crucifixion is almost as telling as what he does record. He doesn't mention the darkness over the land. He doesn't tell of the temple veil being torn from top to bottom, or of dead saints being raised to life. Those things would blow the minds of Jewish readers, but they wouldn't have the same depth of meaning to John's Gentile audience. John doesn't record the words of Jesus to the thief or the prayer of Jesus for the forgiveness of His tormentors. He does not record the testimony of the centurion who concluded, "Surely he was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54). Obviously, these are each important details of the Crucifixion narrative.

John had no desire just to do a "remake" of an old story. Matthew, Mark and Luke had told vital aspects of the story of Jesus and told them well. But John, the lone surviving member of the apostolic band, wanted his readers to know that God had really become a man. Jesus was God in the flesh. The only words of Jesus from the cross that John records are the ones that depict the concern of a man for the care of His mother, words admitting to physical thirst, and a word announcing that a life's work was completed, "It is finished." Make no mistake about it. John wanted us to know that Jesus was not faking His humanity. This was very important to him. Note how he opened his first epistle:

¹That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. - 1 John 1:1

C. What Was the Impact of these Words upon Jesus' Disciples?

"I am thirsty." Initially, these words would be devastating. The disciples had so hoped that this Jesus might turn out to be *Messiah*. He had shown great promise when He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, commanded nature, drove out demons and even raised the dead. Now, He couldn't even help Himself to a drink? "Poor, weak, broken and beaten Jesus." That must have been their thoughts. Jesus couldn't deliver Himself, much less their whole nation. *Messiah* could only say, "I am thirsty."

However, once the resurrected Christ was revealed and the Gospel preached, the words, "I am thirsty," took on a whole new meaning. The true significance of Jesus' humanity took shape. "I am thirsty" reminded them - as they remind us - that in Christ, God became a man - really, truly a man.

⁶Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
⁷but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!
⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. – Philippians 2:6-11

If the end result was God's forgiveness, then what's the difference if Jesus was really a man who suffered or just a phantom that pretended to suffer? If the whole notion of Jesus' suffering in our place was merely an act, then how could any of us really understand God's hatred of sin? When He had a chance to judge human sin with all the severity that His holiness warrants, did He pull His punches? He would allegedly have been pouring out His wrath on Someone Who could not really feel it. God's very real hatred of sin demanded that a very real wrath be poured out upon a very real sacrifice.

If God's wrath was only poured out on a "pretend man," then the integrity of the sacrifice of Jesus to stand in our place is irreparably damaged. If God's very real hatred of sin did not result in a very real and horrible judgment against Jesus, then I rather doubt we could ever really grow to hate our own sin. No, it's very important that we understand that Christ suffered - really suffered for our sins. God did not "fake" His judgment of sin and Jesus did not fake bearing God's wrath to its full measure.

The ability of Jesus to fully identify with the human condition is important to us. We can intellectually acknowledge that God, as God, understands our pain, in theory. But, there would forever be a barrier to our ability to trust that Jesus really understands human suffering if we were not sure that He actually endured it. It is our nature to mistrust anyone who says, "I know how you feel" unless we know that they have walked in our shoes. To Jesus, it was worth it to suffer just to remove any barriers to our ability to trust Him. The writer of Hebrews puts it all in this perspective:

... ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. ¹⁶Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. – Hebrews 4:15, 16

Do you need assurance that Jesus knows what it means to be a man? On the cross, He was thirsty, desperately thirsty.

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