

“I Thirst!”
by Rom A. Pegram (3/29/20)

“I thirst.” This simple statement that Jesus made before he died almost seems out of place amongst the other more dramatic statements he made from the cross. Yet, this seemingly insignificant, utilitarian statement is recorded by John alone; and, with John, almost every seemingly insignificant statement always points to some deeper meaning...

Let’s get into our scripture reading for today; then, we can dig a little deeper into where John might be going... Here’s Jesus’ 5th statement from the cross, found in the Gospel of John (19:28-29, NLT)...

Jesus knew that his mission was now finished, and to fulfill Scripture he said, “I am thirsty.”²⁹ A jar of sour wine was sitting there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put it on a hyssop branch, and held it up to his lips.

Most interpreters of John agree on the deeper meanings of what he wrote in his Gospel ... until they get to this statement for today: “I thirst.” On that, they don’t all agree. So, let me share briefly a few of the interpretations of this statement ... by looking to *the 3 different offers of drink* that took place in and around Jesus’ crucifixion...

- *The first time* Jesus was offered a drink was actually before he was crucified, as recorded by Mark (15:22-23): “And they brought Jesus to a place called Golgotha (which means ‘Place of the Skull’).²³ They offered him wine drugged with *myrrh*, but he refused it.” Matthew’s account (27:34) is similar and it reads: “The soldiers gave him wine mixed with bitter *gall*, but when he had tasted it, he refused to drink it.” There are two possible reasons for the words ‘myrrh’ and ‘gall’ in these verses:
 - One is ... myrrh and gall mixed with wine was routinely given by soldiers to further torment victims of crucifixion...
 - Another is ... myrrh and gall are code for poisons used to lessen the pain and speed up the process of death—more of an act of mercy...

Regardless of which explanation you prefer, *please notice this: Jesus, upon tasting the wine mixed with myrrh/gall, refused to drink it*; in other words, Jesus *intentionally* chose to suffer—his suffering communicating both God’s pain at the brokenness of humanity, as well as the costliness of our salvation. *The suffering was all part of it.* ‘Quite different from most of us who, at the hint of a headache, want to start pounding Tylenols or whatever. *Jesus took the uncomfortable way*, and he calls us, at times, to do the same for the sake of his Kingdom...

- *The second offer* of a drink is recorded in Luke 23:36-37, just FYI: “The soldiers mocked him, too, by offering him a drink of sour wine.³⁷ They called out to him, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’” This wasn’t a real offer of a drink, but more of a soldier’s toast ... to taunt Jesus at his weakest point...
- *The third offer* of a drink comes in Matthew, Mark and John’s Gospels, though John’s account is quite different. For Matthew and Mark, it comes after *last*

week's words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Apparently, some misunderstood what he was crying for and offered him a drink. In John's Gospel (19:28-29), it reads this way:

²⁸ Jesus knew that his mission was now finished, and *to fulfill Scripture* [italics mine] he said, "I am thirsty." ²⁹ A jar of sour wine was sitting there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put it on a hyssop branch, and held it up to his lips.

For John, this was *to fulfill scripture*—a prophecy. Which scripture? Well, Psalm 69:21b says: "...they offer me sour wine for my thirst."

In studying this statement in all the Gospels, it soon becomes clear that John approaches things differently than the other Gospel writers. So, here're some ideas as to what John was getting at in this statement "I thirst"... First,

THE HUMANITY OF JESUS. Many Bible scholars agree that this scene is a picture of the true humanity of Jesus. If you've ever been around anyone who's dying, thirst is a normal part of that process...

I had the privilege of being in Greensboro during my father's final hospital stay and up to about 48 hours before his death. I had to get back to Wisconsin (with my son, Josh), as there was a baptism pending back home. So, we headed out from Greensboro on a Friday morning early; my father passed away then on Sunday night...

We'd gotten up early, all packed and ready to leave town, and I told Josh that I wanted to go by the hospital one more time to say 'good bye' to Dad. I was pretty sure this would be the last time I saw him. I went in and spoke with him, briefly. When I sensed he was tuckered out from the short conversation, I felt it was time to leave. So, I told Dad that we had to go. It was one of those storybook endings, folks. I remember squeezing Dad's hand and saying, "I love you, Pop!" And he, very weakly, squeezed my hand back and said, "I love you, son!" It was perfect. I thought to myself that this was the perfect time to slip on out of his room...

And then, in perfect R.A. fashion, he got in the last word. Just as I got to the door, he cried out, "I'm dry as a bone!" That was code for "I'm thirsty," and I knew I had to go back in and get him a drink before I left. So much for the storybook ending...

Being thirsty, though, is a normal part of being human, especially at the time of death. From the time of Jesus death until now, *there have been people who denied that he was actually human*, denied that he died a human death, and of course they deny the resurrection too—one of God's greatest miracles. Apparently, God used John to help correct that misinterpretation of Jesus' life. For John, "I'm thirsty" meant that Jesus was indeed fully human... Do you believe that? Do you really believe today that Jesus understands your circumstances, no matter what they are? If feeling betrayed wasn't enough to show Jesus was human, John now adds being thirsty at the time of death—something very human. Another significance of "I thirst" might be this...

JESUS FINISHED ‘THE CUP’. This interpretation refers to *an analogy Jesus used to describe his suffering*:

- At *the last supper*, Jesus took the cup and said (Matt. 26:28), “...for this is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people. It is poured out as a sacrifice to forgive the sins of many.”
- In Matt. 20:22a, Jesus is found asking James and John, who wanted to sit at his right and left hands, “Are you able to drink from the bitter cup of suffering I am about to drink?”
- Likewise, in John 18:11, as Jesus was being arrested and Peter drew his sword, Jesus told him, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Shall I not drink from the cup of suffering the Father has given me?”

When we come to understand that on multiple occasions Jesus used the analogy of *drinking as a metaphor for the suffering he’d endure*, it may then be possible for us to see that “I thirst” may have a deeper meaning for John. Is it possible Jesus’ words were pointing toward *his willingness to drink the cup of suffering ... and drink it down to the last drop, without relief? Or perhaps he was pointing to the fact the cup was now nearly empty*—his time of suffering almost over; that seems consistent with John’s statement (19:28): “Jesus knew that his mission was now finished, and to fulfill Scripture he said, ‘I am thirsty.’”

A clue to the third possible significance of “I thirst” is found in Chapters 4 and 7 of the Gospel of John. Here, the significance to the words “I thirst” might be seen as...

THE FOUNTAIN OF LIVING WATER DRIED UP. Do you remember the story of Jesus meeting the woman at the well (John 4:10)? Here, we find Jesus asking the woman for a drink, her giving him one, and then Jesus replying, “If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water.” Jesus was the ‘living water’ this woman was looking for, *as we all are ...* and his time had just about come to an end here on the cross...

Likewise in John 7 (v.37b), Jesus said to the multitudes in Jerusalem, “Anyone who is thirsty may come to me!” And it’s precisely with these two passages (John 4 & 7) as a backdrop that John records Jesus saying, “I thirst.” *So, what does it mean that the One who offers living water was now thirsty himself? God in the flesh had come to earth to offer living water, and humanity had chosen to poison the Spring—the Source. And here on the cross the Spring is drying up; its water will soon cease to flow...*

So, folks, in light of all this ... what are you thirsting for most during this season of Lent 2020? What do you hope will satisfy you?

Jesus’ death on the cross beckons us to thirst only for him—Living Water being the only kind that will satisfy us for eternity! Now, I’m going to close with one more possible meaning for John’s recorded words of Jesus, “I thirst.” And that’s John’s reference to *the hyssop branch*, instead of a stick (as in Matthew & Mark). Consider this:

THE HYSSOP BRANCH (AND A NEW COVENANT). What's the significance of the hyssop branch? First of all, hyssop is a small, bushy plant, and attaching a sponge of any size to a hyssop branch would be nearly impossible! Perhaps *John's point was not botany, but theology...*

The season they were celebrating at the time of Jesus' death was *Passover*. If you remember the story, it was a branch of hyssop that was used to sprinkle blood over the doorposts of the Hebrews in Egypt that would save them from the Angel of Death that'd 'pass over' them at night...

- Only John calls Jesus the "lamb of God"...
- Only in John's Gospel does Jesus' crucifixion take place as the Passover lambs are being slaughtered in the Temple...

For John, *the hyssop branch was one more clue pointing to Jesus' identity as the sacrifice* that would save the Israelites from death and deliver them from slavery to sin.

In telling us about the hyssop branch, John was not giving us needless information; *he was actually pointing us toward the meaning of Jesus' death! Jesus was initiating a NEW COVENANT with God on our behalf*; he was cleansing all who'd trust in him; he was saving us from sin; and he was delivering us from death...

As people stood around the cross that day, watching Jesus die, someone in the crowd heard Jesus say, "I thirst" or "I am thirsty." And we're told that *someone had the courage* to break away from the hostile crowd, get a hyssop branch, attach it to a small sponge, and lift it with compassion to Jesus' lips. It could've been one of several people there that day on Jesus' behalf, but in my imagination, I like to think it was Nicodemus (who we heard from earlier). Regardless of who it was, *someone had the courage* to risk the scorn of the crowd ... and offer Jesus a drink before he died. So, *would you do the same?*

We can, you know—*today!* Jesus said (Matt. 25:40), "And the King will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!'" Who have we seen in need lately and gone out of our way to offer them a drink? It might be physical thirst; it might be spiritual thirst. Either way, when we do this, it's more than just offering H₂O, you know. So, let me ask again: *Would you do the same? Would you offer Jesus a drink today?*