

LIVING WATER

John 4:10-15

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“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn. 4:13-14).

In 1509, Don Diego Columbus arrived on the island of Hispaniola to rule as Spanish governor in the West Indies. Don Diego, the son of the great explorer Christopher Columbus, arrived with several relatives, a large retinue of cavaliers, and a troop of well-bred ladies sent to marry and civilize the leading colonists of New Spain. Among those colonists was Juan Ponce de Leon, governor of Puerto Rico. Ponce had distinguished himself in battle and was revered as a personal companion of Christopher Columbus. Though an old man, he was animated with the ambitions of youth. He watched in frustration as the young courtiers took their young wives and set off for wealth and renown. One biography says, “The enjoyment of life had ever been an exquisite pleasure to him, and his desire to prolong his earthly existence in vigor was intense.”¹

Because of this desire, Ponce was inspired by legends he heard of “crystal waters flowing from living springs... in which he who bathed would be instantly endowed with immortal youth and great beauty.” Outfitting a small fleet, he began searching for this “Fountain of Youth.” Being first directed to the Bahama Islands, he bathed in every stream and lake there. Disappointed, he extended his search northwest. On Easter Sunday he landed at what is now St. Augustine,

¹ Cited from *Our Country*, vol. I, accessed on-line at http://www.publicbookshelf.com/public_html/Our_Country_Vol_I/complete_text.txt, ch. 6

having been drawn there by the perfume of flowers wafting over the ocean. Believing himself to have discovered paradise, he claimed the land for Spain and named it *Florida* in honor of the flowers. Certain that the Fountain of Youth must be among the magnolia-laden streams nearby, and anxious to taste the promised golden fruit proffered by the hands of lovely maidens, Ponce searched in earnest but also in vain. Frustrated at his failure to find the fountain, Ponce returned to Puerto Rico having gained not immortal youth but immortal fame for discovering Florida and for seeking eternal life.²

JESUS' OFFER OF LIVING WATER

If Ponce de Leon had trusted his Bible instead of native legends, he would have learned that the fountain of eternal life is found not in the Bahamas or Florida but at an ancient well outside the town of Sychar in Samaria. According to Jesus, the source of living water was not in Jacob's well itself, on which he sat with the Samaritan woman. Rather, Jesus himself is the fountain of eternal life. "If you knew the gift of God," he said, "and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (Jn. 4:10). Pointing to the well, he added, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever" (Jn. 4:13-14). Though lacking the scented flowers, the golden apples, and lovely maidens, here was a fountain of youth and vigor from which Ponce de Leon may have drunk without sailing in ships, and from which any one of us may benefit simply by believing in Jesus Christ.

Jesus employs the Bible's frequent use of the link between water and life. Water is absolutely necessary for life in this world. If you are flying over the Great Plains in the Central United States, you will look down on a brown landscape slashed with green lines and dotted with green squares and circles. The green lines are rivers, where water brings life to the earth; the squares and circles are farmlands watered by irrigation systems. Where there is water, there is life. Jesus is using his earthly situation, sitting upon a well, to make a

² Ibid.

point about spiritual life. As a well gives water for our bodies, so also does God give life to our souls.

In Jesus' day, the expression "living water" referred to fresh, running water, in contrast to the stagnant water found in wells. But those familiar with the Bible will also see this as a reference to the gift of abundant life through the Holy Spirit that God promised through the Messiah. In Jeremiah 2:13, God described himself as "the spring of living water." Psalm 36:9 says, "For with you is the fountain of life." Isaiah 44:3 tells of the coming day of salvation: "For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring." The last chapter of Bible, Revelation 22, depicts "the river of the water of life," flowing from the throne of God and of his Son, the Savior-Lamb (Rev. 22:1). One writer therefore describes living water as "the soul-satisfying grace of God, or that which only God can give to satisfy a soul. It is... the transforming life and power that God alone gives in and through the gospel of His Son, that leads to eternal life, and that satisfies as nothing else can."³

In making this offer, Jesus summarized his entire gospel in terms of two things the world needs to know. He says, "If you knew the gift of God." This is what we need to know: God has life as a gift for those who will receive it. He says, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters" (Isa. 55:1), and we may bring the parched soil of our hearts to be watered by him. Second, Jesus says, "If you knew... who it is that is speaking" (Jn. 4:10). We need to know who Jesus is as well: the Savior sent by God to bring eternal life to this dying world. In these two statements is our whole gospel; this is what we and others need to know in order to be saved: what is the gift of God and who Jesus is as the One who offers it. Then we must ask of him, and he will bring eternal life as living water for our souls. We need *it* – God's gift of eternal life – from *him* – the Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus promises: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (Jn. 4:10).

³ Joseph "Skip" Ryan, *That You May Believe* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 100.

UNQUENCHED THIRST

Jesus' offer produced a revealing response from the woman: "The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?'" (Jn. 4:11). Here we have another depiction of unbelief. We saw in John 3:19 that unbelief is caused by a moral commitment to sin: Jesus said, "Light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil." We also observed that there are cultural barriers that keep many people from God, which Jesus crossed in speaking to this Samaritan woman. Now, in her response, we see yet another reason for unbelief: spiritual inability. She simply was not able to grasp what Jesus meant in his offer of salvation. She was an earthly, worldly person, unable to think in spiritual terms.

The Bible teaches that fallen mankind is dead to spiritual things (see Eph. 2:1-3). Paul says, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). This woman was a perfect example of this teaching, for she could only think in terms of physical water and literal wells. Nicodemus was similarly unable to understand Jesus in John 3. Jesus said to him, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:3).

The woman's reply to Jesus was almost comical. She did not see how he could offer what she understood only as running water. First, Jesus had no pale: "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" (Jn. 4:11). Second, she could not see how Jesus could do better than so great a man as the patriarch Jacob: "Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock" (Jn. 4:12). Jacob's well remains in Samaria today; it is over one hundred feet deep and was likely deeper then. Some scholars believe Jacob's well may have been the deepest in all of Palestine.⁴ How could this stranger – a man with no apparent distinction or station – hope to do better than Jacob and his well?

⁴ See Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 150.

People think the same way today. Jesus is not someone they take seriously because he does not head a powerful organization or command worldly resources. The people who matter, they think, are those who allocate riches and promotions, or who provide valued goods and services. Despite his unparalleled religious status, Jesus is thought to be of little earthly good – and most people think only of earthly things, like this Samaritan woman. Jesus did not bring any advanced technology and simply could not compare with people who really matter – like Jacob, who at least was head of a great nation. She was interested in plumbing, not salvation; she wanted an easier way to get better water from the well. Likewise, people today want advice on relationships, work, and play, not theological jargon about Jesus.

The problem with such thinking goes back to Jesus' offer: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is speaking to you" (Jn. 4:9). The truth is that the spiritual realm is superior to the material realm; God's gift of spiritual life is more valuable than earthly riches. Moreover, though Jesus Christ seems so easy to dismiss, in fact God has "seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet" (Eph. 1:20-22). Even when it comes to our earthly concerns – jobs, families, and health – Jesus has far more power than any earthly authority. But, more importantly, Jesus has authority over our eternal souls. Unless we come to him in faith we are condemned already, John says, for not believing in the name of God's only Son (Jn. 3:18).

Does this not inspire us to tell people what they do not know? This woman had many needs – she needed relationship advice, she had the stress of being rejected by other women, and she needed help getting water from this well, along with surely many other problems. But her great need was to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. This is why we need to preach the gospel – not lifestyle tips or the self-help plumbing which today's worldly men and women also crave. The Bible says, "The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16), so we must proclaim it.

With this very thing in mind, Jesus replied to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again." Every earthly source of life

and satisfaction will always fail to satisfy our souls. The woman may get beautiful pipes bringing the well water all the way to her house. Yet she would thirst again. Thirst is one of the strongest cravings, and the souls of men and women are thirsty for God, whether they know it or not. Nothing but God satisfies the soul made by God for himself. St. Augustine wrote at the beginning of his *Confessions*: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”⁵ Whether we know it or not, Psalm 42:1 speaks for us all: “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.”

This was true for this Samaritan woman and it is true for you. You may have all this world can offer – riches, rank, place and power –yet be utterly unfulfilled. Isn’t this the story of our own time? Amidst gaudy affluence and ever-ready entertainment, with unparalleled leisure and earthly excitements, ours is a generation aching with thirst. Arthur Pink summarizes the human condition:

Whether he articulates it or not the natural man, the world over, is crying ‘I thirst.’ Why this consuming desire to acquire wealth? Why this craving for the honors and plaudits of the world? Why this mad rush after pleasure, the turning from one form of it to another with persistent and unwearied diligence? Why this eager search for wisdom - this scientific inquiry, this pursuit of philosophy, this ransacking of the writings of the ancients, and this ceaseless experimentation by the moderns? Why the insane craze for that which is novel? Why? Because there is an aching void in the soul. Because there is something remaining in every natural man that is *unsatisfied*. This is true of the millionaire equally as much as the pauper: the riches of the former bring no real contentment. It is as true of the globe-trotter equally as much as of the country rustic who has never been outside the bounds of his native country: traveling from one end of the earth to the other and back again fails to discover the secret of peace. Over all the cisterns of this world’s providing is written in letters of ineffaceable truth, ‘Whosoever drinks of this water *shall thirst again*.’⁶

Remember Ponce de Leon? The tragedy of his life is not that he never found the Fountain of Youth. The tragedy is that even if he had found it, its unending earthly pleasures would not really have satisfied him. So what are you seeking? Riches? Pleasure? Fame? The tragedy today is that people seek these things but find no satisfaction

⁵ St. Augustine: *The Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 3.

⁶ Arthur W. Pink, *The Seven Sayings of the Saviour on the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1958), 96

when they gain them. Jesus says that whatever earthly fulfillment you may gain, you will only thirst again. Especially when our seeking leads us into sin, we end up like broken cisterns not even capable of being satisfied, no longer even able to hold water, unless Christ should come and heal our souls.

Malcolm Muggeridge was one of the leading journalists and writers of his generation. Through the thirst of his own soul he learned what Jesus sought to communicate to this Samaritan woman. He reflected:

I may... pass for being a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the streets – that's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for admission to the higher slopes of the Inland Revenue – that's success. Furnished with money and a little fame... [I] may partake of trendy diversions – that's pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote... represented a serious impact on our time – that's fulfillment. Yet I say to you, and I beg you to believe me, multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing – less than nothing, a positive impediment – measured against one draught of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty.⁷

GOD'S GIFT OF LIFE

That was Jesus' message to the woman at the well. He told her that by drinking from worldly troughs she would always thirst again, but, he added, "Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn. 4:14).

There is a *condition* for what Jesus offers. He says, "Whoever drinks." Jesus did not say that we must fulfill some quest or perform morally or religiously at a certain high level. He does not place a price tag on his living water, but simply says, "Whoever drinks." He is speaking, of course, of simple faith. John 3:16 told us, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Leon Morris says, "The gift of the living water is not a reward for meritorious service. It is a gift that brings to anyone who receives it, no matter how insignificant

⁷ Cited in Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity, 1993), 84.

and limited he or she may be, a totally new experience, a new power, a new life – the life that is eternal.”⁸

Notice that this woman’s sins did not keep Jesus from offering her sal-vation. He brings up her sins later in the conversation, not before but after he offers salvation, knowing that, if she believes, his death on the cross will cleanse her from all sin. George Hutchinson writes, “Christ, who makes offer of grace before we seek it, will not refuse it to them who ask it, nor will former sins hinder their acceptance who come to seek grace; for even to this wicked woman he saith, ‘Thou wouldest have asked, and he would have given thee living waters.’”⁹

When we fulfill the condition of salvation – receiving God’s gift through faith alone – there is a glorious *consequence*: “Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever.” Jesus offers to satisfy our souls. This does not mean that all our trials cease and that life in this world is transformed into unending ease. Far from it! To follow Jesus is to pick up his cross and endure many hardships in life – not the least of which is our warfare with sin. But we gain soul fulfillment through our fellowship with God. Earthly things lose their appeal – the more worldly and sinful they are the more thoroughly their luster fades – and we find permanent satisfaction for the thirst of our souls.

Lastly, Jesus speaks of a *change* that will result: “The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn. 4:14). This refers to the new birth by the Holy Spirit. To be born again is to have a spiritual fountain welling up within you, as God himself lives and moves in your heart.

The results of this change, with the ever-flowing fountain of spiritual power it opens up in us, are faith, godliness, and unfailing spiritual joy. Psalm 16:11 says, “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” Do you experience that? If you are not a Christian, this is what Jesus offers you – not the dreary, negative lifestyle you have been told that Christians endure. If you come to Jesus, he will save you through faith and give you life abundant (see Jn. 10:10).

⁸ Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 136.

⁹ George Hutchinson, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 60.

If you are a Christian, are you experiencing this? Do you enjoy the blessings of the Holy Spirit's fountain in your heart? The tragedy of Ponce de Leon was that he sought a Fountain of Youth that did not exist. But how much greater is the tragedy of Christians who have found the true fountain of eternal, spiritual life, but who know little of its blessings of righteousness, peace, and joy.

The sad fact is that far too many Christians live without enjoying the spiritual blessings Jesus has given them. This is one reason why our witness is often ineffective. There are a number of explanations for this. Some Christians live close to the world and fill their hearts with worldly things. Are you like that? Are you still filling your soul with water that will leave you thirsty again? If so, wean your heart from earthly pleasures and treasures and start serving Jesus only at home, in your work, and in your play. Stop craving for worldly success, stop drinking from worldly troughs, and renew your commitment to Christ, and you will find refreshing waters flowing freely once again. Others have stopped up the spring of the Holy Spirit with sinful habits or attitudes. If you are truly a Christian, you can never ultimately block God's Spirit, but how much better for you to repent or forgive as needed and to walk in the light, cleansed by Christ's blood and refreshed by his fellowship. Jesus says to all who come to him, for the first time or once again: "Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever."

The woman heard Jesus' offer of life – its condition, its consequence, and its change – and still responded with only worldly understanding. She said, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water" (Jn. 4:15). Jesus was not done with her, and he would continue working into her heart until she understood and believed. When she finally did, she responded with a joy that changed her life and the lives of many others. May we likewise know the gift of God and the Savior who offers it, and may many others drink from his living water through our witness in the world.