

## Praying Your Thirst

### [Psalms 24](#)

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During the five Sundays of Lent, I will be preaching on the call to prayer. The text for each of these sermons will come from the Psalms -- the ancient book of worship for both the Hebrews and the Early Church. We begin with Psalm 42 and its call to pray your thirst.

The Southern novelist Ellen Glasgow once wrote a description of her father, who was a Presbyterian elder with a rigid sense of duty. "He was entirely unselfish," she said, "and in his long life he never committed a pleasure." Many think that this is the goal of religion: to learn how to live without any pleasure or desire. Because if we act on our desire, we may act wrongly and commit sin. So they think it is best to rid ourselves of desire all together.

In the early stages of the ascetic movement, monks borrowed the concept of "apatheia" from the Greek philosophical teachers. From it, we get the word apathy. In striving for apatheia, the monks' goal was to detach all desires from their souls in order to make room for God. This may have made sense to those who were accustomed to the writings of the Stoics, but it made no sense at all to the Hebrews who had a long custom of carrying their desire with them into prayer.

The men and women of the Old Testament were filled with desire and made it known to God. They longed for a son, a blessing, deliverance from slavery, promised land, and when they lost their land they longed to return. In fact, one of the recurring themes of the Old Testament is that the people are not at the right place and they are yearning to get there. Even when they are living in the land they are not in the right place in their relationships with each other or with God, and so, through the prophets, they pray to return.

The New Testament inherits this sense of longing, and applies it to the coming kingdom of Jesus Christ. No one is really at home in this world after meeting Jesus. So they preach, and work, and long for some approximation of heaven on earth. From the beginning to the end of the book, the Bible is all about desire.

The problem, the Bible says, is not with desire but with learning to pray your desires that you may discover how to desire the right thing. Apart from prayer, desire races about untethered, and there is no better way to waste your life than to spend it running back and forth chasing desire. When that happens, in the words of Blaise Pascal, "We are never living, always hoping to live." We are always hoping that the next thing will take care of our great desire. But it doesn't. As soon as you attain the next thing, you discover it is only the birthplace for more desire.

We were created thirsty. Every morning we wake up to confront this thirst again. That thirst can either drive you crazy with a lifetime of lamenting, "if only..." or the thirst can become something of a sacrament pointing you to the longing for God.

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God (Psalm 42:1). When Augustine was baptized on Easter morning in the year 387 the congregation sang this psalm. It was exactly the right hymn selection for one who had tried to satisfy his thirst with everything else under the sun: sexuality, philosophy, wealth, even a stolen pear. Finally, he surrendered to the reality that his soul would remain restless until it came to rest in his Creator. But like Augustine, you will never come to that realization until you get to the bottom of your desire.

In his book, *The Awakened Heart*, Gerald May writes, "there is a desire within each of us, in the deep center of ourselves that we call the heart. We are born with it, it is never completely satisfied, and it never

dies. We are often unaware of it, but the desire is always awake. . . ."

When the desire becomes too much for us, we may try to bury it with excessive work. We can try to run from it for years, even decades, but it keeps reappearing in unguarded moments. G. K. Chesterton has called this the "divine discontent" planted within our souls, that incessantly reminds us we were created for something else. We can try to numb the desire with other things but that only leads to addiction. We can try to tell ourselves that this desire will only ruin our comfortable lives, but that only leads to domesticating the wild passion. You don't really think your desire is for a new sofa, do you?

Of all the people I've met in my pastoral ministry, the ones who worry me the most are not the addicts or those who have made a mess of life trying to cram other things into the God-shaped box in their souls. No, at least they are still desiring and will eventually get to the bottom of it all where they will find the savior. The people who worry me the most are those who have abandoned the journey. They have settled into their discontent. They have camped out in the places of resignation, indulgence, or hurt. They have given up their capacity for great dreams, because to dream is to live with yearning, and they are tired of having their yearning disappointed.

But the Psalms will not permit this comfortable despair. When we pray these historic prayers of God's people, the Holy Spirit breathes upon the smoldering embers of our old longings and desires. And we are forced to deal again with our Divine Discontent. We are made restless... for God.

There are different types of Psalms, just as there are different types of prayer. Some are all about praise and thanksgiving. Others are all about lament. Some are prayers for deliverance from enemies. Others are prayers for the King, for Jerusalem, for the Law of God. But the Psalms we will be looking at during Lent, like Psalm 42, are all about how a person's life is oriented around the desire for God. Our Old Testament scholars claim that these Psalms typically take a person through three stages of orientation.

In stage one, the person's life was securely oriented. Life made sense. God was in heaven, and life was good on earth. These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival (42:4). We can all remember a time of festivity and joy. Our desires were simple and we seemed to live without longing. But that was before something happened.

In stage two, the person's life suffers a disorientation. He is removed from the land and cast into exile. David is anointed King but is on the run from Saul. Or he commits a terrible sin and cannot get over the guilt. In our own lives, this disorientation may be caused by a lost job, a routine medical exam that reveals cancer, a child who grows up to reject the faith, a cherished relationship that turns hard and painful. Now you desire like you never have before. Tears have been my food day and night . . . (42:3). As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me. . . (42:10). What you grieve in the second stage of disorientation is not just the thing that was lost, but your lost naivete. There is no going back to stage one, no return to the land as it once was, no return to the life that was childlike. That is because what was lost was not just your health or job, but your former vision of God who made things nice. So the real issue, the real desire, is to find God in the midst of this crisis. That is what the psalmists pray for. If they can just find God in the midst of this disorientation, they know they will be okay.

My soul is cast down within me, therefore I remembered you from the land of Jordan (42:5). I cannot tell you how many times I have heard this same testimony. When the naive world started to crumble and a person's soul was cast down, they remembered something about God from their childhood. This is how new faith is discovered. By pulling out of the ashes of the lost life that old faith that was there but never tested. But now that it is needed, it becomes new faith as it allows you to see God with a different vision.

This is when you reach the third stage that the psalms describe -- the stage of reorientation. The journey is always from naive orientation, to disorientation, to reorientation. Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God. For I shall again praise him, my help and my God. (42:11). In this third stage you return to a place you have never been before. You return to seeing God with you, but you are seeing God so differently than before the crisis. Now you see God not in heaven quietly arranging your comfortable life. That is gone, and in its loss you discovered your desire was for something

much deeper. Now you see that your desire and hope is just for God.

The people who have gone through this dark night of reorientation, discovering that their desire was just for God, are the freest people in the world. That is because they are not afraid of losing anything. It is all gone already. All that is left is the only thing they can never lose -- the love of God.

Is this not at the core of our faith in Jesus Christ? Is he not the embodiment of a God who refused to stay in heaven ordering life on earth, who enters into the fray and chaos of our lives, and who brings us home. Along the way we lose interest in every other desire as we discover the sufficiency of his grace.

When Pascal got to the bottom of his desire on November 23, 1654, he wrote these words, "Fire. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob... Certainty, Certainty, emotion, joy, peace, God of Jesus Christ... Thy God shall be my God. Oblivion of the world and of everything except God. Joy, Joy, Joy, tears of Joy!"

When he died they found those words sewn into his jacket, next to his heart.

O God, it is you alone who is at the bottom of our heart's desire, and we long to worship you. Amen.