

# “The Last Words of Jesus: #5 - Suffering”

μετα τουτο ειδως ο ιησους οτι ηδη παντα τετελεσται ινα τελειωθη η γραφη λεγει διψω.

*Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty” (John 19:28).*

John 4:1-14, 19:28-29 <sup>1</sup>

Jesus and His disciples had gotten up early to begin the journey from Judea back to Galilee. When they came to place where Jews turned east across the Jordan to avoid traveling through the despised province of Samaria, Jesus didn't turn, but kept walking north. The disciples looked at each other in amazement, but they didn't say anything. They'd already been with Jesus long enough to expect the unexpected.

After having walked about twenty miles, they came to the village of Sychar, where the ancient well of Jacob was located. It was about noon, and Jesus sent the disciples into the village to buy some lunch while He stayed behind at the well.

There were two reasons for this. The first reason was that Jesus wanted to stretch His disciples' understanding by requiring them to not only travel through Samaria, but also by requiring them to do business with Samaritan folks—and, most horrifying of all, by requiring them to eat Samaritan food.

The other reason for sending the disciples into town was that Jesus had an appointment to keep. And as often happens, the person who had a divine appointment with Jesus that day had no idea about what was coming. The appointment wasn't on her calendar. Such divine appointments are frequently not on our calendars, either.

Before long, a Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water for the day's needs. She came in the heat of the day rather than in the cool of the morning as the other women did because she didn't want to meet anyone at the well. As I'm sure you remember, this woman was a social outcast.

We don't know much about her story, but we do know that she'd had five husbands, and we know that she was then living with a sixth man who was not her husband. Since women of that day seldom had the right to divorce their husbands, it seems likely that this woman had been divorced by five different men, and one of the organizing principles of her sad life had apparently become escaping the scorn of her neighbors by avoiding them altogether.

The woman was surprised to see Jesus sitting near the well. She was more surprised that He spoke to her, and she was most surprised that He asked her for a drink. The multitudes of hatreds that fill that land down to our own time were already centuries old, and Jews didn't ever speak to Samaritans. Indeed, the Jews tried to pretend that the Samaritans didn't exist at all. Beyond this, it was extremely unusual for men to speak to women in public, and to ask to drink after a despised woman was off-the-charts-bizarre.

So for all these reasons, the woman objected to Jesus' request, and when she did, He told her, *“If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”*

*“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”*

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on March 25, 2012.

Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:10-14). . . .

It was midafternoon. Jesus had now been on the cross for nearly six hours. “Knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty” 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).<sup>2</sup> This cry, “**I am thirsty**,” was Jesus’ Fifth Word from the Cross. And this statement really was only one word—διψω (“dipso”).

At first look, it would appear to make more sense for this to be the Fourth Word. It would seem to be more logical to say “I’m thirsty,” prior to the cry “Daddy, why have you abandoned me?” And that is, in fact, the order Mel Gibson used in his film. Most scholars, though, think that the cry of abandonment preceded the cry of suffering, so let’s try to understand what this might mean.

Jesus surely was suffering physical thirst. It’s quite likely that He’d had nothing at all to drink since the supper with His disciples the night before. He had become wet with sweat in His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. His body had been horribly torn by the scourging, with significant loss of blood.

I expect we’re all familiar with the profuse bleeding that accompanies even small wounds to the scalp, and the crown of thorns had released streams of blood all around Jesus’ head. The soldiers had dressed Jesus in a purple robe to mock Him, and then had ripped off the robe before returning Him to Pilate. His wounds would have clotted into the fabric, and pulling the robe off would have been like ripping away a scab that covered His whole body, causing both horrible pain and more blood loss.

Jesus had continued to lose fluid volume as He sweat under the weight of the cross on the *Via Dolorosa*, and He had now been bleeding through the added wounds of the nails for nearly six hours. Yes, Jesus was thirsty. His body cried out in suffering—*excruciating* suffering. You probably know that the word “excruciating” means “out of the cross.” It’s a word that was coined to describe pain for which no sufficiently awful word existed.

Billy Graham pointed out that when Jesus said, “If you are going to follow me, you have to take up a cross,” it was though He had said, “Come and bring your electric chair with you,” or “Take up the gas chamber and follow me.” Jesus did not have a beautiful gold cross in mind; or the cross on a church steeple or on the front of your Bible. Jesus had in mind a place of execution.”<sup>3</sup>

Roman soldiers got daily rations of a cheap wine called “posca,” and execution details drank heavily to dull the horror of their assignment.<sup>4</sup> Someone standing nearby felt pity for Jesus’ cry of anguish, and offered Him a little posca in a sponge stuck on a hyssop branch.

<sup>2</sup> This was the fulfillment of Psalm 69:21. See also Psalm 22:15.

<sup>3</sup> Billy Graham, “The Offense of the Cross,” *Great Sermons on Christ*, ed. Wilbur M. Smith; cited in *Christianity Today*, vol. 36, no. 12.

<sup>4</sup> No recipes for *posca* are known to have survived. An approximate recreation of the beverage can be made by combining 1½ cups of vinegar with ½ cup of honey, 1 tablespoon of crushed coriander seed and 4 cups of water. The mixture should be boiled in a saucepan to dissolve the honey before being allowed to cool to room temperature. After straining out the coriander seeds, it can be served (Cathy Kaufman, *Cooking in Ancient Civilizations* [Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006], p. 182).



Hyssop was a plant whose long stalks had clusters of blooms on their ends, and its use had a double significance. In the first place, on the night of Israel's Exodus from Egypt, hyssop was the plant prescribed for sprinkling the blood of the lambs on the doorposts to avert the destruction of the death angel. Later, hyssop was also used to sprinkle the blood of the sacrificial animals against the altar (Exodus 12:22; Leviticus 14).

Hyssop, then, was a plant long associated with sacrifice, and as the book of Hebrews reminds us, Jesus' sacrifice was not "*by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all **by his own blood**, thus obtaining eternal redemption*" (Hebrews 9:12).

Second, the mention of hyssop focuses our attention on a different kind of thirst, the kind of dreadful thirst that had really been indicated by Jesus' Fourth Word, His cry of abandonment. Centuries before, the prophet Amos had foretold a time when God would send a famine, "*not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD*" (Amos 8:11). About such a famine the psalmist cried out, "*O God, I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water*" (Psalm 63:1). Jesus was physically thirsty, but far more than this, **He was spiritually thirsty**.

It was for this reason that as Jesus experienced the famine of his Father's absence, He cried out, "*I thirst!*" And it was for this reason that the wine on the hyssop offered no relief.

You and I also have a deep spiritual hunger and thirst, but not because God has abandoned us. You and I hunger and thirst for God because God has so made us that in good times as well as troubled times, our hearts long for relationship with Him.

C.S. Lewis once wrote that "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. . . . If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably, earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing."<sup>5</sup> God has so made us that we yearn for eternity.

Frederica Mathewes-Green, a well-known Christian writer who lives just down the road in Baltimore, agrees with Lewis: "My hunch is that you are already sensing something of God's presence, or you wouldn't care [about God at all]."

"Picture yourself walking around a shopping mall, looking at people and the window displays. Suddenly, you get a whiff of cinnamon. You weren't even hungry, but now you really crave a cinnamon roll. This craving isn't something you made up. There you were, minding your own business, when some drifting molecules of sugar, butter, and spice collided with a susceptible patch inside your nose. You had a real encounter with cinnamon—not a mental delusion, not an emotional projection, but the real thing.

"And what was the effect? You want more, [and you want it] now. And [in a similar way,] if you hunger to know the presence of God, it's because . . . you have already begun to sense [God's] compelling delight."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperCollins, 1952).

<sup>6</sup> Frederica Mathewes-Green, *The Jesus Prayer* (Paraclete Press, 2009), pp. xiii-xiv.

Pastor Mark Labberton tells an interesting story that makes this point in yet another way: “A man once appeared at my office door, asking for some bullet points on Christianity to help make sense of the dinner conversations he was having with his wife, a recent convert. He made it clear he was very busy, very successful, and didn't really have time to study her beliefs—just bullet points, now, please.

“It would have been easy to hand him a book or pamphlet. That can be good. But instead, I said, ‘I can see you are a very busy, very successful person, so I don't think this is a good idea.’

“‘Why?’ he asked, frustrated.

“‘Because,’ I said, ‘If I were to give you the bullet points, and you were to really understand them, they have a way of working into a person’s life so significantly that your life could really get messed up. *You would have to rethink the meaning of success, of time, of family . . . of everything, really.* I don’t think you really want to do that, do you?’”<sup>7</sup>

Many of us are engaged in fasting of one sort or another as we make our way toward Holy Week. **I encourage such fasting, because it has a wonderful way of helping us “to rethink the meaning of success, of time, of family . . . of everything, really.”** (And if you decide to try a fast, I encourage you to remember the guidelines Jesus gave us for fasting in Matthew 6:16-18.)

Fasting of any sort can be a very valuable spiritual discipline, because as we struggle to deal with what we’re feeling the lack of, God has an opportunity to show us more fully what we’re really made of. If your fasting doesn’t involve any such struggle, then you should change what you’re doing without.

A big part of the point of fasting is to feel the struggle and then to eventually be set free from such earthly concerns as our hearts become more fully anchored in God. The practice of fasting is intended to change the things for which our hearts yearn.

Philip Yancey, one of my favorite Christian writers, once interviewed a young man named Mike who works with homeless men. Their conversation had to do with such yearning: “Mike told me,” Philip wrote, “that homeless people, having hit bottom, don’t waste time building up an image or trying to conform. And they pray without pretense, a refreshing contrast to what [is often found in] churches.”

When Yancey asked for an example, Mike said: “My friend and I were playing guitars and singing *As the Deer Panteth for the Water*, when David, a homeless man we knew, started weeping. ‘That’s what I want, man’ he said. ‘I want that water. I’m an alcoholic and I want to be healed.’”<sup>8</sup>

That hunger and thirst for soul healing is what fasting is all about, and it’s what Jesus’ Fifth Word from the Cross was about, too. You and I can find solidarity with David by saying earnestly to God, **“That’s what I want. I want that water. I’m a sinner, and I want to be healed!”**

Jesus [told the woman], “*Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life*” (John 4:13-14).

<sup>7</sup> Mark Labberton, “Pastor of Desperation,” *Leadership Journal* (Winter 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Philip Yancey, “The Word on the Street,” *Christianity Today* (January 2006), p. 80.

This morning, my friend, Jesus says to you as well, *“If you only knew the gift God has for you and who I am, you would ask me, and I would give you living water. . . . If you are thirsty, come to me!”* (John 4:10, 7:37).

As the deer panteth for the water, so my soul longeth after Thee.  
You alone are my heart’s desire, and I long to worship Thee.

*You alone are my strength, my shield; to You alone may my spirit yield.  
You alone are my heart’s desire, and I long to worship Thee.*

You’re my friend and You are my brother, even though You are a King.  
I love You more than any other, so much more than anything.

I want You more than gold or silver, only You can satisfy.  
You alone are the real joy-giver, and the apple of my eye.

*You alone are my strength, my shield; to You alone may my spirit yield.  
You alone are my heart’s desire, and I long to worship Thee.<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> “As the Deer,” words and music by Martin Nystrom (Maranatha! Music, 1984).