

Drought Over: Water Freely Available

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Date: 16 December 2007

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[0 : 00] I want you to picture paradise.

I wonder what's in your picture of paradise, if you can imagine the perfect place. We often see paradise advertised by real estate agents or developers.

They show us a picture of paradise that is a house that is ideal, far too big for us and far too expensive and it usually has water. Often the developments around Melbourne now have artificial water systems, lakes and little streams and you get these pictures of happy families, where are they, and they're all around water having a great time or holiday homes with ocean views or it could be that we see a picture of paradise in the travel brochures and again a dominant theme is water.

Last weekend I was staying in a hotel and I'd chosen the hotel partly because it was just a couple of minutes walk from water, from the ocean. Not that I swam in it, but I walked in it and paddled in it.

So water is often a theme that we find in pictures of paradise and perfection. But not because water is a luxury item.

[1 : 22] Water is an essential item. And the drought in Australia in the last year or two in particular, but in the last decade or so in general, has reminded us that water is not really a luxury item but a necessity.

And the scarcity of water in our own country in recent times has reminded us just how precious such an essential item is.

A waterless land is a land full of death. And so much of Australia in the last couple of years has been like that with animals dying and with the high incidence of suicide amongst rural farmers.

Water is essential for life. In the original paradise that the Bible briefly describes at its beginning, again we find water.

We read in the first book of the Bible in its second chapter, Genesis chapter 2, that a river flows out of Eden to water the garden. Without water, there's no life.

[2 : 27] Without water, there's no paradise. And at the very beginning of the Bible, we get a picture where water comes out from the center in effect of paradise of Eden, the garden of Eden.

And the sufficiency of that water is a key part of that description at the beginning of the Bible. It's a theme that's replayed through the Bible, through the Old Testament, for example.

So when Israel is promised the great land of Israel, or Canaan as it's called in some places, water again is a dominant theme. It is a land where water will flow, where streams will flow, there'll be rain in season, the waters will rise up as springs or rivers flowing out of the mountains, etc.

Israel is a dry land like Australia. And the promise of water is a significant one in the Old Testament. It's not just running water, but there's promises to the Israelites that they'll inherit a land that will have wells and cisterns that they didn't even have to dig.

Water will be laid on for them. And indeed, the flip side of that in the Old Testament is that often drought is a symbol of God's judgment on their faithlessness and in a sense a warning to them to turn back to God.

[3 : 49] Water remains a big theme in the New Testament, the last part of the Bible as well. And here we meet it in John chapter 4 in this last of our readings tonight.

Jesus, in the heat of the day, it's about noon, the hottest time of day, meets a woman at a well, getting water in a fairly dry part of Israel, in its center, in the center of what is today the West Bank, near the city of Nablus.

Water at noon is a strange thing to get. Normally you'd go in the cooler part of the day and get your water supplies for the day and maybe go back in the twilight of the day to get more water for the evening.

But here is a woman who, beyond today's reading, we discover is a bit of an outcast of her own people. And she's there in the noontime, maybe as a reflection of the fact that she's a bit of an outcast woman.

But there's a lot that's strange in this encounter. Jesus is a Jew. The woman is a Samaritan. And though the Samaritans and Jews had common ancestry centuries before, there was high hostility between them in the days of Jesus.

[5 : 01] Here is a Jewish man who speaks to a Samaritan. And the woman actually makes comment that Jews and Samaritans have nothing to do with each other. Why are you talking to me?

And it's not just the sort of racial divide, it's a gender divide. A man would not normally speak to a foreign or strange woman in normal circumstances.

But Jesus does. So it's the man-woman divide and the Jew-Samaritan divide that makes this an odd incident. Jesus is setting it up deliberately for the discussion that ensues between him and the woman at the well.

And he asks us simply, give me a drink. It's an understandable request. He doesn't have a bucket, it's clear. The well is deep.

It's still there today. If their claims of this is the well are right, it's a very deep well and you can still get drinking water out of it. I did that many years ago. And Jesus asks for a drink.

[6 : 05] He breaks the social religious taboos to ask a Samaritan woman for a drink. And the Samaritan woman said to him, how is it that you, a Jew, a Jewish man really, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan woman?

And Jesus' reply lifts the issue to a higher level. It's not just the issue of the man-woman-Jew-Samaritan issue. It's not just the issue of I'm thirsty and I need a glass of water to drink.

Jesus replies to her in verse 10. 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.

The woman doesn't understand this as, well, perhaps some of us don't. She says to him following that, sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?

Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it? Referring back again to the first book of the Bible, about 2,000 years, a bit less, before Jesus' day.

[7 : 21] So Jesus spells out what he means. Everyone who drinks of this water, that is from the well, will be thirsty again.

And as we all know, you get a glass of water from our tap or fridge and an hour or two or three later, we're thirsty again. We need another glass of water. But Jesus says those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.

The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. As though you take a glass of this water that Jesus is offering and it satisfies us, it slakes our thirst forever.

Indeed, it somehow seems to multiply and gush up within us as a well leading to eternal life. Just as water is essential for life on earth, so too is the living water that Jesus offers essential for eternal life.

So astonishing is this concept that the woman doesn't really grasp it. She says to him, well, I want this water, give it to me so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.

[8 : 39] But she's confusing the two levels of the argument, understandably, because Jesus' concepts are indeed profound. The heart of this exchange were Jesus' words a little bit earlier when he said to her, If you knew who it is that is saying to you these things, you would have asked him.

It's a good test, actually, of whether or not we know Jesus. Jesus says, if you know who it is who's speaking to you, if you know me, if you know Jesus properly, you will ask him for living water.

If you know Jesus for who he is, well, the test of whether you know him is, have you asked him for the living water that he's offering to this woman of Samaria?

You see, if you do know Jesus, then you can be sure that you've asked him for the waters that lead to eternal life. But if you don't know Jesus, you may know the story of Jesus, the Christmas story, the Easter story, Good Friday, other stories of the Bible may be oh so familiar to you.

But if you don't actually know Jesus as he is, well, you won't have asked him for that water. But if you do, then you have.

[10 : 10] That's the connection that Jesus makes in his words to this woman. That's a good test for you to reflect on. All of you, I'm sure, at some level or other, know something about Jesus.

Do you really know him? If you've asked him for the living water, the answer is clearly and unequivocally, assuredly, yes, I know Jesus.

But you may have heaps of knowledge about Jesus. But if you've never asked him for the living water, then actually you don't know him.

That same Jesus, born in a stable in Bethlehem, 2,000 years ago, whose birth we'll celebrate in a few days' time, he's the one to ask for living water for eternal life.

And that's Jesus' consistent claim in the words that he speaks recorded for us in four Gospels in the Bible. The living water of life, only Jesus offers it.

[11 : 14] The bread of life, only Jesus offers it. The way, the truth, the life, only Jesus are those things. Giving access to the throne of God's grace, only Jesus is the one who offers that.

Giving us forgiveness and mercy, only Jesus is the one who does that. Giving us hope beyond death, beyond the grave, only Jesus is the one who gives that. Giving us love that is deeper than death, only Jesus offers us that love.

Giving us resurrection and life eternal, only Jesus is the resurrection and the life. He came to give us life, life in all its fullness, life abundant.

And if we know him, that Jesus, whose birth we celebrate, then we will have asked him for the water that leads to eternal life.

Have you done that? Because if not, Christmas and Christmas celebration will have a fairly empty, hollow center.

[12 : 17] It might be nice, you might get nice presents and enjoy being with the family, but in the end it will be one of those sort of sweets or chocolates that you bite into and you find it's hollow and a little bit empty.

If you know Jesus, then you've been given the waters leading to eternal life. And what better time than Christmas to ask him for that extraordinary gift of the waters that lead to eternal life.

It's why he came, it's why he was born in Bethlehem, to offer us this gift of the water that leads to eternal life. For us to know him, to know him better and to introduce us to God.

And it may be that if you're here tonight and you don't really think you know Jesus personally and you've never received those waters, then please do talk to one of us. We'd be delighted to help you think through, read more and reflect more on this Jesus in the weeks and months ahead and into next year.

But there are two other things about this statement of Jesus. If you know who it is who's speaking to you, you would have asked him and he would have given you the water or the living water.

[13 : 30] One thing is when you ask Jesus, you receive. See, he doesn't say to the woman, if you knew who it is who's speaking to, you would have asked and maybe he would give it to you if you're nice.

Not at all. You ask for the waters that lead to eternal life and he will give it to you. You can be sure of that. It's a sure promise of Jesus.

Ask and you will receive. It's not just a promise to this Samaritan woman, but indeed a promise to anyone who asks Jesus for the gift of the waters leading to eternal life.

It's his promise to you and to me. It's the promise to anyone to turn to Jesus and ask him for that living water. The second thing to note is that the Bible ends with another picture of paradise where the promise or the gift of living water is fulfilled.

It came in the second reading tonight from the book of Revelation and there we find just these words I'll read from Revelation 21 verse 6.

[14 : 36] To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. It's something in fact the first reading from Isaiah anticipated and urged us to come to the living waters and at the heart of that reading are three little words that it's so easy to overlook.

They don't look that significant but they are. I will give as a gift. You see we don't need to get rich to get this water to buy this water.

This Jesus is not asking this Samaritan woman to empty her pockets and hand over all her riches. It's a free gift freely given not because it's cheap water's never cheap we of all countries ought to know that but it's free because it's been paid for by Jesus himself.

Friends in our country of Australia this drought ridden land is a major concern socially and politically and economically we need to pray for rain and we need to use our water wisely and frugally but our drought ought actually to be directing us to the higher level that Jesus directs this woman in this passage.

Yes water is essential for life on earth we need it but even more importantly the living waters that lead to eternal life are essential for us as well and the only giver of them is Jesus freely given at his expense and not ours.

[16 : 17] One of the great hymns puts it this way see the streams of living waters springing from eternal love well supply your sons and daughters and all fear of want remove who can faint while such a river ever flows their thirst to assuage grace which like the Lord the giver never fails from age to age.

The writer of those words died 200 years ago next Friday. He's the same hymn writer who wrote the hymn Amazing Grace John Newton.

He came to know and ask and receive that living water from the same the Lord Jesus Christ. He knew he didn't deserve it a slave trading sinner but he received that free gift of the waters leading to eternal life.

He called it Amazing Grace If we have received that gift we too understand how amazing it is. The invitation at Christmas to each one of us whether for the first time or not is to turn to Jesus and ask for the waters that lead to eternal life.

And when you come to know and ask Jesus the life giver then you will surely receive freely from his hand those waters and the sure promise of life everlasting.

[17 : 53] Amen.