

"I thirst"

Have you ever **really** been **thirsty**? I don't mean "I'm ready for a cold one" thirsty, or "where's the water cooler" after tennis or "let's have some lemonade after gardening" thirsty. I mean, "If I don't get some water soon I'm in trouble" thirsty.

My closest brush with that was in the summer of 1994 when I was in sabbatical in the Holy Land. We left Jerusalem in our bus *very* early one morning in early August, drove to the Dead Sea to walk around the remains of the Qumran settlement (source of the Dead Sea Scrolls) and then rode cable cars up to the blistering summit of Masada – what Americans would call a butte – in the desert overlooking the Dead Sea on which King Herod had build a palace.

Then it was back in the bus to drive through more desert, through 100-degree temperatures and *very* low humidity, to cross the border into Egypt where we would camp in the desert en route to Mt. Sinai. Oh, I drank water – some, not nearly enough – under the dangerous illusion that if I wasn't actually in direct sun without a hat I wouldn't get dehydrated. Wrong.

After crossing the border we climbed into Toyota 4x4s, driven by Bedouins who never met a 30-degree grade they didn't like. My ferocious headache was soon joined by nausea and the intense desire for the trip to come to an end – somewhere, anywhere.

Finally, we reached our campsite and I gratefully unrolled my sleeping bag and got out my kit and popped a couple of Advil, unaware that I was one of those people who really should *not* take Advil on an empty stomach.

After my projectile vomiting had slowed down, our trip leader came to assess my condition. He first noted that I didn't have to continue with the hike up Mt. Sinai – which was planned for 36 hours later – and I could even be evacuated back to Jerusalem if necessary. "No, you can just bury me here; this looks like a nice spot, thanks" was my reply, whereupon he handed me a one-liter bottle of water loaded with various salts which I had also been losing and said, "Drink this, drink it all, drink it *now*."

The next morning I was nearly back to normal, and the morning after that I did indeed climb Mt. Sinai, being careful to bring *lots* of water with me.

"I thirst."

It certainly was not as hot and as dry at Passover time in Jerusalem as it was in August in the Sinai desert. Nevertheless, Jesus probably had had nothing to drink since the Last Supper the night before. It would have been very reasonable for him to have been thirsty, and reasonable for someone to respond.

But there's more to this, the briefest of "the seven last words," than that.

First, it is notable because John rarely mentions Jesus' normal human needs or limitations. In John's Gospel, in contrast to Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus never asks a question to which he does not already know the answer, he does not pray in anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, he does not need the help of Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross, he does not fall on the way to Golgotha, and he does not cry out in desolation on the cross. The Johannine Jesus is majestic, regal, always in charge even when being arrested.

But he was thirsty.

Is this a rare, curiously refreshing touch from John's pen, reminding us that Jesus was, after all, incarnate as a human being (though fully divine) who was suffering a grisly death in a subtropical environment?

Perhaps.

But details usually mean *several* things in John's Gospel. So next, we need to look at the preface to this phrase, the evangelist's note that Jesus said "I am thirsty" "in order to fulfill the scripture." What scripture? Psalm 69:21 is the likeliest candidate. The psalmist says, "For my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." The other Gospels mention Jesus being offered something to drink; only John mentions Jesus' thirst and the fact that he did drink.

In reflecting on these "seven last words from the cross" and the details surrounding them, we need to remember the rules of eyewitness testimony, namely that eyewitnesses rarely agree on all details. (I understand that's drilled into would-be attorneys in law school.) The fact that the four Gospels disagree on some details makes it more likely, not less likely, that their accounts each go back to eyewitness accounts, especially because those eyewitnesses who loved Jesus (the only ones who would have shared their memories later) must have found it emotionally excruciating (as well as physically nauseating) to have been within earshot of him for all of his hours on the cross, even if the soldiers allowed all of them to be there for all that time – they could have wandered off to breathe and weep from time to time. That said, I also find Jesus' terse remarks in John (so unlike his usual long discourses in the Fourth Gospel) to be plausibly short for a man struggling to breathe, as he was. "I am thirsty." It makes sense on his lips on a whole lot of levels.

But there's more, much more. Way back in John Chapter Two he was asked to satisfy the *thirst* of the wedding guests at Cana, but his initial response was "my hour has not yet come." His "hour" to manifest himself as the Messiah in John's Gospel is on the cross: then, in his death, he could truly satisfy those who *thirst* for "living water" (7:38).

And, let's remember, the only time in John's Gospel that Jesus actually simply says, "Give me a drink" it's to the Samaritan woman at the well in Sychar. Later in their conversation he says to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but 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."

When will he be able to give others the water of life? Only after he dies – when the soldier pierces his side and “blood and water” come out. Only with his death is this possible; and his death he refers to in advance as “a cup” which he must drink. All four Gospels record one of Jesus’ disciples as trying to defend him in the Garden of Gethsemane with a sword, and all record Jesus rebuking the disciple, though the words vary. In John, it’s all about Jesus obeying the Father’s will that he die for the world: he says to Peter, “am I not to drink the cup which the Father has given me?”

Jesus is the thirsty mortal; Jesus is the source of living water for eternal life; Jesus is the one who can satisfy the thirst of others better and more abundantly than they dare dream; Jesus is the model of obedience to the Father’s will by drinking the cup of death which will be the source of life for others. Jesus says so much with so few words. “I thirst.”

Let us quench our own spiritual thirsts from the water of life which he provides, now and forever. Amen.

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