

Longing For Truth

A Sermon by Rev. Brian W. Keith

Everyone has needs. Everyone requires certain things so that life can go on. There are many natural needs. We need to eat and drink. We need a relatively healthy body. We need a sense of security. We need to be productive, useful.

In addition we have spiritual needs. These are less tangible, but even more important to our eternal well-being. We need a sense of direction, a sense of purpose. Our minds stretch to understand the "whys" and "hows." We also need a goodness within a quality of loving and caring that can bring lasting happiness, to others and to us.

While the Lord is concerned that our natural needs be met, He is more concerned for our spiritual needs. It is these that He is ever attempting to satisfy, guiding us so that heaven may be created within our hearts.

One aspect of our spiritual needs is described in the wanderings of the Children of Israel in the wilderness. Upon discovering the harsh reality of the desert, they grew hungry. After they had complained bitterly, the Lord provided them with manna bread from heaven. It took care of their appetites, but they were soon thirsty. In Rephidim they camped and feared they would die from the lack of water. Moses sought direction from the Lord, who showed him a rock, which, when struck, would deliver water in abundance. So it was that their thirst was quenched and they were able to continue their journey.

Spiritually, this story of survival in the desert depicts how the Lord quenches our inner thirst. The longing we have for truth for ideals and direction is spiritual thirst. The Lord can satisfy this need as we seek from Him the waters of life the truths of His Word. For where there is spiritual thirst, the Lord has said, "I will open rivers in desolate heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water" (Isaiah 4:18).

The Children of Israel had been journeying. So is described our spiritual journeys. For even as there is a natural progression in life from infancy to old age, so there is a development of the spirit. Our thoughts and feelings change as we mature not just because we are older, but because we have thought about what we need to do, and have done it.

Even as the Children of Israel were fed by the manna, so we have been fed by the Lord's good His warmth and love. It has touched our hearts, giving us delight and happiness.

Yet, as we know, life is not a continual progression. We have times of growth and times of leveling out, of reaping the rewards of past efforts and looking ahead to the future. So the Israelites were here seen to be camping in Rephidim. They were regrouping, preparing for what would come next.

But in their encampment they were lacking something. They could not rest or prepare for the further journeying without water. Spiritually we can come into the same predicament. Perhaps upon reaching adulthood we begin to realize that the answers which satisfied us before can no longer meet our needs. It may be that our childlike ideas of Providence are inadequate to help us understand why the Lord allows our parents to suffer a sudden death or a prolonged illness. Or perhaps our concept of how to help the neighbor becomes more cloudy when a close friend is found to be stealing from his company.

Feeling a lack of truth can also arise after we have achieved something in life, and are awaiting what is next. Perhaps after struggling to establish a career or a family, we have reached some goal, only to wonder what is ahead. We can thirst for the truths about the purpose of life or what is really important. Perhaps in the latter half of one's natural life, there is a thirsting for truth about the life after death wondering what it is really like, and whether heaven is a possibility.

Sensing a lack of truth can also occur when one recognizes that there is more to life than this natural world can offer. A person can have success, money, power, and beauty and still sense an emptiness inside. In the midst of all the natural delights, there is still a spiritual longing to understand our Creator and our role in life.

This appears to be what the Lord was trying to awaken in the Samaritan woman He met at the well. When she questioned Him, He replied, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me to drink,' you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water ... [For] whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:10,13,14). The Lord challenged her to think

beyond what she could see with her eyes. He stirred in her a longing for something more, for living water truth that would satisfy her soul.

It is interesting how gentle the Lord was with her, even in the discussion of her many husbands. We may assume that He did not condemn her because in spite of her mistakes there was good within her. That is probably why she responded so positively to Him. So it is with us. When we thirst for living water, it is because there is something good within us that longs for it. The person who hates does not long for truth. The person who feels superior does not desire truth. Only because we have made spiritual progress do we yearn to have a better understanding of life. As the Heavenly Doctrines note, "good longs for truth as a thirsty person does for water" (AC 2698e).

However, the Children of Israel did not have water, and following their traditional reaction to any deprivation, they quarreled with Moses. They demanded water. This response depicts the initial reaction we may have when we do not receive quick answers. It is a sense of frustration that our needs are not immediately met. We want to know. We want to have simple, direct answers.

The quarreling with Moses indicates our irritation with not getting what we want. For wherever we turn, be it our memories from school, a friend, or what we think the church teaches, there is no living water.

Moses accurately pointed out that they were really angry with the Lord, not him; so is seen a conflict we are having with the Lord. When we are confused or have lost a sense of direction, we are apt to think He has left us. For we have certain expectations of Him, and when He does not deliver, we feel He has failed.

This fear does not go away; the thirst continues. The people complain bitterly, wondering why they left Egypt, thinking they are sure to die. From confusion and frustration there arises a sense of hopelessness. Not only is there confusion, but there begins to be fear that there is no answer, no truth, no way out of the maze.

Moses then speaks to Jehovah, realizing the unruly mob may well take his life. This is the recognition that a person who seeks direction or a better understanding of life, and does not receive it, will do violence to what is true. As the ideas that the person had as a child are no longer able to quench his thirst, and no living water is found, there is a danger

of rejecting everything. It is like seeing Christians murdering non-Christians, or evil conquering good, and wondering how a merciful God could permit it. If no answers are forthcoming, Christianity may be seen as hypocritical, and it is rejected entirely.

The danger is in giving up, in becoming mentally passive. If answers are not immediately found, a person may simply stop thinking about spiritual matters. That area of the mind which wants to understand, to explore the spiritual realm, is deadened. And the person goes through life refusing to ask difficult questions for fear there are no answers.

But the Lord is not silent. Jehovah commanded, "Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock in Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink." Spiritually this means that there should be an urgent asking of the Lord for direction. This may sound strange, for the people had been complaining bitterly before. What more could they do?

It all has to do with attitude. A thirst for truth cannot be satisfied until the person is receptive to the Lord. Once past the most basic and simple truths, understanding takes time and maturity. As a young child cannot appreciate why he has to eat a balanced meal, so the young couple are just beginning to glimpse the nature of love, and the mature adult has but a rudimentary concept of God. And a further understanding is made difficult because of selfishness. For when we want to know on our own terms, there is little we are willing to listen to.

When we are impatient, setting a time limit on the Lord and our own ability to grasp the value of spiritual things, then we are likely to continue groping in the dark. Or when we go to the Lord asking Him to put a stamp of approval upon a course of action we have already decided upon, there is little we are open to hear. Or if we ask the Lord for answers from a mild intellectual interest, with little or no intent of doing anything with what He says, then our ears are shut, and we do not see the living water.

Striking the rock is searching the Lord's Word for water that will refresh us, that will enlighten and change us. The Lord said He would stand before the rock, for it is only when we sincerely want to know what He thinks, what He knows is best for us, that we see the rock of truth. Putting aside our preconceived ideas, being willing to admit that our ways have not been perfect, enables us to receive His water.

It is saying "Lord, I will follow wherever You lead. Even if it is not where I had wanted to go, or thought I should go, I will still follow You." It is saying, "Lord, I will trust You. Although I may be unclear as to how Your Providence is working, I will do my best to walk in Your ways, having confidence that You will take care of all my needs." It is as the Lord Himself said, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39).

From humility we can be refreshed with the water of the Word. We will be able to find direction because we want to be the sheep of His pasture. Then our thirst for the truth can be quenched. Then we can receive the living waters which refresh and give direction to our lives. Then we shall accept the invitation to the New Church:

"And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' and let him who thirsts come. And whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely" (Revelation 22:17).

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:1-14, AC 8562