

## John 7:37-52

I had the indescribable joy of discovering a broken water pipe in my front yard this week. It all started when Lisa and I both began to notice a suspicious looking wet spot forming in one corner of the yard. I had actually seen it there a few days earlier but was in denial and, as a result, had somehow managed to delude myself into believing that it was only “runoff” from the rain, or from the neighbor’s yard, or something like that.

But I couldn’t maintain the delusion forever. And so I decided to take a shovel and poke around a little bit to see what I could find. After all, we had repaired a broken pipe in that area a few years before and maybe it was something that we could fix easily by tightening a few bolts or something.

Well, it just wasn’t meant to be because, as I removed the last bit of dirt from one area of the pipe, all of the sudden water came gushing out, no longer hindered by the weight of the soil. And I stood there and watched as the hole I had dug quickly filled with water and this bubbling stream of water began to overflow the edges of the hole and stream down hill toward the sidewalk, and then down to the storm water drains.

Within a few minutes, and with the help of some neighbors, we managed to get the water shut off at the meter and I then began making arrangements to get the pipe fixed and/or replaced. When it was all done, the whole repair ended up taking a couple days which meant that during that time - we were out of water. No water for washing, no water for the bathrooms, no water for drinking - nothing. No water. Period.

And it reminded me of how much we depend on water - for everything - and yet how easily we take it for granted because it’s all around us. We’re never more than a few feet away from something to drink. We have water faucets all throughout our houses on the inside and are surrounded by water faucets on the outside. If we leave the house, we can fill up water bottles and take them with us. If we run out, we can swing through a drive through, or stop at a convenience store, and get something to drink - with ice! We, as a people, are typically inundated with water.

But back in Jesus’ day, it wasn’t like that. The region where he lived and carried on his ministry, while near water, was nevertheless a place that experienced frequent droughts. And, of course, they didn’t have any sort of *tap* water available in their houses. Their water, if they had it, came from wells and from streams, and had to be carried about in heavy jars.

As a result, getting and having water was a major and mandatory chore in everyone’s life. And when the water was scarce everyone knew it and everyone felt it. Nobody in Jesus’ day took water for granted. Water was essential. Water was life.

In the passage before us this morning, Jesus says some things to the people about water. And because it’s *Jesus speaking* and because he is talking about something as essential as *water*, he has their attention.....

(Read John 7:37-52 and Pray)

Now, as many of you will know, throughout this Gospel John has been trying to present an accurate and persuasive picture of who Jesus is, in all his humanity and his divinity, in order that people might come to know him and embrace him as their Savior and Lord. Alongside this portrait of Jesus, John has also given us a fairly unvarnished look at the differing *responses* that people had to Jesus - some of whom believed in him, others who absolutely hated him, and still others who didn't really know what to think about him.

In this and the previous chapters in particular, we have seen the rise and transformation of what was formerly only a generalized and occasional rejection of Jesus into to an increasing, sustained, *official* and not-very-well-disguised plan to get rid of him by the religious authorities in that day! And yet we have also seen how this hatred, as awful as it was, still fell within God's divine plan and purpose and, in the end, would be one of the instrumental causes in God's greatest and highest purpose for His Son - realized at the cross.

Focusing the lens in even tighter, in chapter seven we have seen how some of these dynamics have played themselves out amidst the "Feast of Booths" or "Feast of Tabernacles" celebrations taking place in Jerusalem during the third and final year of Jesus' ministry here on earth.

Now, as John's Gospel makes clear, Jesus never had any intention of playing a big roll during these particular celebrations - certainly not now - not with all this pressure mounting, and not with people plotting his death. Nevertheless, while Jesus wanted to be cautious about these things, he also was very concerned to continue to be faithful to do all that the Father had sent him to do.

What all this translated into was Jesus' maintaining something of "low profile", because of which he has avoided the opening days of the Feast, and especially the joyous processions as people paraded into the city. Had he participated in those events he might have drawn an undue amount of attention to himself and at a time that was not right for it to happen. Nevertheless, while he avoided the opening day activities, he still chose to go up and make an appearance about mid-Feast and, as a result of *that*, created more trouble for himself with some of the things he said.

Now, *on the other side of all this* are Jesus' opponents who have also had to be mindful of their own movements and activities. After all, it is not as if they can just haul off and do anything they like to Jesus, any old time they want to. Jesus had achieved great popularity among a significant proportion of the population which created difficulties for them when it came to having him arrested.

And so, at least from a human perspective, it seems as if there was this sort of "cat and mouse" existence that characterized the interactions between Jesus and his opponents in the closing months of his life, including during this Jerusalem Feast itself.

And so, Jesus' opponents are probably expecting him to show up on the first day of the feast, but he doesn't. A few days pass and they have most likely concluded that he wasn't coming when all of the sudden he pops up at the Temple half way through. They have some words and Jesus disappears again after several failed attempts at arresting him. Again he stays off the radar for a few days and they are probably thinking that he has moved on when he surprises them once more with a last day appearance during the Feast.

And when he shows up this last time, he says these wonderful and mysterious things found in verses 37-39,

*On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. <sup>38</sup> Whoever believes in me, as<sup>1</sup> the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" <sup>39</sup> Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*

Now as you read this, you might be thinking, well this seems a little random. Why does Jesus just stand up all of the sudden and start talking about water and rivers and the Holy Spirit? What's that all about? Where's that coming from?

Well, it's coming from the particular events that are going on during the Feast of Booths, and which are somewhat "invisible" to you and I since John has not described them for us here. But if we had been there on that last day of the Feast, seeing what they were all seeing and participating in what they were all part of, then we would not have found Jesus' words here to be random at all. So what *was* happening on this last day of the Feast? One writer, named Burge, has this to say about it,

*"Each day of the feast witnessed a water ceremony in which a procession of priests descended to the south border of the city.....There a priest filled a golden pitcher as a choir chanted Isaiah 12:3 "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation". The water was then carried back up the hill to the "Water Gate", followed by crowds carrying a lulah (tree branches reminiscent of the desert booths) in the right hand and an ethrog (citrus branches reminiscent of the harvest) in the left hand. The crowd would shake these and sing Psalms 113-118.*

*When the procession arrived at the temple, the priest would climb the altar steps and pour the water onto the altar while the crowd circled him and continued singing. On the seventh day of the festival, this procession took place seven times.*

Now what was the significance of all this you might ask? Burge continues:

*Judaism saw this water ceremony on multiply levels. On the one hand, it was a plea to God for rain since the autumn is a time of threatened drought in Israel. On the other hand, it was a source of rich symbolism. In the desert, God brought water from a rock (Num 20:8-10) and here water was flowing from the sacrificial rock altar of the temple.*

*[Additionally, the OT prophets] Zechariah and Ezekiel had visions of rivers flowing from the temple in a miraculous display of God's blessing. In a drought-stricken land, it was a spectacular vision of water, life-giving water flowing from God's life-giving temple.*

And so, with that background in mind, here is Jesus stepping into public view again and making this remarkable pronouncement. In the midst of all these water processions going on, and with the waters being poured out on the altar of the Temple and with this ceremony very much on people's minds, Jesus stands up and says,

*"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as<sup>1</sup> the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'"*

In other words, what Jesus is saying to them is that He is the fulfillment of the things being symbolized in this water ceremony associated with the Feast of Booths. The waters from the well of salvation that were sung about are the very waters that he supplies to those who come to him and drink. Ezekiel's imagery of the rivers flowing outward from the temple in every direction in blessing toward the nations - that imagery, with Jesus, becomes the template for a parallel imagery of living waters flowing outward from the hearts of men and women who have come to him and who receive the Spirit in abundance which, in turn, becomes an overflow from their own hearts and into the world and lives of those around them.

Well, as we have seen happen on a number of occasions now, Jesus' powerful words and teaching here - as indicated later on by the guards' inability to arrest him - but his powerful words and teaching generate a variety of responses from among the crowd.

Some listen to his words here and immediately conclude that Jesus must be "the prophet". Who is this prophet they are referring to? Well, as we saw in our study of the account of Jesus' feeding of the multitudes, Deuteronomy 18, authored by Moses, speaks of a time that is coming when God will raise up for Himself another prophet *like Moses* to lead God's people. Moses, among other things, was associated with the people of Israel during their time in the wilderness, when God provided for them "bread from heaven". Ever since Jesus performed his miracle of feeding the thousands with a handful of bread and fish, rumors and speculation had been going about that this was the sign that he was indeed the prophet who was "like Moses".

Now, on the one hand, to describe Jesus as "the Prophet" with that sort of thing in mind was not a *terrible* thing to say about him. It is certainly better than an outright rejection of him or discrediting of him. However, in the end, it *amounts* to a rejection of him because it stops short of embracing him for who he FULLY and TRULY is. We have seen this response to Jesus before and have noted its inadequacy, as well as noting how such inadequate views of Jesus still can be found all over the place in our own day.

So, some hear his teaching and conclude that he is "the prophet". Others hear his teaching here and conclude that he is "the Christ" - that is, the Messiah, the deliverer that God promised to send. Now this may well have been the recorded expression of a genuine response to Jesus. That is certainly a possibility.

But we have also seen along the way that people in that day had a lot of funny ideas about “the Christ” or “the Messiah” that were not necessarily all that biblical such as, for example, the belief that when the Messiah came he would be a *political* figure who would establish a *political realm*. It is possible that those who proclaim Jesus to be “the Christ” are thinking in these terms but is also equally likely that this is the expression of a genuine faith and trust in Christ.

A third category of response is seen in those who say, “Is the Christ to come from Galilee?” and then go on to ask a question about his origins, making it clear that they do not know of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, but only know of his time in Galilee. In other words, the origins of Jesus in terms of his birthplace in Bethlehem were, apparently, neither universally nor even widely known.

But this is not really all that surprising when you think about it. We’re not talking about a culture with record books, and picture ID’s, and driver’s licenses. What’s more, because Jesus lived in relative obscurity the first 30 years of his life, there was never any compelling reason for people to find out his origins. By the time questions did start to arise, his many years in Galilee led to assumptions being made that he had been there all along.

So, another response to Jesus, for some, was to again ask questions about his origins which, on one level, seems innocent enough but which, on another level - as we saw previously - can be something of a smoke screen as people ignore the obvious indicators of his identity - i.e., the amazing things he said and did - and tie themselves up in knots over lesser issues - such as his assumed and presumed origins.

And so, as the passage says, there was “a division among the people over him”. Some thought him “the Prophet”, other said “the Christ”, still others simply doubted and expressed their skepticism. Mixed responses followed him wherever he went back then, and they continue to be generated every time his name arises in our own day.

Following this, the passage records an interesting interchange with the officers that were sent to try and arrest Jesus yet again. Apparently, they showed up to do the deed, but when they got there were so taken with his teaching, that they couldn’t bring themselves to actually go through with it and so returned to the authorities empty handed.

Their failure then sends the Pharisees into a vicious rant in which they abuse the officers, speak condescendingly of the people (vs49) in general, and even berate one of their own - Nicodemus - for simply correctly pointing out to them that they are ignoring their own laws and procedures.

And, of course, you have to love the irony here in that, not two seconds after they have asked the rhetorical question as to whether *any of the authorities* had believed in Jesus - Nicodemus begins speaking. Now he may not have *yet* come to full faith at this point - as we know that he does later on - but Nicodemus still stands in our memory as one of “them” who in fact *will* believe in Jesus - as other authorities will also do.

Even further irony is seen in the fact that right after they slander the crowd for not knowing the law, they are reprimanded for breaking it themselves!

And so, in contrast to those who come to Jesus and from whom rivers of living water would flow, you see these Pharisees who are not the source of any such thing and who, instead, spew torrents of vicious and venomous words at any and all who they perceive as a threat or challenge to their power and position.

With that observation, and as we bring this portion of our study of John's Gospel to a close this morning, I would encourage you to look back upon Jesus' words in verses 37-39 and, if you remember nothing else, remember these things....

1) Jesus offers a solution to the *thirsty* person. Thirst is first. John Piper tells the story of one of his family members who was an evangelist and who said once that the hardest thing about evangelism was not getting people saved but getting people *lost*. What did he mean by that? He meant that the hard part in witnessing to people, in his experience, was getting them to see themselves as the broken, helpless, needy sinners that they were - which of course is ultimately a work that no one but God could do - but it was the crucial first step, after which turning to Christ seems to be much more easily and readily done. Jesus is the ultimate and permanent satisfaction to the thirsty soul. But to the soul that does not yet recognize its thirst, he is nothing but a curiosity.

I received a new item this week that was talking about "job satisfaction" among the various professions. As I read through it, I came across two things that I found surprising. The first one was that *clergy* were listed almost at the very top of the list in terms of expressed job satisfaction. That was surprising to me.

The other thing that I found surprising was that *bartenders* were listed near the bottom of the survey. Now I don't know all the factors behind that but it got me to thinking. Because while clergy and bartenders may not have a lot in common (or maybe they do), the one thing that they DO have in common is this: *They both work with thirsty people*. And what they have different is the fact that while the bartender does deal with people who have real, physical thirst, he also deals with a lot of people with another sort of thirst - a deep, soul thirst. And when people with that sort of thirst come into his bar, he knows that there is nothing on the wall behind him in any of those bottles that will quench their thirst. And there has to be a certain amount of dis-satisfaction in knowing that.

Our prayer for the world ought to be that people will know and name their thirst. It may well be that there are some here this morning who are just beginning to recognize that thirst. If that is you, then our prayer is that you *will* fully recognize it, and that you will find in Jesus the satisfaction and refreshment that your soul really needs.

2) So, Jesus is the one who quenches the *thirsty* soul. But what does that mean? How does one go about drinking the water that Jesus offers? What does that look like? Again, John Piper is helpful here. He writes,

*What Jesus means by drinking is the same thing he means by believing or trusting. After he says, "Come to me and drink," in verse 37, he immediately says, "He who believes in me." He could have said, "He who drinks from me." The clearest evidence for this is found in John 6:35, where Jesus says, "He who believes in me shall never thirst." Therefore, the essence of drinking the Word of Jesus is trusting it, banking on it.... The essence of believing in Jesus is finding in him the satisfaction of our deepest soul-thirst. Drinking is believing; believing is drinking.*

3) The third thing to remember is that the intent and consequence of coming to Jesus and having our thirst quenched there is that we become *rivers*, that we become *conduits* of blessing - not stagnant pools that only receive and have no output. The most natural thing in the world, the most natural state for the believer is to be a source of blessing to others because of the blessing you have received in Christ. Whenever we shut that off and close that down, we do so to the detriment and pollution of our own souls.....