

COVENANT PULPIT



RECOGNIZING JESUS

“Heaven and Hell Thirst”

Matthew 25/Luke 16:19-31

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“Mommy, I’m so thirsty. I want a drink.”

Susanna Petroysan heard her little girl’s pleas, but she was helpless. She and four-year-old Gayaney were trapped beneath tons of concrete and steel from a collapsed nine-story apartment building. They were among 55,000 victims of the worst earthquake in the history of Soviet Armenia. Susanna was clad only in a slip and stockings. But the December cold biting at her half-clad body was not nearly as painful as the cries of her child: “Mommy, please give me something to drink.”

Susanna was flat on her back, trapped by a concrete slab eighteen inches above her head. Frantically groping in the darkness, she found a 24-ounce jar of blackberry jam. While she agonized in her own thirst, her daughter devoured the jam, licking the jar clean.

The incessant crying began anew. “Mommy, I’m still so thirsty.”

Consumed by her own thirst and freezing cold, Susanna prayed that she would die. But she was desperate for her daughter to live. She felt in the darkness until she found the dress she had taken off before the quake hit, used it to make a bed for Gayaney, removed her stockings and wrapped them around Gayaney to keep her warm.

The two were trapped for eight days. Susanna lost track of time. She also lost feeling in her fingers and toes. There are few things more painful than dying of thirst. The human body is two-thirds fluids, needing 2½ quarts of liquid a day. Without water, skin cracks, lips crack, and the tongue swells until it begins to split. Mucous membranes shrivel and die. Blood pressure drops and heart rate rises. Blood is shunted from the peripheral limbs to the inner core of the body. Hands and feet turn blue and then black. Devoid of fluid, the mouth and eyes feel like they are on fire. Kidneys shut down and toxins flood the body. Body temperature rises. Internal organs are raging hot. Hallucinations and severe headaches are accompanied by convulsions. Craving for water intensifies until the victim goes mad.

Susanna experienced all of those sensations during that long hopeless night. There were brief moments when the horror of her entombment disappeared into merciful sleep. But thirst, hunger, and cold awakened her too soon. Most often, it was the plaintive cries of her daughter.

“Mommy, I’m so thirsty.”

Somewhere in that eternal blackness, Susanna remembered a television program about an Arctic explorer dying of thirst. A comrade slashed open his hand and gave his thirsty friend his blood to drink. She later said to reporters, “I had no water, no fruit juice, no liquids. It was then I remembered I had my own blood.”

She found a piece of shattered glass, sliced open her left index finger and gave it to her daughter to suck. The drops of blood weren’t enough. Gayaney whimpered, “Please, Mommy, cut another finger.” Susanna can’t remember how many times she cut herself. When rescuers found her, her body was covered with self-inflicted cuts. She only knew that if hadn’t given her blood, Gayaney would have died. Her blood was her

daughter's only hope.

Thirst is a terrible thing. It will drive a little girl to drain her mother dry. It will compel a mother to give her life's blood to keep her child alive. It drives us to our heavenly Father. "Daddy, I'm so thirsty." So God comes down and climbs into the rubble of our collapsed world. He wraps himself around our freezing body and suffers our hunger. He is stripped of everything by a world gone cold, and hangs naked on a cross. Even he cries out to his Father, "**I thirst.**" (John 19:28) He also cries out to the heavenly Father's thirsting children, "I have come to give you my blood." We gasp in horror at his mangled body covered with bloody cuts, open gashes and gaping wounds. Then there is a final thrust of a spear, and all his remaining fluids come gushing out.

The message of the Communion Table today is inescapable: God has come to give his own body and blood to those who hunger and thirst in a world where everything has tumbled down around us. He holds nothing back from God's thirsty children.

This kind of love is at the core of the Final Judgment of Matthew 25. "I was hungry...thirsty...a stranger...naked...sick and in prison..." (Mt. 25:36&37) The protest comes back, "When did we see you hungry...thirsty...a stranger...naked...sick and in prison..." (Mt. 25:37&44) The King replies, "Whatever you did to the least of these brothers and sisters of mine you did to me." (Mt. 25:40&45). It's not that our salvation is earned by caring for "the least of these." Jesus purchased our salvation by his blood on the cross. Rather, our actions prove the *reality* of our salvation. If we are filled with Christ, then we will respond to others the way he does. Today we look at his second statement, "I was thirsty..." through one of his parables. This is the principle that our Lord wants his fully devoted followers to learn:

The cries of the thirsty will echo through eternity.

Thirst is the most primal of all experiences. Pre-natal specialists say that the first sound from the womb is the unborn baby's cry of thirst. Hospice workers say that thirst is the last physical desire of a dying person. In between life and death, thirst is omnipresent. Every eight seconds a child dies of thirst or water-borne disease—1.4 million last year alone. 885 million people have no access to safe water. At one time or another, half the people on earth suffer from unclean water.

We Americans have an unlimited selection of sanitized beverages at our fingertips. Yet there are other thirsts that drive us—thirst for affirmation, applause, material things, drugs, power, prestige, and a thousand other cravings. A Scottish proverb says, "They talk of my drinking, but never my thirst." The Roman senator Cicero said, "The thirst of desire is never filled, nor fully satisfied."

We all have some thirst. English poet, Lord Byron wrote, "Fame is the thirst of youth; power the thirst of the middle-aged; and security the thirst of the old." In John's gospel, Jesus met a woman at a Samaritan well. She had a raging emotional thirst that caused her to plow through five marriages. She was living with a sixth man who couldn't satisfy her

either. So Jesus offered her *Living Water*. He said in John 4:14, “Everyone who drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” What is that thirst-quenching water? The Sons of Korah had tasted it. They wrote in Psalm 42:2, “My soul thirsts for God, for the Living God...” Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (Mt. 5:6)

It is only by crossing over to the other side that we will see an end to our thirst. There is no thirst in heaven. But thirst will not end for everyone on the other side of death. In Luke 16, Jesus tells the story of a beggar named Lazarus who lays outside a rich man’s gate, desperately hoping for someone to feel pity and come out to quench his hunger and thirst. Lazarus surely qualifies as “the least of these.” But the rich man ignores the unpleasantness outside his gates. He would be shocked at any suggestion that this smelly beggar is really God in disguise.

But one day he will cross over to face the King of kings. He will hear those words, “I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I was naked and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” (Mt. 25:42&43) Surely, the rich man protests, “Lord, when did I see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison?” (Mt. 25:44) The King will point to the beggar who now rests in Abraham’s arms. “What you refused to do to *the least of these*, you refused to do for me.” Like that rich man, many won’t know the truth until it is too late. And now the rich man will go through eternity with an agonizingly unquenchable thirst. Indeed, the cries of the thirsty will echo through eternity. But we can escape this Judgment—if only we will respond to four truths:

1. LIFE IS THE GREAT INDICATOR.

The story begins abruptly in Luke 16. “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.” (verse 19). Three things sum up his life: he is rich, he dresses impeccably, and he lives a luxurious lifestyle. He is the epitome of all that is success this side of heaven. Everyone wants to be this rich man.

But there is a jarring shift in Jesus’ story. “At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.” (verses 20&21). The contrast couldn’t be starker. The rich man sits in pampered luxury; Lazarus in poverty. The rich man lives in a gated community; Lazarus is homeless. The rich man is clothed in purple and fine linen; Lazarus is covered with oozing sores. Servants cater to the rich man’s every need; street dogs come to lick Lazarus’ sores.

Jesus carefully crafts the story for his audience. Go back a few verses and you will see that our Lord is speaking to the religious elites of ancient Israel. Verse 14 identifies them as “The Pharisees who loved money...” The religious leaders of Israel had rigged the temple system to make themselves insanely wealthy. They also concocted a theology of

prosperity—like so many radio preachers and televangelists today. They taught that God prospered the righteous, but punished the sinner with poverty and disease. If church folk were poor or sick it was because they didn't have enough faith. These Pharisees loved to quote Psalm 37:25—"I have been young and now I am old. I have never seen the righteous forsaken, or his children begging for bread." Their conclusion: if someone was begging for food, it was because he or his father wasn't righteous. Almost everyone in ancient Israel accepted this theology. When his disciples saw a blind beggar, they asked Jesus, "Who sinned, he or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2)

Jesus says to the Pharisees in verse fifteen, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight." Jesus is telling them something that we all need to hear: God judges by a different value system. We see the rich man and are impressed. By all appearances, he is blessed. We see Lazarus and are repulsed. By every measure, he is cursed. When Jesus speaks of street dogs licking the beggar's oozing sores, it must set these Pharisees' teeth to grinding. To Jews, street dogs were unclean. According to the laws of Moses, anyone with oozing sore was also unclean. Lazarus would have been barred from going into the Temple. He would have been banned from entering any synagogue. He can neither enter the gates of the rich man's house nor God's House. To religious Jews, Jesus' story is triply disgusting: unclean dogs licking the unclean sores of an unclean man.

Two thousand years have come and gone, but most folks would have the same opinion today. That's why verse 15 is so critical to the story: "What is highly valued among men is detestable to God." Don't neglect the first thing that leaps out of Jesus' story: the rich man is nameless. Everyone in town knew his name. It topped the *Who's Who* of the social register. Yet 2,000 years later, we remember the beggar's name, but the rich man remains nameless. In his day, he was a somebody. To God, he is a nobody. People pass by and gawk in wonder at the rich man's palace, trying hard to ignore the smelly beggar at the gate.

But God ignores the palace, and sends street dogs to lick the beggar's wounds because there is healing power in a dog's saliva. God cares about those we write off as "the least of these." Everyone applauds the big giver at church, but Jesus notices the widow who puts her only penny in the offering plate. While we cheer overpaid athletes at a Super Bowl, God watches little sparrows that fall to the ground. Again, Jesus' words: "What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight." May he give us *his* heart, *his* eyes, and *his* values and priorities.

Now the key that unlocks the story: the end of verse 19 says that the rich man, "...lived in luxury everyday." The King James Version of the Bible says that he "...fared sumptuously..." The original Greek language has the idea that his table was overloaded. He had way more than he needed. Lazarus doesn't want the man's food. Verse 21 says that he only wants "...what fell from the rich man's table." In short, the leftovers. Jewish theology was right: abundance is a blessing from God. When we possess it—whether it is food, drink, clothes, a home, money, time, or the

gospel that can bring people to salvation—we are the recipients of God’s grace. God loved the rich man enough to bless his socks off. But he wanted the rich man to love Lazarus in the same way. God blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others.

Every story needs a hero. Who are the heroes in this story? Jesus’ irony is delicious. The heroes are the street dogs. This has to drive the Pharisees crazy. Street dogs in developing countries run in packs like wolves. They are vicious, dirty, soulless creatures. To the Jews, they are unclean like pigs. But even these unclean, brutish dogs felt compassion for Lazarus. No one else would help him—not the rich man, nor those who carried him to the gate and left him there to fend for himself. But the dogs came to lick his wounds. With their tongues they brought soothing relief and healing. And, in the process, they became cleaner in God’s sight than all the ritually-clean religious folk who go to the Temple to recite their prayers and sing their songs.

2. DEATH IS THE GREAT LEVELER.

These men’s stories end the way all of our life stories end. Verse 22 says, “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried.” Catch the first three words in verse 22: “The time came...” There is a time coming for all of us. Hebrews 9:27 says, “It is appointed unto a man once to die, and then to face judgment.” Two things are true for every one of us: we have an appointment with death. After that we have an appointment with God. Rich or poor, it makes no difference! We will answer for what we did with the life we were given.

In eternity, a great gulf was fixed between Lazarus and the rich man. The divide between heaven and hell can’t be crossed, says Jesus in verse 26. A great divide existed between the rich man and Lazarus on this earth—the great social divide between the haves and have not’s, the somebodies and the nobodies, winners and losers, the beauty and the beast, the cool and the uncool, the popular and the outcaste, those who throw away too much garbage and those who scavenge through it. There are other great divides: racial, political, religious, tribal, moral, and unresolved conflicts. In life, the rich man refused to cross the gulf that separated his dinner table from the beggar outside his gate. It was only a short walk from his table to the street, but he would have had to cross so many gulfs of prejudice, greed, apathy, and religious rationalization and excuse. A day will come when he will beg Abraham to cross over to put a drop of water on his thirsty tongue, but that gulf will be a chasm too great to cross. Before death there is still time to cross the chasms that divide us—even if we have to cross to the ends of the earth to share the gospel, or across the street to feed a neighbor, or across the bedroom to ask forgiveness from a spouse. The gulf may be wide, but after death it will be beyond crossing.

The time must come for all of us. The rich man is buried. I’m sure it was a splendid affair. The preacher gave a wonderful sermon about all his achievements and contributions. A large crowd gathered to sing his praises. A tombstone etched with his name covered his mahogany coffin.

Then the grieving retired to a splendid dinner before dividing up his estate. The Bible says nothing of Lazarus' funeral. He was probably thrown in a garbage dump, or laid in an unmarked pauper's grave at government expense. It matters little. Because now they both go naked into the presence of God to face an eternity that is fixed.

3. AFTERLIFE IS THE GREAT REVERSAL.

Jesus is quick to show it in verse twenty-two. We don't know the name of the rich man, much less the pallbearers, preacher, or mourners who attended his funeral. But we know Lazarus' name, and that angels carried him to Abraham's side. The paralyzed man who only found pity from street dogs, now flies on angel's wings to the arms of Abraham, the revered father of God's people everywhere. The picture is so tender: he who was an outcaste on the streets is wrapped in a father's arms. His filthy rags are gone. His cancerous sores have vanished. He who lay in gutters now rises to the heights of heaven. His stomach is full and his thirst satiated. He bathes in pools of Living Water and basks in the glory of the God who always loved him when the whole world wrote him off as "the least of these."

Across that fixed gulf that separates Heaven from Hades, see the rich man: "In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side." (Verse 23) The torment of hell will be made all the more maddening because the damned will look up and see all that they forfeited. Hell defines the phrase *poetic justice*. Those who go there get exactly what they deserved. More than that, they designed their hell while on this earth. The formerly rich man cries out in verse 24, "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue because I am in agony in this fire." The irony is almost suffocating. Lazarus laid outside his mansion with swollen tongue and aching belly. All he ever wanted was some crumbs from the table, and a drop of water from the faucet. All the formerly rich man wants now is a drop of water. Not much to ask. But neither was it much for Lazarus to want a few crumbs. It wouldn't have taken much to walk across the courtyard and outside the gate—only a few steps. But this eternal gulf is too immense.

Afterlife is the great reversal. Verse 25 says, "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in our lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.'" I love the tenderness of Abraham to the damned man: "Son..." That tenderness exists from our heavenly Father on this side of death. After the Great Judgment, everything will be irreversible. Verse 26 say, "...it has been fixed..." But now there is time to reverse the future—before it is unalterably fixed. Our heavenly Father cries to you and me, "Son...daughter..." But we can only reverse the course of our life if we grab hold of the last truth in this story of eternal thirst.

4. TODAY IS THE GREAT OPPORTUNITY.

The story ends with a compelling urgency. The rich man knows that he can't change a fixed eternity. Hell is inescapable. But he remembers

that he has five brothers who are just like him. He doesn't want them to end up in this place of eternal conscious suffering. If Lazarus can't come to him with a drop of water, maybe Abraham will send him back from the dead with a gospel message to his family. Abraham replies in verse 29, "They have Moses and the Prophets, let them listen to them." In other words, they have the Old Testament Scriptures. He would say to our generation, "You have Moses, the Prophets, Jesus, and the Apostles." The Bible is enough to tell us how to prepare for eternity—or for us to tell others about a hell to lose and a heaven to gain.

He knows that his brothers are no more interested in obeying God's Word, than he was when he walked the earth. So he argues that if Lazarus came back, they would surely listen to someone who was raised from the dead. Now Jesus sucks the listening Pharisees right into his story. He knows that they have rejected him. Already they are plotting in secret to kill him. He knows too that he will rise from the dead on the third day. As Abraham gives his last words to the desperate rich man in hell, it is really Jesus speaking to the Pharisees: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Verse 31)

Jesus knows the hardness of a religious heart. But, if the Holy Spirit has tenderized your heart, you will know that this story is really about Jesus and his compassion. He who was everything that this rich man was, and infinitely more, saw us lying in the filthy rags of our messed up righteousness outside the gates of heaven. He saw the cancerous sores of sin oozing out of us and corrupting everything in this sin-sick pitiless environment. We were unable to get up and fix ourselves or our fallen world. Sometimes the dogs came and brought us relief. But mostly we were so hungry and thirsty for a righteousness we could never find in this world. So he opened heaven's gate, and crossed the great gulf between heaven and earth. He laid down next us and put his arms around our uncleanness. We cried, "Daddy, I'm so thirsty." He was cut so we could drink his blood. He laid his body on the cross as food for us to eat. He covered our nakedness with his righteousness. He invited us to come and be part of his forever family. He healed our sicknesses and released us from our prisons. All we have to do is accept it, put our trust in it, and then live his life through him. He has come back from the dead, and stands before us with Living Water. It's more than a drop. It's an ocean of love. Will you drink it?