

Sermon for Sunday, August 16, 1981, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"DRY SERMONS AND PARCHED SOULS"

St. John 4:4-5, 7:37-39

Text: "...but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." St. John 4:14

A major article in the paper the other day caught my attention. It had to do with the proposed Meramec Dam here in Missouri. According to the article there is a large group of people who want the Dam to be built. It is their contention that the great coming American crisis is not oil, but water. The fact is, as more and more land is being brought into use in our country by means of irrigation, as industry demands more water, as the population grows with its increasing water needs, many studying this situation have good evidence to support their contention that our next crisis will, indeed, be a crisis of water. Just last year when we had one of the driest summers on record, many communities in our area began to suffer for lack of water. Water had to be rationed and supplies dropped dangerously low. And in many parts of our country--in spite of our own area having an over-abundance of rain--the drought and its effects linger on.

But there is another kind of water crisis already evident in America. There is already a kind of drought gripping our land. It is a drought of the spirit. Jesus said, "whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." Many today do not know of this spiritual water that is available and are perishing of spiritual thirst. Others have not taken advantage of that spiritual water and their souls are parched and dry. The continued breakdown in families, the steadily rising divorce rate, the continued escalation of crime, are all symptoms of a spiritual drought.

If we lived in China or Russia where the church has been suppressed, we could understand this perhaps. But we don't live in those countries. We live instead in a land where government does not interfere with religion, where the media is open to the churches, and where churches themselves abound. How can we account for this spiritual drought? How can we account for the fact that the lives of so many are suffering from a parched and barren spiritual experience?

Let me suggest that one of the reasons is that we have failed to sink our spiritual wells into those rivers of living water that Jesus speaks about. We have tried to live on surface water and it just hasn't worked. Out in west Texas where I used to live, the altitude is rather high. As you go west across Texas, suddenly the land begins to rise and you climb to an altitude of approximately 3,000 feet. But once you get on top, the land is absolutely flat. When you view this area from the air, you see the land is dotted with round depressions. After a rain these depressions become shallow ponds or small lakes because the water has no place to go. However this seeming abundance of water has no staying power. It is just surface water. Either the farmers quickly pump them dry for irrigating or they are quickly evaporated into the dry air. Though the land may have seemed to be dotted with lakes after a rain, in just a day or two the water is all gone.

A lot of us Christians are trying to live off of spiritual surface water. We try to maintain a dynamic spiritual life by sporadic Sunday School attendance, by somewhat irregular participation in worship. We rarely pray or study the Bible and then we wonder why our religion doesn't mean very much to us. But the fact is, we can't sustain ourselves on that kind of spiritual surface water. At one point in my life I was deeply involved in prayer groups of a charismatic nature. Now, that experience met some needs I had at that stage in my spiritual growth. However, as time went on I became aware that the particular group I participated in was not going anywhere spiritually. We always seemed to stay on about the same level and I realized I was not continuing to grow. And that is true for all of us, isn't it? You can't really stay on the same level spiritually. You can't keep living off of surface water. At some point you have to sink your spiritual well down into those rivers of living water that Jesus talked about, or else you dry up spiritually.

In our Scripture this morning we read about Jesus and the woman at the well. When he told her about the water he gives she made an interesting statement. She said, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw." She wanted some cheap water. She wanted to be free of the need to make the trip to the well and to be free of the burden of drawing and carrying the water. Are you ever guilty of wanting cheap water? I am. It would be nice to have a dynamic, vital relationship to God and never work for it. It would be nice to have a close relationship to Jesus and never have to do anything to maintain it. But there is no cheap grace. You simply cannot live off of spiritual surface water.

Another reason America is suffering from a spiritual drought is that the wells have been put in the wrong places and we have hit dry holes. For example, in my opinion the current liberalism that dominates our churches is a dry well. It is not sunk into the deep, living water of Jesus. Recently I was reading an article in A D Magazine, the official publication of the United Presbyterian Church. The article was written by a person who had just been to Cuba and he was writing about the state of the church there. During his visit he was asked by his interpreter, "What does a person have to do to be a Christian?" Here was his opportunity to share with her about Jesus--to say that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. But what did he say about Jesus? He said, "In a unique way, Jesus helps us to know what God is like and is a model for what God wants men and women to be." Well, that is true--as far as it goes. Jesus does tell us about God and he is our example. But if that is all he is, he is not our Saviour. Above all Jesus is the one who went to the cross to die our death, to take our place that we might be forgiven and have eternal life. If Jesus is nothing more than a good example, we have the same agenda that secular humanism has.

But I don't need any more good examples--I've got more now than I can follow. I don't need any more new teachings. I know more teaching now than I can follow. What I do need is to be told that I am forgiven. In denominations and in churches where the preachers have had social action as their first and primary concern, the people have begun to wither spiritually. The first concern of the church must always be a person's relationship to Jesus. And if a person has that, from those roots in Jesus, the flowers of love and concern for others will inevitably blossom. But if you cut off the flowers from a plant--even though you put them in a lovely vase and water them well--their doom is sealed and they will die. They are cut off from their roots. If the message of the church loses its focus on Jesus you will always end up with dry sermons and parched souls.

Where have you sunk the wells of your life this morning? Some sink their wells in success and achieving status in the world. Some sink their wells in their families. Some sink their wells in the accumulation of things. But those wells inevitably run dry. The only well that will never fail you--the only waters that will never run dry--are those rivers of living water that Jesus talked about.

A third reason people today are so often suffering from spiritual drought is they don't keep their spiritual pumps primed. When a pump loses its prime it simply will not pump water. When I was a boy we used to go hiking out into the country for one reason or another. Sometimes we just wanted to get away by ourselves. Sometimes we were going hunting or fishing, or maybe for a swim in the river--or maybe we had somebody's watermelon patch staked out. But whatever our reasons, the hot Mississippi sun made the sweat run down our backs until our thin cotton shirts were saturated and stuck wetly to our shoulders. It didn't take long for our throats to get dry and parched and we would begin to look for a water pump. Nearly always if we looked across the cotton fields, somewhere we would see a pump sticking up. Now, I am talking about an old fashioned water pump that you pump by hand. Anyway, when we got to the pump it was usually the case that the leather rings would be dried out from lack of use and the water would have run back down the pipe because the suction had been lost. Somewhere nearby in some shady spot there would usually be a jar or a can hidden away out of the sun so that the precious water in it wouldn't evaporate. This was the priming water. One of us would grab the pump handle and pump as fast and as furiously as we could while another would slowly and carefully pour the priming water into the pump. As the leather rings expanded and the suction was regained, the pumping would get harder until finally the cold, clear water would begin to gurgle out of the spout.

Now, the fact is, I suspect a lot of us have lost our spiritual prime. We have not kept those rivers of spiritual water flowing and our spiritual pumps have lost their prime. Then, when an emergency comes along or some disaster threatens we have a sudden need of God. Desperately we begin to work the handle on our spiritual pumps but we get no water. We have lost our prime. Do you ever have that happen to you? I know I do. Every now and then so many things are going on at Central, so many demands are made on my time, that I don't spend the time with the Lord that I should. Then when I try to get started again often it is like a pump that has lost its suction. I am not getting any water and I come up spiritually dry.

The fact is, if we are to have a growing, dynamic relationship with Jesus we have got to keep that spiritual water flowing. See how it works! Fyodor Dostoevsky was a gifted young Russian intellect who wrote a highly acclaimed novel by the age of 25. But fame and quick success went to his head and he began to drink, to party, and to carelessly criticize the Czar. Arrested, he was sentenced to be shot. One cold December morning he was dressed in a white execution gown and set in front of a firing squad. Blindfolded, he awaited the fatal bullets that would rip through his body. Apparently, however, the Czar meant only to teach him a lesson for he was pardoned at the last moment and instead was sent to Siberia for ten years. In Siberia the only book allowed him was the New Testament and when he came out of prison he was totally committed to Jesus as his Saviour. After his release from prison he wrote in rapid succession, The House of the Dead, Crime and Punishment, The Idiot, The Possessed, and The Brothers Karamazov.

But there was one fatal flaw in Dostoevsky. He never seemed to grow as a Christian. He was careless about attending worship. He had no discipline in Bible study. Somehow he never learned to live the Christian life and his spiritual pump lost its prime. He began to drink too much. He had an affair. He became a compulsive gambler and went bankrupt. He fled Russia to live all over Europe, just one step ahead of his creditors. His writing became gloomy and filled with hopelessness. A hundred years ago this year he died a broken and penniless waste. He was a gifted writer and a Christian convert, but he never was spiritually disciplined. Had he kept his spiritual pump primed, had he kept those spiritual waters flowing, who knows what other great and magnificent contributions he might have made to the literature of the world. As King Solomon said in Proverbs, "He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is lost."(5:23)

Well, what about your life? Are rivers of living water flowing out of your heart? If you and I keep our pumps primed, if we keep on growing and maturing in the Lord, if those spiritual waters keep flowing, who knows what contributions we might make for the Lord. But if the well runs dry and the waters stop flowing we, too, may die for lack of discipline and because of our great folly be lost.