

Coming to the Waters of Life

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of thirsting after God and coming to Christ to drink, which requires a belief in Christ's real divinity, self-renunciation, and a reception of Christ by faith as the promised Messiah.

Scripture: John 7:37

Topics: "Communion with God", "Spiritual Thirst"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the profound spiritual thirst that individuals experience for communion with God, likening it to a physical thirst for water. He explains that Jesus' invitation to 'come unto me and drink' signifies the need for believers to seek fulfillment and satisfaction in Christ alone, who offers the living waters of the Holy Spirit. Finney elaborates on the implications of this thirst, the act of coming to Christ, and the significance of the invitation, urging listeners to recognize their need for divine connection and the transformative power of faith. He highlights that true satisfaction can only be found in God, and encourages believers to actively seek this relationship through prayer and faith.

Transcript

"In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink." --John 7:37

The feast spoken of here is the feast of tabernacles, of which we have a full account in Leviticus. It was one of the three great feasts observed annually by the Jewish people. Those who are learned in Jewish antiquities give us many interesting and important particulars respecting the mode of celebrating this great festival.

A tabernacle is simply a tent, and the institution might be called the feast of tents. Its object was to commemorate the forty years sojourning of the Hebrews in the wilderness when tents were their only dwellings. In observing it, the people gathered the boughs of trees and built themselves booths or tents in the streets or on the house-tops in which they sojourned during the eight days of the celebration.

The last day of the eight was deemed the great day, and on this day was observed one ceremony of special interests. Our text evidently alludes to it. The whole people moved in procession to the pool of Siloam and took thence a quantity of water in a golden vessel, carried it thus to the temple, and there poured it out before the Lord. The design of this was to represent the outpouring of the Spirit as taught abundantly by their prophets. It is a most remarkable fact that this great prophecy of the effusion of the

Spirit in the times of the Messiah should have been universally understood by the Jews, and that the knowledge of the coming fact should have been kept fresh in their minds, by this ceremony engrafted upon the great festival of tabernacles. Jewish writers concur in stating that the ceremony of bearing and pouring out the water meant just this and was always so understood by the nation.

It was on this occasion that, as stated in our text, Jesus stood and cried, saying "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink." It would seem that he was in the temple as the procession returned from the pool of Siloam, and that he seized upon that solemn, eventful moment to lift up his voice before all the people and call attention to himself as the great Giver of that very blessing which they were foreshadowing so beautifully in the out-pouring of the waters of Siloam. Then and there did the man of sorrows stand out in the presence of the assembled nation and proclaim "If any man thirst, let him--not go to Siloam, but--come unto me and drink." "He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." The historian here adds his explanation of these words;--"But this spake he of the Spirit which they that believe on him should receive." Christ very well understood what was represented by the pouring out of the water and he knew that the Jews also understood it;--Hence his solemn annunciation at this time, calling attention to himself as the giver of the Holy Spirit according to their well known prophecies. In discussing this subject, I shall show,

I. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN THE TEXT BY THIRST;

II. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN COMING TO CHRIST TO DRINK;

III. WHAT [IS IMPLIED IN] THE INVITATION--COME UNTO ME AND DRINK.

1. It is manifest that Christ has no reference to physical thirst for water, but to a state of mind--a state of intense desire, well illustrated by that natural desire for water which is called thirst. No doubt Christ alludes to that intense desire for communion with God which saints often have, and which is aptly expressed by the term, thirst.

Thus the Psalmist says--"My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?" Indeed he often represents himself as thirsting and panting after God--even as the hart pants after the water brooks.

Now whatever the philosophy of the fact may be, every Christian knows it to be a fact that there is such a thing as an intense desire of mind, terminating upon God. The soul feels most intensely that nothing but the smiles and the manifested presence of God can meet and fill its desires.

You know that we are so correlated to the outward world that certain objects awaken intense desires for their attainment. There is that in our physical constitution which creates a demand for its appropriate gratification. A foundation is laid in our constitution for the desire which we call thirst, and the demand is for water.

Now it is very remarkable that there is a state of mind which corresponds to this state of the physical system. There is a thirst of the soul for God. The soul pants and longs after God with a singleness of desire and a burning intensity which nothing can appease but the attainment of its object. As the thirsty man cries out for water and can be relieved by nothing else, so those who are spiritually thirsty cry out after God, and nothing else can by any means suffice to stay their irrepressible longings. When a man is famished with hunger he wants food, and nothing but food will satisfy him; you might spread his table with

gold--his soul still cries out for bread; you might clothe his brow with pearls--but you cannot even thus quench his insatiate longings for sustenance: so when the soul thirsts after God, this demand of the inner being can be met only by the actual revelations of God to this mind. God has so correlated our inward being to himself that the mind struggles and cries out after God and cannot possibly be satisfied with any thing else. The works of God are beautiful and lovely in their place--the smiles of his common providence are precious; but the spiritual mind can never be content to take these in place of those inward smiles of Jehovah's presence and those testimonies of his love which he gives to his favored children.

Every Christian knows that the Bible abounds with expression of this intense thirsting after God. And all who have had any experience in the deep things of the divine life in the soul understand well what is meant by this language. It may sound like an unknown tongue to those who have no spiritual discernment. What, they will say--the mind pants after God! What does this mean? Is there really any such thing as this? Yes, I answer, there surely is just such a thing as this--just such a longing of soul for God as the man dying with thirst feels for water. When the inward life is thoroughly developed and the soul renewed into the divine image, it thirsts after God, and longs most intensely for the light of his face.

Now it cannot be doubted that Christ had this very state of mind in his eye, and meant to invite to himself all those who had this longing after the knowledge and the favor of God. Most perfectly did he understand that it is not naturally possible for us to attain the highest state of blessedness on earth unless we draw and drink the living waters of life which he has promised, and which he alone can give.

I have said that this spiritual thirst is a certain state of mind. It may be defined thus--an intense desire for the fulness of a present salvation--a desire to realize in our own case what it is to be filled with all the fulness of God. In this state the mind pants after the fulness of a present enjoyment of God. This is the state which Christ had under his eye; a state in which the soul longs and pants after the fulness of a present communion with God.

The state ultimately desired by the individual who thus longs after God may be expressed thus;--A universal and entire cleansing of the mind from all that pollutes--in which all wanderings of thought in prayer are suppressed and controlled:--the appetites are brought into subjection and kept there; and soul lives and moves and has its being as it were in an atmosphere of God and of purity.

This state of mind is well illustrated in the experience of a lady, a letter from whom I saw some years since in R----. A friend of mine there showed me a letter written many years since by his grandmother. In this she gives in detail the course of her experience, showing how her mind had been greatly stirred up on respect to her falling so often and so sadly into bondage to sin--in respect to wanderings of thought in prayer and those various things over which Christians so often mourn. She felt the bitterness of these things, and came to feel at length that she could not live in such a state of bondage any longer.

In reading the scriptures, moreover, she had noticed that the Apostles got above this state of mind and evidently lived in liberty and not in bondage. Pursuing this train of enquiry she lighted upon many of those promises in the Bible which may well be called "exceeding great and precious," and she believed them. She knew they were the word of the Lord, and she had long since settled it in her mind that God must be believed in all he said. Of course her next step was to take hold of these promises and cry to God in mighty prayer that he would fulfill them in her case. She did so. Her feelings became so intense that the strongest language of scripture expressive of thirsting, longing, panting after God, was none too strong to express her actual state of mind. So earnestly did her soul agonize for this blessing that she literally cried

aloud after God, saying, "I cannot let thee go unless thou bless me"--I must absolutely die in this room if thou give me not this blessing which I so greatly need. O, she cried, I cannot live without it.*

Now she came to realize that very state of mind of which the sacred writers spake. She knew what it is to have the soul thirst and long after God, yea, the living God. She thirsted for that water of life which Jesus had promised, and she rushed to his feet to lay hold there of a present salvation from sin. I need not say that such seeking is never in vain. Jesus Christ has said, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink." "He that believeth on me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." Such was the experience of this lady.

This hungering implies a right state of the will. The hungering itself is a state of the sensibility inasmuch as it is simply desire and feeling; but it results from the heart's being in a right state, and could not exist if the heart were in a wrong state. The thirst for spiritual blessings does not, as some seem to suppose, imply that the individual is in a sinful state, but that he is in a holy state comparatively;--yet is he striving to get higher and still nearer to God.

Again, this thirsting implies a self-loathing and disgust towards everything that stands in the way of the most intimate communion with God. Men find that the outward life is not so crucified but that it seems to come between the soul and God. There is something that prevents the soul from entering into that great, deep, calm communion with God, and the mind is in agony because it finds itself thus withheld from God. There is a waywardness of the physical propensities--an agitation and fluttering which I hardly know how to describe, but which most Christians understand but too well in their own experience; and when this develops itself, it comes directly in the way of entering into real and deep peace with God. It creates a sort of effervescing and agitation, not itself sinful perhaps, but excessively annoying and dangerous inasmuch as it often operates powerfully as temptation to sin. Many of you doubtless know what this is, and you also know perhaps how the soul is thrown into deep agony by means of this conflict with the flesh, and gives itself up to mighty energizings of prayer and faith that it may be delivered from this foe within and brought into a state of pure and perfect peace. This is one of the forms of thirsting for the waters of life.

Again, this thirst implies a great drawing of the Spirit of God. The soul is drawn out after God with a deep and powerful drawing, so that it truly yearns after God, and feels that nothing can begin to satisfy this craving desire of the soul but the very object itself--the inner communion of the soul with its Maker. It deserves special notice here that this often seems to the individual himself to be the very calling of the Spirit of God, as if he heard that voice and was conscious of being drawn upward towards the blessed God by some influence not self-originated. The spiritual christian recognizes this call at once as the voice of his beloved.

Again, this thirsting for the water of life implies being heartily sick of sin and heartily sick of tampering with any thing that can become an occasion of sin and that embarrasses the soul and hinders its living in the closest communion with God. It implies a supreme desire to live wholly for God and an utter loathing of any form of life which falls short of this. How often in looking at this point have I thought of Paul's experience. "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live: yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." The Apostle here develops a state of mind which I fear but few enter into and thoroughly understand. I live, he says, yet not I; not I, the same Paul or Saul who once followed the flesh and lived afar from God--it is not the same I, that now lives, but it is Christ within me that now becomes my life. He knew what it was to have a new and spiritual life energizing through all his inmost soul.

Beloved, how many of you know what this means? Who of you have tasted in your own experience and know the blessedness of this divine life?

II. We are to enquire what is implied in coming to Christ to drink.

1. A belief in his real divinity; a belief that Christ is truly God. This cannot fail to be obvious to you upon a due examination of the text in its connection. For, what is the thing about which the Savior is here speaking? Nothing else surely but the gift of the Holy Ghost; and since the Holy Ghost is also divine--nothing else but the gift of God himself to the soul. The historian himself explains our Savior's language; "this spake he of the Spirit which they that believe on him should receive."

Coming to Christ then, according to this invitation is coming to one who can give God to the soul. Of course therefore none can come in faith unless he has confidence in the true divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Take another view of this. The object of this thirst of the soul is nothing other than God himself. The soul as I have already said, when thirsting in the sense of the text, thirsts after God--after his presence--his love and his communion. Now then, while thirsting after God, can we come to Jesus to receive the blessing unless we believe him to be truly divine? Can any being who is less than divine give us communion and peace with God? Can one who is not God himself give God to our souls?

Again, mark the language of the text--"Come unto me and drink." If any man thirst truly after God, let him come unto me--I can quench his thirst, and supply all his wants. How can we believe this unless we truly believe that Christ is God?

There is no escape from this course of argument. Some may seek to escape by maintaining that the thirst spoken of is not really a thirst after God. But surely every spiritual Christian knows that this is nothing else than a longing after God. What else is it? Does the soul thirst after a mortal man, or after an angel? Is it the favor of man or angel which awakens such intense desires and irrepressible thirstings? Nay verily; the Christian does not thus learn Christ. God and God alone is the supreme object of his thirst, and he comes to Jesus to be filled with God. How can he intelligently do this, unless he believes in his real divinity?

Again, this coming to Christ implies self-renunciation. None will ever come so long as they can find enough of good in themselves and without Christ to satisfy the demands of their own mind. This is most obvious. Their own vessel must be empty before they can rationally come to Christ to have it filled. None will ever come to Christ for these waters of life so long as he supposes he can get them by any efforts of his own. One's own righteousness must be utterly renounced and all one's own ways of being saved;--else there will be no real coming to trust in Christ. Self must be utterly renounced.

Again, coming to Christ implies a reception of him by faith as the promised Messiah, as our own Savior, Redeemer, and Mediator before God. There must be a personal appropriation of Christ by faith to one's self as ours in all those respects in which the divine gospel plan makes him the Savior of lost men.

All this implies that the Spirit takes the things of Christ and shows them to us. We have no reason to suppose that any soul ever receives Christ as his own Savior except as the Spirit sets before that mind just views of its own need and of the perfect adaptation of Christ to supply that need.

Again, this coming to Christ implies some degree of expectation of receiving the blessing to be sought. It is naturally impossible to come to Christ without faith in his promises; and this faith you will readily see must

imply some degree of expectation that if we come as we are invited to do, we shall receive.

III. What does this invitation imply?

As I have already said, it implies his divinity. On this I need not now enlarge.

Of course the invitation implies his entire ability to give the blessings needed. If he be really divine, none need to doubt his ability. If he promises to give, we ought not to doubt that he can.

Again, the invitation implies also his willingness to bestow upon us the spiritual good promised. The very promise itself most perfectly implies this.

The promise implies also that if we do come to him to drink, we shall receive. When he invites, it is not to tantalize; it is not to raise expectation only to disappoint it again; it is not that he may send us away empty and confounded; no, but it is to induce us to come and enjoy the bliss of being blessed; and this of course implies the strongest, richest pledge that if we do come in honesty of heart and in humble faith we shall receive the promised blessings.

Again, we must get this blessing of Christ and of no one else. He doubtless intended to teach this most emphatically, that if anyone thirsted for the waters of life, that soul must come unto him and to none other but to him for those waters.

Mark how beautifully and impressively he taught this. See him in front of that lofty temple and in [the] presence of that vast triumphant procession as they move slowly along. He waits till the priest has brought forward the golden vessel of water from Siloam's pool and poured it forth at the foot of the altar, he stands by in silence till the ceremony is completed, and then he lifts up his voice before the assembled nation and cries aloud, Ho, ho, all ye people of Israel, ho, all ye children of the promises and covenants of the Lord, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink." With me are the waters of real life. "He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water."

What an announcement is this! And with what mingled emotions was it received by those dense masses of human beings on whose ears it fell! Some of the Pharisees were man enough to murder him on the very pavements of the temple; they would not have scrupled to shed his blood, so enraged were they at him--but he meekly goes on in his Master's work, and perhaps through fear of the people they did not dare just now to lay their hands upon him. "Many of the people, it is beautifully added, when they heard this saying, said, of a truth this is a Prophet." Some said one thing and some another, so there was a division among them. What a scene of prodigious excitement did this startling announcement make! Such a sort of excitement the gospel in these later days often produces where it is announced with demonstration of the Spirit and the power of God.

REMARKS.

1. Many persons have none of this thirst, for several reasons.

(1.) They have never suffered themselves to be thoroughly convinced of sin. I say, never suffered themselves, for mark me, they could not fail of being thus convinced if they would not resist the Holy Ghost. His Spirit would reprove them of their sin if they would not resist his reproof. But they do resist, and hence they never know the depth of their own guilt and vileness so as to be led to cry out after deliverance and to thirst after God.

(2.) Many know not this thirst and supply, because though they have had a conviction of sin, yet they have never believed and tasted so as to know the blessedness of receiving these waters of life. In fact men need to know God by having some degree of communion with him before they will have their desires kindled intensely for more and deeper communion. The heart must first be submitted to God, and some experience be had of the rich blessedness of gospel peace and gospel love; than the soul will naturally thirst after God. But multitudes never have this thirst because they have not tasted of these waters.

(3.) I am often struck with the fact that many seem to know nothing of the meaning of such language as the Bible employs to express the longings of the soul after spiritual blessings. They confess that when they read such passages as the text, and many passages to which I have alluded in the Psalms of David, they really know nothing of this thirsting. They say the language is much too strong to express any state of mind they have ever had. They cannot call any of their exercises a hungering or a thirsting;--these terms would express a far stronger desire than they have ever felt. It is astonishing to see how many there are who never know God--never have the soul cry out after a full and perfect salvation--never feel a longing, a quenchless, burning desire, just like a natural thirst, which nothing else can supply but the very thing desired. They do not understand how the mind gravitates towards God. They do not know what it is to have God become the natural food and drink of the soul, so that nothing but God himself can satisfy its demands. There is such a state in which nothing but God can satisfy the demands of the soul. If all the angels of heaven were given us it would not satisfy; if everything else besides God in the whole universe were laid at our feet, it would not suffice; it would not be the thing which the soul craves. This object of supreme desire is nothing else but God. O how the soul cries out after God, the infinite God, the perfect, the glorious, the ever-blessed God! There is a most beautiful and wonderful correlation established between God and the human soul which lays a foundation for this want, this demand of the soul for God as its only satisfying portion. Consequently when the soul comes into an upright state, and the inner voice of its spiritual nature is heard, that voice cries out after God and feels that the soul must live in God and that to depart from God is hell itself. The living in and with God and being sunk in him, is the natural, the necessary and the eternal good of the soul.

In view of this great and glorious good, where and what is all that pertains to this outward life? It effervesces for a day--it bustles for a moment;--it is, and then it is no more; men may be fascinated by it for an hour: but when the soul comes to understand God, then nothing but God can suffice. Nothing else can meet its demands.

It is remarkable that this is the sum of all the blessings promised to the saints of God in the Bible. To Abraham God said--"Fear not--I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward." Mark this language. God does not say--I will give thee an exceeding great reward--but I am--I myself am thy glorious reward. I give you myself as thy portion.

So God often represents himself as being the infinite good of the soul. The spiritual Christian can easily understand this.

On the other hand, some think of heaven as being some place which is itself blessed. They fancy its streets to be of gold--its rivers and flowers and fruits combine every thing that can regale the senses and charm the taste, and the place itself becomes in their view the heaven, and would be if there were no God there.

But all such views are false and delusive. Really it is the presence of God and nothing else that makes heaven blessed. There the mind is swallowed up and forever enfolded in God. There the glorious God becomes truly the portion and the everlasting blessedness of every holy soul.

(4.) Many confound conviction of sin with this thirst for the waters of life. A state of conviction will truly precede it; but this thirst is entirely a different thing, and arises from the fact that the mind really knows and has entered into the enjoyment of God. You recollect how our Lord most beautifully represents his people as eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Now this must certainly denote a cordial reception of Christ by a living faith. And the previous hunger and thirst which are always implied in eating and drinking must in their spiritual acts imply much more than simply conviction of sin.

(5.) Many have not this thirst because they allow themselves to thirst for other things. The two are absolutely incompatible with each other. There is even among professors of religion a vast deal of thirsting after the outward life and its enjoyments. When this is indulged the inward thirst after God must cease.

2. It is a great blessing to have this inward thirst developed.

It is in itself a very great blessing to have the soul thus drawn out after God. The very desire is a heavenly state of mind, for you are conscious that your exercises are perfectly reasonable and that your affections are now taking hold of objects which are most perfectly worthy of an immortal mind.

And if the state of desire is blessed, how much more so is the fulfillment of it? O, to be filled even on earth with all the fullness of God! This is of all things below, most blissful!

3. When this has ceased in the mind, one can have no reason to hope that he is going to heaven. If the mind has become so apostate from God, there is no hope left. Why should God take that soul to heaven which has no longings for his presence?

4. Many persons stop short with this thirst because they have not faith to come to Christ. Do you see them come to Christ and plead--"Lord, didst not thou say--if any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink, and now, Lord, I have come, expecting thou wilt give me those blessed waters." Do you see this state of mind? No. They do not come to Christ believing absolutely that he will give them the blessings they need.

I can well recollect a scene in my own experience which is in point here. My soul was drawn out exceedingly for this blessing and I did not see why I did not attain it. My heart seemed full of prayer, echoing and echoing with pleadings and promises, till all at once the thought came across my mind--you do not believe you shall receive. I instantly thought of a dear friend of mind who would always anticipate my wants, who seemed to have the faculty always of foreseeing the things I needed, and who would be sure to supply them as if this was the chief pleasure of his existence. Then I asked myself--Do you as much expect Christ to supply your wants as you expect it of this earthly friend? I saw then that I did not. I saw the shameful unbelief of my state of mind, and I felt so rebuked and so perfectly ashamed that I could not help crying out--"O my blessed Jesus, I have not had so much faith and confidence in thee as I have often had in a man!"

So, many are withered and blighted because you do not believe that God is drawing, but you are resisting. O, you do not believe. Jesus himself comes near--yea very near;--he puts the cup into your very hand and says "drink, yea drink abundantly, O beloved;" but alas, how many still will not believe.

O this fountain of life--what is it but the fountain of God bubbling up in your inward, spiritual being. Verily the blessing offered you is nothing less than the glorious God himself; and now will you not believe? If any man will come believing, the voice divine says, I will give him of the waters of life freely.

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