

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel - Part thirty-three

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JESUS EXPLAINS WHAT IT MEANS TO BELIEVE IN HIM

John 7:37-53 - "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. [38] Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" [39] 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. [40] When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." [41] Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee? [42] Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" [43] So there was a division among the people over him. [44] Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him. [45] The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" [46] The officers answered, "No one ever spoke like this man!" [47] The Pharisees answered them, "Have you also been deceived? [48] Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? [49] But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed." [50] Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, [51] "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" [52] They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee." [53] They went each to his own house...."

I have a longer introduction with a few more condensed teaching points.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus adds one more shocking statement to the great list of John's "*I came to....*" proclamations. It isn't referred to all that often - **Matthew 10:34** - "**Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.**" And in our text today everyone is *fighting* over Jesus. He's *dividing* the crowd just as the old priest Simeon said He would in his Christmas prophecy.

Look at our text. This is not a prayer meeting. It's a religious brawl. The people who *don't* believe in Jesus as God's redeeming Messiah aren't just *indifferent*. They're *threatened* and they're *strident* and they're *on the march*.

One more thing by way of contextualization. On each day of this feast a libation or offering of water was drawn out of the pool of Siloam and brought by the priests while the crowd sang, "*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation*" (Isaiah 12:3)

While historians differ over what this symbol represented the two best guesses seem to be that it pictured the *water from the rock* God provided twice during their wilderness wanderings or a *prayer for rain for the next harvest*. Either way the water signified thankfulness and trust for the life-giving water only God provides. There was recognition they would perish from thirst without this divinely provided water.

This is the setting for Jesus' loud cry at the feast - "**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. 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'**"

What that physical water in the wilderness did for human thirst Jesus did for the spiritual thirst of mankind. Jesus stands to His feet and points to Himself as God's answer to the deepest spiritual needs of sinful people. And He *cries out* because He knows He hasn't much time left. He will be executed six months from now at the next feast - the Passover. And there is longing and deep emotion in His voice as He cries to drive His point home.

This is not the first time Jesus used this imagery of Himself as water. It seemed one of His favorites. He described Himself in very similar terms to the woman at the well in **John 4:13-15** - "**Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."**15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

What makes our text in John 7 slightly different is the way Jesus lays emphasis on the giving of the *Holy Spirit* - **John 7:39** - "**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.**"

This will be the important theme in today's text. As you will see, there were various responses to Jesus' words. Some thought Jesus must be the great coming prophet Moses promised (40), some were divided over whether or not He might be the Messiah (41-44), and some wanted to arrest Jesus and be rid of Him for good (45-49b).

These varied responses only highlighted how desperately they needed to hear Jesus' words with understanding. A *prophet* would only bring teaching. By their view, *the Messiah* would bring military peace and economic prosperity. But clearly Jesus comes with more than either of these. Jesus was God's means of *transforming lives through the power of the Holy Spirit*. Jesus actually was the means to God's *forgiveness* (which no prophet then or now could offer) and God's *inward transforming power* (and no political Messiah could provide the gift of the Holy Spirit). Only Jesus prepared hearts for the very Spirit of God. There was nothing *man-made* in the changes Jesus wanted to bring these needy people.

All of this brings us to some practical lessons from this text:

1) **JESUS TAKES EVERY POSSIBLE OPPORTUNITY TO PRESENT HIMSELF AS THE FULFILLMENT OF THE ENTIRE OLD COVENANT AGE OF EXPECTATION**

John 7:37 - "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."

I know this isn't a new idea, but I've been awakened all over to the conscious repeated effort of Jesus to constantly link Himself and His work with accounts of the Old Testament. In our present text He's the fulfillment of the water being brought at the Feast of Booths.

In *chapter two* He equates His physical body with the Temple in Jerusalem - **John 2:19-21** - "Jesus answered them, "**Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.**" [20] The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" [21] But **he was speaking about the temple of his body.**"

In *chapter three* He equates His coming death on the cross with the lifting up of Moses' bronze serpent in the wilderness - **John 3:14-15** - "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, [15] that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

In *chapter six* He equates the life-giving mission of His redemption with the manna that God sent in the wilderness - **John 6:32-35** - "Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. [33] For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." [34] They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." [35] Jesus said to them, "**I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.**"

There is no missing Jesus' intent in these texts. While He *could* have illustrated His Person and work in countless different ways He *chose* to summarize Himself in ways that consistently pointed to the fulfillment of previous revelation. He chose to define Himself as **completing accounts that stood incomplete without His coming.**

And there's a particular point that needs explaining. True, all of those Old Testament accounts are inspired and important for our understanding. We don't in any way *diminish* the importance of the Old Testament. It is wonderfully true that all of those accounts were written for our benefit and instruction - **Romans 15:4** - "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

But it's important to remember *how* we receive benefit from these Old Testament accounts. We don't receive benefit from them by putting ourselves back under the Law. We don't come to any of these Old Testament texts ***as we would come to them if Jesus had never come.*** We come to all of these texts ***seeing and rejoicing in their anticipation and endorsement of Jesus the Christ.***

And the lesson to take home from church today is we all need to be very careful ***how we listen to the Old Testament.*** It is precious God's Word. But it's very easy for prophet-styled preachers to proclaim Old Testament texts as though people get to heaven by their keeping of God's laws. It's easy to come to Old Testament texts and hammer them out as though Jesus never came and died. And there are many self-endorsed, well known personalities who love the attention that self-proclaimed prophets get. Enough said.

2) **BELIEF IN JESUS IS DESCRIBED IN THREE CONTINUOUS VERBS - THIRSTING, COMING, AND DRINKING**

John 7:37 - "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**."

I think we should be so grateful Jesus took the effort to flesh out ideas that so quickly can become empty religious clichés. It's almost as though our Lord knew how subtly common faith expressions can become void of the meanings they had when they were hot off the pages of the New Testament.

Notice **verse 38**. John says Jesus is **shouting** at this point (**"cried out" - 37**) - **"Whoever believes in me.....!"** There's the topic. Jesus tells us what He's defining right out of the gate. Everybody and his dog talks about **"believing in Jesus."** But they don't always mean what Jesus means.

Jesus defines belief:

- a) **Thirst** - Thirst is laid down as the very first component of belief. How shall we explain spiritual thirst? We all know that even on a physical level thirst is a kind of **emptiness**. Thirst is a felt **lack**.

For anyone to **come** to Jesus he must come to the end of himself. But not just in the sense of having a tough time in life. A person can be living through the nightmare of a broken home or marriage and just be so sick of all the pain that he thinks he's come to the end of himself and is ready for Jesus. But what he longs for is a happy home, not Jesus the Messiah. A person may be facing financial ruin and think he's come to the end of himself. But what he's reaching out for is the end of financial pressure.

My point here is it's easy to be thirsty for happiness or health or relational healing and think one is thirsty for Jesus Christ. So what do I mean when I say **thirst is coming to the end of yourself?** I don't mean physical or emotional fatigue. Thirst means a gnawing awareness that what is missing is **Christ-shaped**. Thirsting for Jesus is **ceasing to write out the prescription for your own fulfillment and handing the pen and paper over to Jesus Christ**. It means **letting Him write out His own prescription for your present and future joy**.

Let me try to put it another way. Thirsting for Jesus is coming to the place where you **no longer trust yourself with the management of your life**. It's realizing your **self-rule is gradually emptying your life from the inside and finally coming to hate that emptiness**.

Take this first step very seriously. **"If anyone thirsts...."** No one else need apply. You can't **"come"** (the second step to believing) to Jesus the way you **come** to your debit machine. He will never **share** the management of your life. The desire to be ruled and led by Christ must be as dominating and all-consuming as a parched baked thirst craves water.

- b) **"Come"** - Jesus makes the idea as simple as possible. Nothing is **earned**. There is no hurdle over which to climb or jump. Just come. But the verb means at least leaving one point and moving to another. You can't **come** to one place without **exiting** another. This isn't **earning** grace or favor. It's simply recognizing the coming must be **actual** and not just **imagined**.

My own opinion is it is quite common for people to **think** they have **come** to Jesus when they never have. By that I mean they tried to **come** to Jesus and **remain where they were**. So they talk and sing and pratter about **coming to Jesus** but they only mean in some tranced-out, pretend religious sense. They **come** to Jesus and still maintain the planning and running of their daily lives and choices.

What usually happens is, eventually, they will come to the mistaken conclusion that Christianity didn't work for them or they'll be mad at God for not catering to them. All the while the truth of the matter is they never actually **came** to Jesus in the first place. They only came to Jesus in their imaginations - kind of like writing a letter to Santa.

John talked about this kind of **"belief"** in Jesus in **John 2:23-25** - **"Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. [24] But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people [25] and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man."**

- c) **"Drink"** - I think Jesus deliberately chose this image of **one substance entering another**. This is what **believing** in Jesus entails. No thirst was even quenched by the spreading of water over the **outside** of the parched individual. Drinking is **internalizing**. It's **taking it in**. It's **absorbing and soaking up**.

Was Jesus confronting our tendency to **talk** more than **do**? Was He calling all of us to make sure our **believing** in

Him wasn't just for show or impression? Was He reminding us how quickly we can deal with just the *outsides* of spiritual life while our hearts are ruled by other agendas?

At the very least Jesus surely reminds us *believing* in Him isn't merely a *mental* process. His life dominates *only* from the inside out. His presence and grace is proven in the doing of His will - John 7:17 - "If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority." That's what Jesus meant by an *inside-out* belief in Himself.

3) THE ANTICIPATED HOLY SPIRIT AND HIS OUTFLOWING LIFE

John 7:38-39 - "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" [39] 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 we come to the nub of life in Christ. Jesus has a promise for His followers. There was a new day coming. It would follow His death, resurrection and ascension. That this was essential in the mind of Jesus is born out by His repeated emphasis on the Spirit's coming:

John 14:16-17 - "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, [17] even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you."

Now, says Jesus, He is *with* you. Then He will be *in* you. Or, in the language of John 7:38b-39 - "...Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." [39] 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."

See also John 16:5-7 - "But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' [6] But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. [7] Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you."

This ties in with John 7:39b - "...as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified." The *coming* of the Holy Spirit is tied to the *going* of Jesus. That's because Jesus is the One, according to Peter, who *sends* the Holy Spirit - Acts 2:32-33 - "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. [33] Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he (Jesus) has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing."

This is exactly as John the Baptist had predicted when He says of Jesus, "...I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16).

5) THEN, AS NOW, JESUS IS THE GREAT LIGHTNING ROD DIVIDING THE OPINIONS OF MANKIND

John 7:40-52 - "When they heard these words, some of the people said, 'This really is the Prophet.' [41] Others said, 'This is the Christ.' But some said, 'Is the Christ to come from Galilee? [42] Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?' [43] So there was a division among the people over him. [44] Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him. [45] The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, 'Why did you not bring him?' [46] The officers answered, 'No one ever spoke like this man!' [47] The Pharisees answered them, 'Have you also been deceived? [48] Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? [49] But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.'" [50] Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, [51] "Does our law

judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" [52] They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee."

What mixed bag of response! People who believed lightly - applauding His words and wonders. People who were mistaken and uninformed about the basic facts about Jesus, thinking He was actually born in Galilee rather than in Bethlehem as the Scriptures clearly state (**Matthew 2:1**), and people who just wanted Jesus dead and off the scene so He could no longer interfere with their own lives and work. And there was even one man, **Nicodemus**, who seems in process of enlightenment, trying his best to stick up for Jesus without sticking our his own neck.

Then as now Jesus forces response. Sides are drawn up. People begin to declare something of their own inner condition and light. The officers were right - **"No one ever spoke like this man" (46)**. There never has been another like Jesus.