

FINDING THE RIVER THAT
NEVER RUNS DRY

Part 1 of 4: *DISCOVERING THE RIVER OF LIVING WATER*

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Resources For Christ-Centered Discipleship

I saw in the Sunday paper a while ago that Fred Durst of Limp Bizket was being interviewed and he said something like this: "I used to think that if I became a rock star I'd have everything and be happy." He discovered it wasn't like that. Durst said: "I still worry about the same old things. I wonder if my girlfriend really loves me."

It seems that no matter what age we are living in, and no matter what people achieve or attain we still hear the same expressions of a longing for something more, and an experience of being unfulfilled and unsatisfied. The prophet Jeremiah said that one of the appalling tragedies of life is that people turn away from God, the fountain of living water, in order to try to find life somewhere else only to end up continually unsatisfied.

In Jeremiah 2:12-13 God says: *Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror, " declares the LORD. ¹³ "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.*

One of the striking things about the bible is the way it holds out incredible promises of true satisfaction through a relationship with God. A.W. Tozer in His classic book, The Pursuit of God, summed up the teaching of the bible by saying: "God is so vastly wonderful, so utterly and completely delightful that He can, without anything other than Himself, meet and overflow the deepest demands of our total nature, mysterious and deep as that nature is.

Against the background of the promises of the Bible the question that I want us to think about is this: Is God meeting and overflowing the deepest demands of your total nature? If not, why not? Do you have much in the way of real practical experience of the streams of living water that Jesus spoke about?

The Bible tells us that God is satisfying

There are many ways we can get at the greatness of God's promises. The Bible tells us that God is "satisfying." C. S. Lewis says that God in the Psalms is the "all-satisfying Object."

Psalms 63:4-5 I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. ⁵ My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

Psalms 16:11 You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

The Psalms give testimony that everything we need is found in God.

Psalms 73:25-28 Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. ²⁷ Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. ²⁸ But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.

The Bible tells us that God is not only satisfying, God is Inviting

Some of the most powerful language in the Bible concerning these themes is found in the prophets.

Isaiah 55:1-3 "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. ² Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me,

and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. ³ Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.

If you look first at the picture in verse 1: you will notice that God offers us three things to quench the thirst of our soul. He offers us water, wine, and milk. Isaiah 55:1-3 *“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.*

Water refreshes and restores life.

Psalm 23:2-3 says, “...He leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul...” When you are thirsty and tired, it’s water that restores you. It is water that you want and need. God invites you right now to quench your thirst and receive refreshment, and restoration.

Milk nourishes us and makes us strong.

1 Peter 2:2 says, *“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation,”*. When someone is gasping for life, you give them water, but when you want a little baby to grow day after day you give it milk again and again. God is not just for emergencies. He is for health in the long haul. He invites you not only to come alive with water, but also to grow strong with milk.

Wine is exhilarating and intoxicating.

Psalm 4:7 says, *“You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound.”* No matter how unemotional or laid-back we may seem to others, there is a part to everyone of us that God made for exhilaration—for shouting and singing—for laughing and leaping for joy! There is a kind of high, a kind of intoxication that doesn’t come from drugs or alcohol but from the goodness of God and the richness of life with God.

Verse one says that God wants to quench our thirst for life, keep us nourished and growing strong, and fill our hearts with joy. Notice the quality of what God offers us. The last part of verse 2 says, *“Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.”* The word “good” means that what God offers is healthy and nourishing. The word “richest” means it’s the best quality there is. The water is good for you; it’s the best there is. The milk is good for you; it’s the best there is. The wine is good for you; it’s the very best quality there is.

In verse 3 God tells us what the reality is behind all of this imagery. *“³ Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.”* In verse 1 he said, *“Come to the waters . . . come for wine and milk.”* In verse 3 he says; *“...come to me...”* God Himself is the water that restores our souls, God Himself is the milk that nourishes our heart and makes us strong, and God Himself is the wine of the spirit that brings true joy and gladness.

Verse 3 is even more specific, *“³ Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.”* When a person takes God up on his great invitation to come, He makes a covenant with that person. What kind of covenant? The same kind of covenant that He made with King David in 2 Samuel 7, a covenant of “faithful love.”

God binds Himself to you with a promise, an unbreakable covenant to follow you with goodness and mercy all your days right into eternity. When you live in relationship with

God, drawing on his resources of faithful love for you it is refreshing, nourishing, and exhilarating. This brings up a very practical question. What must we do to get these benefits? You have to obey the twelve commandments!

If you look carefully you'll notice that packed into these first three verses of Isaiah 55 are 12 imperatives or commands. The most pleasant, and most inviting 12 commandments you will ever hear.

Isaiah 55:1-3 *"Come, all you who are thirsty (#1), come to the waters; (#2) and you who have no money, come, (#3) buy (#4) and eat! (#5) Come, (#6) buy wine and milk without money and without cost. (#7) ²Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, (#8) and eat what is good, (#9) and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. ³ Give ear (#10) and come to me; (#11) hear me, (#12) that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.*

What God wants from us is really very simple.

When you reflect on these 12 commandments for a moment they fall into a natural pattern. First there are three commands to listen carefully to what God is saying (one in verse 2 and two in verse 3). Are you listening carefully? Then, in addition to listening carefully, there are three basic things in all these commands that God repeatedly asks us to do: (1). Come, (2.) buy, (3.) and eat.

What God is simply saying is "Come to me, get what you need, and enjoy it." Come, buy, and eat. Although the word "buy" is used, it's really a free gift! God says; *"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.* Salvation and relationship with God are not bought or earned by any good works that we do. It cannot be paid for with money, religion, or anything else.

Romans 6:23 says the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Christ paid for our sins and purchased our salvation. We receive this salvation by faith when we turn to Him and trust in Him. The same is also true to experience the fullness of God in Christ.

John 7:37-38 tells us that Jesus said, *"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."* The way we come and drink is by trusting, believing, and placing our faith in Him. Come to God just one time through faith in Christ and He enters into that everlasting covenant of faithful love with you. He will never lose you or let you go, but the way you keep the water, milk, and wine of God flowing in your life is by continually coming, eating, and believing over and over again.

If the well is not dry, why are we so often thirsty?

We've been digging when we could have been drinking.

Isaiah points us to the ongoing issue that keeps many Christians from experiencing this fullness of life with God that is so powerfully pictured here. In verse 2 he asks the question: *Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.*

The reason we don't experience satisfaction at God's table is because our hands and hearts are filled with the local cuisine! This is what Isaiah calls that which is not bread, and that which does not satisfy.

This is the same theme that Jeremiah pictures so powerfully in a different way: Jeremiah 2:12-13 *Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror, " declares the LORD. ¹³ "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.*

God is the ultimate source of joy, strength, and satisfaction in life. His sufficiency to meet all of our deepest needs and thirsts, and to satisfy us is repeatedly taught in the Bible. He is the unending spring that quenches every thirst.

Our choice in life is between true satisfaction in God or a frustrating and unfulfilling search for satisfaction in other places and from other sources. Our twofold sin is that we tend to repeatedly forsake God, the fountain of living water, and dig for ourselves broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

How I dug a broken cistern – "The Bizarre Case of the Dispirited Pastor"

Soon after I graduated with my M.A. in New Testament studies I received a call to be the pastor of a church in Topeka, Kansas. I entered into my work and ministry with a great deal of energy, commitment, and enthusiasm. The demands placed upon me by the ministry were intense and the expectations of the people seemed insatiable. What had started out as a hopeful and exciting endeavor was soon turning into a demanding, difficult, stress filled chore. No matter what I did, the people could not be satisfied. I did a lot of visiting, far more than I do now. I was in the homes and the hospital often. I helped repaired the building, counseled with people, taught Sunday School, preached sermons that kept me up late on many nights. Still, I found that some people were critical and demanding.

During this time I struggled continually from overwork and neglecting other things that should have been given priority. During this time I swung between anger and discouragement

One day I was driving down the street, doing visitation, and listening to a tape that I soon found fascinating. I wanted to improve my counseling skills and I had a series of teaching tapes by Jay Adam on Christian Counseling. On this particular day I was listening to an actual case study; it was the recording of a real counseling session.

The case that I was listening to was introduced as "The Case of the Dispirited Pastor". It began with the pastor telling his story of frustration and discouragement. He told how the needs and demands of his church were insatiable, he was tired from working too many hours, he was neglecting his wife and family, he was spending little quality time with God in prayer and meditation, not to mention the fact that he was underpaid. Not only was this pastor physically exhausted, but he was emotionally drained as well. While the people in his church went on fun filled vacations his wife had to take on a second job to make ends meet. On and on he went. I felt such sympathy for this man because his story mirrored mine in so many ways. I couldn't wait to hear the encouraging and helpful words that the caring Christian counselor would share with him when he had finished telling his story.

Soon the story of the sad situation of the dispirited pastor came to an end and it was the counselor's turn to speak. I will never forget the first four words the counselor spoke because they cut me to the heart. He said, "You need to repent."

I thought to myself, "Wait a minute. This guy doesn't need to repent. It's the congregation that needs to repent! This guy needs a break. He deserves a medal!"

But the counselor began to speak and as he did God was speaking to my heart. He was saying something like this, "If you are working yourself to physical and emotional exhaustion, neglecting your family, your time with God, and being wounded by the criticisms of the people you are not serving God and seeking to please Him, you are trying to please the people. If you were committed to pleasing God you would say, 'Lord what do you want me to do?' If you were committed to serving God you would set a realistic schedule that was sacrificial, but you would find time to rest and be with your family and your God. If you are unable to do that don't blame God or the people. It is your own fault. You have become a people pleaser and you are letting it destroy your life. You need to repent for the sin of letting people pleasing overshadow your commitment to serving God."

That moment in the car was a great moment of clarity for me. It showed me that although I believed in God and wanted to serve Him, the truth was that a large part of me was looking to find life, joy, and peace, in the approval of my congregation. I would be happy if they told me I was a good pastor, but if they didn't tell me that I would try harder and feel sad and frustrated when I could not satisfy. If my longing for significance, satisfaction, and happiness could be compared to a thirst, I wanted the people in the church and the growth of the church to be my source of water that quenched. This proved to be a broken cistern.

Some of the most important lessons come out of the trials. That's what happened to me. I believe some of you may be facing a variety of trials in which God is showing you the ways in which you have looked for life in broken cisterns. God calls us to leave our broken cisterns and to find life in the fountain of God.

Remember that the words "broken cisterns" are a metaphor, a symbol, for any thing we turn to instead of God in our search for fulfillment. One of the reasons why Christians today don't often experience fullness is because they are committing the twin sins of Jeremiah 2:13. They are forsaking God the spring of living water, and digging broken cisterns. A spring is a constant source of water that wells up and overflows. A cistern is a hole dug in the ground that catches the rain. In Jeremiah's illustration, the cisterns we dig are not only dependant on the circumstances (rain), but they are broken cisterns so that even when the circumstances are good our broken cisterns don't hold the water very well or very long.

In my testimony my broken cistern was the approval of people. If they told me I was doing a great job I felt good about myself and my life was full. If they were critical and demanding of me the little bit of joy I did receive leaked out of the holes in my broken cistern. I was down in the cistern with my shovel working as hard as I could to catch and hold more of what I needed to fill my cup, but it was frustrating and empty.

To use Isaiah's picture, I was working hard to buy the expensive bread of human approval and outward success, but it proved to be as unsatisfying as it was expensive.

During that time because my head, my heart, and my hands were so filled with what I thought I needed and with what I hoped would make me happy and fulfilled, I was completely failing to respond to the constant invitation of God: Isaiah 55:1

"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

What holes are you digging? There are several things most people look to for fulfillment in life. We depend on these things and like a mirage they shimmer with fulfillment but offer only dust and disappointment to our deepest needs.

Five Broken Cisterns are common:

1. **People:** Galatians 1:10 *Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.*

2. **Possessions:** Luke 16:13 *"No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."*

3. **Positions:** Jeremiah 9:23-24 *This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches,²⁴ but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD.*

4. **Protection:** Philippians 2:3-4 *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

5. **Pleasures:** Ephesians 4:17-19 *So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.¹⁹ Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.*

The defining Truth about broken cisterns:

- * They don't hold water
- * They aren't called broken cisterns for nothing!
- * They do not bring satisfaction

Like hungry people trying to ease their hunger by gulping mouthfuls of air.

Like drinking saltwater. The salt content requires more water to flush the salt out of the kidneys. The more you thirst, the more you drink, the more you need, the worse it gets.

- * They can distract you
- * They can destroy you

The refreshing alternative:

"God is so vastly wonderful, so utterly and completely delightful that He can, without anything other than Himself, meet and overflow the deepest demands of our total nature, mysterious and deep as that nature is." A.W. Tozer, The Pursuit of God p. 42