

Psalm 69:14–21 (NIV)

- ¹⁴ Rescue me from the mire,
do not let me sink;
deliver me from those who hate me,
from the deep waters.
- ¹⁵ Do not let the floodwaters engulf me
or the depths swallow me up
or the pit close its mouth over me.
- ¹⁶ Answer me, LORD, out of the goodness of your love;
in your great mercy turn to me.
- ¹⁷ Do not hide your face from your servant;
answer me quickly, for I am in trouble.
- ¹⁸ Come near and rescue me;
deliver me because of my foes.
- ¹⁹ You know how I am scorned, disgraced and shamed;
all my enemies are before you.
- ²⁰ Scorn has broken my heart
and has left me helpless;
I looked for sympathy, but there was none,
for comforters, but I found none.
- ²¹ They put gall in my food
and gave me vinegar for my thirst.

John 19:25–29 (NIV)

²⁵ Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," ²⁷ and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

²⁸ Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." ²⁹ A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips.

*The question is a simple one:
For what or whom do you thirst?*

And so it has come to this. After the beatings, the humiliation, the flogging and the mocking, Jesus labors in the moments just before death. His mother, a few other women, and a teenaged disciple stand at the foot of the cross. They aren't very far from Jesus, as Roman crosses weren't high. They could probably reach up and touch Jesus if the soldiers allowed them to do so.

Jesus knows that the end of his suffering is now very near. Adam Hamilton tells us that, in his experience, those on the verge of death usually experience an overwhelming thirst. Jesus does. "I am thirsty," he says, probably with great difficulty. . . . *I am thirsty.*

Where is the Living Water, we ask? This water that is "a spring of water welling up to eternal life," such that "whoever drinks [it] will never thirst" (John 4:14). Hauerwas writes,

If Jesus is this living water, how can he also be the one who says on the cross, "I thirst"? "I thirst" seems so out of character for the Jesus we find in the Gospel of John.

The Jesus of the “I am”: “I am the bread of life” (John 6: 35), “I am the light of the world” (John 8: 12), “I am the good shepherd” (John 10: 11), “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11: 25), “I am the true vine” (John 15: 1). How can this Jesus— the Jesus who seems so self-assured, so completely in control— thirst?¹

But such questions have to wait, for John tells us that Jesus’ words are not merely a statement of need, a Word of Distress, for he speaks them “knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled” (John 19:28).

“So that Scripture would be fulfilled”

What does Jesus mean? What is completed? What Scripture is fulfilled? There must be a couple of levels to our answer. It seems hard to deny that Jesus has in view one or more of the Psalms, for several speak directly of “thirsting.” For example:

Psalm 42:1-2 (NIV)

- ¹ As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
- ² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?

Psalm 63:1-8 (NRSV)

- ¹ O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
- ² So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
- ³ Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

Yes, these beautiful prayers speak to our thirst for God, but are they what Jesus has in mind, the Second Person of the Trinity, as he nears death?²

It would seem that the prayer Jesus has in view is psalm 69, for the psalmist speaks of being given vinegar for his thirst, which is just what the soldiers offer Jesus, a sour vinegar wine on a sponge resting atop a piece of hyssop (see the page four textbox).

Yet, even this cannot be all that Jesus means. Surely, John wants us to grasp that Jesus understands his own death to be the culmination of God’s work, from the time of Abraham, to restore humanity to a right relationship with God.

Across the gospels and especially in Matthew, Jesus is often said to be fulfilling Scripture in some way and an Old Testament passage is then quoted. But it is a mistake to see these merely as individual proofs of this or that about Jesus. The larger point is that all the Law and the prophets had always pointed to the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul understood this too – that all of the Hebrew Scriptures testified to Jesus; he was the one for whom Israel had long waited (Romans 3:21).

I’ve found that many Christians don’t really grasp this. They might understand that when John writes “everything has now been finished” or Jesus says “it is finished” with his dying breath, Jesus’ death has put us right with God, but they usually don’t see his sacrifice as part of God’s larger project that began almost two millennia before Jesus was nailed to that cross. Here is the story of God’s project, concisely told³:

¹ Hauerwas, Stanley (2005-01-01). *Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words* (p. 61). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² It is important to remember that this Fifth Word comes from John’s gospel, in which Jesus’ does not scream out “Why have you forsaken me?” John takes the reader from “Here is your son . . . here is your mother” to “I am thirsty . . . it is finished” in just a few sentences. John’s focus at the moments of Jesus death are on Jesus’ completion of his work.

³ I’ve taken this from my book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*. Copies of the book are available in the St. Andrew bookstore and elsewhere.

God made a promise to Abraham that the world would be put right and that it would be done through his own family, indeed, that all the families of the earth would be blessed through them. And God rescued Abraham's family from slavery in Egypt, making a covenant with them, teaching them how to live in right relationship with God and one another. He would be their God, they would be his people, and one day the world would be put right; justice and mercy would remake the planet.

God's teaching boiled down to two things: love God and love neighbor. Yet, tragically, this love-filled life proved impossible for God's people. They chased after other gods and they failed to love their neighbors every day. They even lost sight of who their neighbors were. They forgot that all the families of the earth were to be blessed through them. They imagined that they had some sort of exclusive claim on God.

It became sadly evident that God's promise to restore and renew the cosmos could not be kept, for his people could not keep their end of the covenant. So what did that mean, would God's promise stay an unfulfilled promise forever?

In a word, no. God would provide one Jew who would be utterly faithful to the covenant, loving God and loving neighbor every day and in every way. God, in the person of Jesus, would do and be for Israel what Israel was unable to do and be for herself.

Of course, such love put Jesus on a collision course with the powers of this world, who had long forgotten God's ways. Jesus' path would take him to that cross. It had to, for the only way off that path was for Jesus to abandon the vocation given him by God. But, instead, Jesus was faithful all the way to the cross. The covenant had been kept by this one faithful Jew and the restored relationship of this kept covenant can be ours, if we only trust Jesus and embrace him as our representative Messiah, the one whose faithfulness revealed that God is not only the great promise-maker but the great promise-keeper.

For what, or whom, do you thirst?

In Psalm 63 (page two above), the psalmist stands with open mouth, thirsting for God, hungering for God, praying to God, praising God. He thinks about God at night, in the dark. The psalmist's soul clings to God like a child that clings to its mother. The psalmist lifts up his hands to God, calls God by name, and trusts God. What a powerful image of someone who has given herself over to God completely, holding nothing back. Someone who has dropped all pretensions to self-sufficiency. Someone who has transcended the world's appetites.

Likewise with Psalm 34 (you'll have to look this one up!). "Open your mouth and taste how good God is." No wonder the psalmist can't wait to get the word out. He has found his true home and met the God who has always been there.

Do the psalmists describe your own relationship with God? For what or whom do you hunger? What do you think about at night? For many Christians, these images can be a bit intimidating or at least very "other," certainly not describing themselves. The world seeks to cultivate very different appetites in us and often succeeds.

Yet, such joyful thirsting and fulfillment is not some impossible ideal nor the privilege of a special few. Rather, it is available to us all. God desires it for us all.

It is this for which we were made and for which our souls long.

It is this for which Jesus thirsted and died on that cross.

Richard John Neuhaus on the Hyssop¹

There is this oddity about the hyssop. The sponge with the vinegary wine is put on hyssop and offered to Jesus. Hyssop is a small bushy plant quite unsuited to bearing the weight of a sponge soaked with wine. Embarrassed by that, some translations have seized upon an eleventh-century manuscript that suggests the sponge was actually put on the end of a javelin or long pole. That is how it is pictured also in some medieval paintings of the crucifixion. But for all the awkwardness, perhaps we should stay with John's hyssop and see in it a deeper meaning. In Exodus 12, hyssop is used to sprinkle the blood of the paschal lamb on the doorposts of the Israelites so that the angel of death will pass over their homes. In the New Testament, Hebrews 9 picks up on this to show how the blood of Jesus seals a new covenant, just as Moses used hyssop to sprinkle the blood of animals in order to seal the earlier covenant.

The connection is between hyssop and the blood of the lambs. The image of the Lamb of God keeps recurring in John's Gospel. At the very beginning of the ministry, John the Baptizer declares, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." In John 19, Jesus is judged at noon, the very hour when the slaughter of the Passover lambs begins in the temple. Jesus' bones are not broken, just as the bones of the paschal lambs are not broken. At the cross, the wine is offered in response to his "I thirst." Thus does "I thirst" complete the work the Father had given him to do, and thus are the Scriptures fulfilled. It is fitting that the new covenant should be sealed by the wine on the hyssop, for the wine is the new covenant in his blood of the Eucharist. Had Jesus, the ultimate Passover Lamb, not indicated all this much earlier? There it is in John 6: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

1. Richard John Neuhaus. *Death On A Friday Afternoon Meditations On The Last Words Of Jesus From The Cross* (Kindle Locations 1570-1583). Kindle Edition.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The psalmist thirsts for God. What do you thirst for in life? What do you really hunger for? You might make a list. How would this list compare to the list you would have drawn up earlier in your life? How might this list compare to the list you imagine you'll make later in your life? Our appetites change as we get older. The hunger gets deeper. It can no longer be satisfied by a new dress or a new game. What hungers do you see in others? Is there any evidence, any sense, that this hunger is spiritual? *How does a spiritual hunger differ from a physical or emotional hunger?* It seems odd to think that we should ever desire hunger, but in your own life . . . have you ever experienced the joy of hungering for God? If you don't hunger for God it can only be because your hunger has been satisfied or you've yet to experience the joy of a deep desire for God. *How might we go about becoming hungry for God?*
2. Jesus' death on the cross brought the story of God's redemptive work to its completion. You might go on to discuss the story as I told it toward the end of the study. How well do you think this story fits with what you've heard or been taught over the years? How well does it fit with your own reading of Scripture? What do you think it highlights? What do you think it leaves out? Do you think it would be helpful to someone trying to make sense of Jesus' death? It helps me understand that Jesus' death was not arbitrary, but the unavoidable consequence of Jesus' faithfulness to God. Do you see this too?
3. Finally, the story as I told it requires us to embrace Jesus as our representative, the one who has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. How do you think Jesus can be our representative? We are human after all and Jesus is God. Your answer will reveal why the Christians have always held fast to the claim that Jesus is fully and completely human, just as he is fully and completely God.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Psalm 34 "Taste and see that the Lord is good"	Tuesday, Psalm 42 "My soul pants for you, my God"
Wednesday, Psalm 63 "My whole being longs for you"	Thursday, Psalm 69 "Answer me Lord, out of the goodness of your favor"
Friday, Psalm 105 The story of God's rescue of Israel	Weekly Prayer Concerns

