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**So holy desire, exercised in longings, hungerings, and thirstings after God and holiness, is often mentioned in Scripture as an important part of true religion.
Jonathan Edwards**

CHAPTER 1

DO YOU THIRST FOR GOD?

"Lord, I want to know You more," sang Mike, just before the sermon. One of my seminary professors from years back, who was guest preacher at our church that Sunday morning, sat next to me on the front pew and listened transfixed. As Mike continued to sing, I could hear my older friend sigh occasionally. When the song was over, T.W. sat motionless for so long I thought he had forgotten that he was now supposed to preach. As I turned to remind him I saw his shoulders lift and fall with the slow draw and release of his breath. Finally, he opened his eyes and stepped thoughtfully to the pulpit. He looked down for what seemed to be a full minute before he could speak. And then, "Lord, I *do* want to know you more." Departing from his prepared words for awhile, he spoke of his thirst for God, his longings to know Christ more intimately, to obey Him more completely. Here was a man who had followed Christ for more than fifty years still captivated by the sweetness of the quest. In his second half-century as a disciple of Jesus, the grace of growth still flourished in him.

It's been ten years since that Sunday morning. I've seen T.W. at least annually since, and the things of God have not diminished their magnetic pull on his heart's aspirations. Two months ago I found myself sharing a shuttle bus ride with him from a denominational convention back to our hotel. Though nearly seventy now, and weakened by cardiac surgery, his eyes flashed as he talked half an hour about what he was learning about prayer. Even as his body decays, his longings for God display the growing strength of his soul.

The Apostle Paul must have similarly impressed others in his day. Despite all his maturity in Christ, all he had seen and experienced, late in life (in Philippians 3:10) Paul wrote of the passion that propelled him: "that I may know Him." What is he talking about? Didn't he already know Jesus more closely than perhaps anyone else ever will? Of course he did. But the more he knew Jesus, the more he wanted to know Him. The more Paul progressed in spiritual strength, the more thirsty for God He became.

With a similar thirst, the writer of Psalm 42:1-2 prayed, "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" Does this describe your thirst for God? If so, be encouraged: whatever else is transpiring in your Christian life, your soul-thirst is a sign of soul-growth.

THREE KINDS OF SPIRITUAL THIRST

Though it is not every moment felt, in some sense there is a thirst in every soul. God did not make us to be content in our natural condition. In one way or another, to one degree or another, everyone wants more than he has now. The difference between people is the *kind* of thirsty longing in their soul.

Thirst of the Empty Soul

The natural, that is, unconverted man or woman has an empty soul. Devoid of God, he is constantly in pursuit of that which will fill his emptiness. The range of his mad scramble may include money, sex, power, houses, lands, sports, hobbies, entertainment, transcendence, significance, education, etc., while basically "fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind" (Ephesians 2:3). But as Augustine attested, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." Always searching and never resting, the empty soul turns from one pursuit to another, unable to find anything that will fill the God-shaped vacuum in his heart.

Thirsting and searching, the empty soul is blinded to his real need. Nothing or no one on earth fully and lastingly satisfies, but he doesn't know where to turn except to someone or something else "under the sun" (as opposed to the One beyond the sun). Like Solomon, he discovers that no matter who or what he at first finds exciting, ultimately "all is vanity and grasping for the wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:14).

A Christian observes the man with the empty soul and knows that what he is looking for can be found only in the One who said, "whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst" (John 4:14). Occasionally an empty soul searches in more serious-minded or spiritual ways that lead some Christians to think that he is thirsting for God. But the world has no such thirst. "There is none who understand," God inspired both King David and the Apostle Paul to write, "there is none who seeks for God" (Psalm 14:2 and Romans 3:11). Until and unless the Holy Spirit of God touches the spiritual tongue of the empty soul, he will never want to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). Just because a man longs for something that can be found in God alone doesn't mean he's looking for God. A man may pine for peace and have no interest in the Prince of Peace. Many who claim they are questing for God are not thirsting for God as He has revealed Himself in Scripture, but only for God as they want Him to be, or a God who will give them what they want.

The irony of the empty soul is that while he is perpetually dissatisfied in so many areas of his life, he is so easily satisfied in regard to the pursuit of God. His attitude toward

spiritual matters is like that of the man who said to his complacent soul in Luke 12:19, "Soul, you have many goods for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry." Whatever the empty soul may desire in life, he never has what the eighteenth century pastor and theologian, Jonathan Edwards, called "holy desire, exercised in longings, hungerings and thirstings after God and holiness"¹ as the Christian does. The eternal tragedy is that if the empty soul never properly thirsts on earth, he will thirst in Hell as did the rich man who pled in vain for even the tip of a moist finger to be touched to his tongue (Luke 16:24).

Thirst of the Dry Soul

The difference between the empty soul and the dry soul is that one has never experienced "rivers of living water" (John 7:38) while the other has and knows what he is missing. That is not to say that the dry soul can lose the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, indeed Jesus said that "the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into *everlasting* life [John 4:14, emphasis added].

How is it then that a true believer in Christ can become a dry soul when Jesus promised that "whoever drinks of the water I shall give him will never thirst" (John 4:14)?

Pastor/author John Piper was reading this verse one Monday morning and cried out, "What do you mean? I am so thirsty! My church is thirsty! The pastors whom I pray with are thirsty! O Jesus, what did you mean?"

As he meditated on the text, the illumination which seemed to come from the Lord upon His Word was perceived by Piper this way:

When you drink my water, your thirst is not destroyed forever. If it did that, would you feel any need of my water afterward? That is not my goal. I do not want self-sufficient saints. When you drink my water, it makes a spring in you. A spring satisfies thirst, not by removing the need you have for water, but by being there to give you water whenever you get thirsty. Again and again and again. Like this morning. So drink, John. Drink."²

A Christian soul becomes arid in one of three ways. The most common is by drinking too much from the desiccating fountains of the world and too little from "the river of God" (Psalm 65:9). If you drink the wrong thing it can make you even more thirsty. In particularly hot weather, my high school football coach would give us salt tablets to help us minimize the loss of fluids. During one game he experimented with stirring salt into our drinking water, hoping the diluted form would expedite the benefits of the salt. Bad idea. At halftime I drank until my stomach swelled and I was too heavy to run well, yet I was still thirsty.

Similarly, perhaps it was because the psalmist had drunk too much of the world's briny spiritual water that he wrote twice in one chapter about longing for God with all his heart while closely asserting his resolve not to wander from the Lord's Word (see Psalm

119:10, 145). Too much attention to a particular sin or sins, and/or too little attention to communion with God (two things which often occur in tandem) inevitably shrivel the soul of a Christian.

Another cause of spiritual dryness in the child of God is what the Puritans used to call "God's desertions." While there are times God floods our souls with a sense of His presence, at other times we dehydrate by a sense of His absence. Let me quickly say that His desertion of us is merely our *perception*, for the reality is just as Jesus promised: "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). When feeling deserted by God, however, the Christian believes himself to be in the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4), or somewhat like Jesus when He cried from the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). The words of David in Psalm 143:6-7 describe the emotions of those who try to pray from such a spiritual desert: "I spread out my hands to You; my soul longs for You like a thirsty land. Answer me speedily, O Lord; my spirit fails! Do not hide Your face from me, . . ." (Psalm 143:6-7).

For reasons not always made clear to us, the Lord does sometimes withdraw a conscious sense of His nearness. Since this is not the place for a lengthy treatment of the subject³, the best concise counsel I could offer is that of William Gurnall: "The Christian must trust in a withdrawing God."⁴ When the sun goes behind a cloud it is no less near than when its rays are felt. However, for the specific purposes of this book and chapter, remember that it is a good thing that you are able to discern the seclusion of God's presence. Such spiritual sensitivity characterizes spiritual health.

A third cause of spiritual aridity in a Christian is prolonged mental or physical fatigue. Both cause and cure are usually obvious enough, so I won't elaborate on them. What I do want to emphasize is that a believer may not sense spiritual growth when fatigued or burned-out, but instead brood under shadowy thoughts about the reality of his relationship with Christ. And yet, much may have been learned in the very battle that caused the fatigue, things which, when the sunlight returns to the soul, will be seen as significant spiritual turning points. Again, don't forget that the longing for fresh water is itself a sign of progress.

Regardless of the cause, the dry Christian soul is like the believer of Psalm 42:1-2, thirsting for God "As a deer pants for the water brooks." When you are in this condition, nothing else but the living water of God Himself will do. My daughter was three when she separated herself from me while we were in a child-oriented restaurant. She wanted to play with some of the game machines instead of eating. Though she had run to the far side of the restaurant, I could see her and was following to return her to the table. Suddenly she realized she didn't know where she was or where I was. Panic-stricken, she began crying and calling for me. The store manager could have offered her unlimited play on every machine and given her every toy prize in the place, but nothing would have appealed to her without my presence. Everything else was meaningless to her without me. Once we were reunited, for a few moments she was content just for me to hold her, just to have me back. That's the cry of the dry soul. Other things may have

distracted you, but now the only thing that matters is a return of the sense of your Father's presence.

Thirst of the Satisfied Soul

Unlike the dry soul, and as self-contradictory as it may sound at the moment, the satisfied soul thirsts for God precisely because he is satisfied with God. He *has* "taste[d] and see[n] that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8), and the taste is so uniquely satisfying that he craves more.

The Apostle Paul personifies this in his famous exclamation, "that I may know Him" (Philippians 3:10). In the preceding lines he has been exulting in his present knowledge of and relationship with Jesus. He announces, "But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (3:7-8). Then, just one verse later, the apostle cries out, "that I may know Him." Paul was soul-satisfied with Jesus Christ, yet thirsty for Him still.

Thomas Shepard, founder of Harvard University and an influential New England minister, explained the cycle of satisfaction and thirst this way: "There is in true grace an infinite circle: a man by thirsting receives, and receiving thirsts for more."⁵ Knowing Christ well is so spiritually thirst quenching because no person, possession, or experience can produce the spiritual pleasure we can find in Him. Communion with Christ is incomparably satisfying also because there is no disappointment in what you find in Him. Moreover, the spiritual gratification you find in Him initially is never ending. On top of these, the Lord in whom this satisfaction is found is an infinite universe of satisfaction in which one may immerse himself to explore and enjoy without limitation. So there is no lack of satisfaction in knowing Christ, but neither has God designed us so that one experience with Christ satiates all future desire for Him.

Here's how Jonathan Edwards described the relationship between the spiritual good enjoyed in fellowship with Christ and the thirst for more that it produces:

Spiritual good is of a satisfying nature; and for that very reason, the soul that tastes, and knows its nature, will thirst after it, and a fullness of it, that it may be satisfied. And the more he experiences, and the more he knows this excellent, unparalleled, exquisite, and satisfying sweetness, the more earnestly he will hunger and thirst for more, . . .⁶

Has your worship and/or devotional experience lately provided you with ravishing tastes of what A. W. Tozer called the "piercing sweetness"⁷ of Christ, only to leave you with a divine discontent for more? Would the following prayer of Tozer reflect your own aspirations?

O God, I have tasted Thy goodness, and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more. I am painfully conscious of my need for further grace. I am ashamed of my

lack of desire. O God, the Triune God, I want to want Thee; I long to be filled with longing; I thirst to be made thirsty still.⁸

Such desires, Christian brother or sister, are marks of a growing soul.

THE BLESSING OF SPIRITUAL THIRST

"How blessed are all those who long for Him," declared the prophet Isaiah (in 30:18, NASB). "Blessed are those," reiterated Jesus, "who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5:6). A thirsting desire for the Lord and His righteousness is a blessing. How so?

God Initiates Spiritual Thirst

The reason a person thirsts for God is because the Holy Spirit is at work within him. If you are a Christian, two people live in your body, you and the Holy Spirit. As 1 Corinthians 6:19 explains, "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?" And the Holy Spirit is not passive within you.

For example, just as you can choose to put thoughts in your consciousness, so can He, and He does. For instance, as you can decide to think for a few moments about what you should do this evening, so He can plant thoughts in your mind about God and the things of God. Such work is part of how He causes a Christian to be "spiritually minded" (Romans 8:5).⁹ Another part of that ministry is to cause you to have Godward thirsts and longings (such as "Abba, Father;" see Romans 8:15), as well as other signs of spiritual vitality.

Charles Spurgeon, the peerless British Baptist preacher of the 1800s, elaborated on the blessing of thirsting:

When a man pants after God, it is a secret life within which makes him do it: he would not long after God by nature. No man thirsts for God while he is left in his carnal [i.e., unconverted] state. The unrenewed man pants after anything sooner than God: . . . It proves a renewed nature when you long after God; it is a work of grace in your soul, and you may be thankful for it.¹⁰

God Initiates Spiritual Thirst in Order to Satisfy It

God does not fire a thirst for Himself in order to mock us or frustrate us. He Himself declared, "I did not say to the seed of Jacob, 'Seek Me in vain'" (Isaiah 45:19). What's true for the physical lineage of Jacob (Israel) is also true for his spiritual descendants, i.e., those who believe in Israel's Messiah, Jesus. God creates a thirst for Himself so that He can satisfy it with Himself. "For He satisfies the longing soul," is the promise of Psalm 107:9, "and fills the hungry soul with goodness." Jesus assured, "Blessed are

those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they *shall* be filled" (Matthew 5:6, emphasis added).

Jonathan Edwards argued that Scripture plainly teaches that "The godly are designed for unknown and inconceivable happiness."¹¹ And, "No doubt but God will obtain his end in a glorious perfection."¹² If God has indeed made us for an unimaginable fullness of joy, and has implanted longings for it, then surely

God has made man capable of exceeding great happiness, which he doubtless did not in vain. . . . To create man with a capacity that he never intended to fill, . . . would have been to have created a large capacity when there was need but of a smaller; yea, it makes man less happy, to be capable of more happiness than he shall ever obtain. . . . [C]an any think that man, . . . was intended in his creation to be left in this respect imperfect, and as a vessel both partly empty and never to be filled? . . . It appears that man was intended for very great blessedness, inasmuch as God has created man with a craving and desire that can be filled with nothing but a very great happiness. . . . God did not create in man so earnest a desire, when at the same time he did not create for so much as he should desire. . . . [A] desire that could never be satisfied would be an eternal torment.¹³

Edwards maintained, of course, that this "craving and desire" was a Christian's thirst for God, a longing which can be thoroughly and finally satisfied only in the eternal, undiminished, and face-to-face enjoyment of the Lord Himself in Heaven. Therefore, writes Edwards,

Seeing that reason does so undeniably evidence that saints shall, some time or other, enjoy so great glory, hence we learn that there is undoubtedly a future state after death, because we see they do not enjoy so great glory in this world. . . . [A]ll the spiritual pleasure they enjoy in this life does but enflame their desire and thirst for more enjoyment of God; and if they knew that there was no future life, [it] would but increase their misery, to consider that after this life was ended they were never to enjoy God anymore at all. How good is God, that he has created man for this very end, to make him happy in the enjoyment of himself, the Almighty.¹⁴

Once beholding His glory, believers will testify that "They are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of Your house, and You give them drink from the river of Your pleasures" (Psalm 36:8).

Do you thirst for God? Thirst is a God-planned part of the growth of a soul toward its Heavenly home.

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR THIRSTING AFTER THE THIRST-SLAKER

If you possess a true thirst for God, you will long to long even more. As Edwards insisted, "true and gracious longings after holiness, are no idle ineffectual desires."¹⁵

Meditate on Scripture.

Note "meditate," not merely read. Many languishing souls are assiduous Bible readers. Without the addition of meditation, warned the great man of prayer and faith, George Muller, "the simple reading of the Word of God" can become information that "only passes through our minds, just as water passes through a pipe."¹⁶

Think of the incessant flow of information through your mind on a daily basis—all that you see, read, and hear. Most of us struggle with "information overload," unable to keep up with the constant input of data. If we are not careful, the words of the Bible can become just another gallon of words in the ever-increasing current through our thought. As soon as it passes by, pushed on by the pressure of the flow in the pipe, we remember little (if anything) of what we've just read, for now we must immediately shift our focus to what's now before us. So much processes through our brains, if we don't absorb some of it we will be affected by none of it. And surely if we should absorb anything that courses through our thinking, it should be the inspired words from Heaven. Without absorption of the water of God's Word, there's no quench of our spiritual thirst. Meditation is the means of absorption.

Spend twenty-five to fifty percent of your Bible intake time meditating on some verse, phrase, or word from your reading. Ask questions of it. Pray about it. Take your pen and scribble and doodle on a pad about it. Look for at least one way you should apply it or live it. Linger over it. Soak your soul slowly in the water of the Word, and you'll find it not only refreshing you, but prompting a satisfying thirst for more.¹⁷

Pray through Scripture.

After you read through a section of Scripture, pray through part of that same passage. Whether you read one chapter of the Bible per day or many, afterward choose a portion of your reading and, verse by verse, let the words of God become the wings of your words to Him.

While it is possible to pray through any part of Scripture, I particularly recommend, regardless of where in the Bible you have done your reading, that you turn to one of the Psalms and pray your way through as much of it as you can. The book of Psalms was the God-inspired hymnbook of Israel. In addition, twice in the New Testament (see Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16) Christians are commanded to sing Psalms. Unlike any other book of the Bible, the Psalms were inspired *by* God for the expressed purpose of being reflected *to* God.

Say, for example, you begin praying your way through Psalm 63. The first verse is: "O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water." You could enter into prayer by confessing that the Lord is your God, thanking Him for being your God and gracious, then simply exulting in God as God. Next you could express your soul's thirsts and longings for Him, acknowledging what a blessing it is to have a God-given thirst for God, etc. Perhaps then you would ask the Lord to plant a thirst for Himself in your children, or in someone with whom you've been sharing the Gospel. On you would go through the

psalm, praying about whatever the text said and whatever occurs to you as you read it. If nothing comes to mind while pausing over a verse or verses, go on to the next.

The poetic, visceral, and spiritually transparent elements of the Psalms often combine in ways that send the soul soaring and that inflame passion for God. They deal realistically with the full range of human emotions, and can take you from wherever you are spiritually and lift your spirit Heavenward. Nothing so consistently renews my longings for God and catapults me into experiential communion with Him as praying through a Psalm.

Read thirst-making writers.

After the God-breathed words of the Bible, read the time-tested works of those Christian writers with a thirst-making pen. If you can find the collection of Puritan prayers and devotions called *The Valley of Vision*¹⁸ you will be blessed by reading it meditatively. Don't neglect John Bunyan's classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*. Read the more devotional pieces of Puritan writers such as John Owen, Richard Sibbes, Thomas Brooks, John Flavel, and Thomas Watson. Enjoy the books and sermons of Jonathan Edwards and Charles Spurgeon, for they will be treasured as long as the church is on the earth. For more recent publications, A.W. Tozer's small books are both convicting and exhilarating; John Piper's writings are a burning blend of spirit and truth.

As He has with my friend T.W., may the Lord bless you with a great, lifelong thirst for Himself, for surely He intends to satisfy it with Himself.

1Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, Perry Miller, gen. ed., Religious Affections, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959), page 104.

2John Piper, *A Godward Life* (Sisters, Ore: Multnomah, 1997), pages 84-85.

3For further reading on God's desertions, see Joseph Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul* (1671; reprint ed., Morgan, Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996).

4John Blanchard, comp., *Gathered Gold* (Welwyn, England: Evangelical Press, 1984), page 100.

5Thomas Shepard, *Parable of the Ten Virgins*, as quoted in Edwards, pages 376-377.

6Edwards, page 379.

7A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Christian Publications, 1948), page 8.

8Tozer, page 20.

9For further reading on spiritual mindedness, see Donald S. Whitney, *How Can I Be Sure I'm A Christian?* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), pages 67-80.

10C. H. Spurgeon, "*The Panting Hart*," Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, vol. 14, (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1869; reprint ed., Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1982), page 417.

11Jonathan Edwards, "*Nothing Upon Earth Can Represent the Glories of Heaven*," The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 14, {Sermons and Discourses, 1723-1729}, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), page 143.

12Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses*, 1723-1729, page 147.

13Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses*, 1723-1729, pages 151-152.

14Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses*, 1723-1729, pages 152-153.

15Edwards, *Religious Affections*, page 378.

16Roger Steer, ed., *Spiritual Secrets of George Muller* (Wheaton, Ill: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1985), pages 62-63

17For further reading on meditation on Scripture, see Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991), pages 43-51, 67-72.

18Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975).

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