

The Gathering Church Dan's message:

5/3/26

CHASING SMOKE, FINDING WATER (Week 4)

(The emptiness only God can fill)

Willingly Remain Thirsty Who is God? Where is God? Find the Lord!
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Are you chasing smoke... or finding water?

Why is it that the things we chase in life never quite satisfy?

You finally get the job promotion or the award you've been working toward... and it feels good, for a moment. But then something inside you says, *there has to be more.*

The writer of Ecclesiastes called that feeling **vanity**.

Eugene Peterson translates it in the Message: **smoke**.

You reach for it... but it slips through your hands.

About this time every year, I get pulled into the world of horse racing. The Kentucky Derby—the “best two minutes in sports.” I love it. I follow it. I look forward to it.

And every year... it ends the same way.

It's exciting. It's fun. But it doesn't quite satisfy. Nothing really changes. I'm not filled — I'm just... done watching.

And depending on whether my horse won or not, I might have a shot of adrenaline, but it fades moments after the race.

And honestly, that's not just horse racing.

That's life.

We chase the next thing: the degree... the job... the relationship... the milestone like retirement...

We get there— and then we look up and think:

Is this it?

What if that feeling isn't failure? What if your thirst isn't telling you you're doing life wrong...

What if it's telling you ... **you're not home yet?**

Our thirst is pointing us to the living water, the source of water that we can get a taste of while we are here on this earth, but we will not drink deeply of it until we meet Christ face-to-face.

Over the last few weeks, we've been walking through a book called *Living Thirsty* by Kent Denlinger.

He describes four ways we try to deal with this thirst —

4 Metaphors (Chasing Smoke)

- **City Building** → trying to eliminate loneliness
- **Fire Lighting** → trying to eliminate uncertainty & mystery (seeking to reduce life and faith to things we can understand and manage. If I do A +B, I will get C, but this doesn't always work. God's ways are mysterious)

- **White Washing** → trying to hide what's broken (we try to hide the uncomfortable truths about ourselves; it's a determination not to see ourselves, others, and our world accurately. We live in denial. It's really not that bad.
- **Well Digging** → trying to eliminate emptiness (The relentless attempt to fill the emptiness inside us with something—anything—other than God.)

Each of these four metaphors represents ways we try to avoid living thirsty and dependent on God.

Today we are looking at that 4th metaphor: Well Digging.

In his book, Kent uses a prophetic rebuke of the God's people in the Old Testament by the prophet Jeremiah to explain this metaphor.

What **Jeremiah** highlights about God's people the people of Judah:

1. **You are thirsty people,**
2. **and You're looking to satisfy your thirst apart from God.**

This is also true of us and Kent says nothing is more critical to understand about ourselves than these two truths.

1. **we are thirsty people,**
2. **and we look to satisfy our thirst apart from God.**

In Jeremiah 2:2, God tells Jeremiah to . . .

² "Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the Lord, I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth, the love of your betrothals, your following after Me in the wilderness, through a land not sown...'"

Translation: You started out so great; You were **"Head over heels"** in love with me.

(Show picture of Aspen/ Connor Engagement, where Aspen is "Head over Heels" in Love)

She said YES.



4-18-26

“You followed me in the wilderness for 40 years and had the faith to enter into the promise land. But then the chains fell off and you started getting distracted by your thirst for other things.

Jeremiah 2:5-8 (God’s Rebuke of Judah)

⁵“What injustice did your fathers find in Me, That they went far from Me And walked after emptiness and became empty? ⁶“**They did not say, ‘Where is the Lord, Who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, Who led us through the wilderness,** ⁷“I brought you into the fruitful land To eat its fruit and its good things. (land flowing with milk and honey) ⁸ **“The priests did not say, ‘Where is the Lord?’**

They started well, it was beautiful but then after filling their emptiness with idols, **God’s People** stopped asking “Where is the Lord?” Even **the Priests** stopped asking “Where is the Lord?”

They had no desire to take their emptiness to the Lord but instead they looked to the things of the promise land to fill their up their emptiness.

They started **chasing the gifts instead of the gift giver.** They started **chasing smoke** instead of turning to the **living water.**

Jeremiah goes on to say....

Jeremiah 2:13. “For My people have committed two evils:

They have forsaken Me, The fountain of living waters, To hew for themselves cisterns, Broken cisterns That can hold no water.”

Cisterns in ancient times were large cauldrons that held water. These were kept inside the city gates in case they were attacked from the outside. They could not survive in their fortified city without water and food. So they built cisterns.

But God says their cisterns are broken and they cannot hold water. These cisterns won’t satisfy your thirst.

Kent uses this metaphor **Well Digging** and says “**We are Well Diggers**”.

We make safety nets of provisions to fill up the perceived threat of emptiness in our lives.

How often do we prepare for rainy days and dry times instead of trusting God as our provider. Only to discover that these things we are trying to fill their lives with are just broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”

At the Kentucky Derby concluded, I watched people leave the Kentucky Derby, especially those who had had too many mint juleps and had put their life savings on the line hoping to make some money. But they had found out it was a worthless endeavor. They are hoping to fill the emptiness of their lives with the promise of great riches if they only get the right ticket.

Betting on a sporting event is just well Digging: Americans lose over \$100 billion per year in gambling losses (You have a 70-90% chance to lose your money when you bet on a horse race.)

It is a broken cistern. Yeh, you might get lucky a few times, but it is no way to get rich.

We might not have a betting problem, but we have a **well digging problem.**

The accusation being made by God through the Prophet Jeremiah could be said of us.

Here is a question for all of us to ask ourselves today as we think of these 4 metaphors . . . **Where am I turning to the things of this life to fill me, instead of to God?**

And could I slow down and **willingly allow myself to remain thirsty**; waiting for God's plan to either relieve some of that thirst now or to trust him regardless of whether my thirst ever gets met or not.

One of the ways we Dig Wells is by running from His bests for our lives:

Running from God eventually leads to hitting a rock bottom. Where all that is left to do is look inward at the mess and upward at a God who can clean up the mess.

Many times God allows for us to hit Rock Bottom so He can do some of his deepest work of growth in us.

In the Book, Kent Mentions the story of the Story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

Two Sons, One Father. The younger son asks for his inheritance early. He leaves home and **wastes everything**. Instead of being content in His father's house, he takes matters into his own hands and digs a well. He ends up broke, hungry & feeding pigs. He has reached **Rock Bottom**; a point of emptiness

For the prodigal son, the turning point is found in V.17 of Luke 15.

¹⁷ But when he came to his senses, he said, ***'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!'***

His **Well Digging** had left him hungry and empty.

Digging wells will never work, but God will not stop us from doing it. He lets us dig, while at the same time waiting for us to return to him.

The Faithfulness and Steadfast love God has for us is here on full display, He is faithful to let us dig our wells, not holding it against us and is ready for us to return to the source of Living Water.

The end of the prodigal son story tells us the father not only waits but meets the prodigal as He sees him coming and throws a party for his return.

Aren't you grateful for a God like that?

There is another story in the Old Testament that is Similar; Its the story of Jonah.

Jonah - Book of Jonah

- God tells Jonah to go to the Ninevites and preach to them because of their wickedness
- Instead of going and trusting in God's goodness, he runs from God. He is digging a well by running away from God's best for him. **(We could ask "Where in my life am I doing that?")**
- He **Hits rock bottom** — like the Good Samaritan- he is literally in the depths of the sea; in the belly of the whale.

This was a turning point for Jonah in Jonah2:2

² *"I called out of my distress to the Lord, And He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; You heard my voice."*

God has the fish spit him out on dry land and Jonah does what the Lord asked him to do.

[The Ninevites listen and repent. Then Jonah sulks and cares more about a dead plant than the people God saved.]

Jonah dug wells when He refused to believe God's ways were the way of fullness; in his digging and emptiness, He became desperate for God's saving work.

Again, aren't you glad that *"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning, great is His faithfulness."* (Hymn – "Great is Thy Faithfulness)

The last story which Kent spends three chapters unpacking in the Book is the story where Jesus meets a **Samaritan Woman at a Well - John 4**

Sometimes we are not intentionally running from God (the Samaritan Woman didn't know God); we are just trying to make life work the best we can with the resources we have.

But God is committed to meeting us even no matter how and why we are **Digging our Wells**.

That is what he did here for this Samaritan Woman. She was an outcast. How do we know she was an outcast? She came **alone** to Jacob's well to draw water at noon. Jesus sat at the well while his disciples went to town to get food.

Her **waterpot** was a symbolic for the Thirst that she had deep within her. She was digging wells and making life work. But her cistern/ waterpot was cracked; she was extremely thirsty for something, and she had no awareness that she needed Jesus.

Jesus asks her for water. She struggles to understand why a man, a Jewish man, would be talking to her. He tells her if she really knew who it was that was asking her for water, he would give her water so that she would never thirst again.

She responded,

"Sir, give me this water... so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw." (John 4:15).

He tells her to go get her husband and come back to the well. She says she has no husband and Jesus tells her, "She has rightly said that "she has no husband". He tells her she has had 5 and the one she is with now is not her husband.

What is Jesus doing here? He is confronting her thirst and revealing to her how she is trying to fill her thirst apart from Him.

Denial is one form of the biggest road blocks to God making us aware of our well digging. We don't think what we are doing is all that bad.

Question: Where are you living in denial about some of things you are doing to relieve your thirst in this life?

But these things . . . are just cracked waterpots that cannot hold water.

God reveals to her that those who Worship Him will worship Him in Spirit and in Truth.

When we live in Denial and go after our Well Digging, we are not living and worshipping Him in Truth.

The Samaritan Woman Leaves Her Waterpot

Scripture tells us that he reveals himself as the messiah to her and she believes.

The disciples come back and she is so transformed and changed by this encounter that she leaves her waterpot and goes into town.

²⁸ *So the woman left her waterpot, and went into the city and said to the men,*

²⁹ *"Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ, is it?"*

She forgets what she was doing and has no need for the container that seemed to fill her thirsts. This waterpot was symbolic of her old life and the things that meant the most to her. And now she is so free, and she no longer needs to travel and do what she used to do.

I can't help but think of the **Rich Young Ruler** who Jesus also had compassion on. He was challenged to give up his waterpot (sell all your possessions and stop all your well Digging and follow Me) but the Rich Young Ruler could not let it go.

God meets the Prodigal when he saw him returning.

He delivered Jonah from the belly of the whale, when Jonah cried out to God.

He sits down at the well to talk to the Samaritan woman, waiting for an opportunity to have her ask for the water.

God always meets us in the place of emptiness, where we **stop pretending**, where we are ready to **stop well digging** and we are ready to receive what he is telling us to do.

Could it be that part of our problem is that we are so often busy **digging our wells** thinking that is where life is found that we don't sit with our emptiness and ask. **Is this all there is? Is this really what I want?**

Kent shared about winning a state basketball game and running off the court at the end of the game wondering. Is this all there is?

We go after so many things in life and if we are not careful the things that we go after to make life full will only end in emptiness.

Kent said it this way in his book,

"God is so patient, He waits for our well-digging too run dry. It will.... What we turn to for life will run dry. God is not in a hurry because he knows what we don't. The thirst or in the case of the well digging, the emptiness will eventually be felt. Will we be wise enough to discern the moment?" (p.29-30)

I was reading the Psalms over a dear sister in the Lord who was days before going home to be with Jesus and I walked away thinking about a Psalms that I read over her that day

Psalms 23:3-4

He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

The Path of Righteousness is often connected with what seems like the valley of the shadow of Death.

When we walk with Jesus it will sometimes feel like death, we instinctively run from what feels like death. Its counterintuitive to slow down and notice what is going on in me when I feel thirsty, instead of trying to fill my thirst with the stuff of life. Listen to what the shepherd provides us...

⁴ His Rod, His staff to comfort me. ⁵ He prepares a table of food before me in the presence of mine enemies, He Anoints my head, my cup that runs over

The Righteous Path, a well-worn path that the shepherd leads his sheep down will be a path that is not without danger and setbacks, trials and tribulations, but in the midst of the path that seems opposite of everything I desire out of life, he gives me the thing my soul most desires, his protection, his correction, his food & water, his anointing,

Sonia said it last week.... It is very much like the "blessed are the poor in spirit"; those that think they have very little. Because when we are in a place of emptiness, we stop digging the wells and we position ourselves to receive from Him and Him only.

As much as we are ruthlessly dedicated to eliminating loneliness, emptiness, mystery and the actual truths about ourselves, When we commit our lives to Christ, God is equally as ruthlessly committed to remove those things from our lives that keep us from growing to be more like Him.

He has one goal in your life, to sanctify you and transform you into the image of His son. And He will stop at no expense to put you in the situations that will test and purify the parts of you that are not like him.

Are you slowing down in those moments to set down the waterpots and follow Him?

Hymn: Be Thou My Vision

Riches I heed not nor man's empty praise

Thou mine inheritance now and always

Thou and Thou only first in my heart

High King of Heaven My treasure Thou art!