

Scripture: John 7: 37-39

Title: Let those who are thirsty come to me and drink / translated by Emma Choi

1.

I first set foot on Chinese soil in 2001 when I participated in a church medical missionary trip. The first airport I landed at was Xian's Shenyang International Airport, and I immediately boarded a train heading to Gansu Province. Upon arriving in Lanzhou, the largest city in Gansu, our team transferred to a large bus and headed to a mountainous area inhabited by the Dongxiang ethnic minority. The Dongxiang people are a minority group with a population of only 500,000. They are a very poor ethnic group who live in high-altitude areas and cultivate corn and potatoes for their subsistence. In 2022, a film that became problematic in China was screened. The film, titled *Return to Dust* (隐入尘烟, Yǐn Rù Chén Yān), is a very sad story about an elderly bachelor in rural Gansu who cannot marry due to financial constraints and a disabled woman who marries him. The protagonist of this film is said to be a real farmer from Gansu. However, the film portrayed the harsh realities of rural China so vividly that the Chinese government banned its screening. The Dongxiang people live in the region depicted in the film. Gansu Province itself is a very dry area with an annual precipitation of only 200 mm. Due to the low rainfall in the high-altitude areas, they had no choice but to dig into the ground to store rainwater for survival. The missionary advised us to drink bottled water at least once or twice every hour while on the bus to the Gansu village, because hydration is essential in such a dry, high-altitude environment. It was fascinating to see how people cultivated crops and survived on such bare mountains, and the rainwater storage systems left a deep impression.

In 2008, I went on a pilgrimage to the holy sites in Israel. During the pilgrimage, there were programs where we walked through the desert, and it was essential to drink water frequently. The level of thirst in desert regions is on a different scale compared to places like Minnesota. There, I saw water storage systems similar to those in the Dongxiang villages. Even in the dry land of Palestine, cisterns are absolutely necessary.

In the Judean Desert south of Jerusalem, where the Qumran Caves and En Gedi Caves are located, there are wadis. A wadi refers to a temporary stream that only appears when it rains. Sudden heavy rains bring fresh water that flows through these normally dry streams. This water flows into cisterns through conduits that connect the streams and the cisterns, allowing the storage of water. You can still see such conduits and cisterns around the Qumran Caves today. The living water that Jesus speaks of is symbolic of this fresh water flowing into cisterns in the midst of the desert.

2.

The passage describes an event where Jesus cried out loudly on the last and most important day of the Feast of Tabernacles. As mentioned, the Feast of Tabernacles is one of the three major Jewish festivals, similar to Chuseok in Korea, and it is celebrated after the harvest is

completed. During this festival, Jews reenact their ancestors' 40-year journey in the wilderness after the Exodus. They set up tents outside the village and live in them for a week.

The final day of the Feast of Tabernacles is the most significant because it features the priests' performance. The priests go to the Pool of Siloam to fill a jug with water. They then carry the jug up the hill to the Temple. Upon reaching the Temple, they perform a ritual of pouring the water onto the altar, which is the climax of the Feast of Tabernacles. The wilderness experience was challenging due to the scarcity of water. Receiving water in the desert was crucial for survival, and this ritual symbolized God's provision of water to their ancestors by striking the rock in the wilderness.

Many people gathered in Jerusalem to witness this performance. Jesus had to speak loudly because of the large crowd. In the midst of the Feast of Tabernacles water ritual, Jesus shouted, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."

John explains its meaning in the following verse in case the future generation who reads this message misinterpret it. He says, "By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive." The Old Testament background for this teaching is found in Ezekiel 47. The prophet Ezekiel was active among the Jewish exiles in Babylon. When Jerusalem was destroyed and the Temple fell, the people experienced a profound sense of despair, as the Temple was the focal point of their faith.

During this time, the prophet Ezekiel foretold that the Temple and Jerusalem would be wondrously restored after the exile. In a vision, he saw a new river flowing from beneath the threshold of the Temple, bringing life to many. Ezekiel describes this vision in Ezekiel 47. He prophesied that the river starting from the Temple would flow through the Judean desert and into the Dead Sea, bringing life even to the Sea of Death. He also foretold that fish would be caught there and beautiful fruit trees would grow around it. This description is repeated in Revelation 22, which depicts the New Jerusalem. The living water mentioned here symbolizes the Holy Spirit.

### 3.

Let's circle back to Exodus during the Feast of Tabernacles. When the Israelites escaped from Egypt, they were slaves. Although they physically left Egypt, their mindset and values remained those of slaves. Therefore, God had to train Israelites to be completely free of Egypt through having them living in wilderness for 40 years. The wilderness was essentially a training ground for becoming free individuals. To become free, one must be trained to make choices independently and take responsibility for those choices.

However, the wilderness lacked water. In the desert, thirst makes a person to be impatient and aggressive. When the Israelites ran out of water in the wilderness, they lashed out at Moses and God, disregarding everything else. When we do not receive the living water, we experience

the same phenomena as the Israelites in the wilderness. All social crimes occurring in this era can be seen as self-destructive behaviors of humans who have not received the living water.

Last week, a fourteen-year-old from Atlanta, Georgia, carried out a school shooting, killing his friends and teachers. What kind of mindset would lead someone to aim a gun at others? Clearly, this shooter was in a state of extreme thirst. Without the living water, we too could end up like this. What happens if we continue working without receiving the living water? Is it possible to live as a stay-at-home-mom without receiving the living water? Can one fulfill the role of a parent without it? Raising and educating children often influence the lifestyle and basic needs of the parents. When our souls are thirsty, we end up influencing other's soul in a negative way. The workplace is fundamentally like living in the wilderness. Even if you do relatively well at work, the corporate culture and the environment continues to push you to be mentally and physically exhausted.

I've never had a full time job in corporate. So, when I watch a show that depicts the harsh realities of the workplace, such as *Misaeng*, I pay close attention to how they describes the corporate dynamics and politics. In *Misaeng*, a senior who retired honorably and started his own business visits Manager Oh. He tells him to survive in corporate. He says to Manager Oh, "Did you say corporate is a battlefield? When you get out of that battlefield, the outside world is a living hell." People who are exhausted from their wilderness-like lives may try to quench their thirst with alcohol and deviation, but this only provides temporary relief and does not address the fundamental thirst. Without constantly receiving the living water, our lives become desolate like the wilderness.

Jesus calls out to our lives, which are unfulfilled and lacking in inspiration: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." At that time, people believed that the deepest human emotions resided in the abdomen. So, the imagery of living water flowing from one's belly signifies the resolution of the fundamental thirst of life. How are you addressing the fundamental thirst in your life? Do you acknowledge your thirst?

#### 4.

You might wonder about the connection between believing in Jesus and having rivers of living water flow from within. As mentioned, the rivers of living water are a symbol and metaphor. The rivers of living water represent the Holy Spirit given to those who believe in Jesus. This means that without believing in Jesus, one cannot receive the Holy Spirit. To receive the Holy Spirit and thus the living water, one must first believe in Jesus.

So, what does it mean to believe in Jesus? Believing in Jesus encompasses several aspects. First, it means believing that Jesus is the only Son of God. Even though Jesus was born in human

flesh, He is the Son of God. It also means believing that Jesus died on the cross in our place for our sins. Jesus, who was without sin and blemish, died to take the punishment for our sins.

Additionally, believing in Jesus means accepting that God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day, making Him Lord and Christ. The resurrected Jesus ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God, from where He sends the Holy Spirit to us. It also involves believing that this Jesus will return as the judge at the end of the world.

You should seriously consider about what it means to accept Jesus as my Lord and Christ. It is not a simple yes or no question. When you decide to believe and accept Jesus as your Lord and savior, God will open the heavenly door for you. It is a gift from God that you're given a permission to enter the door of Heaven. In Christian tradition, this belief was taught through pre-baptismal instruction and confirmed through baptismal vows. Therefore, deciding to be baptized is a vow to the Lord and the church community that you surrender yourself and believe in Jesus Christ.

I know some of our church members are not baptized yet. I strongly encourage those who are not baptized to reflect and wrestle whether you truly believe Jesus as their Lord and Savior. I strongly encourage you to receive holy spirit as a gift from God. We plan to hold a baptismal service next Easter. Until then, I hope you will seriously consider believing in Jesus and make a commitment.

Again, without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, living through a wilderness-like existence is impossible. Only those who have experienced the Holy Spirit can escape the fundamental thirst. When the Holy Spirit comes upon us, both spiritual and physical biochemical responses occur simultaneously. Not only does our spirit become fervent, but our pupils also dilate, making the world seem brighter. What once appeared as a battlefield or hell now reveals beauty within it. When the Holy Spirit comes, our heart rate increases, and everyone around us appears more beautiful. The emotions of young people in love become evident in those who have received the Holy Spirit. Although we continue to live in a world that feels like a wilderness, we can live differently from other people who lives in the same wilderness. The Holy Spirit, given to believers in Jesus, acts as a binding force that connects us firmly with God. We begin to feel assured of our forgiveness of sins and our citizenship in the kingdom of God. With the confidence of becoming a child of God, we also become assured of the transfer of ownership to God's kingdom on this earth. This sense of connection is so powerful that it cannot be broken by anything in this world.

5.

The Holy Spirit is a gift given to those who ask for it. Whether it is day or night, God gives the Holy Spirit as a gift to those who earnestly seek it. There is a proverb in Korea, "A thirsty person digs a well." It means that because one is thirsty, they dig. If you are thirsty, you cannot just stay idle. You must seek out a well and put in the effort to dig it yourself. A thirsty person begins to read the Bible to know God more. The Bible contains countless verses that can

quench our thirst. At the very least, you must demonstrate your thirst by the effort of reading the Bible and praying. When such thirst persists and is earnestly pursued, it will be approved by God, and you will receive the approval code from God. This means receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

When we live in this world without Holy Spirit, we risk falling into two types of people. One is becoming a secularist, and the other is becoming an escapist. Without the fullness of the Holy Spirit, it is easy to blend into the world and live a life indistinguishable from it. We might become secularized, clinging to the world and saying, "As long as it's good, it's fine." Alternatively, we might become escapists who deny the world and wait only for Jesus' return, saying, "This world is not my home."

A person filled with the Holy Spirit lives in the wilderness but does not conform to or be influenced by it. Instead, they transform the world. Just as the rivers of living water bring life to the dead around them, those filled with the Holy Spirit also play a role in revitalizing the world. They turn hate into love. They transform the world. They make the world beautiful. They sanctify people within the wilderness.

Life is a wilderness, but it is also a gift. God has prepared the Holy Spirit, the river of living water, as a gift for us as we navigate this wilderness-like life. Remember the words from Isaiah 12:2-3: "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord himself, is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." Only those who diligently draw water from the well of salvation each day will receive the strength from God to transform the world while maintaining their humanity. I pray that you earnestly seek the Lord with a thirsty heart and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. May the rivers of living water overflow in the places where you are, and may you live a blessed life with beautiful fruits abounding. I earnestly wish that you do not overlook your thirst or try to fill it with other things but be quenched by the inspiration given by Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.