

The Word of Suffering
by Dr. Mark Smith
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Psalm 69:1-3, 19-21; John 19:28-29

Ps 69:1 Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.

Ps 69:2 I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.

I have come into the deep waters;
the floods engulf me.

Ps 69:3 I am worn out calling for help;
my throat is parched.

My eyes fail,
looking for my God.

Ps 69:19 You know how I am scorned, disgraced and shamed;
all my enemies are before you.

Ps 69:20 Scorn has broken my heart
and has left me helpless;
I looked for sympathy, but there was none,
for comforters, but I found none.

Ps 69:21 They put gall in my food
and gave me vinegar for my thirst

Jn 19:28 Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said,
"I am thirsty."

Jn 19:29 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 Palm Sunday crowd that hailed him King quickly deserted him. Forsaken by everyone, Jesus was crucified.

Among his last words was a cry of pain - word of suffering: "*I thirst.*" Here is Jesus in all his humanity, enduring the cruelest of punishments. Crucifixion was designed to administer the most pain with the maximum amount of consciousness. Death was excruciatingly slow. His thirst points up the fact that the terrible stretching of the tissues of His body under the heat of the burning Middle Eastern sun was really taking its toll.

"*I thirst*" he said. It says that he said this to fulfill the scripture; it is an allusion to Psalm 69: "*I am worn out calling for help*" says the Psalmist, "*My throat is parched....They put gall (poison) in my food, and gave me vinegar for my thirst.*"

But he was not merely quoting scripture, of course. He was really thirsty. He was in agony. In his words "*I thirst*" were gathered up all the suffering of his passion -- the struggle in the garden, the stress and humiliation of his betrayal and arrest and trial. He was mocked, spat upon, and beaten. He was led up the cobblestone path of what is now called *Via Dolorosa* - the Way of Sorrows-- carrying the cross bar to the place of Calvary. There was the loss of sleep, the

strain of the long night, the loss of blood, the cruel nails and the tortured body. With a crown of thorns on his brow and bones out of joint, the crowd mocked and jeered.

All of this suffering now found its focus in his cry "*I thirst.*" He was a man well acquainted with pain and suffering and sorrow.

Pain and suffering is, of course, part of the human condition and has been so since the Fall of Humanity. We have all been there to some degree. We suffer in many ways. Loneliness, grief, heartache, disappointment, worry, physical pain . . . all takes its toll. At such times we wonder if anyone really understands. Does anyone care? Who will comfort us at such times?

God does. Or *does* God? Does the God of this universe really hear us cry "*I thirst?*" How do we know God cares?

Well the Scripture tells us that God knows our pain because God walked in our shoes. In the person of Jesus God walked this lonesome valley we walk and suffered on that cross. In Jesus God experienced our struggles and our pain and our loneliness and our heartache and hurt. He truly suffered and overcame it all - for us - to show us that we are loved and that he understands and that in our times of deepest need and pain we can count on him to be there for us.

"I thirst!" cried Jesus: a cry of suffering and pain.

And what is interesting is how that cry was answered.

There was a jar of vinegar nearby. The Greek word for vinegar, *oxos*, refers to a diluted, vinegary wine drunk by common people and soldiers. The jar may have been placed there by custom for the dying men, or it may simply have belonged to the soldiers or someone else. The fact that the wine was not merely held to Jesus' mouth but was poured on a sponge and extended to him on a stick, is the clearest indication we have that the cross was a high one.

There is another interesting detail. John tells us the vinegary wine was applied with hyssop. The hyssop plant was used at the time of the exodus to sprinkle the blood of the Passover Lamb on the doorposts of Israelite families so that the angel of death would know to passover that household -effecting God's deliverance. Here now was Jesus, the Lamb of God, pouring out his blood, in another great act of deliverance – making possible a new exodus from the bondage of sin and death. It would have been extraordinarily fitting for a hyssop plant to have come in contact with his bleeding body in the final moments of the crucifixion.

In any case, Jesus' cry was answered by a soldier who gave him something to drink. Some think that is was just another act of cruelty - sticking vinegar in his mouth in a mocking way. But the gospel accounts, including John, do not suggest that. In fact it is very possible that this was the kindly act of a soldier who was touched in some way by the dying Jesus. After Jesus cried out for water, few were interested or sympathetic. They did nothing about it. They only said, "*Wait,*

let's see. Maybe Elijah will come and help." But there was one man who simply could not take it anymore. His kindness drove him into action; he may have said to himself: *"This man is suffering intensely now. Perhaps I can give him some small comfort."* So we read of him – at least in the Gospel of Matthew, that he "went at once" to give the vinegar to him.

When everyone else was indifferent to Jesus' cry of suffering, here was a man who offered him something to drink. He literally fulfilled Jesus' words: *"I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink."* We don't know his name, but perhaps he is written up in the Book of Life.

Imagine the high privilege of having been the one who helped Jesus in his greatest time of need. The fact is, you and I can still have the privilege of helping our Lord by helping those around us.

There are those who suffer for lack of purpose and meaning in life. They are thirsty for the gospel word. Who will give them living water? Who will tell them about Jesus Christ? So many are overwhelmed by life. *"I thirst"* pleads a homeless mother and her children. *"I'm thirsty"* weeps a person with mental illness. *"Stay with me"* cries the lonely widow or the abused child or the man dying of cancer. *"Please give me a cool drink of water..."* The suffering Jesus comes to us in those who need our help. All around us there are people who thirst for understanding and care, just as we do. Can we follow the example of that caring soldier and swing into action to provide comfort and help at the point of their need? You and I are needed to carry the water of life to those who thirst....

Take the hand of Jesus, who knows all about our pain and suffering, and drink from the living water of life. And then stretch out your hand to a fellow suffering human being and minister to them in Jesus' name. Just a cup of water counts for a lot. Perhaps one day Jesus will say to us: *"I was thirsty, and you gave me drink....Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me!"*