

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Those Hungering and Thirsting After Righteousness

by Dan Trygg

“Blessed are the ones hungering and thirsting for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

Matthew 5:6

“Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; ⁵ hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. ⁶ Then they cried to Yahweh in their trouble, and He delivered them from their distress. ⁷ He led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in. ⁸ Let them thank Yahweh for His steadfast love, for His wondrous works to the children of men! ⁹ For He satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul He fills with good things.”

Psalms 107:4-9

“They will not hunger or thirst, nor will the scorching heat or sun strike them down; for He who has compassion on them will lead them and will guide them to springs of water...”

Isaiah 49:10 ESV

In this fourth “declaration of happiness”, Jesus again draws our attention to someone who has a strong felt need, a sense of lack, an emptiness. Like the poor in spirit, the ones who mourn, and even the meek, on the surface, it would seem that “*hungering and thirsting* for righteousness” would be a *negative* thing. **Someone in extreme hunger and thirst would seem to be the farthest thing from contentment or “happiness”. They are experiencing *want*, not happiness or good fortune.** They feel a *longing*, a *yearning* for something which is *not* readily at hand. **Yet Jesus says that such a person is “happy” or “fortunate”.** His assurance is that those who have this particular hunger *will* be satisfied, even “filled to the full”, as the Greek word implies. For this reason, because they are longing for righteousness, **they are in a good place. God will give them what they desperately long for.**

What is “righteousness”? What does it mean to be a *righteous* person? The Greek word refers to someone of integrity, moral purity, and justice. **It implies both upright thinking and behavior.** He or she has a heart to *honor and worship* God, and the *outcome of that relationship* is the conduct that *honors other people and treats them with respect and fairness*. The righteous person is *approved by God*, and *does what He requires*.

Thus, **the first thing we can say about the person who “hungers and thirsts for righteousness” is that they have a profound awareness that they fall short** of the standard which they believe God would require of them. They value what God thinks of them, and they desperately want to do what He requires, but they see themselves missing the mark in their relationship with Him and their treatment of others. They do not long for what they *already have* (cf. Rom. 8:24). They are hungry and thirsty for what they feel they do *not* possess. They see the places where they fail. **Secondly, however, is the fact that something within them longs to be righteous.** They have *not* closed their heart toward God. They have *not* spurned Him or His ways. They are *not* arrogant or scornful toward Him. *They still hold out a hope and desire to be approved by God and to consistently live in a way that they know is right.* This beatitude describes a person who is *plagued* by the brokenness, distortion and imperfection of his or her fallen state, ...*frustrated* at the inability to do right, ...and *longing* to overcome the weaknesses of the flesh. Their failures could (and *may*) drive them to frustration or even deep depression, but, underneath it all, *they long and yearn to be righteous.* They *hunger and thirst* for it. They *cry out* for it. They may feel faint and without strength, and yet *their soul cries out to overcome and rise above the recurring self-defeating patterns of their lives.*

As was true with the first three “declarations of happiness”, **this blessing-statement of Jesus is rooted in the OT scriptures.** There are three very significant passages to mention. Again, the connection is clearly seen in the Greek Septuagint translation (LXX), the Bible of non-Judean Jews of that time. **The words Jesus used would have triggered associations in the minds of His listeners.**

The most direct allusion would have been to Psalm 107:4-9. The words “hungering” and “thirsting” in vs. 5 are *exactly the same* as those Jesus used in His statement. Also, the word “satisfied” in Psa. 107:9 is *from the same root word*, although it is stated in the future instead of a past tense in Matt. 5:6. To hear Jesus say, “hungering and thirsting” would have brought vs. 4 to mind, and the example cited in Psa. 107 *were* “satisfied” (vs. 9). True, the people mentioned in this Psalm were hungry and thirsty for physical food and drink, but *the language is very direct.* **These people cried out to God in their physical longings, and were answered.** Jesus’ “declaration of happiness” is based upon the extrapolation that if God would do this for those who cry out to Him out of their *physical* emptiness, then surely **He will answer the crying out of hearts hungering and thirsting out of spiritual longings.**

There is *more* to the saying than this, however. **Another well-known passage that contains some of the same themes is Isaiah 55:1-3,** “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with

you an everlasting covenant, ...my steadfast, sure love for David.” **This is a clear invitation to *spiritual life and satisfying sustenance for the thirsty and hungry soul*.** Notice that there is mention of an everlasting covenant, a fulfillment of the promise made to David. **In the context of Matt. 5, Jesus’ declarations about the Kingdom of God certainly would have sounded like a fulfillment of Isa. 55.** Jesus is the Son of David calling His followers to align themselves with the Kingdom of heaven, a Kingdom that is the fulfillment of OT promises. The passage continues in verses 6,7, “Seek Yahweh while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near; ⁷ let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; *let him return to Yahweh, that He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.*” **For the one who is hungering and thirsting for a right standing with God, this would be a wonderful promise! ...one in agreement with the Baptist’s and Jesus’ message of repentance.** They taught that God will be compassionate and forgiving to those who returned to Him in repentance. They would find acceptance with God, and a new, clean start. **Those who return to God will find sustenance to meet the inner hungerings and thirstings for righteousness.** There is a source of spiritual water and spiritual food in God which will satisfy and fill these needs. *Jesus is saying that in aligning with Him they will find satisfaction* (cf. Jn. 7:37-39).

Finally, the most amazing reference using the words Jesus employed in Matt. 5:6 is from Isaiah 49:8-13, “Thus says Yahweh: ‘In a time of favor I have answered You; in a day of salvation I have helped You; I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, to restore the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to prisoners, “‘Come out’”; to those who are in darkness, “‘Show yourselves.’” **They shall feed along the ways; their pasture on all bare heights; they shall not hunger or thirst,** neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for He who has compassion on them will lead them, and will guide them to springs of water. And I will make all My mountains a road, and My highways shall be raised up. Behold, these shall come from afar, and behold, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Sinim.’ Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For **Yahweh has comforted His people** and *will have compassion on His afflicted.*” The promise that “they shall not hunger or thirst” in *this* context has to do with the comfort of the righteous in a new age of restoration (cf. Rev. 7:16,17). **The “You” in verse 3 is a reference to the Suffering Servant, a prophetic description of the coming Messiah.** The passage earlier declares that *this Servant would be called and named from the womb of His mother* (vs. 1; Matt.1:18-21). *He would be hidden for a time, but eventually through Him God’s glory would be revealed* (vs. 2,3; Matt. 2:13-23; Jn. 1:14-18; Matt. 1:23). **His mission was to bring Israel back to God** (vs. 5; Matt. 15:24; cf.10:5,6), **and, beyond that, to be a light to the Gentiles** to bring God’s salvation to the ends of the earth (vs. 6; Matt. 28:18-20). **He is called “the despised one”,** the “one abhorred by the nation” (vs. 7; Matt. 27:20-44), and although He came to be a servant to rulers, **ultimately kings and princes will bow down to Him** (vs. 7; Matt. 28:20; Phil. 2:1-11; Rev. 19:11-16). It is in answer to *His* petitions that God will bring restoration and comfort (vs. 8; Heb. 5:7-9).

For those first hearers of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, people steeped in the OT, each of His “ten words” of the New Covenant Decalogue would have linked to familiar passages and word pictures they had learned from childhood. **Jesus purposely picked statements that would have this effect, because He wanted to do three things:** **(1.) Meet His ragamuffin band of followers at the level of their personal experience.** They were *not* the religious elite. They were not even great achievers at righteousness, by the standards of the scribes and Pharisees, at least. They were people who were *sincere*, people who *believed in God* and *wanted to serve Him*. Jesus’ words to them comforted and encouraged them because *He was telling them that God wanted to significantly include them in His purpose for Israel, and His purposes on the earth.* **(2.) He wanted to clearly establish continuity between the promises of the OT and the ministry which He was beginning in their day.** *He was clearly saying that the time was fulfilled.* The reign of God was at hand. He had come to fulfill God’s promises in *their* time, and to initiate a new movement of God in Israel. He was, in fact, the promised Messiah. **(3.) He desired to motivate these everyday people to put the Kingdom of God before everything else, so that an army of people would be raised up to carry out God’s purposes on the earth.** A big part of what needed to be established in their thinking was the notion that the rewards were *not* all about the here and now. **To be warriors for the Kingdom of God, you must be willing to delay many of the gratifications that other people seek here.** Nevertheless, there will be a *greater reward, a certain and sure promise*, for those who will deny themselves now *in order to serve an invisible Kingdom and a future hope.*

Are you one who “hunger and thirsts for righteousness”? Then you are fortunate, because God will satisfy your emptiness with His own righteousness. His plan was to send the Suffering Servant, who would purchase a righteousness He could offer us *as a gift* (Rom. 3:21-24). Christ has become our righteousness, so that we can have right standing before God *when we trust* in His provision for us (I Cor. 1:30). The new birth, and the inner working of the Spirit, will *produce* that righteousness in our experience, as we walk with Him (Gal. 5:5,25). Finally, when Christ returns, we will be like Him, righteous, holy and faultless. *That is a sure hope and promise* (I Jn. 3:1,2; Eph. 1:13,14).