

RICO TICE

Life
that lasts

Quenching our thirst
for more

Life That Lasts

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Life. We're all looking for it.

Not the quality of being alive—if you're reading this booklet, you've got that already. What we're looking for is that special something that will elevate mere existence to real life. That quality that makes life worth living. Real, satisfying, meaningful life that lasts.

Have you found it? And, if you have, can you be confident it will last? My sense is that all of us are on a quest for that kind of life. Sometimes we glimpse it, but it stays out of reach. Sometimes we think we've grasped it, but it slips through our fingers. And so here we are...

Feeling a bit unhappy, but we don't know why.

Looking for satisfaction, but we don't know where.

Thirsty for something, but we don't know what.

Strangely, this desire is often awakened by good experiences. Maybe you get the job you want, or you buy a house, or you meet the person you want to spend your life with, or your team is at last successful, or you have your first child. And you think, *This feels amazing; this will quench my thirst.* There's such euphoria—but then the euphoria fades. And so the quest begins again.

In Philadelphia there's a famous stretch along the Schuylkill River called Boathouse Row. It's a beautiful spot. There's one point where a stream comes into the river; the water bubbles up and it looks so refreshing. Apparently, if you follow the stream

uphill to its source, there's an inscription over the spring that was put there by the city's founders many years ago. It's a quote from the Bible—words originally spoken by Jesus: “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again” (John, chapter 4, verse 13).

They're words that equally apply to our search for satisfaction. Whatever we look to to quench our thirst—and however refreshing it is in the moment—we soon find ourselves thirsty again.

Why do we feel like this?

When we feel this dissatisfaction, there tend to be three directions that people go in. The best-selling author and pastor Timothy Keller puts them as follows. Which one resonates with you the most?

1. It must be a problem with the people and things around me.

I've made it—so why am I not happy? It must be that I've got the wrong relationship, the wrong lifestyle, the wrong job. I thought these things would bring satisfaction to me and they don't, so it must be time for a change.

2. It must be a problem with me. The dissatisfaction is my fault.

I haven't been successful enough. I haven't performed to the right standard. I've made bad choices. I should never have come to this city/chosen that job/trusted that person. What was I thinking? If only I'd done things differently. I'm such a fool.

3. It must be a problem with the universe. The world's a mess and bad things are always going to happen. Look at COVID.

Life is outside of our control. I used to think I could be happy, but now I've wised up and all the great idealistic notions and hopes I had are gone. I won't be happy and I'm done trying.

But there's a fourth option. It's one that may not be immediately obvious to us, but which actually makes the most sense:

4. It must be a problem in my soul. *I've looked for satisfaction in so many places but I'm still thirsty. The answer to that thirst must be out there somewhere. Just as ducklings want to swim and there's such a thing as water... and sheep get hungry and there's such a thing as grass... and babies are thirsty and there's such a thing as milk... So if I find a deep thirst that nothing in this world can satisfy, maybe, just maybe, it can only be satisfied by something outside of this world—by God. But is God there? And if he is, what does he think of me?*

An outrageous claim

Imagine being in a cathedral one Easter Sunday. There are thousands of people there, including the queen and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

And then in the middle of this marvellous ceremony, just as the choir have finished singing like larks and the archbishop clears his throat to speak, there's a great disturbance.

A man gets out of his seat, stands in the aisle, and shouts, "Are you thirsty? Come to me!"

An incident like that would doubtless make an impression. So

it's no surprise that when Jesus did something similar 2,000 years ago, his friends never forgot it. One of them, John, recounted it later in his book about Jesus' life. That book is called John's Gospel, and it forms part of the Bible today.

The incident happened during a major annual Jewish festival, called the Feast of Tabernacles. Most years, the celebrations followed the same traditional pattern. But not this year. This year, something unusual happened...

“On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood [in the temple courts] and said in a loud voice, ‘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 7 v 37-38)

In other words, Jesus stood up in the equivalent of a cathedral on Easter Day and said: *Don't do the religious stuff. Don't rely on tradition. If you're thirsty, come to me. If you want real water—real life and lasting satisfaction—you'll find it in me.*

When you think about it, it's an outrageous claim.

But if it's true, then we've found the solution to our soul-thirst; we've found the secret to satisfaction. For ever.

So let's think a bit more about what Jesus said.

The condition

“Let anyone who is thirsty...” (John 7 v 37)

Jesus' offer is for anyone who's thirsty, on one condition: that they're honest enough to admit it.

There'll be lots of people who will never acknowledge this thirst, because they don't want to go anywhere near God. They're determined to live their own way, enjoying God's gifts but ignoring him. They're satisfied with that. And if they do ever feel the dissatisfaction of life lived without the life-giver, they shrug their shoulders and conclude that nothing can be done.

Some of us, though, are prevented from admitting our thirst because of fear. One of the classic books of the 20th century, *1984* by George Orwell, predicted a future in which people would be controlled by fear and oppression. That's why they wouldn't go looking for more from life.

Similarly, lots of people today may acknowledge their thirst, but they're afraid of what their family, friends, or the culture around them would think if they got interested in Jesus. They say, *It may be true, but I'm not going near it. I'm not risking it. What will people think?*

Perhaps it's a "1984 reason" that's stopped you from admitting you're thirsty.

Another 20th-century novel, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, imagined the future slightly differently. It painted a picture of a world in which the ruling authorities control people not with fear, but with pleasure—by plunging people into a consumer culture in which they are never satisfied but are utterly trapped.

Doesn't that ring true today? As a society we have more opportunities and resources than any generation before us; but we seem less content, more anxious, less secure. Yes, we're spiritually thirsty—but we're too deep into a YouTube-induced coma to recognise that and do something about the thirst. The algorithms are designed to keep our attention clip after clip, and yet the scrolling doesn't satisfy. It's a diversion. We're told so often that pleasure and possessions will satisfy us that we forget to look around and ask, *But do they?*

Perhaps it's a "*Brave New World* reason" that's stopped you from admitting that you're thirsty.

But if you're ready to wake up and accept that you're thirsty—if your soul is seeking something more—then Jesus has good news.

The invitation

"Come to me and drink..." (John 7 v 37)

There are plenty of people who claim to be able to help the dissatisfied find their way out. There's the guru, the self-help author, the counsellor, the drug-dealer. But Jesus is different, because he's not offering us a pill, a technique or a programme. Instead, he offers himself.

He says, "Come to me and drink".

He's claiming that he is, himself, the answer to the spiritual drought in a person's soul. So he doesn't talk about an approach

to life or an experience. He points to himself and says, “Come to me and drink”.

Along with air, water is the most basic necessity of life. A human can survive without food for weeks (and without WiFi for years, apparently). But without water, you’ve only got days.

And Jesus says, *I’m someone your soul needs every bit as much as your body needs water. Your soul needs me.*

How can that be? It’s because of who Jesus is: God the Son, come into the world in human form. Every other religion has a founder who says, *I’m here to show you how to find God.* Jesus says, *I’m God coming to find you.*

So if we’re thirsty, what we need is a personal encounter with Jesus—to get to know him. Freedom from dissatisfaction isn’t something you achieve by taking Jesus’ advice. It’s something you receive by taking Jesus’ hand.

How do we do that, in 2022? It’s not as if Jesus really is standing around in the nearest cathedral! But he has made himself known through the words that he inspired his followers to write about him—the Bible (or “Scripture” as it’s sometimes called). As a pastor, I’ve had the joy of seeing many people meet Jesus in this way. At first, as they read, Jesus is just a famous figure from history, like a waxwork in Madame Tussauds. And then something extraordinary happens—he comes alive! As you read the Bible it’s as though Jesus starts walking off the pages. He starts meeting you.

It's uncomfortable at times, because he can see right through us. He sees all the thoughts, words and deeds of which we are rightly ashamed. But at the same time, it's wonderful, because we discover that Jesus will accept us, even though he knows the truth. Whoever you are and whatever you've done, Jesus welcomes you to come to him.

So what does life with Jesus look like?

The promise

“Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.’ By this he meant the Spirit.” (John 7 v 38-39)

A spring bursting out of a mountain: clean, sparkling, refreshing, pure water. That's the picture here. Living in our rain-soaked land, we might miss the impact of these words. But Jesus was speaking in the sun-scorched Middle East. To have a relationship with him is like discovering a purifying, satisfying, invigorating, exhilarating, constant, life-giving stream of water in a desert. It's to have him present with you—by his Spirit—living in you, so that you're never alone and never without help or hope.

Notice that Jesus is not promising anything about a person's external situation. The source of these streams of living water is not external, but internal—which is reassuring, since if the pandemic taught us anything, it's that the externals can let us down, and without much warning.

What Jesus *is* promising is that whatever is going on on the outside, his followers will have a fountain of sparkling vitality bubbling up deep inside them from the core of their emotional life, as his Spirit gets to work. He delivers us from dissatisfaction not by changing our circumstances but by transforming our inner resources. When you come to him, he promises to give you spiritual life—a purpose, a love, a peace, a hope, a beauty—that permanently wells up from within you.

And just as you can't cover over or clog up a spring, because it's going to bubble through, Jesus says, *I'll give you such spiritual life so that no matter what blows up in your circumstances—however brutal—my joy will bubble through.*

But there's something strange about these words of Jesus too. You might expect the sentence to go like this: "Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow *into* them". But it doesn't. Instead it says that rivers of living water will flow *from* them.

If we come to Jesus, he fills us with life not for our benefit alone, but to make us an agent of life-giving change to others.

Jesus came not simply to give you joy. He came to make you a joy to others as you pour yourself out for them. It's a much more satisfying way to live than our constant chase for more stuff and new experiences.

No one has taught me more about this recently than my friend Helen. Helen was a member of the church that I am a pastor of. She'd been ill so long that her lungs were like paper. So

when COVID hit, she spent over a year locked up in her flat in the city centre, not seeing anyone. But whenever I phoned her, she was so full of joy. *She* would ask *me*, “What can I pray for you?” She’d ask after others. She’d write cards and notes for people at church and give them to me to hand out. She was always seeking to be a joy and a help to others.

Eventually, somehow COVID got to her. When she was taken to hospital, she told the staff that she was not at all worried about dying, because she’d get to be with Jesus. She even recommended they give her bed to someone else!

Helen was not afraid to die because she knew this: that the fountain of living water that Jesus gives cannot be quenched by death. In Jesus, she had hope for life beyond death. And not long after, she got her wish and went to be with Jesus.

But is life that lasts beyond death for real? And how is it possible?

The explanation

After reporting what Jesus said in the temple, John adds a note of explanation:

“By this [Jesus] meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.” (John 7 v 39)

As John’s Gospel continues, we discover that Jesus’ moment of being “glorified”—his moment of true greatness—was his death.

Twelve chapters later, John records how Jesus was betrayed by his friend, arrested by his enemies, tried by a sham court, and executed by crucifixion. It was an absolutely brutal method of capital punishment that the Roman authorities saved for the worst offenders in society.

Yet John describes it as Jesus' moment of greatest glory.

Why? Because Jesus' death unlocks the floodgates for the Spirit to be poured out. His death opens up the possibility of relationship with God.

Think about it: it is no small thing that we live in God's world, enjoying his gifts, while ignoring him. It is no small thing that we have done, said and thought things of which we are ashamed. It is no small thing that in our pursuit of satisfaction we have selfishly pushed others aside. It is no small thing that we have rejected for so long the God who stands there offering us a drink. This approach to life, and to God, is what the Bible calls sin. And God is not going to send his Spirit to live in our lives, or take us to live with him in his perfect kingdom after we die, unless that sin has been cleansed—removed and forgiven.

John records how, as Jesus was on the cross, he cried out, "I am thirsty" (John 19 v 28).

It's not just a statement of his excruciating pain but an indication of his spiritual agony. In his death, Jesus was cut off from his Father, paying for our sin with his death, so that we can be forgiven. He was experiencing hell so that we don't have to. He

was dying of thirst so that we can have a spring of living water welling up within us in this life.

That's what Helen believed. And it wasn't just wishful thinking. Because three days after Jesus died, he rose again—proving that he can keep his promises, proving he's more powerful than death, proving that we can look forward to even greater, overflowing, abundant life and joy on the other side of the grave. And if that sounds unbelievable to you, please check out the evidence. (There are ideas for how to do that on p 15.)

Why can I have my thirst quenched? It's because Jesus died for me. That's why I can be filled.

This makes a real difference. As I look back over the pandemic, I've been able to get through it with joy amidst the tensions because, in God's kindness, Jesus died on the cross to deal with my sin and he sent his Spirit to fill me. And that means I don't need to put pressure on other things to fill me. If I were to put that pressure on my wife, Lucy, it would crush her. She was never made to fulfil me. Neither were my kids, or my colleagues. It's foolish to look to quench our soul's thirst for satisfaction with anything or anyone other than the one our souls were made for.

Instead, Jesus says: "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."

That's life. Real, satisfying, meaningful life. And all you need to do to have it is to come to him and ask him for it.

What next?

Thanks for reading! It's worth asking yourself: *What will I do next?* To keep considering this offer from Jesus, the best things to do are:

- 1. Read a Gospel**—a historical account of the life of Jesus, found in the Bible. There are four: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. You can read on your own, or why not ask a Christian you trust to read it with you?
- 2. Connect with a church.** Hundreds of churches across the UK and Ireland are offering opportunities to explore Jesus' offer in a way that is helpful to you. Visit findlifethatlasts.com to find out what's happening near you or online.
- 3. Pray.** Speak to God (even if you're not sure he's there) and ask him to help you see the reality of who he is and who you are. You might like to use these words:

Father God, please help me to understand and to experience what it is to come to Jesus by his Spirit. Thank you for the cross—for the way in which that terrible death enables this relationship to take place. Please help me to grasp it with my heart, mind and soul. Amen.

Life

We're all looking for it.

Not the quality of being alive—if you're holding this booklet, you've got that already. What we're looking for is that special something that will elevate mere existence to real life and quench our thirst for more. Real, satisfying, meaningful life that lasts.

Where can we find a life like that?

Rico Tice is a church minister in London.

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