THIRSTY FOR GOD
Psalm 63:1-8

I invite you to open your Bible to Psalm 63:1-8. In the weeks leading up to Palm Sunday we’re going to be thinking together about spiritual renewal. The President of our Southern Baptist Convention has asked each church to study such things sometime during the first part of the year and to pray for revival in our land. It’s a good idea. Our nation needs a great awakening. That won’t happen until the church is renewed, until the fresh wind and fire of the Holy Spirit ignites renewal in the church. Some years ago, Jim Cymbala wrote a book called Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire to tell the story of the renewal that God’s Spirit brought to Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York City. We’re praying God will bring renewal to First Baptist Church, Hot Springs.

Renewal is an act of God, but there are things God’s people can do to put us in a better position to receive it. That’s why we’re calling this series Earth, Wind, and Fire. Genesis 2 teaches us that God scooped up a handful of earth, fashioned it into the shape of a man, breathed into that man the breath of life, and the man became a living soul. Earth represents us. Wind and fire are common biblical metaphors for the Holy Spirit. So when we mix earth, wind, and fire we get more than a 70s rock band, we get revival and renewal. But speaking of the rock band, Earth, Wind and Fire’s biggest hit was probably Shining Star. You remember any of the words? “Shining star for you to see / what your life can truly be.” Those words can apply to spiritual renewal. For when the wind and fire of the Holy Spirit falls upon earthly vessels like us, we can truly become what God wants us to be. So for the next several Sundays we’re going to be thinking together about spiritual renewal: what God does and what we can do to get ourselves in a position to receive it—Earth, Wind, and Fire.

It seems appropriate then that we begin the series with a song—a song of David, a psalmic prayer—Psalm 63. The superscription to the psalm describes it as “A psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah.” And David wasn’t out there on any vacation. This wasn’t a family camping trip or a fishing trip with the boys. He was running for his life from an angry, unstable King Saul. David was a man of vast ingenuity, cunning, and skill. But in this struggle he needed more than his own resources. Dip from that bucket long enough, and it will run dry. He needed something beyond himself. He needed God. Hear the word of the Lord ... (read the text).
I've seen it so much I know most of the dialogue, but I watched in December yet again: the classic film *A Christmas Story*. The story of a little boy named Ralphie in post-war Indiana, who, more than anything, wants a BB gun for Christmas. And not just any BB gun, but the “holly grail of Christmas gifts”—a Red Ryder 200 Shot Range Model Air Rifle with a compass in the stock. He salivates over it as he sees it in a store window. He dreams about it. He’s obsessed with it. And he’s got to have it. He works every angle he can to get it. He strategically slips an ad for the gun in his mother’s favorite magazine. She won’t hear of it. “You’ll put your eye out,” she says. He writes passionately about his desire for the BB gun in a school theme entitled “What I Want for Christmas.” “You’ll put your eye out,” his teacher wrote. Next he tries Santa at the big downtown department store. No sympathy here either—Santa’s response: “You’ll put your eye out, kid.” Ralphie pretty much resigns himself to the fact that he won’t get the one gift he wants most of all, the mother of all Christmas gifts, a Red Ryder 200 Shot Range Model Air Rifle with a compass in the stock.

He opens his gifts on Christmas morning. He tries to be brave and grateful for what he receives in spite of his terrible grief over not getting the present he wants most of all. And then, when it looks like every present is open, Ralphie’s dad points out another present hidden in the corner behind the desk. You guessed it. It was the BB gun. Nothing could contain Ralphie’s joy and he couldn’t wait to try it out. He took it outside, taped it up on a metal sign, aimed, fired, and the BB ricocheted, hit him in the glasses, and darn near put his eye out. But as Christmas day comes to an end, Ralphie is sleeping in his bed with his Red Ryder cradled in his arm. No Christmas gift before or since ever meant as much to him as this one.

Ever wanted anything that bad? So bad you dreamed of it, ached for it, schemed for it, worked for it, lived for it? A particular job maybe? A certain kind of car? A million bucks? The man or woman of your dreams? A baby to fill your empty arms? A true friend? How about God? Do you want God? Do you thirst for Him, long for Him, like you would long for water in a dry and barren land? Are you thirsty for God?
**David was bone-thirsty for God.** On the run from a jealous King Saul who wanted him dead, David was hiding in the wilderness. And this wilderness is not like some rain forest in Brazil or some shady hillside here in the Ouachitas. This wilderness is a desert—a barren, dry, deserted place—a good place to hide out. And that’s what David was doing: moving from cave to crag, trying to stay one step ahead of Saul and his posse. David had committed no crimes. Saul had no good reason to track him down. But Saul was jealous of David’s popularity. Saul was on the warpath. God was taking the kingdom away from Saul and giving it to David. And though David was in no hurry to assume the throne, Saul was desperate to keep power. Power, control, glory, popularity—those were the things for which Saul thirsted.

David thirsted for God. Listen to the verbs in v. 1: “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” That’s extreme language. This prayer is no Sunday drive in the country; it’s an ambulance ride. It’s intense ... passionate ... desperate. David thirsted for God. Without a tall cool drink of God, David believed he would wither and die. David was thirsty for God. It’s that thirst and longing for God that can get us in a position for renewal. We have to want God more than we want anything else.

That’s where David was. Not Saul. Saul wanted David’s life. In fact, Saul wanted David’s life more than David did. In v. 3 David prayed, “Because your steadfast love is better than life.” David wanted God even more than his own life. Live or die, David knew he rested in the love of God, and that was good enough for him. Paul expressed a similar sentiment to the Philippians: “For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). David wanted God more than he wanted life or deliverance or anything else. That’s why even in the physical barrenness of this desert wilderness, David was spiritually renewed and could sing God’s praises in his awful circumstances:

Listen to v. 4:
“I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands.”

Listen to v. 5:
“My mouth will praise you with joyful lips.”

And v. 7:
“For you have been my help, 
and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.”

David wanted God and David got God. And that was enough: “My soul will be satisfied,” wrote David, “with fat and rich food” (v. 5a). God’s not chopped liver, you know. God’s not a tossed salad and a can of Slim Fast. God is caviar and rib-eye, loaded baked potato and cherries jubilee. Rich food. Fat food. Lots of substance. Lots of calories. Plenty enough to satisfy and fill you up. That’s why David found renewal in the desert—a satisfied life when his life was in danger. Satisfaction in spite of circumstances that were less than ideal. A banquet in a barren land. That’s what David had because David wanted God more than anything else. David wasn’t so much looking for a way out. He was looking for God.

III

And David found God because he knew that God was seeking him first. David was oriented toward God, had a heart tuned to look for God, had eyes trained to see God. Sometimes we see so little Christian growth and so little renewal in our lives because we don’t have a God-orientation. We may have God in our life but we’d be hard-pressed to say God is our life—the core of it, the meaning of it, the blessing and the sustenance of it. In the novel, The Sparrow, the character Anne Edwards is on a search for God, and she notices how few seem to be able to recognize God when they find Him. She says:

God was at Sinai and within weeks, people were dancing in front of a golden calf. God walked in Jerusalem and days later, folks nailed him up and then went back to work. Faced with the Divine, people took refuge in the banal, as though answering a cosmic multiple-choice question: If you saw a burning bush, would you (a) call 911, (b) get the hot dogs, or (c) recognize God?1

Those who are thirsty for God will recognize God. They will find God when they search for Him and discover that God was there first—searching, waiting for them. David discovered this.

And he discovered this in a desert. Our lives get so cluttered and distracted it sometimes takes a desert for us to recognize our need for God. Some of you remember the great power outage of 2000 here in Hot Springs. A wicked ice storm left most of the city without power for days. We were out for five days at our house. This was the week between Christmas and New Year’s Day. Our kids were home from college. And with no power to provide television or video games, we were put in a position to entertain ourselves with ourselves. We played board games and card games in the miserable cold. We enjoyed more conversation and enjoyed one another more than we would have or could have in front of a blaring TV or if we’d scattered in different directions with our own friends doing our own things. We hunkered down like that for two days and two nights … until my son decided to head back to Jonesboro because they had power there. (His mama didn’t raise no fool.) But out of a no-electricity desert came a new thirst and appreciation for relationships that mean a lot to us.

Sometimes spiritual revival grows in the hot, dry sand of a spiritual desert—places or circumstances that clear the clutter of our God-evading lives and stir in us a parched-throat thirst for relationship with God, a recognition of just how much we need God. Sometimes we have to lose our power before we recognize where our power really comes from. When we find ourselves in some spiritual desert, we discover that all we have is God. Mother Teresa once said, “You’ll never know Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you got.” For some of us renewal may require a desert of some kind that helps us thirst for God more than anything else.

That’s true for the individual and that’s true for the church. More than a building, more than great activities, more than the best youth group or preaching or music in town, churches need to want God—to long for Him, to hunger and thirst for Him. Great churches aren’t built around great facilities, ministers, and programs. Great churches are built around God—the Triune God: God the Father who calls us into being; God the Son who is our head; and God the Spirit who is our power and vitality. Buildings won’t bring revival. Staff members won’t bring revival. New activities won’t bring revival. Only God can bring revival. He holds the matches that can light the fire of renewal and revival in this place. But God won’t strike match one unless we want Him more than anything else.
God wants us to want Him. Not on our own terms either, but on God’s terms. Most of us want the benefits of God—peace, forgiveness, joy, grace. Most of us want God’s benefits—just enough to make us comfortable but not enough to make us committed. We want God’s benefits. But how much do we want God? God can be a little pushy, you know. You invite God to be at the center of your life and He starts messing with you. God demands the wheel of your life. God sets the direction, the course, the journey. God is, after all, God—Lord, boss, master, King of the universe, CEO of the world, CEO of your life.

God may take you into deserts you would never choose for yourself. But in time, you will be glad God did what God did. Like David, you’ll discover a satisfaction that is greater and deeper than anything money can buy or power can possess or ease can provide. As many have pointed out across the ages, there is a God-shaped void in the heart of every person. And though we try to cram it full of material things, shallow relationships, and delusions of grandeur, all that stuff turns out to be fool’s gold. It looks appealing. It sounds great. But it does not lead to satisfaction because it cannot fill the God-shaped void in our hearts. Only God can fill the void. And God stands ready to fill that void if we will earnestly seek Him, fainting for Him, thirsting for Him. That’s where lasting satisfaction is found—when we let God be God in our lives, when we let Him run the show, call the shots, direct our path, slake our thirst. Do you thirst like this for God?

V

Here are some practical steps we can take to help whet our thirst.

We can begin with an honest evaluation of our lives, taking a good hard look at our desires, our sins, our priorities, our habits, our entertainment, and our relationships. What in your life suppresses your God-thirst? What whets it? Or to put it another way: what in your life leads you away from God, and what draws you closer to God? Hard questions and honest answers help us clear the clutter that suppresses our thirst for God.

Practicing personal spiritual disciplines helps too. Making time for God through Scripture and prayer are essential. In a detailed study of how Christians grow deeper in their faith, researchers at Willow Creek Church
found that no matter where a person was on the spiritual growth continuum, Scripture and prayer were the staples of continued growth. How can we grow in our thirst for God if we do little more than give him a passing nod on Sunday or cry out to Him only when we’re in trouble?

Another discipline that helps some believers whet their thirst for God is fasting—going without food or some other prop in our life for a specific time for spiritual purposes. We’re challenging the church to do that one day a week (you choose the day) either as individuals or in small groups from today through March 22. There are guideline handouts that can help you with this in the foyer. The disciplines are important. The history of our faith makes that crystal clear. Practice some personal disciplines so that you can make some space for God to work in your life and so you can pay attention to what God is doing.

Community prayer is also helpful in the process of renewal. Praying with and for one another. Praying in groups. Seeking God’s face. Seeking God’s will. Praying together. Community prayer reminds us that we don’t take this journey alone—that we need the encouragement and prayers of others to get down the road. Would you make prayer for renewal part of every small group meeting these next few weeks—Connect Groups, women’s groups, men’s groups, prayer groups? Like James wrote in his epistle: “You have not because you do not ask” (Js. 4:2). Let’s ask. Praying together and asking God to bring renewal is vital.

And so is God-conversation. We tend to talk about the things that are interesting and important to us. Why is it that in most any Sunday School class there will be much more talk about sports and weather and people than about God? I want to challenge Sunday School classes and other small groups to invite conversation each week about what God is doing in the lives of your class members. Where is God at work in your life? What might He be up to? Is He answering prayers? Does He seem hidden? Talk about God and his work in our lives. Do it in your small groups and do it with other Christian friends through the week. This whets our thirst for God. It encourages us that what God is doing for others He can do for us too.

While we can’t manufacture renewal and revival, we can plow the soil and break the ground so that it can grow more readily and that’s what these simple practices are designed to do.
VI

But it all comes back to desire. In 1984, I had surgery to remove a king-size kidney stone. Dr. Freiden expected the surgery to be routine, but they ran into some complications that kept me in the operating room for about five hours. My recovery was slow. And when I finally came to my senses I was desperate for some water. My mouth was dry as twenty-year old paint. The anesthetic and other drugs put a nasty taste in my mouth. I was desperate for water—just a sip even. But no water for me. "Could I at least have some ice chips?" I begged. And Nurse Ratchet said, "Never! No ice chips for you!" Nothing by mouth. For five days, nothing by mouth. I was hooked to an IV, but I was dying with thirst. And I can't tell you how much worse I felt when the nurse would come into the room and say to my roommate: "Why Mr. Johnson, you're not drinking enough water. Let me pour you some more." And then I heard a noise I would hate for a few days, the gurgling, bubbling, rattling sound of water and ice pouring into a cup. I would watch that cool, clear liquid roll out of the pitcher and into the cup, and I would lick my dry, parched lips with a longing that I hadn't felt before or since. I longed for some water—something wet, something cool, something refreshing to drink. Oh to let such nectar cross my lips, to roll it around in my mouth, and to gently swallow it down. Talk about a taste of heaven! I ached for it.

I wish I ached for God that way. I wish you did too ... because when we finally thirst for God that much, renewal will not be far behind.

Preached: February 1, 2015  
First Baptist Church, Hot Springs, AR  
John Scott McCallum II