Last week Pastor Rachel closed out our series “In Christ,” which looked through roughly the first half of Ephesians. And I figured after nine straight weeks of heavy doctrine, it might be a good time to change things up a bit, but there’s a lot of powerful stuff in the rest of the letter. So an open invitation, if you have any questions about anything you come across in the rest of Ephesians, let’s talk more.

But today we begin a new sermon series called “Thirst.” And the reason it’s called “Thirst” is because for the next seven weeks we’ll be exploring what I would say is an inner restlessness at the core of the human heart that no matter how hard we might try to ignore it, it’s always there, unless that “thirst” is quenched, so to speak, by the Lord himself. So we’ll be asking, why do we thirst for the Lord? What is it about us that longs for a connection that only he can satisfy?

So, kind of by definition, we will be talking about a decidedly spiritual thirst, where it comes from, what it means about us, what it means about God. But alongside that spiritual thirst, we’ll be taking time as well to talk about how even the most spiritual longing can have very practical, tangible meaning for the church today.

And we start today, by looking at a song in Scripture that is all about one’s sense of separation from the Lord, and the unrest that separation causes. Will you pray with me?

_Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen._

“Oh that I might rest in you! Oh! That you would enter into my heart and inebriate it, that I may forget my ills, and embrace you, my sole good. What are you to me? In your pity, teach me to utter it…. Oh for your mercies’ sake, tell me, O Lord my God, what you are unto me. Say unto my soul, I am your salvation. So speak, that I may hear. Behold, Lord, my heart is before you; open you the ears thereof, and say unto my soul, I am your salvation. After this voice let me haste, and take hold on you. Hide not your face from me. Let me die—lest I die—only let me see your face.”

Those words might sound like Scripture, but they aren’t. They’re instead a part of a work known as _The Confessions_ by an early church leader named Augustine, kind of a theological autobiography. We’ll talk more about Augustine in a little bit, but for now just know that much of it is a prayer, directed to God, praying that God would make himself known, that God would reveal himself, that this humble petitioner would come to see his face.

Again he writes, “Oh that I might rest in you! Oh! That you would enter into my heart and inebriate it, that I may forget my ills, and embrace you, my sole good,” and then later, “Behold, Lord, my heart is before you; open you the ears thereof, and say unto my soul, I am your salvation. After this voice let me haste, and take hold on you. Hide not your face from me. Let me die—lest I die—only let me see your face.”
He writes as a man who has known all too well what it means to feel distant from the Lord, to feel separated from him, and as a result to know the longing, the relentless uneasiness that comes when we are distant from God and from his peace.

It’s the same kind of longing we find in the psalm. Its singer writes, “As a deer longs for flowing streams so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” Maybe some of you have heard these verses before, maybe some of you haven’t. But whether you’ve heard this for the first or five-hundredth time, have you ever stopped to think what it means for our soul to long for something, what it means for our soul to thirst for something or someone?

Surely, we all have some idea what it means to be thirsty at one point or another, like on a hot, summer day. It’s pretty straightforward. Water is something we need, it’s vital to sustaining life, and if we don’t have enough of it, our bodies let us know. But is that all this is talking about?

The word here for “longs,” or other translations have “as a deer pants,” is in fact only used in three instances in all of Scripture. In this verse twice, and then in one other verse in the prophet Joel. And it’d good for us to consider that other one too. Joel 1:20 says, “Even the wild animals cry to you because the watercourses are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness.” That word “cry” in this case is the same word used for “longs” in Psalm 42. It’s an image of an animal that has lost all access to water and food and is crying out in fear and desperation.

Here’s why that’s important. Knowing what that word means, or at least how it is used, tells us just how serious a longing this psalm is talking about. Because when we read about a deer longing for flowing streams, we might be tempted to think of a pretty forest meadow, and Bambi’s strolling through the flowers and the trees, and Bambi realizes, “I haven’t had a drink in a little bit. Wouldn’t a flowing stream be nice about now?” Then Bambi goes over to a babbling brook, laps up a few sips, says “Ahh,” and then moves along his merry way with all his forest animal friends.

That’s not what this psalm is talking about when it says a deer longs for flowing streams. What this psalm is talking about is if the forests have all burned down, and all the streams have dried up, and Bambi hasn’t had water to drink or food to eat for three days. That’s what the psalm is talking about.

I’m not so sure I’ve ever known that kind of physical thirst, the kind that becomes so all-consuming that nothing else matters until you have satisfied this need for water. It’s the kind that you see in cartoons, where Wile E. Coyote or someone is stuck in the middle of the desert for a long long time, and he sees in the distance a glistening pool and fountain filled with clear, cool water. So, he rushes to it and goes and swims around in it, drinking his fill, only to realize that because he was so thirsty and desperate, he was hallucinating the whole thing and he’s really just been crawling over cacti inhaling gulps of sand. That is a kind of physical thirst that I have never known, but that is the kind of longing the psalm is talking about when it says, “As a deer longs for flowing streams,” and more importantly, that is the kind of longing the psalm is talking about when it says, “so my soul longs for you, O God.”

It makes me wonder. If we’re honest with ourselves, have we ever considered the Lord in those terms, I mean in terms of an all-consuming thirst and longing? I’m sure some of us have, but I’m sure others of us, if we’re honest with ourselves, have never felt a longing like that at all when it comes to God. And I’m sure still others of us maybe could remember a time when we
did have that passion, that longing for God, but we don’t feel it anymore. Something’s been lost, and you’re not really sure what it is.

As we keep reading, we find that this psalm isn’t just speaking about a longing for God that exists in a vacuum, but it’s a longing for God that at one point in time did know satisfaction. Read how it describes it in v. 4: “These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival. Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God. My soul is cast down with me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.”

Here’s what all that is describing. This singer—and some have said this is David, but the psalm doesn’t specify, so we’ll just say “the singer”—this singer was once in the thick of things, leading processions of worship and praise to the house of God, right there in the thick of the presence of God, there was a nearness, an intimacy, a joy that this singer knew, but no longer. Now the singer is far off in the land of Jordan and Hermon. No longer near. No longer feels the presence of God. “Why are you cast down, O my soul, why are you disquieted within me?”

And it makes me wonder. If we’re honest with ourselves, how many of us have asked that same question. “Why are you cast down, O my soul, why are you disquieted within me?” I wonder how many of us can remember a time when God felt near, a happier time, a more peaceful time, a time when faith came more easily, but no longer, not now. Now we just ask, “Why are you cast down, O my soul? Why are you disquieted within me?”

I know I’ve felt that at times. I can remember times, especially in my youth, when faith felt so alive and new and vibrant and God felt so immediately present, I felt like I could reach out and touch him. But it feels different now. Not that it’s lesser, just for me at least, steadier. The highs aren’t so high, nor the lows so low, just steadier.

There are plenty of studies out there on the so-called “stages of faith,” and they all have their own nomenclature, but a common tale is some combination of the joy and simplicity of faith in younger years, or the passion and vibrancy of faith at a moment of new realization or conversion, but as life goes on the simplicity of faith becomes more difficult to hold on to when faced with life’s complexities and challenges, and the passion of faith can fade as the newness wears off. And for many of us, we find ourselves remembering those times long past, and it pains us, makes us feel as if we’ve lost something. It’d be easier if we could just shake loose of it, but something won’t let us.

Augustine, the one who wrote his Confessions that we read from a little bit ago, couldn’t shake loose of it. Though he became a leader in the church in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, a good part of his early life was spent running away from faith. Hailed from a city called Hippo in northern Africa, in what is today the country of Algeria. His mother was a devout Christian who raised him in the faith, but later in his adolescence, he rejected it, enticed by other philosophies and a more sensual lifestyle. A gifted student, he started to rise up the ranks, but he confessed that something was always missing, something was always lacking, something in the core of him.

Some time later, as his studies took him to Italy, to the city of Milan, he encountered a bishop there named Ambrose. It was during his time in Milan that he came to know this bishop not just as a talented orator (which was why he had gone there in the first place) or as a well-studied conversation partner, but as a friend, a compassionate voice and mentor.
And friends, how important it was then, and how important it remains to this day, that the
church be a place where struggling, hurting, questioning souls can come and be welcomed with
compassion and friendship. Whether we’re talking about children, about adolescents, about
young adults like Augustine was, or about adults of any age for that matter, the church must be a
place—and must be supported to be a place—where this discipleship, mentorship, and all the
messy questions and doubt that come with it are nurtured patiently and allowed to grow.

Several years later, Augustine returned to the Christian faith, being baptized by Ambrose.
Later on, when he composed his *Confessions* which in part described this conversion, in the
opening sentences he wrote these now well-known words, and in minute we’ll close with these
words in prayer, just hearing them this week but in later weeks we’ll pray them together. He
writes: “You [addressing God] have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they
find their rest in you.” The restlessness, the uneasiness, the longing, he had felt for much of his
life, had found its peace.

Friends, what if I told you that this uneasiness, this restlessness, can be a very, very good
thing?

V. 7 of our psalm for today reads, “Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all
your waves and your billows have gone over me.” And I think that most apparent meaning of
those words is that it’s talking about a storm at sea, about thunder, about waves, that the depths
of the sea call to each other, deep calls to deep. God, simply, is overwhelming.

But I think there’s something else going on here too. I think it’s also a promise, because
the verse right after it is so comforting, v. 8: “By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and
at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.” It’s a promise that God speaks into
the very depths of our hearts or our souls or our minds or whatever you want to call it. Deep calls
to deep, and within all of us are depths and longings that can only be answered by the depths of
God.

We can try to offer other answers, try to fill our hearts with other things like Augustine
did, whether it be things that make us feel good or courses of study or worldviews that make us
feel smarter. We can try all those things. But there will always be a longing, a thirst, always
something missing down in the depths.

Friends, in the coming weeks, we will be looking more and more what it could mean for
us to thirst for God, to look for God, to long for God, but one thing will remain constant: that this
longing comes from the very core of our being, and if we try to satisfy it with something else,
it’ll only leave us asking, “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” Friends, seek out the flowing
streams, the place where God’s depths call to yours, that you might finally know rest.