

Grounded: Water

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, September 14, 2025, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Exodus 17:1-7](#) and [John 4:5-30](#)

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I admit that I can totally nerd out and I'm going to start this sermon a little nerdlly. (Is "nerdlly" and adverb? If not, it should be.)

On Friday, I was listening to a video blog¹ I follow about some news from the week that did not catch my attention. During the past week, NASA announced and released a paper that said Perseverance, the NASA rover on Mars, has detected some things on the surface of Mars that we do not know how to explain without there having been life on Mars. Hank Green, the vlogger, pointed out, "that's very different from saying that there *was* definitely life on Mars, and very, very different from saying there *is* currently life on Mars."² And still, the nerdy part of my psyche is pretty psyched by this announcement.

So here's my incredibly over simplified explanation of what's happening. Perseverance was analyzing some rocks it collected from a river delta that once fed into a Marcian lake. These rocks were made from mud spreading out, getting compressed, etc., much like a sedimentary rock forms on Earth. These rocks have spots, and these spots are what made this an exciting rock, because they suggest that something was going on as the mud stretch out. So, NASA scientists used the Perseverance laboratory to give it all a closer look.

They found some surprising molecular structures, surprising because heat was needed to create them, and a known potential source of that heat could be biology. There's no evidence that this was a hot place geologically, nor that these were formed somewhere else and were deposited there, so NASA scientists are asking, was it biology, or was it a chemistry that we don't know about (given that there's a lot about Martian chemistry that we don't know about)?

Listening to the video again, the thing I was surprised Hank Green didn't mention is the connection between water and life. One of the reasons it is worth considering that biology might be the cause of these molecular deposits is that this rock formed in a river delta, which means there was water there. And we know that life on Earth would not exist without water. "Every cell in our body, every plant that grows, and every animal that roams this Earth depends on water to survive. The human body, for example, is composed of roughly 60% water, and every metabolic process in our cells relies on water."³

Water, a universal solvent, carries nutrients and gases (including oxygen) to the cells of our bodies and waste away from our cells (as it does for all animals). Water enables

¹ Hank Green, "This Might Actually Be Happening," *vlogbrothers*, <https://youtu.be/iWuFBZw90lk> (posted and accessed 12 September 2025).

² *Ibid.*

³ Muhammad Tuhin, "Could Life Exist Without Water?" *Science News Today*, <https://www.sciencenewstoday.org/could-life-exist-without-water> (posted 6 May 2025; accessed 13 September 2025).

our bodies to regulate their temperatures. Water supports the chemical reactions that enable bodies to get nutrients out of what animals eat, just as it supports chemical reactions for plants the get minerals from soils and for photosynthesis to work. Water even helps cells keep their shape; plants wouldn't stand up without water.⁴

When the first peoples of Americas tell the rest of the world that "Water is life," they are stating a scientific fact.

Is there any wonder that, when there was no water to drink, the Hebrews turned on Moses? There he was, leading these formerly enslaved kinspeople through the wilderness. There he was, trying his best to help them form into a community as he led them to a land that he believed was where God wanted them to settle. And they ran out of water.

In chapter 16 of Exodus, the issue was food. They needed sustenance and God provided them with manna and quail to eat. Here in chapter 17, the issue is water. One can survive with minimal food for weeks. One can survive without water for mere days.

I've never been desperately hungry or thirsty. Still, I imagine that the greatest feeling of abandonment could well come from a deep thirst. I do know what it's like to be out at the hottest time of the day thirsty. And I know how wonderful that first sip of cool water feels on the lips and the tongue. I know how glorious it feels as that first sip of cool water descends the throat and enters the stomach.

Though John is a good storyteller, I think the story would be more alive for me if he told us about his characters' thirst. It's noon, the sun is overhead, and Jesus is by the well with no way to get water out. A woman comes to draw water for herself (and, presumably, for her household). Jesus asks her for water, and she verbally jousts with him. "Oh, you'll share my water vessel when you're thirsty, but are you going to start being all judgmental against me as soon as your thirst is quenched?" Their little contest of words goes several more rounds until this unnamed woman goes back into town to talk to her friends about this stranger, leaving behind her water jar.

I like that John includes that little detail – the leaving of the water jar. Water is life. She needed that water jar to bring water home on a daily basis. Leaving it behind would deprive her and her household of water. I wonder what she was drinking that caused her to leave her water jar behind.

Maybe I'm reading too much into John's rich metaphors. Still, there are contrast in this story that strikes me. Jesus shows up without a water jar, without a bucket, without a way to capture and contain the water from the well. The woman shows up with her water jar, with her tool for capturing and containing the water. Presumably, the well has tapped into an aquifer that has supplied the well with water for generations. There's a reason the residents of this town say the well goes back to the time of Jacob. So the water isn't technically contain, the way it would be in a cistern. Still, the water has the appearance of being contained within the walls of the well.

⁴ *Ibid.*

These images of contained, controlled water are so different from the water Jesus offers the woman. “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

In the Hebrew scriptures, “living water” is water that is flowing, as in a stream or as water flowing from a spring without being pumped or lifted. It is water that isn’t contained. I think John is contrasting the idea of a bucket of water, a static vessel that holds a finite amount of water, and a spring of water gushing up, uncontained, flowing freely. It seems to me that by the end of the story, the woman has found in Jesus a source of water for a thirst that isn’t purely physical. And it seems to me that, when she goes back into town to tell her neighbors about Jesus that she has become not a static vessel of that water. A better description might be that she has become a channel of that water, that she has become the streambed through which that water flows.

Human beings are thirsty creatures. There’s an American adage, “Whiskey is for drinking and water is for fighting.” Though often attributed to Mark Twain, it probably originated half a century or more after he died.⁵ Regardless of its origins, there’s definitely some truth to it. We fight, debate, and legislate water rights. We attempt to bend water to our will. We try to contain it and control it. We dam it up to make electricity, for irrigation, and to keep areas downstream from flooding.

Meanwhile, global water supplies are threatened. Back in July, ProPublica reported on the crisis. “As the planet gets hotter and its reservoirs shrink and its glaciers melt, people have increasingly drilled into a largely ungoverned, invisible cache of fresh water: the vast, hidden pools found deep underground,” the article says.

“Now, a new study that examines the world’s total supply of fresh water – accounting for its rivers and rain, ice and aquifers together – warns that Earth’s most essential resource is quickly disappearing, signaling what the paper’s authors describe as ‘a critical, emerging threat to humanity.’ The landmasses of the planet are drying. In most places there is less precipitation even as moisture evaporates from the soil faster. More than anything, Earth is being slowly dehydrated by the unmitigated mining of groundwater, which underlies vast proportions of every continent. Nearly 6 billion people, or three quarters of humanity, live in the 101 countries that the study identified as confronting a net decline in water supply – portending enormous challenges for food production and a heightening risk of conflict and instability.”⁶

I’ll stop reading from the article there because my goal is not to depress you. I’ll just say that humans need to be better stewards of water. Climate change is making droughts and flooding more ferocious, so every fraction of a degree we keep the planet from heating will make a difference. And I think we need to end the commodification of water. Water is not ours to hoard, dam-up, divide, or capitalize. That’s why I was so delighted when last

⁵ “Quote Origin: Whiskey Is for Drinking; Water Is for Fighting,” *Quote Investigator*, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/06/03/whiskey-water/> (posted 3 June 2013; accessed 13 September 2025).

⁶ Abrahm Lustgarten, “The Drying Planet,” *ProPublica*, <https://www.propublica.org/article/water-aquifers-groundwater-rising-ocean-levels> (posted 25 July 2025; accessed 13 September 2025).

month “a group of Indigenous teenagers became the first people in 100 years to paddle all 310 miles of the newly undammed Klamath River.”⁷

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well reminds us that all creation thirsts, and not only for water. As followers of the One who gives living water, we are to share that water. And I think we would do well not to think of ourselves as buckets or water jars. Rather, let’s be channels. Let’s be living waterways that help distribute the life-giving abundance meant for all creation.

So, here are some sense practices that might help you keep this calling in mind.

Touch some water. Getting to living water can be hard in suburban California, so if you can’t touch the water flowing in a stream or the water of the ocean, touch the water in a bowl at home. Notice how it feels on your skin. Pay attention to its temperature. Notice the emotions the touch of water evokes in you.

Taste some water. Or drink some water and notice the lack of taste.

Smell some water – and not only the water from your sink. If you can get to a stream or a lake, breath in through your nose and notice what it smells like. Walk along the shoreline at low tide and notice the smells, or by a pool and notice the chlorine smells. I like walking by the holding ponds in the Niles Community Park at different seasons and noticing how the smells change.

Hear the water. As your shower or bath water warms up, pause to listen to it. If you go by a fountain that running, listen to it. Listen to the water coming out the end of a hose.

See the water. Look for water, in the stream and in the kitchen sink. And look for water in the unexpected places – in the humidity of your own breath, in the moisture of the soil.

God calls us to be channels, living waterways that distribute the gift of water and the many gifts it represents.

Amen.

⁷ San Francisco Chronicle post on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/SFChronicle/posts/pfbid029PwdNR2WetbE8ao9VijxVc8Hj4f1M6QzWqNohLasdLgzrZW6Ymbj7oEViYxe3yyxl> (posted and accessed 29 August 2025).