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Water—God’s precious gift—Handle with care!

Introduction

Around the world, many people are familiar with the TV show, “Who wants to be a millionaire?” Imagine that you, the reader of this article, are a candidate today. But today’s show will have a slightly different format. Today’s questions pertain to one theme only, namely **water**.

And, today’s questions are:

How long can a person survive without water?

1. Approx. one day
2. Approx. three days
3. Approx. one week
4. Approx. one month

How much of the water on earth is fresh water?

1. 2.53%
2. 9.76%
3. 16.88%
4. 34.21%

Which area uses the largest amount of water?

1. Industry
2. Private households
3. Navy
4. Agriculture

Could you answer these questions?

If not, then hopefully you are not frustrated by now but, rather, curious to learn more about the special element *water*, a precious part of God's creation, closely connected with the Bible and Christian spiritual life and nowadays, highly endangered.

Amazing facts and figures

Only 2.53% of the water on earth is fresh water of which only a part is available to human beings. Much of it is bound in glacier ice, polar caps and deep ground-water occurrences and hence inaccessible.

Humans will die after approximately three days without any intake of liquids.

On average, the agricultural sector uses the most water (approx. 70%), followed by industry (approx. 20%) and private households (approx. 10%).

Problems

Water means life. Humans, animals, plants—they all depend on sufficient access to water. But water is not distributed equitably and the current way of consuming water causes serious problems and has dangerous consequences.

Changing eating habits—especially in the global North (increased consumption of meat, constant availability of exotic products)—force farmers in the global South to use large amounts of water for irrigation to increase agricultural production. As a result, water resources run dry and desertification accelerates. Women and girls, often predominantly responsible for their families' water supply, miss school because they need more and more time to procure water for the household.

The use of fertilizers—necessary in an intensive agricultural production—toxic industrial by-products, aggressive cleaning agents and the inadequate disposal of medicaments in private households lead to the contamination of water reservoirs. Globally, approximately 900 million people lack access to clean drinking water and, in the global South, approximately 2.2 million die annually because they are forced to drink polluted water.

Water is wasted by ineffective irrigation systems in which liters of water trickle away without having being used. In private households, taps are not immediately turned off and drinking water is used for gardening. All this can lead to serious water shortages.

Climate change, predominantly caused by the highly industrialized countries, has led to melting glaciers and polar caps and elevated ocean levels. Salt water intrudes river deltas and spoils agricultural products leading to hunger and finally migration.

We can observe an increase in the number of conflicts around water such as the one between Mexico and the USA over the use of the water of the Rio Grande. In Kenya, large

areas are used for the water-intensive production of flowers for European markets. Cattle breeders lose access to their traditional water resources resulting in conflict between the two interests groups.

In the global South, the privatization of water is endangering poor people's access to water since private commercial companies cut off water supplies from those who cannot afford to pay. Also in the global North the privatization of water can lead to problems such as increasing prices, poor maintenance standards and a lack of transparency regarding pricing politics and monopolism.¹

Theological approaches

Several biblical stories reflect on the need for water and the hard work involved in procuring it. These stories show us that conflicts around water are not a new phenomenon. The necessity of handling the precious element with care is underlined since water is a God's gift to all people.

In Genesis 26:17-22 we read about Isaac and the cattle-breeder from Gerar's struggle over water. In the arid areas of the orient, water is scarce leading to constant competition over water. But this story does not only refer to the potential conflict but also points to a possible solution. Isaac and the cattle-breeder only fight over the first two wells of spring water but not the third one. It remains unclear why the third well does not give rise to conflict but it may well be that Isaac and the cattle-breeder have found a solution for peaceful cooperation. And this has to do with God's will to provide water for all people and not only for some. The name of the third well, Rehobot, which means wideness, reflects this. God's concept of justice includes fullness for everybody and hence we as people of God are asked to take care of this concept, also in terms of access to water.²

When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:7-14) the need for water is highlighted. It is hot, Jesus needs to drink and the woman needs to draw water for her household. The woman is used to collecting water and therefore talks to Jesus about how best to draw water. Water is precious in this area and it is a matter of hospitality to offer it. But it is also connected with conflict and people from different sides of the conflict, such as the Samaritans and people from Judea for instance, do not drink water together.

¹ www.unesco.de/weltwasserbericht4_kernaussagen.html. Frank Kürschner-Pelkmann, *Das Wasserbuch. Kultur Religion Gesellschaft Wirtschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Otto Lembeck, 2005), 347-55; 262-67.

² Ecumenical Water Network, Seven weeks for water 2013, Week 3, Afrayem Elorshalimy, *Wells of Quarrel – Space for Peace* on www.oikoumene.org/en/activities/ewn-home.html.

The story furthermore highlights the spiritual dimension of water. Jesus is the one who offers living water; faith in him ends all thirst.

The link between spirituality and people's everyday needs in this story may encourage people today to become involved in working toward an equitable distribution of water.³

A call for action

Particularly in the Northern and Western parts of the world, but also in the high industrialized centers of the South, private persons can easily contribute to an enhancement of the global water situation. Reduced consumption of meat and an increased focus on regional and seasonal products alleviate pressure on global agricultural markets. Why not decorate churches with flowers from own gardens instead of buying those that are produced in arid areas requiring large amounts of water? The use of mild cleaning agents and an adequate disposal of medicine and other waste help to maintain the quality of natural water reservoirs. Switching off lights after leaving rooms, avoiding the stand-by-mode of modern technical devices, effective heaters and canopies for cooling houses are basic requirements for saving energy and contributing to reducing climate damage. Water can be saved by using rainwater for flowers and gardens, by installing a stop-function in toilet-tanks and by taking a shower instead of a bath.

The European Union is striving toward the privatization of water. People can become actively involved in campaigns to prevent this. Signing petitions and awareness raising are small but effective steps.⁴ Many people are already doing a lot to improve the global water situation. The biblical word can be an encouraging guideline for this.

The Lutheran World Federation is a member of the Ecumenical Water Network, <http://water.oikoumene.org/en>

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³ Messi Henore, 'In Christ, our Natural Element', in World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Judi Fisher (ed.), *Water: God's Gift for Life. Ecumenical Reflections* (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 2006), 53-54.

⁴ www.right2water.eu, accessed 4th April 2013.