

Parched: The quest for water

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We usually don't think about water unless we're thirsty, or unless we're enduring a flood or a drought. Water has been very much on the minds of people in Georgia and other southeastern states, which have experienced the worst drought in a hundred years. Without significant rain, the water supply for Atlanta (Lake Lanier) could run out in the next three to nine months. Georgia governor Sonny Perdue hosted a prayer service at the state capitol in November to petition God to send rain.

The Southeast is not the only area worried about water. Water tables all over the country have been dropping. Population growth over the past 50 years has been mostly in the South and the Southwest, some of the driest parts of the country, where water supplies have long been a concern. There has been a precipitous drop in the flow of water in the Colorado River, which brings water to about 30 million people in seven different states. The snowpack in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, which provides water for much of northern California, is at its lowest level in 20 years.

The quest for water is likely to be the source of major conflicts—international and domestic—in the 21st century the way the quest for oil was in the 20th century. Water issues strike everyone close to home. The Century's offices are near the shores of Lake Michigan, one of the Great Lakes, which contain about 20 percent of the world's surface fresh water. Politicians in the southern U.S. have already started eyeing ways to divert Great Lakes water to their regions. But leaders in the Midwest are poised to fend them off.

What will it mean, in the midst of such battles over water, to follow Jesus' command to give water to the thirsty? Part of the answer to the water crisis is a wiser use of water resources. We will need to do more, however, than just take shorter showers or turn off our lawn sprinklers. Fred Pearce points out in his book *When the Rivers Run Dry* that "agriculture is the biggest user of water and the biggest cause of water shortages." The foods we've come to expect at the grocery store rely on intensive watering. American households use about 40 gallons of water a day for drinking,

washing and cleaning. But it takes 130 gallons to grow a pound of wheat and 800 gallons to produce a hamburger.

To have a prayer of avoiding a water catastrophe, we need new policies on water use, more efficient means of irrigation and new habits of consumption.