

Rivers in the Bible

The Bible begins and ends with rivers. In Genesis 2, we're told that a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and to become four rivers that watered the earth. And when we fast-forward to Revelation 22, we see the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, nourishing the trees all along its banks, the trees whose leaves brought healing to the nations. The water of life springs up wherever heaven touches earth – the garden, the holy city – and flows all over the world.

This theme runs like a river throughout the whole Bible as a picture of God's life-giving work – Psalm 1, Isaiah 44, Ezekiel 47 – but listen to Zechariah 14, where the prophet describes the day of the Lord: "On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea... And the Lord will be king over all the earth."

Did you hear that? On the day the Lord becomes king, living water flows out of Jerusalem! And so when Jesus stands up and declares that He is the source from which every thirst will be quenched and from whom living waters would flow, and when John tells us that Jesus was talking about the Spirit who was to come after Jesus was glorified, we see that the river of life running through the entire Bible from beginning to end is a picture of the great work of the Triune God, promised by the Father, accomplished by the Son, and spreading all over the world through the Holy Spirit.

On the last day of the feast

That's the big-picture background to Jesus' announcement. But Jesus makes His great announcement in the middle of a specific context: on the last day of the Feast of Booths. This was the feast commemorating God's care for his people throughout their wilderness wanderings on the way to the promised land. As they wandered, they lived in booths, and so during the feast, Israel would make booths out of tree branches and live in them for a week, during which they would have other feasts and ceremonies.

One of these other ceremonies reminded the people of Israel of how God provided water for them in the wilderness – Numbers 20 tells the story of how Israel got water from a rock! But listen to how Israel combined the celebration of that miracle with the prophecy from Zechariah: During the week-long Feast of Booths, the priest would go each day and dip a golden water jar in the pool of Siloam, and would march in a joyful parade to the altar, where the water would be poured out, and picture this theme of water flowing out from a rock, from the altar, from the temple, to give life to the people. A major celebration during the Feast of Booths was this reminder that just as God gave water in the wilderness, so He promised to give water from the Holy City on the day when the Lord became king.

And with that on everyone's mind, and before everyone's face, on the great and final day of the feast, Jesus stands up and cries out: "If anyone thirsts, let him to come to me and drink!" Not "let him come to the pool of Siloam." Not "let him come to the temple." Let him come *to me*. I am the one who will quench your thirst! I am the rock from which the water of life flows!

What an incredible claim! This great feast, these great moments in Israel's life and history, all pointing to Jesus! And how absolutely insane unless it's true. It's an incredible claim that demands faith from those who hear it. And some people do believe, but some try to have Jesus arrested, because if this isn't true, it's blasphemy for Jesus to claim to be the place where heaven and earth meet, and the giver of living water. But listen to what he says:

If anyone thirsts

Jesus opens the invitation to anyone who thirsts, to anyone who wants to leave the wilderness behind, to anyone who longs to receive life from God. There is a simple way to know if Jesus' invitation is for you: are you thirsty? Do you long for communion with God? Are you ready for your restless wandering to be over? Then yes, this invitation is for you. And the invitation is simple:

Come to Jesus

Come to Jesus. Approach the rock with your mouth wide open, ready to drink your fill. Come to Jesus. And this "coming" means looking to Jesus to quench your thirst. By coming to Jesus and not looking elsewhere, you are acknowledging that the world doesn't satisfy you. You have a thirst that cannot be filled any other way! It's a **humble** step – you are acknowledging that you can satisfy your own thirst – your efforts, your career, your accomplishments, your relationships have all still left you thirsty. It's a **bold** step – can you imagine the first person who walked over to Jesus that day, the first person to say that what had just happened that week at the temple was not enough? But it's a **necessary** step – without this water, you will die of thirst, and this means that you can't appreciate Jesus from a distance. You need to *come*. You can't just *approve* of His message; you need to *respond* personally! And let me say this to those of you who were brought to Jesus by someone else – many of you, especially you younger children, were brought to Jesus, because your parents loved Jesus and because they loved you. At that time, it wasn't your decision. But now you cannot just sit back and coast. Now it is your decision – the daily decision of discipleship. You need to come to Jesus every day. And not just that...

And drink (believe)

You need to come to Jesus *and drink*. Maybe you thought this was obvious, but Jesus wanted to make sure you know that simply coming close is not enough. Judas was close to Jesus for years, and it didn't do him any good. So what does it mean to "drink" Jesus? Jesus explains – "whoever *believes* in me..." to drink of Jesus is to believe in Him, to personally commit yourself to Him in faith, and to put Jesus into your heart. Remember, when Moses hit the rock instead of

speaking to it in Numbers 20, it was because he didn't believe. And so don't just come within striking distance of Jesus; don't just come to church and do churchy things. You need to believe that Jesus is the one who satisfies your thirst, and you need to fill your mouth with Jesus in prayer, in reading and hearing his word, and in sharing in the Lord's supper, not just as mechanical actions, but as acts of devotion, actions that spring up from faith that Jesus is your life. Come to Jesus *and drink*.

Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water

And the promise is that when you drink Jesus, out of your heart will flow rivers of living water. Jesus' life will flow into you, but it will also overflow out of you. You won't just be a *container*, you'll be a *conduit*. The water of life will flow out through your life, through your actions and through your words. So look at your life: what's flowing out your fingertips and your lips? Is it Jesus? If you've been drinking Jesus, then Jesus will flow out of you. If you've been drinking something else, then something else will flow out.

But what does that even mean, "Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water?"

Spirit gives life

In verse 39, John clarifies for us: Jesus said this about the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gives life! When you drink deeply of Jesus, He fills you with His Holy Spirit, just as He did the saints on the day of Pentecost, and you are forever removed from the dry and thirsty desert of unbelief. The Spirit of God lives within you, and so there is spiritual life constantly springing up in your heart. Worry, anxiety, fear, dread, unbelief, hatred, malice, spite, bitterness – all these things dessicate and dry out your soul, but the Holy Spirit comes rushing over you like a flood, changing you from the inside out, so that out of your inner life, you bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Some of you can testify to the dramatic changes that happened in your life when you believed in Jesus and were filled with the Spirit. Others of you have simply grown and flourished over time, which only happens when you are planted by rivers of water; that is, you only grow in grace by the power of the Spirit. When you came to Jesus, He gave you His Spirit, and your heart was transformed from a dry desert into a rushing river of grace.

Future promise

At the time that Jesus said this, the Spirit had not yet been given. Even those who believed in Jesus had not received it yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified. So when and how was Jesus glorified? First and foremost, through His death. Remember Moses striking the rock? Well, Paul said that rock was Christ, and Christ the rock first had to be stricken, smitten, and afflicted for us before that life-giving water would start to flow. And so our rock was struck on the cross, and what flowed from his side? A river of blood and water, picturing a deeper spiritual reality.

Christ's death *seemed* to be humiliation, but because through His death He overcame sin and unbelief, His death is glorious, and it was made even more glorious through His resurrection and ascension.

Remember the river from Zech. 14? Israel would read that passage at the Feast of Booths, to remind the people that on the Day of the Lord, when God struck the rock, then rivers would flow from Jerusalem, and the Lord will be king over all the earth. And what they saw as *future* is what we remember as we celebrate the feasts of Ascension and Pentecost. When Christ Jesus ascended into heaven to take up His throne as King, He sent His Spirit to the disciples in Jerusalem, so that through them His glory, His gospel, His Spirit would flow like a river to the ends of the earth. What Jesus spoke of as future in John 7 came to pass through His Ascension and on the Day of Pentecost, and it came true for you, too, when you believed in Jesus and received the Holy Spirit.

The glory of Jesus

And this is the result of Jesus' being glorified: through His Spirit, He is satisfying the spiritual desire of all those who thirst for God. It doesn't matter how dry you are, Christ gives you Himself through His Spirit as living water. And through your life, as your heart overflows with what Christ has done for you, the Spirit spreads that living water to others. They see that you are satisfied, that you aren't thirsty any more. They see that God has revived your dry and drooping soul. They see that you have life welling up inside you, a joy and a satisfaction that no other source can provide. And just like in Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, they hear you speaking in their own language, and telling of the mighty works of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. Proverbs 10:11 says that the mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life: through your witness, thirsty people are invited to step into that river, to be baptized in the life of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and to receive that great Pentecost blessing: the presence of the Spirit who causes life and health and joy to spring up inside them, a river of life that never runs dry. So let all the thirsty come and drink.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

Let us pray:

"Almighty God, on this day you opened the way of eternal life to every race and nation by the promised gift of your Holy Spirit: May this gift flow like rivers of living water throughout the world by the preaching of the Gospel, that it may reach to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."