

John's Gospel - Streams of Living Water

by John Vissers

Jesus offers living water to those who are thirsty, and it flows from within those who believe in Him, bringing spiritual life and nourishment to their souls.

Duration: 36:58

Scripture: Psalm 78:15-16, Psalm 105:40-41, Proverbs 18:4, Isaiah 58:11, Ezekiel 47:1-11, Zechariah 14:8, John 7:37-39

Topics: "Living Water"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker describes a significant event in the Gospel of John that took place during the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. The festival was a time of celebration and remembrance of God's salvation in the past. One of the highlights of the festival was the water drawing ritual, where the priests would gather water from the pool of Siloam and bring it back to the temple. On the seventh and final day of the festival, as the priests were about to pour out the water, Jesus stood up and proclaimed that whoever is thirsty should come to him and drink, and that streams of living water will flow from within them. This moment was a powerful declaration of Jesus as the source of spiritual nourishment and salvation.

Transcript

Let's turn to God's Word. We're reading tonight in our continuing study of John's Gospel from the seventh chapter, and I'm going to read tonight just from 37 to 39 of this chapter. John chapter 7 at verse 37 through to the end of verse 39.

On the last and the greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, If a man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.

Up to that time, the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. Let's pray together. Gracious and sovereign God, we thank you this evening for your Word.

We thank you for teaching us through your Word, and we pray this evening that as we take these moments together to reflect on this passage, that you by your Spirit would speak to us through the scriptures. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O God, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

This brief passage in John's Gospel, the seventh chapter, describes one of the highest moments of drama in the Gospel of John. And I'd like for you tonight, if you will, imagine in your mind's eye what it would have been like to have been there as this event unfolded some 2,000 years ago. We're in the Temple.

We're in the Temple in Jerusalem, and it's the last and indeed the greatest day of the Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Booths. And the festival has been going on all weekend. Now it's come to the seventh day, to the final day.

We're pilgrims, and we've made our way to Jerusalem, and each day of the Feast we've gathered to watch the famous water-drawing ritual. It's one of the highlights of the festival every day. The rabbinic tradition tells us this, that those who have not seen the joy of the water-drawing have not seen joy in their whole lives.

But we've seen it each and every day for the first six days of the Feast, and each day we've watched the priests at the break of day as they've made their way out to the Pool of Siloam at the break of day. And there they filled a golden pitcher with water and carried it back to the Temple. And each day as this event unfolded, we followed them back in as they made their way to the Temple.

We followed them to the water gate of the Temple, and then as we approached that water gate, the trumpet sounded three times, and each time that joyous blast reminds us of the words of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 12 and verse 3. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. The priests then entered into the Temple proper, and they processed to the altar while we sang hymns of thanksgiving to the Lord. And we raised the willow branches, and we raised the fruit that we've brought, that we've been carrying, as we sang.

And then the water was offered up to God as part of the daily offering. And one of the priests made his way into a place where we can't really see, but we know that he pours the water into a silver bowl on the altar, and he pours the wine into a second silver bowl, and then poured it all out as an offering to the Lord. And although we can't see this, when that particular act is done each and every day, when it's completed, the priest raises his hand, and it's a signal that it's done, and all of God's people then begin to sing, and they begin to rejoice and sing praises to God, sing psalms from the psalter.

And as all of this happens, we know what it all means, because we've been trained, we've learned the meaning of all of this from childhood. We know that it reminds us of God's salvation in the past, because we're celebrating the blessings of God upon our own people, the people of Israel during the 40 years in the wilderness. And the water drawing reminds us of the water that came from the rock smitten by Moses when the people were in danger of perishing from thirst.

And how we've read that story again and again in Exodus chapter 17, how God provided for his people, how God saved his people by providing water, streams of living water, as they were out in the desert, as they were making their way to the promised land. And we also know that this festival, this celebration, is also a thanksgiving festival, a thanksgiving feast, and we give thanks for the harvest, and we understand that our utter and absolute dependence is upon what God provides, that we depend on the Lord for our daily bread. And so we pray that God will send rain for the harvest into this dry, parched desert land, that streams of living water will continue to flow today so that indeed we might harvest a rich harvest, and that our people might thrive, and that we might live.

It reminds us of what God is doing today. But we also know, and we've also been taught by the prophets, that this great feast points to the future. The joy that we feel during this feast comes from the promise that there will come a time when streams of living water will flow from Jerusalem, when the kingdom of God will come in all of its fullness.

And the prophets speak about a great day when the water of life would be poured out. And so each and every day we've participated in the feast, and this is what it has meant to us as we've experienced it, as we've witnessed it, as we've shared in it, as we've understood it. But today is now the seventh day, the final day of the feast.

And we know that we've reached now the high point, and everyone gathers in the temple, and there's a sense of expectation in the air, and a hush falls over the crowd. Because on the seventh day of the feast, the priests march around the altar, not once before they begin the offering, not twice before they begin the offering, but seven times. And here we are, and we watch the chosen priests, the one set apart, make his way into that secret place.

And he begins to pour the water into a silver bowl, and then he does the same with the wine, and then he picks it up. He picks up the silver bowl of water and begins to pour it out, and when he finishes again on the seventh day, he raises his hand. And we are about to lift our voices in praise, and in adoration, and in worship, and in thanksgiving to God, because the high moment of the festival has come.

But before we have a chance to sing, there is a stir behind us, and then we hear his voice. If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.

And it strikes, those words strike like a thunderclap out of heaven, at this high holy moment of the festival. And we turn around, and we see that it's Jesus of Nazareth. He's the one that everyone's been whispering about.

He's the one that everyone's been talking about. Some say that he's a great teacher, and some say that he's a good man, and some say that he's a prophet. Some say that he's demon-possessed.

But these words, at this point in the feast and the festival, as awkward as it all seems to us, these words are unmistakable. Because Jesus is saying, this Jesus of Nazareth, is saying that all that is represented by this feast, all that is represented by this water-drawing ritual, all that we believe, all that we know, all that we've been taught, the past deliverance of the people of God, the present prayer for God's provision, the future hope of salvation, all of this, Jesus is saying, is fulfilled and finds its fullness in Him. It's available and offered through Him.

He's saying to us that He's the Lord of the Exodus. He's saying to us that He's the Lord of the harvest. He's saying to us that He's the Lord of the kingdom that is yet to come.

And the question, the question, of course, which immediately rises in our minds, is simply the question, how can this be? Who is this Jesus of Nazareth? Is He the Christ? Had we been there almost 2,000 years ago, that's what we would have heard. That's what we would have seen. That's what we would have experienced.

That's what we would have understood. It was a moment of high drama. But we need to move past and into and through this drama to look at the substance of what Jesus is saying in this passage.

Because we need to ask, just as if we had been there some 2,000 years ago, what does this really mean? How can these things be? What is it that Jesus is really doing here? What is it that He's saying? What does it mean for our faith and for our life today? And so as we think and reflect for a few moments on what this may mean for us, let's consider a few angles in this passage. The first is this. Notice that what Jesus says here, this saying contains an invitation.

Jesus says, if anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. As the water is being poured out on the altar, as the feast, the water- drawing ritual is unfolding before the people gathered in the temple, Jesus invites those who are thirsty to come to Him and to find their nourishment, to find their fulfillment, to come to Him and drink. You'll remember that this is not the first such invitation that Jesus issues in the Gospel of John.

Do you remember a few chapters earlier in the fourth chapter of John's Gospel? Jesus says to the woman at the well, if you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water. He invites the woman at the well in that encounter that we looked at some time ago to drink from Him, to come to Him and find her fulfillment, her nourishment in life. And after feeding the 5,000, Jesus told the crowd in John chapter 6, I am the bread of life and the one who comes to me will never go hungry and the one who believes in me will never be thirsty.

And in these sayings in the Gospel of John, Jesus is really picking up and reflecting a significant line in Old Testament teaching. The prophet Isaiah, for example, speaking for the Lord says, I will pour water on the thirsty ground and streams on the dry ground in the 44th chapter. Or in Isaiah 55 verse 1, the prophet says, come all you who are thirsty and come to the waters.

You see, the idea that the Lord God was the one who could quench his people's thirst is an idea that's rooted already in the Old Testament. The Lord invites His people to have their thirst quenched. And the New Testament makes it clear that Jesus identifies Himself and the Apostles understood Jesus to be the fulfillment of all of that yearning, of all of that teaching in the Old Testament.

Think, for example, of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 10 verse 4, where the Apostle says that the people of Israel drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them and that rock was Christ. You see, they understood, the early church understood that Christ was the substance of all that was taught in the Old Testament. Or think in Revelation 22 when it is the Spirit of Jesus who says, whoever is thirsty let him come and whoever wishes let him take the free gift of the water of life.

The early church understood that Jesus, the Spirit of Jesus, is the one that will be poured out. That Jesus is the Lord of history, the Alpha and the Omega. That His salvation is bound up with the past and the present and the future.

He is the water of life. And so when He gets to His feet and invites those present at that feast to come to Him, it's with all of this in the background, it's with all of this before the people that He makes this invitation. We know, of course, how important water is for life, don't we? A very high percentage of our bodies, I tried to look up what percentage it was but I couldn't come to the exact figure, but a high percentage of our bodies consists of water.

We drink water to stay alive. The last time I went to visit my doctor, she said to me, one of the things that I'm not doing enough of is drinking water and so now I'm trying to drink about eight glasses a day consistently so that my health will be looked after. It makes a difference.

It's important to drink water. We drink it to stay alive. It nurtures our growth.

When we go without it, we ultimately die. And we all know how important it is and we all know how we long for it, how we yearn for it when we don't have it. And we live at a time when people are hungering and thirsting for God, but when they are being provided with all kinds of counterfeits and less than what the Lord Himself offers us.

Today we're satisfied with what I might describe as spiritual tap water or spiritual bottled water or wretched spiritual lake water that's chlorinated to a dangerous level so that we can take it in, rather than the spiritual, the living water, the streams of living water which Jesus provides. You see, we try to fill our lives with all kinds of things to fulfill that yearning, but only Christ, only Jesus provides the living water, the streams of living water that bring the life in which we ultimately find fulfillment. There may be all kinds of things that we drink in, drink into excess in order to fill that yearning.

It may be sex, it may be drugs, it may be money, it may be material possessions, it may be relationships, it may be simply filling our lives with so many activities and busyness that we don't have to think about what really matters. It may be television, it may be food, it may be any number of things, it doesn't really matter, but we always are looking for that which is going to quench our thirst, which is going to slake the dry, parched throats of our souls. It's not a question of whether we're going to find and drink what Jesus offers.

What are you quenching your thirst with tonight? Jesus invites us to come and drink from him. And secondly, notice that this text contains a promise. Verse 38, whoever believes in me, Jesus says, as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.

Now I need to tell you that there are two problems with this particular verse that we need to note as we try to understand what it means. The first is this, it's not clear which scripture Jesus is quoting when he says here, as the scriptures have said, because there is no Old Testament passage that corresponds exactly to the reference in verse 38. There are a number of texts, and I tried to look them all up this past week, which are close and which clearly say basically the same thing.

For example, Psalm 78 verses 15 to 16. We're not going to have time to look these up, but let me just rhyme them off. Psalm 105, 40 to 41.

Proverbs 18, 4. Zechariah 14, 8. Ezekiel 47, 1 to 11. And Isaiah 58, 11, just to name a few. Of these, Zechariah 14, 8 is perhaps the closest parallel, where we read on that day, living water shall flow out from Jerusalem.

And so it may be that Jesus here is encapsulating again this theme, which is clear in the Old Testament, and perhaps bringing together a number of different texts in this saying. What is clear, however, is that Jesus is clearly pointing to the fact that all of this finds its fulfillment in Him, in His life, and in His ministry, and ultimately in His death. Whoever believes in Me, as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within Him.

In other words, those who have faith in Jesus, those who come to believe in Jesus, those who accept His teaching, are going to find the streams of living water that are promised throughout the scriptures of the Old Testament. The second problem is simply this, that there's a word order. The word order and the lack of punctuation in the original Greek make the exact meaning of this promise a little unclear.

Now, if you follow the NIV, and just stick with me for a moment here, if you follow the NIV translation, which I think most of you have, it seems that as the believer drinks of Jesus, the believer becomes a source of living waters. That's the way the text reads. Whoever reads, whoever believes in Me, streams of living water will flow from within Him.

And it would appear that the hymn there refers to the believer. That as we drink from Jesus, the water of life wells up within us, and so it becomes a source of nourishment and strength for our own lives, and so then we're able to share that overflow of living water with others. It is a real part of our lives.

The problem is that the way the text is written, it's not exactly clear that that word order and that punctuation is the right one. And if you look at the footnote in the NIV, you'll see the alternative reading. It goes something like this, if anyone is thirsty, comma, let him come to Me, period, and let him drink, comma, whoever believes in Me.

Now, the significance of this is that it connects the phrase, this word order connects the phrase, whoever believes in Me, with the previous sentence. And when you read it that way, it makes the hymn of verse 38 refer to Jesus rather than to the believer. So that the text reads, the streams of living water will flow from Him, that is, from Jesus.

And so the living water wells up from within Christ, through His cross and resurrection and the pouring out of the Spirit. Well, you may say to me, that's all very interesting, but what ultimately does it mean? What difference does it make? And to be quite honest, I'm not sure it makes a whole lot of difference in the end, because it seems to me that whichever translation and punctuation of the text that you take, the theological meaning is quite clear. And it's unmistakable.

Jesus is presenting Himself as the ultimate source of this living water. And so as believers receive this living water, it wells up from within them. And in fact, the word that's used there, khaliyah, is the word for belly from the innermost, as it were, the place of feeling, the innermost part of our lives.

It wells up within us and overflows. And so there's no ground here. There's no ground here for believers claiming for themselves some inner, spiritual, personal spiritual source of life or power, independent of their relationship with Christ.

But that which the believer receives, in fact, comes from Jesus Christ. And the application of this truth, it seems to me, is vital to the believer. Because the source of our life is Christ and Christ alone.

His death on the cross for us. His being raised from the dead for us. Our salvation is something that occurs for us.

It is something Christ does for us. It is what Luther says, extranos, outside of us. It is something done on our behalf.

We do not contribute to it one iota. It's what the Bible describes as justification. It is something Christ does for us.

And so Christ is the ultimate source of this living water. This is something He gives. It's not something we kind of contribute to ourselves.

We don't make this living water. It is Christ who gives it. But at the same time, this passage nicely reminds us that that experience is a real one within our hearts and within our souls.

Our salvation is something accomplished for us by Christ, but by the Spirit of God, it becomes a reality within us. We become new people in Christ. The old is gone.

The new has come. It is what the Bible describes as regeneration. It is the wellspring of our sanctification.

And if you separate these two realities, you have a truncated understanding of Christian salvation and Christian living. There are those who can affirm with their heads, in fact, that Jesus died for them, that He is the way, the truth, and the life, but it's never become by the Spirit of God a reality in their hearts and in their lives. On the other hand, the opposite problem is equally a problem and perhaps even more dangerous today.

People longing to have spiritual experiences. They want to feel. They want to sense the streams of living water flowing from within them, but the experience itself becomes the thing.

Whatever it takes to get that experience seems to be justifiable. There's a kind of pragmatic spirituality at work in our culture today. There's a kind of consumer spirituality.

As long as it meets your need, even though it may not be quite in line with what the Bible teaches, as long as it kind of wells up within you, then that's okay. We need to be clear that the Bible affirms the spiritual life of the believer, the spiritual experience of the believer, the fullness of that life welling up within us. We have to experience the reality of God.

The Bible promises that, but it's never, never, never separated from the reality of what Christ has done for us. And I can tell you, my sisters and brothers in Christ, that if the church today could somehow grasp that truth, if believers today could somehow grasp the reality of that truth, it would prevent a lot of the problems that we see unfolding in the church in North America today. A spirituality centered in Jesus Christ.

That's what is promised here. A Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered life in Christ. Isn't that what you want? Isn't that what the Bible promises? Isn't that in which you'll find fulfillment? And then finally, I want you to notice that verse 39 concludes this passage with an interpretation interjected by John the Gospel writer.

Verse 39, John says, By this he meant the Spirit whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. If we haven't gotten the point yet, John the Gospel writer underlines it with a red marker.

He says Jesus here is talking about the Holy Spirit, and he's talking about the Holy Spirit who will be poured out after the cross and after the resurrection and after the ascension. Remember that we've reached a point in John's Gospel, as I've said before, where the cross is already clearly before Jesus, and everything that he says and everything that he does is pointing to that reality. And the death of Jesus, and you need to understand this, the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus was to be the means through which the Spirit of God would be poured out.

Jesus is the One who gives the water of life, because he poured out his own life on the cross, and through the pouring out of his life on the cross, and through his being raised from the dead, through those means the Spirit of God was poured out. And the eschatological promise which is fulfilled in Acts chapter 2, when Peter gets up, and Acts 2, and on the day of Pentecost, and the prophecy of Joel is fulfilled, in those days I

will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your people will see the power of God's Spirit at work. You see, the kingdom breaks into the world through the coming of Christ, through his death, through his resurrection, through the pouring out of the Spirit of God.

But it meant that he first had to go to the cross. There's an interesting rendering of the death of Jesus in John's Gospel. I don't know whether you've ever noticed this before.

I worked on it a little bit this week in preparation. John makes a point in the 19th chapter, and particularly verse 34, of describing what happened when the soldiers speared Jesus' side after he was dead. The text reads this way, John 19:34, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.

And it's as if John the Gospel writer is making it clear that in the death of Jesus, his life has been poured out. Blood, which signifies the life, the life which we have is poured out. Water, which too signifies the life which we have, is poured out.

It's drained from the body of Jesus for his people, so that, so that the water of life might be poured out on his people by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is the one sent by Christ, sent from the Father, sent into the world, sent into the church, sent into the believer's heart to do the work, the work of God, to apply that work in our own hearts and in our own lives.

By this he meant the Spirit whom those who believed in him were later, were later to receive. And that Holy Spirit, that living water poured out through the death and the resurrection of Jesus, that Holy Spirit is the same Holy Spirit who tonight, as we participate in this table, takes the bread and takes the wine and makes it for us a communion in the body and the blood of Jesus Christ. The bread reminds us of that body broken, the blood of the cup reminds us of the blood shed for us, and it all reminds us of this reality that Jesus, Jesus invites us to come, to drink from him.

This is where the Spirit is poured out for us. And so tonight, as we come to the table, this is his invitation, this is his promise, and as we eat and as we drink tonight, I want you to think, I want you to imagine in your mind's eye, I want you to think about Jesus just as he appeared at the Feast of the Tabernacle so many years ago, and I want us to have a sense that he's standing here in our midst, that he's saying, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me and eats will never go hungry, and whoever drinks of me will never be thirsty.

I am the water of life. If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink, because as you drink, streams of living water will well up within you. I want you to have a sense tonight, as we come to this table, that Jesus is not just someone who died 2,000 years ago, but just as he got to his feet at that high moment of the Feast of Tabernacles on the day, the last and greatest day, so he gets to his feet here and he invites you to come.

He invites you to come. Will you come? Will you come? Let us pray. Lord, we give thanks tonight that you give water, water which alone can quench our parched and thirsty souls, water that nourishes us so that we in turn may become a source of life to others as we share the reality of Christ.

And so, Father, we pray this evening that as we come to this table, we might experience afresh the reality of what it means to drink from that water, to drink from that well that never runs dry. Touch us, we pray, by your grace and by your Spirit, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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