

THE HOLY SPIRIT (1) THE RIVER OF LIFE

John 7:37–39

In two weeks time it will be Whit Sunday, Pentecost, the day we remember and celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. Over the next few Sundays we're going to think about some of the ways in which the Holy Spirit is described in the New Testament, starting with this passage in John chapter 7, where the imagery is that of water, in fact, a river, streams of living water. Verse 37. 'On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink."' "

I want us to think first of all of

THE SOURCE OF THE RIVER

Verse 38 seems straightforward enough. 'Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.' The river is going to flow from within the believer, literally from his innermost being.

However, there is another way of understanding this text. If you're using the NIV you'll find it at the bottom of the page. To understand the alternative you need to know something about the way the New Testament was originally written and passed on. There were no divisions into chapters and verses. The kind of script the writers used was all in capital letters. The words were joined up with no gaps between and there was no punctuation. In spite of this the meaning is usually quite clear although there are occasions when more than one meaning is possible.

The textual scholar Alexander Souter came up with an amusing example.

DIDYOUEVERSEEABUN
DANCEONTHE TABLE

Because of the way the Greek language works the verses in John 7:37 and 38 can be understood in two ways. Literally it goes like this.

IF SOMEONE IS THIRSTY
LET HIM COME TO ME
AND LET HIM DRINK
[THE ONE] WHO BELIEVES IN ME
AS THE SCRIPTURE SAYS ...

You can either take the first three lines together and link the fourth line with what follows or you can take lines 1 and 2 together and then lines 3 and 4 echoing them. This opens up the possibility that the source of the river, the source of the living waters, is not the believer but Jesus. Streams of living water will flow from within *him*.

This interpretation solves a few problems. First of all, where does Scripture say that living water will flow from the believer? There is more evidence that the Spirit flows from Christ. Think of those passages in Exodus chapter 17 and Numbers chapter 20 when God commanded Moses to bring water from the rock. What is Paul's commentary on that in 1 Corinthians 10:4? '[They all] drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, *and that rock was Christ.*'

Think of that prophecy in Ezekiel chapter 47 where a man shows Ezekiel the entrance to the temple and water coming out from under the threshold. Verses 3–5. 'As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. He measured off another thousand

cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist. He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross.'

When we come to the New Testament what does Jesus say about the temple? John 2:18–21. 'Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body.'

Jesus is the temple and the water that flows from that temple is the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well he said, 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water *I give him* will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life' (John 4:13, 14). Jesus gives the living water, the water of life, and that water is the Holy Spirit.

When John the Baptist was witnessing to Jesus he said, 'the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, "The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit"' (John 1:33). John baptised people in the water of the River Jordan. Jesus baptises people in the water of the Spirit.

"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.' This ties in with the witness of Peter on the day of Pentecost. 'God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear' (Acts 2:32, 33).

Paul links believing in Christ with receiving the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:12, 13. 'The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.'

THE COURSE OF THE RIVER

In Psalm 46 verse 4 we read, 'There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.' The river of God flows from Christ to the believer. Its streams make glad the city of God. Look at John 7:39 again. 'By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.' What benefit does the living water of the Spirit bring to the believer?

The Spirit brings refreshment.

Jesus said, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.' The Spirit revives and refreshes the thirsty soul. There is a spiritual thirst which cannot be satisfied by material things. In our western, rich, materialistic culture we've never had so much and been satisfied so little. There's an emptiness that the world cannot fill, a thirst that material things cannot satisfy.

But when we believe in Christ we receive the Spirit and our spiritual thirst is quenched. Our need is met – our need for forgiveness, peace of mind, a purpose in this life and a

hope beyond this life. We're like the woman at the well. She had a need. She had had relationships and they just kept breaking down. Her need was deep and her need was spiritual and only Jesus could meet it with his gift of the Holy Spirit to bring new life.

There's a fantastic feature in Ezekiel's vision, Ezekiel chapter 47. In verses 8 and 9 we read, 'This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Sea. When it empties into the Sea, the water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live.'

Think about it. That's the opposite of the natural order of things. When a fresh water river flows into the sea the salt water overpowers the fresh water. But God's power to change our lives is illustrated by this. A river flows into the sea and the sea turns fresh.

The Spirit brings refreshment and ...

The Spirit brings fruitfulness.

Going back to that great vision in Ezekiel chapter 47 about the river of God verse 12 says, 'Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.'

Turn to Galatians 5:22, 23. 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.' This is none other than the character of Christ created in us by the life that flows from him to us through the Spirit. These characteristics help us in two ways. They serve for food. They feed our souls, our innermost being. And they bring healing. Where there is hatred love brings healing. Where there is unhappiness joy brings healing. Where there is anxiety peace brings healing. Suffering, cruelty, evil, betrayal, harshness, delinquency – all these can break us, but there is healing in patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Two thoughts to close with. First of all, Jesus said, this is a river. Not a canal, not a lake, not a pond, but a river. It flows. It is renewed every day. This is not a one-off quick fix but a commitment to come day by day and hour by hour in dependence on the Lord for refreshing and fruitfulness. When the New Testament says, 'Be filled with the Spirit' the meaning is 'Go on being filled with the Spirit.'

And finally, the flow of a river is always downwards. Rivers don't run up mountains. They seek the lowest point. The gift of the Spirit is not for those whose pride is like a mountain. It is for those who humble themselves, admit their need, and open their hearts to Jesus. And when we do his Spirit will flow and our needs will be met.