

33. RIVERS OF LIVING WATER (VV37-39)

Have you ever considered just how important water is for us? We are told that we should drink up to two litres of water a day, and we understand thirst, but have you ever wondered what water actually does for our bodies? You probably know that helps regulate our body temperature, but did you know that it also protects our joints and spinal cord, that it helps brain function, energy levels, and circulation. In fact, water is essential in running the major systems of our bodies and helps our bodies dispose of waste. A healthy person can only survive three to four days without it.

One of the great blessings of the modern world is having easy access to drinking water. We just turn on the tap and there it is. It is a blessing that many of us do not take time to consider and appreciate, that is, until it is not there. Whenever there is a burst pipe or our water is turned off for some reason, we very quickly realise just how much we take it for granted.

Generally, people in South Africa have access to water, but in many other parts of the world, water is in short supply due to drought and poor purification and storage facilities. In Africa especially, millions of people do not have indoor plumbing and have to make daily trips to communal sources of water. We may be someone shocked by that reality, but do you realise that is very similar to the situation in Jesus' day? Remember chapter 4 where Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well? Drawing water from a well was common practice back then.



CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Israel technically only has two seasons – the dry season from May to October, and the rainy season from November to April. Now the Feast of Booths occurs around September or October, depending on the lunar cycle, therefore, it occurs towards the end of the dry season. So as Jesus talks about living water here, it has quite a lot of significance to the people.

However, what makes it even more significant is one of the ceremonies performed during the feast, called the ceremony of the water drawing. This ritual was introduced fairly late in Israel's history and is not included in the rituals that God gave them in the Old Testament, but is rooted in the agricultural nature of the feast as a reminder of God's provision during the Exodus.

Glaser and Glaser¹ provide a good description of the events:

“The water-drawing ceremony was a joyous occasion, replete with grand activity and high drama. It began with an especially assigned Levitical priest descending to the pool of Siloam. He was accompanied by a throng of faithful worshipers and a band of liturgical flutists whose lilting music enhanced the wonder of the ceremony. When the Levitical priest arrived at the pool of Siloam, he filled a special golden pitcher with water. The crowd then returned to the Temple through the Water Gate, which obtained its name from the ceremony. As the priest arrived, the trumpets—rams' horns similar to the ones used on Rosh Hashanah—were sounded. The Mishna specified that there should first be a prolonged blast and then a quavering note, then again a prolonged blast of the Temple trumpet.

“The priest entered the Temple area and went directly to the southern side of the great altar. There, he placed two magnificent silver basins on the southwest corner of the altar. These

1 Glaser, Mitch and Zhava. 1987. *The Fall Feasts of Israel*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, pp175-176.

two bowls were slightly different from one another. The wide-mouthed bowl on the eastern side was used to receive the wine of the drink offering. The western basin was somewhat narrower, and into it was poured the water from the pool of Siloam. As soon as the priest poured the water into the basin, the people surrounding the altar would shout, "Raise thy hand. Raise thy hand!" The crowd was insistent on making sure the priest had indeed poured the water and poured it properly. This tradition goes back to approximately 95 B.C. when Alexander Jan-naeus, one of the Maccabean priest kings, wickedly poured the festival water on the ground rather than upon the altar. At that point, according to tradition, the crowd carrying both *lulav* (branches) and *etrog* (fruit) began pelting him with their *etrogs*. The event escalated into a massacre, and legend says that no less than six thousand Jews were killed in the Temple (Sukkah 9).

"The liturgical flutists kept playing while the water was poured into the basin, except on the Sabbath and on the first day of the feast when flute playing was not allowed (Sukkah 5:1). The flutists were joined by a choir of Israelites chanting the words of the Psalm 118, "O Lord, do save, we beseech Thee; O Lord, we beseech Thee, do send prosperity!" (Psalm 118:25). As these words were repeated, the worshipers shook palm branches towards the altar until all the water was poured."

The Significance of the Feast of Tabernacles

The significance of the Feast is seen in several passages (cf. Lev. 23, Num. 29:12-38, and Deu. 16:13-15). Here is a summary of its meanings and purposes:

Agricultural Significance: The festival occurs during harvest time, marking the end of the agricultural year. It is a time of thanksgiving.

Historical Remembrance: It serves as a reminder of when God provided for the Israelites in the wilderness for the forty years after the Exodus from Egypt when they lived in temporary shelters (*sukkot*).

Joy and Unity: The festival encourages communal participation, joyous celebration, and unity among the people.

Spiritual Significance: The temporary nature of the *sukkah* (the hut or booth) is a reminder of the brevity of life and the importance of relying on God.

Eschatological Significance: In prophetic literature (e.g. Zec. 14:16-19), the Feast is seen as a time when all nations will come to Jerusalem to worship God, signifying peace and the universal recognition of God.

Our text opens with the statement that it is the last day of the feast – the last day that this ceremony will take place. So put yourself in the shoes of a first century Jew in Jerusalem. You have just seen the bowl being carried from the Pool of Siloam to the temple, and you know that inside the temple the priest is going to walk around the altar, etc.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Read John 7:37-39 with the contemporary context described above in mind. How does that change the significance of the passage for you?
2. If you were a Jew living in the time of Christ, what effect do you think Jesus' words would have on you? Do you think that you would respond differently to the Jews in John 7? Why or why not?

Jesus promises living water against the backdrop of the water-drawing ceremony. His statement is actually quite astonishing, for no mere human could ever make such a promise. Who, except God can legitimately make the claim that if anyone goes Him and drinks that the Scriptures will be fulfilled as rivers of living water flow? Consider too the significance this has for these Jews as the dry season comes to the end and the lengths they have to go to for clean drinking water, especially during the dry season.

The first thing that we need to understand is that Jesus is not talking about thirst and drinking purely from a physical perspective, but from a spiritual one. As He did with the feeding of the five thousand, He appeals to the physical desires and needs that the people are aware of, and draws out a spiritual principle. What He is saying fits in with the rituals of the feast and would have been in the forefront of people's minds.

However, this historical bridge is not sufficient to understand these verses, so it is also important to build bridges to Old Testament texts.



OLD TESTAMENT CONTEXT

There are several passages to consider here, the first is Exodus 17:1-7. The context is the nation of Israel is wandering in the wilderness after their exit from Egypt. In chapters 15 through 17, the Israelites are still in the first few weeks of their desert wanderings. So far they have witnessed God bring the plagues upon the Egyptians and the parting of the Red Sea. However, the Israelites quickly begin to grumble. In Exodus 15, they grumble about not having water as if to doubt that God who had miraculously freed them would continue to provide.

In Exodus 16, the Israelites then complain about not having enough food and even accuse the Lord of having brought them into the desert to die. Despite their selfish attitudes, God is gracious and provides manna. But then in Exodus 17, the people again complain about water despite the fact that God has already shown his ability to make bitter water sweet and will provide food. But instead of raining down righteous judgement, God does another miracle – He provides water from a rock (vv4-6).

This is part of the background for the water ceremony at the Feast of Booths, as it looks back at the time of the Israelites beginning their wanderings in the wilderness. Wanderings that would turn out to be forty years long due to their sin in Numbers 13 where they doubt God yet again.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Before we judge the Israelites, we need to remind ourselves that we are no different to them, for how many times are we quick to forget the Lord's blessings in our lives? Spend some time thinking about how God has provided for you, in big and small ways, and then spend some time in prayer thanking Him.
2. In the sermon it was mentioned that, "we need to remember that with accounts like this one in Exodus 17, we're looking into a mirror. We're not reading ancient history but our own stories". Do you agree with this statement? How does this affect your reading of the Bible, especially the accounts in the Old Testament?

A further significance to the water is that in the Old Testament water itself is a symbol of blessing. There are several passages that refer to this. For example:

- *"With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: 'Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted'"* (Isa. 12:3-4).

- *“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price”* (Isa. 55:1).
- *“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. It shall continue in summer as in winter”* (Zec. 14:8).
- See also Isaiah 32:1-2; 44:3; 58:11; and Zechariah 14:16-21 that speaks of the future Feast of Booths when the Lord is King.

The Old Testament prophets were looking forward to a time of the Lord’s provision of not just any water, but living water.

Also in the Old Testament there is a connection of water with the Holy Spirit, most famously Ezekiel 36:25-27, *“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules”*. Here there is a very specific connection between water and the Spirit and the impact that the Spirit has in the life of a believer.

So although during the Feast of Booths the water was a reminder of God providing physical water to the Jews during their exodus from Egypt, it was also to help them look forward in hope to a future when the Lord would pour out his Spirit on his people.

Let us now bridge this back to our passage in John 7. Jesus says, *“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”*. Ezekiel pointed to a time when people would be able to live out the Law of God because they would be filled with the Holy Spirit. Then Jesus says that whoever believes in Him out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. What this is saying is that everyone who comes to Jesus will be given the Holy Spirit, as the scriptures have promised, which will be evidenced by rivers of living water flowing out of the heart as the believer’s life is transformed through the Holy Spirit. He or she will begin to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:16-26).

However, this is not something that we can cause to happen. The Jews performed their rituals during the feast, remembering and looking forward, but they do not, in fact they cannot, transform the heart. They may participate in good traditions that help them to remember things, but those things do not lead to spiritual growth. That is a supernatural work of God in the heart and life of a believer as a result of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The fact that the living water is the Holy Spirit is specifically mentioned by John in verse 39, *“Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”*

So here we have a large crowd at the feast which points back to their ancestors’ time in the wilderness, listening to Jesus preach about the living water that He provides. But it also points to something greater when God would pour out his Spirit.

When will that be and how will that happen? Well Jesus proclaims He is the One who has come to provide that Spirit – He says, If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. So if they came to Jesus

now would they receive the Spirit at this point? According to verses 39, no. For as John ends the passage, he points out that the Spirit had not yet been given. Why not? Because Christ had not yet been glorified. And when does that happen? It happens at the cross.

As we have seen several times already in this gospel, Jesus' ministry has a singular focus – everything He says and does always points forward to the cross.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. What does it mean that everything Jesus said and did was pointing to the cross? Why is this important? How does it change how you interpret the Gospels?

But how can we be certain that this is what Jesus is referring to here? Are we not merely speculating that this feast and Exodus 17 and the other passages are linked? Well, this is where the third bridge comes in.



APOSTOLIC CONTEXT

In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul recounts some of the wilderness experiences of Israel to exhort his readers not to become idolaters like they were (cf. vv6-7). We are to learn from the errors of Israel's past. However, before this he makes a very interesting statement that builds a bridge not only to our text in John 7, but all the way back to Exodus 17.



Read: 1 Corinthians 10:1-4.

Take note of the last statement – *“The Rock was Christ”*. Here Paul is telling us that the physical rock in the wilderness from which the water that quenched the Israelites thirst flowed out of, is a picture of Christ. In other words, in the same way that the physical rock brought forth water, Christ was with them and brought forth the spiritual water they needed for spiritual life.

What Moses, Jesus, and Paul are telling us, is that the only thing that can quench our spiritual thirst is Christ. It is not through tradition, programmes, vibrant singing, or enjoyable services, it is only through Christ. If you are spiritually thirsty, only Christ can quench that thirst as He provides you with the living water, which is the Spirit.

David expressed this yearning and the fact that only God can quench that yearning so well in the Psalms. For example:

- *“As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God”* (Psa. 42:1-2).
- *“O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands”* (Psa. 63:1-4).

The only water you need is the living water that Jesus provides. If you are thirsty, then drink from Him today. Stop drinking at the dead, polluted cisterns of the world, for they are an abomination to the Lord (cf. Jer. 2:11-13).



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Have there been times in your life when you felt spiritually dry like David in the above passages? How did it feel? Before you became a Christian, what did you do to try and alleviate that thirst?
2. Even as a Christian, there are times when one drinks from the polluted cisterns of the world to try and quench our spiritual thirst. What are some of those cisterns? What is the effect of drinking from those cisterns compared to drinking from Christ?

But this is not the only Apostolic bridge, for there are so many more. Here are a few more examples:

1. In Exodus 17 when the people complained that they were thirsty, God told Moses to take his staff, the same one he struck the Nile with, and to strike the rock, and when he did, the water came out of it and the people drank. This is the same staff the Moses struck the Nile with back in Egypt, causing the water to turn to blood – the first of the ten plagues. Through that plague and those that followed, God was judging the people of Egypt, making Moses' rod a rod of judgement. So in Exodus 17, when God instructs Moses to take his rod of judgement and strike the rock, He is painting an incredible picture. Paul tells us that the rock in the wilderness was Christ, so by striking the rock with his rod of judgement, Moses was portraying Jesus being struck, thousands of years before it occurred. In the same way that God's judgement of the Israelites in the wilderness was taken upon that rock instead of on the people, Jesus took the judgement that we rightly deserve.

Warren Wiersbe put it well in one of his sermons, "As Moses stepped up and smote that rock, God the Son, turned to God the Father, and said, "One day that will happen to me. One day they will take me and nail me to a cross and I will be smitten with the rod of judgement. They will smite the Shepherd. They will smite the Rock". Jesus was struck so that you may be reconciled to the Father. He gave His life on the cross so that your sin may be forgiven. He was struck so that you do not have to be. But He was also struck so that the rivers of living water may flow out. He died, rose, and later ascended to heaven so that the Holy Spirit may come and satisfy your soul. And when Moses struck the rock, it was not just a trickle that came out, for as the psalmist tells us in Psalm 105:41, water gushed out; it flowed through the desert like a river. In other words, when God gives the Spirit He does not measure Him out with an eyedropper. Rather it is like a river in flood.

2. In Numbers 20 the situation is similar to Exodus 17 – the people are thirsty and are complaining again to Moses about having no water. But God's instructions to Moses are different this time. Instead of striking the rock, now Moses only has to speak to the rock (v8). This is yet another picture. In Exodus 17 it was a picture of the rod of judgement used against Christ the rock as He is crucified. But this time, he does not need to use the rod again. Why not? Because Jesus does not need to die a second time. There is no need to crucify Him again because His sacrifice has paid our debt in full (cf. John 19:30). The rod of judgement is not needed any more. As people who have already received the Living Waters, we only need to ask for it when we feel thirsty again.

3. In Hebrews 9:28 we read, “*Christ having been offered once to bear the sins of many*” that is, the rod of judgement (Exodus 17), “*Christ will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him*”. When Christ returns there will be no need for the rod of judgement, for His people are already saved and waiting for Him.
4. Revelation 21:6, “*To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment*”, and then in 22:17, “*The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price*”. Because of the work Christ did on the cross, as God’s child you do not have to come to Him with a rod of judgement looming over your head. You just need to come to Him in faith and ask Him to revive your soul.

These and many more, are the picture that Moses was meant to portray in Numbers 20, but unfortunately He ruined it, for there we learn in verse 11 that instead of speaking to the rock, he struck it, not once, but twice. As a result, Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. The writer of Hebrews tells us that we can draw near to the throne of grace with confidence knowing that we may find mercy and grace in our hour of need. However, we often come like Moses with our rod and strike the rock instead of simply asking for the living water. What are some ways that you have struck the rock? What should be your approach instead?



MODERN CONTEXT

What does this all mean for us today? Well we have already made a few connections, but here is another: “*Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few*” (Mat. 7:13-14). Jesus is the source, the only source, of the living water that we so desperately need which He provided for us through His death and is now available to those who are His who just need to ask for it. Jesus promised to give His living water, the Holy Spirit, to anyone who thirsts and who comes to Him and drinks. But the problem is, there are more people who will not drink the living water, who do not thirst for it because they do not see the need for it. However, there are others who cannot drink because we are not pointing people to the well. And so as a result, they are all heading for destruction instead of life.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Apart from those given in this study, what other bridges can you build to the modern context in application of the truths learned? (e.g. see Rom. 5:1-5; 12:1-2; 1Co. 12; Eph. 1:13-14; Heb. 6:1-8; 1Pe. 2:1-5; Jude 17-23)

The well that Jesus promised in John 4:14 has now become a flowing river with many tributaries. He has come for thirsty people and the Spirit is there to satisfy the spiritual thirst of His people. The question is, are you thirsty? And if you are, then what well are you drinking from? And if you are drinking from well of living water, are you telling others about it so they too may drink?