

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN

21. The Life-Giving, Thirst-Quenching Presence of God

John 7:37-39

This is our 21st installment in our study through the Gospel according to John. We noted in our overview of the book that John tells the story of Jesus in way that is very different from Matthew, Mark and Luke. John's account doesn't come at us in numerous paragraph sized bites. Instead, carried along by the Holy Spirit, John carefully curated a handful of moments in the life of Jesus and gave them extended development. Up until John's record of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus there's only about a dozen of those moments. But each of them are SO deep — SO wide — SO lofty.

Those LARGE chunks of narrative make teaching through the Gospel of John on Sundays challenging, to say the least! John 7 proves the point. Last week pastor Travis walked through THIRTY-SIX verses. It was no small task to unpack the historical backdrop of the Feast of Tabernacles and then tackle the swirling currents of unbelief, confusion, ignorance and polarization that Jesus walked into and how He responded to it. All of that to set up the TWO verse climax that those THIRTY-SIX verses were building towards.

John 7:37-39 (ESV) ³⁷On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' " ³⁹Now 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.

I want us to begin by noting that this amazing moment and those amazing words are tied to John's purpose statement:

John 20:30-31(ESV) Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing **you may have life in his name.**

Here's how — All of the unbelief, confusion, ignorance and polarization swirling around Jesus sits in the specific context of ONE of the three major religious feasts in Israel. THAT feast — the Feast of Tabernacles — is centered around the life-giving presence of God!

This idea of God's life giving presence in the midst of His people is **the** powerful, recurring theme throughout the Scripture. Two things I want us to bear in mind here:

1. The biblical picture for this is temple. The tabernacle, and later the 1st and second temples were not just the place where sacrifices were offered. They were the place where God met with Man.
2. The theme of God's life-giving presence in the midst of His people frames the trajectory of the storyline of the Bible.

The first two chapters of the Bible give to us the creation narrative.

L. Michael Morales — *“Genesis 1 portrays creation as a tabernacle, Genesis 2 – 3 portrays the garden of Eden as something of an archetypal holy of holies – the place of most intimate communion and fellowship with YHWH God.”*¹

The climax of the creation narrative is not the creation of man on the 6th day. It is man living in the presence of God in the Garden on day seven!

It is interesting to note that we're told in Genesis 2:15 that God placed man in the Garden to work (serve) and care for (guard) the Garden. Those are words used in reference to temple worship (Numbers 3:7–8; 1 Chronicles 23:32; Ezekiel 44:14). This wasn't just gardening; it was Temple service.

In Genesis three we have the account of the fall of man. Man was sent out of the Garden — separated from life-giving communion with God. The rest of the Bible is about God at work in human history to make the way for

¹ NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY Series editor: D. A. Carson
Who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord? A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS
L. Michael Morales

humanity to be reconciled to God — returned to life-giving fellowship with God.

Morales — *“Indeed, the fundamental plotline of the Pentateuch (and redemptive history) is often missed precisely from the failure to discern the ultimate goal of creation, namely for humanity to dwell with God.”*²

The final two chapters of the Bible record God once again dwelling with man.

***Revelation 21:3–4 (ESV)** ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, **the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.** ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.....*

But check this out — John goes on to say

***Revelation 21:22 (ESV)** ²²And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.*

The first two chapters of the Bible and the last two chapters of the Bible shape the way we understand everything in between.

Last week, pastor Travis told you how God designated three mandatory gatherings for His people: The Feast of Unleavened Bread (Pesach/Passover), the Feast of Weeks (Shavout/Pentecost), and the Feast of Booths (also called Succoth/Tabernacles **Lev.23:33-43**). Here’s an interesting factoid: The Feast of Tabernacles is the **ONLY** one of the feasts of Israel mentioned by name that is observed during the Millennial Rule of Jesus on the earth (**Zech. 14**).

The Feast of Tabernacles LOOKED BACK in the history of Israel to the 40 years that the Israelites spent in the wilderness. The feast remembered how they lived in tents and booths. It was designed by God for them to remember how **God was present with them** as they lived between their redemption in Egypt and their

² Ibid

entrance into the promised land — how He miraculously sustained them with **manna from heaven** and **water from the rock**. About 6 months earlier in John chapter 6 Jesus told the people that HE is that true bread that came down from heaven!

During the Feast of Tabernacles the Jews would live in booths for seven days. Every day during the feast there was a procession of priests, people and musicians from the Temple Mount down to the Pool of Siloam. When the procession arrived at the Pool of Siloam the priest would fill a golden pitcher from the pool. The procession then returned to the Temple by way of the Water Gate. Along the way the people recited **Isaiah 12:3** — “*with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*” The water was carried into the courts of the Temple and **poured out** on the altar as an offering to God.

D.A. Carson gives us a detailed picture of this moment

While the pilgrims watched, the priests processed around the altar with the flagon, the temple choir singing the Hallel (Pss. 113–118; cf. Mishnah Sukkah 4:9). When the choir reached Psalm 118, every male pilgrim shook a lûlāb̄ (willow and myrtle twigs tied with palm) in his right hand, while his left raised a piece of citrus fruit (a sign of the ingathered harvest), and all cried ‘Give thanks to the Lord!’ three times. The water was offered to God at the time of the morning sacrifice, along with the daily drink-offering (of wine). The wine and the water were poured into their respective silver bowls, and then poured out before the Lord.³

All of that reminded them of the water that God provided for their fathers in the wilderness — **especially the water that flowed from the rock in the wilderness.**

1 Corinthians 10:1-4 NLT — *I don’t want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, about our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. All of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them, and all of them walked through the sea on dry ground. ²In the cloud and in the sea, all of them were baptized as followers of Moses. ³All of them ate the same spiritual food, ⁴and all of them drank the same spiritual water. For they drank from the spiritual rock that traveled with them, and that rock was Christ.*

³ Carson, D. A. (1991). [*The Gospel according to John*](#) (p. 322). Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

REMEMBER that Jesus would not go up to the feast for the purpose of making a miraculous showing of Himself as his unbelieving brothers suggested. REMEMBER that Jesus had a RIGHT TIME — the FATHER’S TIME — for everything in His ministry. Those first 36 verses that you studied last week were all moving towards the Father’s appointed time when Jesus would declare Himself to be the One the tabernacle and temple have been pointing to and preparing for all along — declare Himself to be the source of God’s healing power and presence.

HERE’S THE SETTING

John 7:37–39 (ESV) ³⁷On the last day of the feast, the great day,

It is the LAST day of the Feast — the GREAT DAY of the feast. The Temple Mount is filled with people watching the final procession led by the priest arrive at the Temple to pour out that water.

It was AT THAT MOMENT that

³⁷... Jesus stood up and cried out,

and offered himself to the people of Israel as the true source and giver of Life giving Water.

³⁷ ...“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

³⁸Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ ”

There are two possible ways to interpret these two verses — leading to two different applications (by the way: interpretation always precedes application. Wrong interpretation >> wrong application). But I want to say upfront: I don’t think this is an either/or choice. I don’t believe that one interpretation is wrong and the other is right. I believe it is both/and. I believe both are necessary to getting the full picture concerning this living water

1. The traditional interpretation (as in the ESV and the NIV) places a full stop (period) at the end of v. 37. By placing the period there, “**Out of his heart**” in **verse 38** refers back to “**whoever believes in me**” at the beginning **verse 38**. Tuck that away! We will see the applicational importance of that in a bit.

2. This one is called the “Christological interpretation” — we’ll see why it’s given that name. This interpretation places a comma after “to me” in verse 37, with no full stop after “and drink”.⁴

*If a man is thirsty, let him come to me,
And let him drink who believes in me.*

The result is that the next words, “**as the Scripture has said**” — and the words “**streams of living water**” are seen as flowing out from the heart of *Christ* — which is why this is called the “Christological” interpretation.⁵

With *that* interpretation in mind turn with me to Ezekiel 47 (right after Lamentations and right before Daniel)

Ezekiel 47:1–12 (ESV) ¹*Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). **The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar.*** ²*Then he brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and behold, the water was trickling out on the south side.* ³*Going on eastward with a measuring line in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits, and then led me through the water, and it was ankle-deep.* ⁴*Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was knee-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was waist-deep.* ⁵*Again he measured a thousand, and it was a river that I could not pass through, for the water had risen. It was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through.* ⁶*And he said to me, “Son of man, have you seen this?” Then he led me back to the bank of the river.* ⁷*As I went back, I saw on the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other.* ⁸*And he said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah,*

⁴ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 323). Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

⁵ *Ibid*

*and enters the sea; when the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh. ⁹And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; **so everything will live where the river goes.** ¹⁰Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From Engedi to Eneglaim it will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. ¹¹But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. ¹²**And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.**”*

There in Ezekiel 47 (almost 600 years before Christ) the scriptures promise a time when life and healing would flow like a mighty overflowing river from the temple — which again, speaks of the life-giving presence of God.

The interesting thing is that this is very counter intuitive to the way the Israelites understood the Temple. Here’s what I mean by that: From the time of the tabernacle till the time of Jesus only very specific people could approach the presence of God, and to do so you had to go through all kinds of purification rites and rituals in order to come into God’s presence. You could not bring uncleanness into God’s sacred space. But in **Ezekiel 47** all of that happens in reverse. Rather than the sacred place being defiled by uncleanness and unholiness, the sacred space of God is on the move, like a mighty river bringing life, healing and goodness to everything it touches.

THAT is exactly what we see happening in the life and ministry of Jesus. In normal everyday Jewish life, if you touched an unclean person — a person with a disease or an open wound or a woman on her menstrual cycle — you were made unclean; if you touched a dead body you were made unclean. People avoided — ran away from anyone or anything that could possibly defile them. But not so with Jesus. He touches the sick and they’re made whole; He touches the unclean leper and the leper is cleansed; He touches the dead body and the dead person is raised to life. Why is that? How is that? John told us why and how in the prologue: Jesus is the God of creation who walked in the garden. The God who tabernacled in the midst of the Israelites in the wilderness became flesh and “tabernacled” among

fallen mankind. Jesus is the same God who put his holy presence in the Temple at Jerusalem. As John said in the beginning of this Gospel

John 1:14 (NET) ¹⁴Now the Word became flesh and took up residence among us. We saw his glory—the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth, who came from the Father.

HOW RADICAL IS JESUS?! Right there — at that very moment — Jesus declares that HE is the place where people encounter the life-giving presence of God! Right there — at that very moment — Jesus declares that HE is the One who gives this life giving, life restoring, soul satisfying water. THAT is the essence of the Christian life — receiving from Jesus life-giving, life restoring, soul satisfying living water. Ezekiel 47 happens to YOU! You come alive! You begin to flourish! God produces fruit in your life that nourishes others and brings healing to others!

Ezekiel 47 Parallels **Psalm 1** where we have the description of the man or woman who delights in God.

*Ezekiel 47:12 And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, **because** the water for them flows from the sanctuary (the presence of God). Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.”*

Note the description in **Psalm 1** of the man or woman delighting in the Word of God

Psalm 1:1–3 (ESV) ¹Blessed is the man who(se)... ².... delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. ³He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

If **you** are thirsty — if **you** have not found anything in this life that truly satisfies you (and there is no created thing that can ever do that) — **come to Jesus**.

I love how a friend of mine put it:

Are you thirsty? Do you want this? All you need is nothing. Freely receive God's gift of life by believing.

Now let's close by look at the application of these words of Jesus from the traditional interpretation which says that "rivers of living water" will flow out of the heart of the man or woman who comes to Jesus.

Listen again to the words of Jesus —

***John 7:37-38 (ESV)** "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will **flow from within them.**"*

Years later, while writing this account John adds this comment concerning the *rivers of living water* that *will flow from within* the believer

***John 7:39 (ESV)** ³⁹Now **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.*

Jesus promised that the life-giving presence of God would reside within those who believe — The Holy Spirit would flow from them like rivers of living water.

THIS is absolutely amazing!! Jesus not only promised that He Himself satisfies our thirst for the life-giving presence of God — that HE revives and restores and renews. He tells us that when we believe in Him we are **recreated** in Him to be conduits through which **He** can dispense that *living water* to the world around us. Whether we are gathered or scattered, we are meant to be a foretaste of that great day when healing waters will flow from the presence of the Lord and heal all the nations.

Have you been around such a person? There might not be anything spectacular about them — they might not know much about the Bible — but when you leave them you feel refreshed, renewed, restored and revived.

We have not only been rescued and made alive by Jesus — His life-giving presence is with us everywhere we go. Our lives and our words re-sound the appeal of Jesus here in John 7 — *If anyone thirst let come and drink!!*

I know that a lot of you might be thinking: “I don’t see any spectacular things happening through my life.” As a rule this doesn’t have much to do the spectacular. Most spiritually vital Christians are barely, if at all, aware of this happening.

“I am now convinced that those Christians who are most filled with the Holy Spirit are those who are least conscious of it. All they know is that they want to serve Jesus Christ.”

PLEASE DON’T MISS THIS — From cover to cover the Bible makes it clear that this has nothing to do with what we’ve done, or accomplished. This is something that is done **to** us, **in** us, and **through** us. This does not originate from us. All of this comes from the Father, by the work of the Son and the dwelling presence of the Spirit

Here’s what this looks like.

We live out our lives in our community. Everyday we meet and rub shoulders with people that are thirsty, that are needing living water. It’s a life in which we consciously choose to not hurry and move on. It’s a life that takes the time to be conversational.

QUESTION: What is one way that your life can be a conduit of filling and healing to those around you who don’t know God?

You are called *as you are, where you are, to be who you are*, representing Jesus and being a vessel of the life-giving presence of God.

Just as Jesus was sent by the Father, you and I are sent by Jesus into our neighborhoods, into the work place, to be with family members, and friends. Our lives should awaken men and women to the deep spiritual thirst they have for God — cause them to realize that they’ve been seeking living water all of their life. That’s exactly how I got saved!