

JOHN 7

RIVERS OF LIVING WATER

Before the Feast

In chapter seven there continues to be much debate about Jesus among various groups. Jesus is in Galilee, but the Feast of Booths is approaching. Jesus must go to Jerusalem along with all other Jewish males. A confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish leaders is inevitable. The Jewish leaders want Jesus dead (v. 1). Jesus will be crucified in about six months, at the next Passover. This Feast of Booths will be the last Jesus experiences until his second coming.

In Galilee, many of Jesus' disciples have just abandoned him (John 6:66). Even Jesus' brothers do not believe in him (vv. 3-5), though soon they will (Acts 1:14). Jesus refuses to join his brothers on their way to the feast (vv. 8-9), but later he goes privately (v. 10). He will be known to the world on his Father's terms, not on his brothers' terms.

In Jerusalem, the Jewish crowds are all talking about Jesus. Some say he is a good man (v. 12); others say he is dangerous (v. 12). The Jewish people are divided over him.

The Middle of the Feast

Halfway through the seven-day feast, Jesus suddenly appears and begins to teach in the temple (v. 14). The Jewish leaders are dumbfounded. They can't understand from where Jesus has gotten his teaching. He had not attended one of their schools (v. 15).

Jesus asserts, as he has done before, that God the Father is the ultimate source of his teaching (vv. 16-18). Anyone tracking with God will recognise that Jesus' teaching is from God (v. 17). Getting on God's wavelength, then, is getting on Jesus' wavelength. Jesus teaches to glorify his Father, and everything Jesus says is true (v. 18).

Some in the crowd accuse Jesus of being demon-possessed (v. 20), but Jesus questions their judgment (v. 24). Six months earlier, in Jerusalem, Jesus had made completely healthy a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years (v. 23; cf. John 5:8-9). If Jesus is demon-possessed, why would he make a man healthy? It does not make sense (see Matt 12:22-30). Also, the Sabbath is a day for healing and making people whole, as all Jewish people should realise.

Then some in the crowd begin to ask why the Jewish leaders are not doing anything to stop Jesus (v. 26). They also ask questions about Jesus' origin (v. 27). Jesus responds that they know where he is from (Bethlehem and Nazareth), and he repeats his claim that he has been sent by his Father (vv. 28-29). The Jewish leaders hate what Jesus is saying but are powerless to stop him (v. 30).

However, there are some in the crowd who get it. They believe in him. They reason from Jesus' signs that he must be the Messiah (v. 31). They do what the purpose statement of *John* says we should do.

...[B]ut these [signs] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31).

The Jewish leaders are frustrated because their control over the crowds is slipping. They decide to send their temple officers, Levites, to arrest him (v. 32). The officers attempt to do so, but Jesus says he is going to be with them for a little while longer, and then he will return to the one who sent him. When he goes, the Jewish leaders won't be able to find him, and they cannot come where he is going (vv. 33-34).

The Jewish leaders are flummoxed. Ironically, they prophesy that Jesus will go to the Jews living in the diaspora and teach the Gentiles (vv. 35-36). This is indeed what happens through Jesus' disciples in *Acts*.

The Last Day of the Feast

So far, chapter seven has not recorded the content of Jesus' teaching in the temple. But in verse 37, that changes.

Traditionally, on each of the seven days of the Feast of Booths, a priest would collect water from the pool of Siloam in a golden pitcher and carry it in procession up through the Water Gate into the temple, with a trumpet sounding. Another priest would then pour the water into a bowl beside the altar from which a tube would transport the water to the base of the altar. At the same time, wine would be poured into a similar bowl and through a tube on the other side of the altar. Then the water and wine would be poured out before the Lord. This ceremony was a way of thanking God for the water he gave in the past and asking God for water in the coming year.¹

Jesus' words are to be understood against this background. He stands up and cries out for all to hear that it is to him one must come for living water. We don't know if Jesus spoke these words on the seventh or eighth day of the feast, but it doesn't greatly matter.

The primary message is that Jesus himself will supply the deep, internal, personal needs of the believer through the Holy Spirit whom he will send, once he is glorified. Water from the pool of Siloam is good, but the rivers of living water flowing through the bellies of believers is much, much better.

Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. The one who believes into me, just as the Scripture said, from

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 420-21.

his belly will flow rivers of living water.” Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for not yet was the [era of the] Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:37-39).

These words are similar to what Jesus told the Samaritan woman a year or so before:

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water” (John 4:10).

“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14).

Jesus is confident he can supply the souls of believers with rivers of living water. The thirsty soul will find in Jesus a supply of water that he or she separately needs and that cannot be supplied from any other source.

At the time Jesus spoke these words, the era of the Spirit had not yet come (v. 39). Jesus had to die, rise from the dead, and ascend to the right hand of his Father before the Spirit could be sent. Sin had to be dealt with before believers could enjoy life by the Spirit. Jesus’ strategic victory at the cross inaugurated the era of the Spirit. The Spirit has now come in a way never known before. The Spirit-empowered life is now possible for the believer.

The reaction to Jesus’ bold statement is typical of what we have seen before. Some in the crowd believe Jesus is the Prophet that Moses wrote about in *Deuteronomy* (v. 40). Others say Jesus is the Messiah (v. 41). Others question whether the Messiah can come from Galilee, given that the Messiah must come from Bethlehem, the city of David (v. 41). Division among the Jewish people continues.

At this point the temple officers decide to disobey orders and not arrest Jesus (v. 45). Jesus’ teaching is like nothing they have heard before (v. 46). The Jewish leaders are upset at this and accuse the officers of being deceived, just like the accursed crowds (vv. 47-49). Nicodemus, probably by this time a believer, encourages the Jewish leaders to give Jesus a fair hearing before judging him (v. 51), but he is ridiculed as well (v. 52). The Jewish leaders cannot stop Jesus. All they can do is criticise those who are sympathetic towards him.

Life by the Spirit

What is the chief benefit of believing in Jesus? According to *John*, it is life. How does this life work in operation? It is life by the Holy Spirit. It is like rivers of living water flowing out from one’s belly.

“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. The one who believes in me, just as the Scripture said, from his belly will flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38).

The first sentence is for the unbeliever; the second sentence is for the believer. It is for the unbeliever to recognise his or her spiritual thirst, come to Jesus, and drink. To drink is to believe the gospel message: that Jesus, the Messiah and the Son of God (John 20:31), died for our sins and was

raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3-4), so that one might have forgiveness and life. When one believes in Jesus, one is taking one's first sip of the living water.

But then something extraordinary happens. The new believer is suddenly, invisibly, and permanently baptised by the Spirit into union with Jesus. At the same time, the Spirit comes and lives inside him or her. Rivers of living water begin to flow from up inside him or her. The Greek word used is not καρδιά, *heart*, but κοιλία, *belly*. The κοιλία is the cavity of the body that holds the stomach, intestines, and womb. It is in this cavity that the rivers of living water flow.

Step one is coming to Jesus for our first sip. Step two is continually drinking the rivers of living water that flow up from inside us, which is life by the Holy Spirit. It is not one river (singular) but multiple rivers (plural) we are drinking from.

Both the initial sip and the continual flow of living water are free. They do not cost anything. There is no metre, restrictor, or shut off-valve installed by a government council. The amount of flow isn't tracked. There is no scarcity of this water. One cannot overuse his or her water allocation, for the allocation is limitless. The source is God himself, who is limitless.

As believers, we carry about rivers of living water wherever we go. No matter where we are or what we do, the waters are available. Whether we are feeling great or horrible, happy or sad, relaxed or stressed, the rivers are there. If we are feeling hungry, angry, lonely, or tired, the rivers are there. The rivers are there to bring satisfaction and the production of good fruit.

We can turn the handle of our belly tap to the left or to the right. If all the way to left (counter-clockwise), the water flows unrestricted. If all the way to the right (clockwise), our access to the water temporarily stops. When we choose to shut off the tap, we are sapped of spiritual strength and cannot live the Christian life, which must be lived by the power of the Holy Spirit. To regain access to the living waters inside us, we are to confess our sins and resume living by the Spirit.

We can be a reservoir or a pipe. If we are reservoir, the flow of living waters stops with us. If we are a pipe, the water flows out through us into the lives of others. God prefers us to be a pipe. The Spirit-filled life is not to be a self-centred life. The living waters we receive as a gift are to flow out through us into the lives of others. It is more satisfying to be a pipe than a reservoir.

Imagine a local church where, inside every believer, all the internal belly taps are cranked all the way to the left and where all the believers are functioning as pipes, not reservoirs.

We may feel like a cracked water tank, a broken pipe, or a kinked hose. But Jesus says we are new creations in him. The past is forgiven. When we believed, God installed a totally new water carrying apparatus, complete with new tanks, new pipes, and new hoses. We are already complete in Messiah. The living waters are already flowing inside us. We have simply to turn on the tap, enjoy the flow of waters, and allow those waters to flow to others. This is life by the Spirit.

Let us turn on the tap and enjoy the rivers of living water that flow within us. Then let us pipe those waters to others.