

A River Runs Through It: Living Life in the Spirit

by John Ortberg



In the Apostle John's gospel, the picture Jesus uses for life on His Way is the picture of a river. He tells us, living in the flow of the Spirit, this river will flow out of the core of who you are. Ever find that a bizarre image? A river of life flowing out of you? Does it even sound appealing?

It seems to be a big deal to God, though. This image of a river is used about 150 times in scripture, most often as a picture of spiritual life.

And there is good reason. Israel is a desert country where rivers mean one thing: life.

When Jesus speaks of this central metaphor for our life with Him, the river is grace. The river is gift. To we desert people, the river is life. We don't know much about the Garden of Eden, but we know this: a river ran through it. Genesis 2:10 says, "a river watering the Garden flowed in Eden" and everybody in Israel who hears that verse knows what that means; that's life, that's grace. Beyond Genesis, other references to a river will bring tears to your eyes and hope to your soul if you let it.

"THERE IS A RIVER WHOSE STREAMS MADE GLAD THE CITY OF GOD." PSALM 46

Where the river flows, life will flourish. Where a river dries up, life does as well. Psalms 42 reads, "As the deer pants for the water, so my soul pants for you, O God." When I used to sing the praise chorus based on this verse, I often had a mental image of a little deer like Bambi walking through a green forest—a little thirsty, but otherwise fine. That's not the picture in this psalm, though. Remember, Israel is desert country. The waters are dried up. This deer is going to die if he doesn't find water—and that's me. That's every human being. To be cut off from the Spirit of God means a life of perpetual unsatisfied desires, spiritual dryness, emotional death.

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There is a river at the very beginning of the Bible. And in the Psalms. And there is a river at the very end. In Revelation 22:1, John writes, "then the Angel showed me the river of the water of life as clear as crystal... a beautiful thing in that day... flowing down from the throne of God and of the Lamb." Of course, the water that flows from the Father, from the Son, down the middle of the great street in that city—right through the heart of the community of God—is the flow of life.

On each side of the river stood the tree of life. Soaking up nourishment on the banks of this river, it flourishes in a most unusual way: bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding fruit every month. This is a remarkable tree. We do not have trees like that, even in California. These trees yield their fruit every month; not just a crop of fruit but twelve crops of fruit. Now, when anybody in Israel heard "twelve crops of fruit," what would they think of? Most likely the twelve tribes of Israel. We, too, think of the twelve tribes and, of course, the twelve disciples. This is a reference to the people of God. This is God taking care of His people. Of course, God would do that. Bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; God is being abundant and good with His people.

The next sentence is the one that will take your breath away: “and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” Let me ask you a question. Could the nations use a little healing today? Can Iran use a little healing today? Could the Gaza Strip? Could Dafar? Could Washington use a little healing today? Your home? Your neighborhood? Your apartment? Your office?

Jesus says, “This is your life and a river runs through it and it’s not just for you. Your flourishing is for the healing of the nations.”

The healing we have received, the redemption we have received, the grace we have received in God’s work making us whole people...it not just for ourselves...but that we might be bearers of this same grace to a hurt and desperate world.