

RIVERS OF LIFE

John 7:37-38

The four gospels record many memorable things said by Jesus, words that have been providing hope, comfort, and encouragement to people for the past two-thousand years. Sometimes, however, the time separating us from Jesus' sayings and our familiarity with them conspire to cause us to miss the import of his teachings. This lesson will consider Jesus' promise in John 7:37-38, exploring how Genesis offers a backdrop for understanding his claim about God's plan for those who believe in Jesus. In particular, the lesson will give attention to what it looks like to be a 'river of life' person.

Eden people

- Jesus claimed that "rivers of living water"¹ will flow out of the hearts of believers during the Feast of Booths, a religious event observed by the Jewish nation that offers an important context for understanding his statement (*John 7:38-39*).
 - Moses, at God's direction, instituted the Feast of Booths as a reminder of God's protection of the Israelites during their wilderness wandering that allowed them to enter the Eden-like land of Canaan (*Leviticus 23:33-43; cf. Leviticus 23:40; Genesis 13:10*).
 - By the first century, the seven-day feast's ceremonies included the priests pouring out water drawn from the pool of Siloam as a reminder of the water God provided the Israelites in the wilderness (*cf. Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 20:2-9*).
 - The feast's reminders of the exodus stoked Jews' anticipations of the Messiah who they believed would lead them in a new exodus (*cf. Nehemiah 9:36-37*).
- Jesus' claim, set against the backdrop of the Feast of Booths, brings together two sets of images.
 - First, "rivers of living water" referenced Eden and God's presence.
 - Genesis describes a river flowing out of garden in Eden that brought life to the whole world (*Genesis 2:6, 10-13*).
 - The imagery of Eden's life-giving river provides the backdrop for God causing water to flow from rocks for the Israelites wandering in the wilderness – He gave them an Eden-like experience in the midst of the wilderness (*Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 20:2-9*).
 - Later passages connect rivers of life to God's life-giving presence and offers insight into Israel's experience in the wilderness (*Psalms 36:7-9; Jeremiah 17:7-8, 13*) – they had an Eden-like experience because God's life-giving presence was with them like His presence had been in Eden.

¹ All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.



- Because rivers of life tie to God's life-giving presence, the temple, which housed God's presence and was consequently modeled after the Garden of Eden that also housed His presence (*cf. Genesis 3:8*), became a common location for a "river of the water of life" (*Ezekiel 47:1-13; Zechariah 14:8-9; Revelation 22:1-2; 1 Kings 6:29-36*).
- Second, John wrote that Jesus' comment about "rivers of life" referred to the Holy Spirit (*John 7:38-39*).
 - Luke records the fulfillment of Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:1-4 (*Acts 1:4-5*), writing that the Spirit descended upon the disciples in the same way God's presence descended into the tabernacle and temple (*Exodus 40:34-38; 1 Kings 8:10-11*).
 - The Spirit's indwelling of the apostles thus made an important claim - God's presence inside of Christians reveals their identity as His new temple (*Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19*). The Holy Spirit revealed that God now dwells in Christians like He previously dwelt in the temple and in Eden.
- Jesus' statement about "rivers of living water" reveals that those who believe in him become sources of God's presence in the world, that they host God's presence within their hearts and that, through them, God exercises His life-giving agenda in the world.

Applications

What does it look like to be people from whose hearts flow rivers of life? Consider the following three passages that picture Christians as God's temple and discuss the kind of practices connected to that identity.

1 Corinthians 3:16-17

Practice unity by putting God's will ahead of your own will

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Practice purity by rejecting the selfish impulse to use others for your pleasure

1 Peter 2:4-3:9

Live honorably so that your integrity directs peoples' attention to God

Jesus promised to turn those who believe in him into sources of God's life-giving presence in the world, a promise fulfilled through the transformed lifestyle that accompanies believing in him. What does your life reveal about your relationship with Jesus? Has your belief in him resulted in a transformed life that allows God to use you to further His purposes in the world?

