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THE BEST RIVERS EVER

John 7:36-52

Michael and Carissa have been bring their son, Wesley, out 3 year old grandson, to our community pool to have swim lessons once a week. They have limited objectives. They just want to get him used to being in the water. Last week he had a bad lesson. For some reason there was a lot of tears and resistance. Laurie thought the great parental cure all would help. I’m speaking, of course, of bribery. Wesley and Nana had seen a street sweeper working one day, then they found a toy street sweeper truck on the Internet. Laurie told him the street sweeper toy would be at the pool waiting, and if he could come with a good attitude and have a good lesson, then the toy sweeper would be his. What a difference! The week before he let it be known loud and clear he was having no part of swim lessons. What a contrast this week. He couldn’t wait for swim lessons. He cheerfully cooperated and even did the required thing that had been a meltdown causing event a week earlier, which was to put his face in the water. What caused such a dramatic turn? He wanted that toy truck. He had to have that toy truck. His entire future hung on his ability to get that toy.

At the turn of the century in the year 2000 Tom Hanks starred in a movie called, *Castaway*. He played an engineer whose plane crashes in the South Pacific. He is the lone survivor, and he washes up on a small deserted island. It was not my favorite kind of movie. It was about one guy all alone, so it featured him having conversations with a volleyball. The day after he lands on the island one great need begins to rise up above all others. He becomes desperately thirsty. He must find something to drink or he won’t survive. He finds some coconuts that have fallen from the trees. He knows there’s fluid inside. He frantically tries to open one. He pounds it against a rock, but doesn’t even dent the hard shell. He tries to drill a hole in one, but to no avail. Eventually he finds a sharp rock and uses it as an axe. He is able to cut into and remove the outer husk, then to break into the hard shell. But as he does most of the milky juice spills out. He lifts a fragment of the shell and drains the little liquid left in it into his mouth.

Thirst is a huge need. What do you thirst for? There is something we all thirst for as desperately as the castaway thirsted for liquid to sustain his life. Without what we thirst for we, too, will die. Jesus told us to come to him and drink. To slake our thirst with him. Let’s look at John 7:36-52 and see what he means.

JESUS MADE AN ASTOUNDING CLAIM

After a series of miracles and plagues that led to the people of Israel being allowed to leave Egypt after centuries of slavery there, they found themselves trapped on the shore of the Red Sea with the Egyptian army charging toward them, intent on forcing them back into slavery. The Israelis were saved when God parted the water of the sea and allowed them to escape. But they escaped into the Sinai Peninsula, not exactly a verdant landscape. It is a rugged, arid, desert region.

Problems began cropping up quickly. The first problem was water. Water sources in the desert are few and far between. How long will you survive without water? The rule of thumb is the average person can survive 3 days without water. That number varies, but if you’re in a hot climate that’s going to shorten the time.

God worked one miracle to provide good drinking water for Israel at a place called Marah. Then they moved on to an oasis were there were 12 springs and 70 palm trees and camped there. Then their food ran short. That’s when God began providing manna every day for them to eat. After the miracle of the Red Sea, the water at Marah, and the manna every day you’d think they realize they had no worries. But they traveled farther into the desert and the predictable happened. They ran out of water again. Exodus 17:3 says, “The people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to maker us and our children and livestock die of thirst?’”

Exodus 17:5-6 says that God told Moses, “Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink. So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel.” God miraculously provided water out of a rock. Water doesn’t come from a rock. That was a miracle. It told Israel that God can do anything. He can provide a way of escape from an impossible situation by parting the water of a sea, he can provide food that drops out of the sky or he can provide water from a rock when that should be impossible. This should have been a huge lesson for Israel.

Fast forward some 1400 years to first century Jerusalem. The opening verses of John 7 tell us that Jesus went to the Feast Of Tabernacles, one of the most heavily attended feasts of ancient Israel. It took place in the early fall. It was sometimes called the feast of booths or Succoth, because as part of the observance of the feast people would build small sheds or lean-to’s and live in them for the week of the feast. Essentially they camped out. If it were established today in this country it probably would have been called the Feast Of Recreational Vehicles, because that’s what people would camp out in. It would be celebrated at that holy site, KOA. It would be the Feast Of RV’s, brought to you by REI. This would not be my favorite feast. I agree with Jim Gaffigan that the only Happy Camper is the guy who is leaving the campground to go home.

The point of the people living in their early form of camper trailers was to remember the people of Israel living in the wilderness of Sinai. It was a reminder of how God provided for them in a difficult situation. Water was a special focus of that feast. The incident of water from the rock was a focal point, because its message was so profound. Each morning of the feast the high priest would carry a golden pitcher to the pool of Siloam. He would fill the pitcher with water, then lead a procession back to the temple. There, to shouts of rejoicing, he would pour the water on the altar in celebration of God’s provision.

There was a lot of talk about Jesus at the feast. Who was this man? How was he able to do the amazing things he did? The leaders were determined to eliminate him, but couldn’t because he was too popular. In verse 34 Jesus said he was going away and they could not go where he went. This confused many of them. He was talking about his eventual ascension into heaven after his death and resurrection. But they didn’t know what he meant. So they asked what that meant. Jesus ignored that and said in verses 37-38, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” He was claiming that he was what that festival was all about. He was the miraculous water God provides, the water that gives life.

JESUS CONFOUNDED THE PEOPLE

It is not surprising that this led to controversy among the people. Some believed that Jesus was a prophet, others thought he might be the Messiah. Others said he couldn’t be the Messiah because he was from Galilee and Messiah had to come from David’s family out of Bethlehem. Obviously they didn’t know the story of Jesus’ birth.

What Jesus said was tough to swallow. When Laurie and I were first married she had a terrible time taking pills. She insisted it was because her throat wasn’t big enough for them. I told her the problem wasn’t in her throat, it was between her ears. This actually gave me zero points in the husband of the month contest. But imagine if poor Laurie with her narrow throat had to swallow some gigantic horse pill sized meds. There would have been gagging and possible reverse peristalsis events. And that would have gone smoother than many of those first century Jews swallowing Jesus’ claim that he was the one producing life giving water from a rock and that feast was all about him. What would you think if I claimed all the fireworks on the 4th of July were actually all in celebration of ME?

The final verses in the chapter have a little bit of humor in them. The leaders of the people sent the temple guards to arrest Jesus, but they came back empty handed. They had already made one abortive attempt to nab Jesus. In verse 30 John wrote, “At this they tried to seize him (Jesus), but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come.” This time when the guards came back without him the leaders said, “Why didn’t you bring him in?”

I’m pretty sure there was some shuffling of feet and considerable hemming and hawing. I picture them trying to explain it, saying, “Well, what happened was…” All they could come up with was, “No one ever spoke the way this man does.” When they heard Jesus speak they couldn’t imagine arresting him in front of all those people. Of course telling the religious leaders, “No one ever spoke the way this man does” was not going to make them happy. They were essentially saying, “This guy is way better than you guys.” It made the leaders mad. They said, “You mean he has deceived you also?” You can see the arrogance of the leaders in their response. Essentially they say, “You don’t see any of us, who know what is right, believing in him do you?” Then their opinion of the people is revealed. They say, “This mob that knows nothing of the law, there is a curse on them.”

The religious leaders mostly looked down on the common people. All the people knew of God’s revelation was what they were taught by the religious leaders. They were not as steeped in the Law of Moses as the leaders were, and often they violated it not out of rebellion, but just because they weren’t aware of all its stipulations. The religious leaders assumed that since those people were so ignorant of God’s truth it is not surprising that they believe some heretical spellbinder who is leading them astray.

Nicodemus, who was impressed by Jesus as we saw in chapter 3, tried to defend him. He said they should at least give Jesus a fair hearing. This earned him an angry rebuke from the majority of the leaders. They said he must be from Galilee too, because that was the only explanation for why an educated religious man would believe in Jesus. They said, “You will find that a prophet does not come from Galilee.” Actually there were some prophets from Galilee, Jonah and Nahum among them. But they were saying that there is no prophecy that depicts a prophet, or the Messiah, coming from Galilee. In other words, Nicodemus got nowhere.

IMPLICATIONS

THERE IS SAFETY IN GOD’S PLAN

We see this in the slightly humorous incident where the temple guards went to arrest Jesus and came back empty handed. The ones who sent them on that mission considered their excuse to be more than a little lame. The Father had determined that it was not time for Jesus to be arrested, so he wasn’t arrested. Those guys weren’t going to be able to arrest him no matter what they did.

In 1 Samuel 19 King Saul was doing everything he could to kill David. David narrowly escaped one attempt to get him, then went to the prophet, Samuel for help. Samuel took him to a town called Naioth to hide. But Saul had informants everywhere. Someone spotted David and sent word to Saul. When he heard this, Saul sent another team to go get David. They had him cornered. There was no way out for him. But when they tried to get David, according to verse 20, the Spirit of God came upon them and they began prophesying. They forgot all about David. Must have been fun for them when they went back and reported that to Saul. He sent two more teams to get David, and they had the same result. Saul concluded if you want something done right you have to do it yourself. So, disgusted and annoyed, he went to take care of the problem personally. Verse 24 says when he got there, “He stripped off his garments, and he too prophesied in Samuel’s presence. He lay naked all that day and all that night.” He upped the ante on his men. He took all his clothes off and lay there naked, prophesying all day and night. The passage ends saying, “This is why people say, is Saul among the prophets?” It’s what you say when the most illogical thing happens. If the Spanos family sold the Chargers and the new owner moved them back to San Diego it would be appropriate to say, “Is Saul among the prophets?” Saul, with all the power at his disposal, had David right in his crosshairs, but David got away and Saul became a joke. Saul was never going to be able to kill David because God had a plan for David to be king. It was going to happen no matter what Saul tried to do.

In Luke 4 Jesus was back visiting in his home town of Nazareth. He was asked to say a few words in the synagogue. He read a passage of prophecy from Isaiah 61 and said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” In other words, this is about me. They got upset. Verses 29-30 say, “They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.” Once again you see people with every intention of wreaking harm on Jesus somehow standing there frozen as he calmly walks right by them. Jesus was as safe as the gold in Fort Knox regardless of what people intended to do to him. They weren’t going to be able to do anything to him until the time came.

But what does that mean for us? We aren’t Jesus. It certainly doesn’t mean that nothing bad can ever happen to us. It doesn’t mean we can do foolish things and assume God will protect us. But it does mean we can trust in God’s plan and protection. Psalm 4:8 says, “In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.” God is watching over us. God has a plan for us. Psalm 139:10 says to God, “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” Your days are ordained by God. Every one of them was written in his book. So you don’t need to fear. You can trust in God’s sovereign plan for you. Nothing can threaten it.

THERE IS LIFE IN GOD’S PROVISION

The heart of this passage is in verses 37-38 where Jesus said whoever believes in him rivers of living water will flow from within them. By this he meant the Holy Spirit. He was claiming to be what was depicted by the ritual of the feast. God miraculously providing life giving water. By believing him in, Jesus said, one can have the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, who will produce true life inside of us.

This is what we have seen Jesus saying consistently in the book of John. In John 4 Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well that he could give her living water. In verse 14 he said, “Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” In John 6:35 Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” In verse 40 he said, “Everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life.”

Jesus was claiming that all those who believe in him will receive the Spirit of God in them. This is consistent with the prophecy in Ezekiel 36:27 that when Messiah comes and God sets up a New Covenant, one aspect of that will be, as God says, “I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees.” God promised that he would put his Spirit in us, and Jesus said the way that happens is we believe in him.

Do you believe in Jesus? Have you put your faith in him as the Son of God, as the one who died to save you and conquered death to give you life eternal? If you do, then you have his Spirit in you. Some of you are thinking, “I find that hard to believe.” Well, do you believe that Jesus told the truth, or do you think he was lying, or maybe just wrong? I believe he told the truth. Then if you believe in him, you have his Spirit in you.

But I don’t feel anything. I don’t feel the Holy Spirit. I don’t feel any different than I used to. I am certainly not somehow better than other people. I don’t feel the power of God working in me. It just doesn’t feel like the Holy Spirit is really there. Ultimately this comes down to living by faith, trusting that what God promised us is true. Going through the immunotherapy treatments I’ve been receiving for the past almost 5 months at times has made me feel old. Just going to the cancer center to get treatments contributes to that because everyone there is mostly old and sick. But at times the treatments have made me feel sick and weak, and I am tired most of the time .But before the treatments I didn’t feel old, and even now that I am feeling better, I don’t feel old. I don’t feel all that much different than I did 20 or 30 years ago. But the hard truth is, what I feel is not accurate. I am old. When I see myself in pictures I’m dismayed. I look so old. Dude, you’re on Medicare. Because you’re old. What I feel does not reflect the reality. The reality is that I am old by anyone’s definition. The calendar doesn’t lie. You can’t always judge what is true by what you feel.

This is a matter of living by faith. What God promises about the Holy Spirit doesn’t have anything to do with what we feel. Go back to the prophecy in Ezekiel. What did God say the Holy Spirit would do in us? He would cause us to follow his decrees. That has nothing to do with what we feel. It is about what we choose. We choose to do what God says. None of us does that perfectly. But why are you in church? Why are you listening to this sermon? It is because you want to do what God commands. Otherwise you wouldn’t care. Have you noticed that most of the people who live in our area aren’t here, or at any other church? Why are you? Because you care about living as God says you should. You care about that for one reason. It is because the Holy Spirit is in you. If he weren’t, you wouldn’t care.

In 1 Corinthians 2:14 Paul wrote, “The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.” Do you accept that God is the creator and ruler of all things, that Jesus is God in human form, that God exists as one being but three persons, that Jesus died to atone for our wrongs and then rose from the dead, never to die again, that through him you will have eternal life? Do you think people generally believe all that? They do not. So why do you? Because you are either a lot smarter or a lot dumber than they are? No, that’s not the reason. Paul said people can only understand and accept those things by the work of the Spirit of Christ. If that Spirit isn’t in you, you won’t accept any of it. It will be religious nonsense to you. If you do accept it, that is because the Spirit is in you. You object, but most of the time it doesn’t feel like it. Did you note what Paul said in that verse about how it will feel? No? That’s probably because he didn’t say anything about feelings. He only wrote about what is true, regardless of how we might feel. That is what we must know and believe.

The second thing Jesus maintained is that when we have the Spirit in us he will produce streams of living water flowing from within us. Let’s start with the word translated “streams.” The Greek word’s basic form was potamos. It has entered into English as party of the name of an animal, the hippopotamus. Hippo was the Greek word for horse. The last part of the name meant “river.” So a hippopotamus is actually a river horse. But what I want you to get from this is that the word actually meant river, not stream. I’m not sure why translators went with streams when the basic meaning of the word was rivers. A stream is kind of like what we tend to see around here, a creek. A river is something more substantial, more impressive. Jesus literally said rivers of living water would flow from within those who have the Holy Spirit.

Pay attention to the plural. Jesus used the plural to strengthen the image. It’s not just a river flowing from within, it is rivers, more than one. The point is to add punch and power, emphasis on the abundance of this life flowing from within a person. Jesus was depicting both the power and the sufficiency of this flow of water. One of my singular moments of plumbing history happened on a Christmas Eve many years ago. That year the day before Christmas Eve the shower in our master bath developed a leak. It was just a drip every 30 seconds or so. I knew I was going to have to fix it, but it was minor, so I figured after Christmas Day I would deal with it. But the next day the drip was more pronounced. I just hoped it wouldn’t get much worse. However, as you know, hope is not a plan. As the morning went on it got steadily worse until it was a constant stream. I had to do something. I’ve fixed leaky faucets before, so I figured this would be no different. Annoying, but not insurmountable. I was now under the pressure of a time constraint. We had to do a couple of Christmas Eve services that night, so I only had about an hour to get done before we had to leave for church. I diligently went to work. Things went reasonably well for a while, until they stopped going well. To my dismay, at one point part of the faucet suddenly shot out of the wall and instead of a drip or a stream there was a jet of water gushing out of the wall all the way across the shower stall. It was a major blast of water. I had no way to stem the tide. The only thing I could do was run out to the main water valve and shut off water to the whole house. But we had a big family gathering coming to our house that night and the next day. We had to have water. What was I going to do? We couldn’t go through Christmas without water. But now it was time to go to church. Laurie came to my rescue. She called a friend who was a handyman with plumbing skills. He came over to our house and fixed the problem on Christmas Eve while we were at church getting ready for the services that night. He came to our last service that evening and after the service, after I thanked him profusely for his work, he said to me, “Rick, please do me a favor. Don’t ever attempt to do plumbing again.” I promised him I would avoid the temptation. I have kept my promise ever since.

I tell you that story because I want you to picture that powerful jet of water gushing out of the pipe in our shower. It was unstoppable. That is what Jesus pictured the Holy Spirit doing in us, only it will be multiple, powerful, unstoppable jets. They will be jets of living water, meaning powerful, flowing life. Note that it comes from inside us. Not from outside. We don’t derive it from our circumstances. It is originated by the Holy Spirit inside us, and is so strong it flows out toward other people so that we can be life affirming for them.

What are these living waters like? What sort of life is it that rises within us and flows as a never stopping force? It is what we thought about a couple of weeks ago on Easter. It is that full life, sometimes called the abundant life. It is true life, the life of heaven. Perhaps the best way to understand it is to remember what Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit. This is the kind of life that the Holy Spirit produces. Paul depicted it in Galatians 5:22. It is a life full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness gentleness and self-control. What a great life! Always loving, always joyful, totally at peace, ever patient with often irksome people and circumstances, always kind and good, faithful, gentle with people knowing they all have broken hearts in some way, not living a life out of control. It sounds perfect. We’re not perfect. But those are the traits that will mostly show up in this living water river, which means it will be a truly full and joyful life. It will go with us everywhere we go and will flow no matter what may transpire.

APPLICATION

This passage is very appealing because generally speaking humans are thirsty. We all want life and are hungry for it. The problem many believers have is there is a gap between theory and reality. Jesus claimed believing in him will mean we have his Spirit in us and he will produce rivers of living water. Unfortunately we find our experience doesn’t match up very well with that. Life is better, for sure, with Christ, but a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and gentleness does not continually flow from with us. The big question is, how does this happen?

There are lots of people giving us theories about how we get this life to flow from within us. Some say we must have some miraculous experience where the Holy Spirit descends upon us or baptizes us and miracles occur. There are several problems with this idea. First, Jesus suggests no such thing. Second, if you examine the lives of people who claim to have had such experiences, you don’t see any more evidence of rivers of living water flowing from them than you do in anyone else.

There are other people that will prescribe steps of how to experience the Holy Spirit and his river of living water. You must do things confessing your sins, spending time praying and reading the Bible, do other various religious activities. But once again, Jesus said no such thing. Furthermore, those who push this approach end up kind of telling you what you have to do to produce this kind of life by your choices and effort, which is the opposite of what Jesus said.

So the answer for us is to go back to what Jesus said. How do we get the Holy Spirit and these gushing rivers of life? Jesus said it happens by believing in him. That’s it. Trust in him and it will happen. But someone objects, I trust in Jesus, I believe in him, but still I don’t see this life he describes, at least not to the level that he seems to depict. I get some of that life, but it seems like it ought to be more.

The Christian world proliferates with books, seminars, speakers and more that offer the secret to the abundant life, the secret to being filled with the Spirit. I’m going to let you in on the real secret about all that. The secret of the Holy Spirit and the abundant, full life is, ***there is no secret***!

Here’s a crucial question. Do you think God wants you to have this full life and to experience the Holy Spirit at work in you? I can tell you without reservation that he absolutely does. Jesus said he came so you could have that life and God said centuries before Jesus even came that he would give us his Spirit. He commanded that we be filled with the Spirit.

Do you think that given that God wants this for us, he would make the way to experience it a secret, he would hide how to do it from us? Let’s imagine a scenario to see if that would make sense. Imagine that you are a Dad whose son is now a young teenager who is bright, doing well in school, and he is a terrific baseball player. He is a pitcher who has a cannon for an arm. But now he’s getting to a place where he needs to be able to do something besides throw blazing fastballs. You realize the ideal next pitch for him is a slider. So you tell him, “Son, you need to develop a slider, but you need to do it right so you don’t hurt your arm.” He is eager. He says, “Great. I want to learn how to throw a slider. What do I do?” And you say, “It’s a secret.” He says, “Well, how do I learn the secret?” And you say, “That’s also a secret.” Does that make any sense at all? Of course not. If you want him to do this, you tell him how to do it. If God wants us to have his Spirit and have that full life, he’s not going to keep the way to do that a secret. No, there is no secret. Jesus has put it out there in plain sight. All we have to do is listen to him.

What do I need to do? Jesus said believe in him. That’s the not secret “secret.” Yes, but I believe in Jesus, and I still think I’m not experiencing it. Perhaps it will help if I point out that Jesus used a present tense verb when he said believe in him. That could be translated, “keep believing in him.” He said if anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink. Again, present tense, “Let him keep coming to me and drinking.”

I got up yesterday morning and I was thirsty. So I got myself a glass of orange juice. I drank it. I was done drinking for the day. In fact, I am done drinking anything ever again. I will never be thirsty again, right? Well that is clearly wrong. Yes, I drank a glass of juice, but then after breakfast I worked out and I need to rehydrate. I was thirsty again and had to drink some water. We don’t drink once of Jesus, just put trust in him once, and then never again. We keep putting our trust in him continually, believing in him, and that’s how we experience the work of his Spirit producing life in us.

A few weeks ago I worked on filing my taxes, a truly onerous task. Every year I use tax software to do this because our tax situation is uncomplicated. This year I used the same software but have a new computer. I got right down to the end of all the work, but to finish the last few steps I suddenly couldn’t enter responses into the forms. I would type, but nothing would show up in the form. I tried everything I could think of, which wasn’t all that much beyond reboot the whole system, to fix it but nothing worked. I found a help phone number for the company that makes the software and called for help. A nice young woman started working with me. She had me try all kinds of things, but nothing worked. She got very frustrated. She kept saying, “That ought to work.” A task that I should have been able to finish up in 10 minutes stretched into an agonizing hour and a half. I was annoyed, feeling frustrated, impatient and unhappy. At that point it occurred to maybe I should drink of Jesus. I quickly told him how frustrated I was, I prayed that he would make this somehow work, but I also said, “Lord, if this is what you want for me, and if you want me to have to do this all over again for some reason, then I will do it. I trust you know what is best. I believe in you.” At that point I calmed down. I was able to be at peace with whatever happened. I experienced his life. A few minutes later, the thing suddenly worked. I don’t know why for sure. I stumbled on something that worked, and was happy for whatever it was.

The point here is as we keep believing in Jesus, trusting that he is enough, believing what he gives us is enough, living in his grace and love, drinking of him continually, we will experience those rivers of living water.