

STREAMS OF LIVING WATER
Health, Movement and Life in God's Spirit
October 11, 2009

In our study of biblical images of vibrant faith, we've looked at fire and salt. Now we consider water. Not just *any* water. The Bible refers over and over to *living* water-rivers and streams and wells and springs of living water.

Dead water is at the end of the line. At the low point in the system, dead water is where water collects when it has nowhere else to go. For example, the Dead Sea sits in the lowest valley floor on the face of the planet. Fed by the Jordan River, flowing south from the Sea of Galilee, that dead pool has no place to go – no outlet to flow toward the oceans. All points are up from that thick, salty sea, and water only flows down.

In much the same way, dead faith has no outlet. Dead faith just sits there until it is finally taken up into the heavens by evaporation.

Streams of water imply a host of positive images. Most obviously, living waters represent **health** and the **nourishment** that feeds health. The man who loves God's council, instead of the wicked, the mocker and the scoffer, will be like a tree planted by streams of living water, "yielding fruit and enduring" (Psalm 1:3). In the wilderness, God "split the rock of the desert and gave [the people] waters as abundant as the seas...out of a rocky crag...made water flow down like rivers" (Psalm 78:15-16). The flowing water represents God's provision of nourishment and corresponding health and sustenance.

In similar ways, living waters symbolize **hope** in the hard seasons of life. The prophets would speak of better days to come using the image of rivers, streams and plentiful living water (Isaiah 33:21, 35:6, 49:10). Psalmists do the same, offering songs and prayers that elicit hope in bitter times (Psalm 46:4).

More ultimately, living waters point to the plentiful and eternal blessing of **heaven**. This is found in the prophets (Zechariah 14:8) and in the teachings of Jesus. He tells the Woman at the Well that his gift is "a spring of water that wells up to eternal life."

In John 7:38, Jesus changes the image somewhat during the Feast of the Tabernacles. Part of that celebration involves ceremonial water poured on the altar of the Temple at Jerusalem. Jesus uses that visual to launch into his own profound celebration, "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him". While Jesus might have meant more than *only* the **Holy Spirit**, John, the gospel writer interprets, "By this [Jesus] meant the Spirit, who those who believed in him were later to receive."

In Revelation 21:6, Jesus offers living waters of **life** to those who believe and overcome.

Closer to the Fire: Images of a Vibrant Community

In Amos 5:24, *justice* and *righteousness* are likened to a river and a **never-failing** stream.

And in Jeremiah 2:13, God refers to himself as the spring of living water.

The Particulars of Living Water

So why is living water such a useful and common image?

- Streams of living water comes from above.
- Springs of living water comes from within.
- Living water is fresh and pure.
- Living water is forever moving
- Living water supports life.
- Living water has an outlet.

Streaming Spirituality

So let's do the personal and spiritual applications. First, "every good and perfect gift comes from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." Like every good gift, a vibrant, streaming spirituality acknowledges the Source for all that's good. Pride and self-reliance stunt spirituality and steal God's glory. Streaming spirituality gives God thanks, credit, praise, honor and all that is due the Source.

Second, streaming spirituality is filled with the Holy Spirit and hungers to give the spirit free and uninhibited influence. Too often we've reduced spiritual living to a set of moral dictates and acts of the will, when the best act of the will is surrender and self-presentation to God's Spirit. Praying in the Spirit, walking in the Spirit, serving according to the gifts of the Spirit and cultivating the growth of the fruits of the Spirit brings vitality to our faith.

Third, streaming spirituality is fresh and new. Jesus did not come to put new wine in old wineskins (Matthew 9:17), but rather to completely remake us. Then we've asked to self-present for a steady and thorough renewing of the mind (Romans 12:2).

Closer to the Fire: Images of a Vibrant Community

Fourth, streaming spirituality has movement. Flowing from the Source to a great destiny ordained by God, our lives find vitality when we see our potentials and never settle into a changeless, direction-less pool.

Fifth, streaming spirituality carries life and brings life. We've been given a gift with eternal implications and practical benefits. The Spirit alive in us is life-giving and the gospel we carry is life-transforming. We are agents, carriers, ambassadors, witnesses and catalysts of the real life.

Sixth, streaming spirituality always has an outlet. It isn't fed without feeding. It isn't filled without overflowing. We don't receive in order to hoard or merely to bless and develop ourselves. There is always a person or a cause immediately downstream, and God is asking us to roll down the hill with justice, mercy, love, joy and purpose.

So how do I get from the Dead Sea to the Sea of Galilee? How do I travel north from my desperate low point uphill to the living lake of water teeming with life?

Literally, the walk from the Dead Sea to Galilee means following the Jordan River. Spiritually, this trek is a walk into the waters of full baptism – a life immersed in Jesus, the Spirit and the loving purpose of God's kingdom.

Dabbling and dilly-dallying won't do. Jesus asks us, and all of scripture cries out, for a full immersion.

In Jeremiah 2:13, God confronts the people for two sins. First, he accuses them of forsaking him, the spring of living water. Second, he rebukes them for digging their own cisterns – their own tanks – which prove to be broken. They don't hold water. And if they did, it wouldn't be living water.

We neglect God. We build our own cisterns. We build our own lives and supposed pathways to fulfillment. God pleads with us not to be fooled or to be so unkind to ourselves. He is the Source of real life and Jesus, the Spirit and the Word bring the kind of nourishment and health that make life work.