

John 7:25-52
(Psalm 1; Ephesians 3:14-21)
“Rivers of Living Water”

Introduction

As we saw last week, everyone who has gone up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Booths is looking for Jesus, but few recognize him. The first half of our chapter explains why they miss him, even when he is standing right in front of them – and why so many of us miss him as well: if we reject Jesus when he challenges our time-table, or our behavior, or our beliefs, we will miss him. But if, on the other hand, we are seeking God’s will, God’s glory and God’s grace, we will recognize Jesus, trust him and follow him in the way that leads to life.

Now the second half of the chapter, which is before us this morning, begins with the people debating over whether or not Jesus really is the Messiah. Jesus warns them that they must not put off making a decision about him, because he will be with them only a short time, and then they will seek him but not find him. At the high point of the festival – the dramatic moment when water that was drawn ceremoniously and carried up the Temple to be poured out – Jesus stands up and cries out in a loud voice, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me ... ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” The final verses describe the division between those who believe his words and those who reject him.

Clearly the heart of this passage is what Jesus did at the height of the feast, his moment of going public and making a staggering invitation to those who believe in him, then and now. John explains that when Jesus offered us living water flowing out of the center of our lives, he was talking about the Holy Spirit. He was promising the baptism of the Holy Spirit to those who believe in him. We have noted before how arresting these words are. Why does John speak of the Spirit as not yet given, when the Spirit first appears in the second verse of Genesis chapter one and appears repeatedly throughout the Scriptures? How can he say that the Spirit had not yet been given, when we encounter in the biblical record many people filled with the Spirit prior to this?

Our failure to seek an answer to this question, and our failure to study this promise until we understand it more deeply, has contributed to the rather low level of Christian life too typical of our experience here in the West, and to our all too jaded view of what is in store for us this side of eternity. In order to answer this question, we must begin to understand what too many Christians have never comprehended: namely, that *the greatest gift given to the child of God is nothing less than the life of God lived in and through us.*

This morning, I want to remind you of the treasure we have been given in salvation by rehearsing several popularly held, but inadequate, descriptions of the gospel. Then, we will try to describe the gospel in its fullness and glory.

Body

- 1. Salvation is forgiveness of sins. We remain broken people who sin, but at least we are forgiven sinners.**

It is true that the gospel offers forgiveness of sin through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This is entirely of grace, and is received through faith alone. Nothing that we do can contribute in any way to the grace of forgiveness, made possible only because of the perfection of Jesus' life offered in place of ours. The moment we are saved, we are forgiven forever. It is also true that we remain sinners, that we continue to sin, and shall continue to sin until we stand at last before our Lord, and he at last makes us perfect, not only in our standing before him, but in actual fact.

This is the extent of most Christian's operative understanding of the gospel. It is all true, but woefully inadequate.

- 2. Salvation is not only forgiveness, but includes the imputation of Christ's righteousness.**

This is a crucial fact. Apart from some understanding of this, we have no idea why God could not simply forgive us without sending his Son to die in our place. The righteous requirements of God's law had to be satisfied. The penalty had to be paid, or God could not forgive us and remain just and righteous. It is, in other words, this imputed righteousness that alone enables God to forgive sinners without himself becoming an accomplice, implicated in our sin and rebellion by the act of forgiving and setting free those who have broken his law and rebelled against him. And he does not simply pay our debt and leave us broke. He credits the riches of his righteousness to our account. All of this also is gloriously true, and for many of us who stand in the noble reformation heritage, this is the fullness of truth. Here the soul rests, and nothing more is sought.

This is, indeed, the souls resting place; however, God has more, so much more that depends upon this great bedrock fact and flows from it, but that takes us out of the realm of merely contemplating what God has done for us, and invites us into the living experience of what God wants to do in us. We must always build on the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us. But, we must build. A foundation is not a building.

- 3. Salvation is more than imputation and forgiveness. God has not only done something for us, but has done something in us as well. He has given us his Spirit: the same Spirit who came upon Jesus at his baptism, and in whose power Jesus lived and ministered. In other words, the very same power that was available to Jesus in his life and ministry is available to us here and now.**

This takes our understanding of the gospel beyond the merely legal concept of sin and guilt, forgiveness and justification, and brings us into a living experience of the life of this God who loved us so much that he gave his Son for us, to save us from sin and death, and make us his adopted children. This, in fact, was my understanding of the fullness of the doctrine for many, many years: Jesus poured out at Pentecost the same Spirit that had empowered him throughout his ministry. This in itself is far more glorious than many Christians really believe or contemplate. Just think of having available the same power for living and loving and ministering that Jesus himself had. The very lowest understanding of the Spirit's work must lead one at least to acknowledge this.

However, God has done something even greater than this, and when this greater thing is grasped, it begins to make clear certain Scriptures that are otherwise difficult to understand. Well, then, what is it?

- 4. Salvation is all of this, and something gloriously more, and here is the key to understanding in what sense John could say of the Holy Spirit that he had not yet been given: Salvation includes the very power, not of the Son of God in his humiliation and earthly ministry when his glory was set aside, but of the risen, ascended and glorified Christ who is seated at his Father's right hand in power and glory.**

It is in this sense that John could write, "as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (John 7:39). Jesus had to accomplish redemption, break the power of Satan and his rebellion, kick down death's doors from the inside, make a way for us to be fully forgiven and justified, and then resume his seat at the right hand of the Father, now as the risen conquering Son who has triumphed over everything that would separate us from the love of God. What I am saying is this: Jesus has given us far more than he himself was given at his baptism. The Spirit was poured out upon him as he had been poured out upon the Old Testament saints, upon Abraham and the patriarchs, upon Moses and the prophets, upon David and the righteous kings of Israel, upon Zechariah and Elizabeth, and upon Mary and John the Baptist.

This is exactly the point where most of us make our mistake – as I said, I missed this for many years, and spoke of the new age dawning at the outset of Jesus' ministry, when the Spirit descended on him. But this was the culmination of the old age. He was fulfilling it, living the old covenant perfectly, so that he could open the way to a glorious and new covenant, and could pour out his Spirit with all of the power and authority of the One who had conquered sin and death.

- 5. How did the writers of Scripture know these things? How could they know that Christ was declared King of kings in the heavenly realms, and that he took his seat in majesty at the Father's right hand?**

The testimony is uniform, whether reading John or Paul, or Luke quoting Simon Peter. Each says what Jesus himself had said: the witnesses are two: There are the human witnesses, the apostles who witnessed Jesus' ministry and his death, and who saw him raised from the dead and ascending from this world. The second is the Holy Spirit, who witnessed the return of Jesus in power and glory to the majesty in heaven. It is he who bears witness to the church. [Read John 15:26,27 and Acts 5:30].

It is, therefore, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the church that assures us that Christ is enthroned in heaven, and that we are accepted in the Father's presence because of him.

Conclusion

But what are we to make of this as we return to work, as we try to live here on earth's dust, a place of love and betrayal, of joy and sorrow? What does this mean, what should it mean to us this morning? Three things:

It means, *first*, that Paul was not merely speaking of our position or standing in Christ when he wrote to the church at Ephesus, "And [God] raised us up with [Christ] and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6). Paul is speaking of actual fact, and what ought increasingly to be our experience, our point of reference. If I am a member of Christ's body, and the head of that body is in heaven seated at the Father's side, then I am seated there also.

For example, if I am swimming and my head is out of the water, I can breathe. I don't need any other part of my body out of water to breathe feely, only my head. If my head is in the throne room of God, and I am learning to live connected to the head, then I am breathing the very air of heaven. And, of course, in both the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New, Spirit and air and breath are all the same word.

It means *secondly*, that we should be astonished and appalled at the state of the Church, and at the state of most of our lives. God has given us nothing less than the presence and power of the risen, conquering Christ, and most of us live such pathetically distracted, anxious, faithless and powerless lives.

Finally, it should give us incredible hope and confidence in approaching God and asking for a greater experience of the reality of what he already given, the grace of forgiveness and the glory of his presence and power.

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