

THE RIVER OF LIFE

22 And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. ²In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, *was* the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each *tree* yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree *were* for the healing of the nations. ³And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. ⁴They shall see His face, and His name *shall be* on their foreheads. ⁵There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.

⁶Then he said to me, "These words *are* faithful and true." And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show His servants the things which must shortly take place.

Well, we now reach the final chapter not only of this Book, but the final chapter of the Bible. There are certain people out there who don't much care for reading of books. You know who you are. You are the ones who when you were assigned a reading assignment in high school would read the first chapter, skim the rest, and read the last chapter, and that way you could have some knowledge of the book. Well, If you were to do that with the Bible, and from conversations I have had with certain individuals, I think they did, you would see many of the same images in Genesis 1 and Revelation 22. Of course, just jumping straight to the end does cause us to miss the meaning of virtually everything in this chapter.

The Bible is a story. It begins in a garden, it ends here in a garden city. It is a story of development. It builds. There is a Christian song that was released about 20 years ago, that I just truly and absolutely love. The song is by Steve Green and it is called "The River." I want to quote some of the words to you .

There's a river ever flowing,
Widening, never slowing,
And all who wade out in are swept away.
When it ends, and where it's going,
Like the wind, no way of knowing.

The song is one of my favorites, even though I do have just a few issues with some of the teaching. Let me explain. The River spoken of in this passage is a river that encompasses the entire world. It is a river that brings life and healing and God's victory throughout the entire world. The song tends to focus on the river in each of our individual lives. The River spoken of in this passage though is a river that sweeps over the entire creation. Hear me, I love this song, but I often find that when I listen to a lot of Christian Music I see this overwhelming individualistic approach that kind of tweaks my theological buttons.

In saying that I would like to make a statement that clarifies some of the message I have bringing to you through this entire Revelation series. There is a predominant tendency amongst the modern church to look at this book as entirely future. How many of you have heard the famous quip, "I have read the last chapter, and we win?" While this is true, we do win, if you have to wait till the last chapter to recognize this I might assume you are one of those skimmers I talked about earlier.

The glorious portrait we see of the New Jerusalem, and this glorious garden city are not entirely future. This does not mean they are not future, they are just not entirely future. In the Christian walk we move from grace to grace. We see our enemies slowly, sometimes too slowly for our desire and our understanding, and gradually, being subdued under the cross of Jesus Christ. This Garden City is truly and amazingly a present reality, but what we see here in these final chapters of the Bible is that City in its ultimate glorious manifestation, and yet even this city is still growing.

And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb.

The center piece of the city is the river of the water of life. Water is one of the premier symbols in the entire Bible. It is literally everywhere. As I mentioned earlier Biblical Symbolism as it was intended is one of those things that most contemporary seem to miss. A lot of this might be because we are not Hebrew, and thus we read things differently than they did. Biblical symbolism is not a code. This would be exciting to many people in our day as we can tell by looking at the sales numbers for books about hidden codes in the Bible. Rather, Biblical symbolism is a new way of seeing. What James Jordan called, "Through New Eyes."

I want to give us a brief introduction to "How to Read Biblical Symbols." And in doing that I am going to borrow very heavily from David Chilton in his excellent book "Paradise Restored." What is great about the example he gives in that book is that it is about water.

In John 4:10 when our Lord was speaking to the woman at the well, we hear this exchange:

Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

All of us understand that our Lord is not speaking here of offering just water. What He is offering is eternal life. But He called it "water." Most of us stop at that point but David Chilton says of this passage that if we have to begin to ask questions, "Why did He do that?" Jesus could of simply said eternal life, but He did not. Why did He speak in metaphor? Why did He want her to think of water? Now this is where we can make a big mistake, and this is the primary error of many interpreters who try to take a "symbolic" approach. It is to think that Biblical symbolism is primarily a puzzle for us to solve. We can suddenly decide: "Aha! Water is a special code-word which means eternal life. That means that whenever the Bible talks about water symbolically, it is really talking about eternal life; whenever someone takes a drink, he is really becoming a Christian." It just doesn't work that way (as you will see if you try to apply it throughout the Bible). Besides, what sense would it make for the Bible simply to put everything in code? The Bible is not a book for spies and secret societies; it is God's revelation of Himself to His covenant people.

When a person takes the puzzle-solving, mystical interpretive approach it tends to be speculative; it does not pay attention to the way the Bible itself speaks. When Jesus offered "water" to the woman, He wanted her to think of the multiple imagery connected with water in the Word of God. In a general sense, of course, we know that water is associated with the Spiritual refreshment and sustenance of life which comes through salvation. But the Biblical associations with water are much more complex than that. This is because understanding Biblical symbolism does not mean cracking a code. It is much more

like reading good poetry. The symbolism of the Bible is not structured in a flat, this means-that style. Instead, it is meant to be read visually. This is in large part because the language it was written in was a highly pictorial language. We are to see the images rise before us in succession, layer upon layer, allowing them to evoke a response in our minds and hearts. The prophets did not write in order to create stimulating intellectual exercises. They wrote to teach. They wrote in visual, dramatic symbols; and if we would fully understand their message we must appreciate their vocabulary. We must read the Bible visually.

These visual symbols themselves, and what the Bible says about them, are important aspects of what God wants us to learn; otherwise, He wouldn't have spoken that way. So, when the Bible tells us a story about water, it is not "really" telling us about something else; it is telling us about water. But it is giving us a Biblical meaning of water rather than a western or scientific meaning. But at the same time we are expected to see the water, and to think of the Biblical associations with regard to water. The system of interpretation offered here is neither "literalistic" nor "symbolic"; it takes the "water" seriously and literally, but it also takes seriously what God's Word associates with water throughout the history of Biblical revelation.

When Jesus spoke to this woman about the water, what are some of the Biblical associations which might have occurred to the woman at the well, and to the disciples?

Here are a few of them:

1. The watery, fluid mass that was the original nature of the earth at the creation, and out of which God formed all life (Gen. 1).
2. The great river of Eden that watered the whole earth (Gen. 2);
3. The salvation of Noah and his family by the waters of the Flood, out of which the earth was re-created (Gen. 6-9);
4. God's gracious revelations to Hagar by a fountain (Gen. 16) and a well (Gen. 21);
5. The well called Rehoboth, where God gave Isaac dominion (Gen. 26);
6. The river out of which the infant Moses, the future Deliverer of Israel, was taken and made a prince (Ex.2);
7. The redemptive crossing of the Red Sea, where God again saved His people by water (Ex. 14);
8. The water that flowed from the stricken Rock at Sinai, giving life to the people (Ex. 17);
9. The many ritual sprinklings in the Old Testament, signifying the removal of filth, pollution, sickness and death, and the bestowal of the Spirit upon the priests (examples in , Lev. 14; Num. 8);
10. The crossing of the Jordan River (Josh. 3);
11. The sound of rushing waters made by the pillar of cloud (Ezek. 0);
12. The River of Life flowing from the temple in Ezekiel 47 and healing The Dead Sea.

All of these are Biblical images that the woman at the well would have been expected to associate with the Words of Christ when He spoke of living water. And likewise, when we see this river of life flowing

forth from this glorious city, these are all images that we should pull from our Bible bank, and see a bit more of what is being presented to us.

The first thing this river should make us think of is the great river that flowed from the garden sanctuary in Eden. This river was the source of life to the entire world in the pre-fall world. Now, in the restored paradise of God, the river flows directly from the temple. Again familiarity with the Book of Ezekiel helps us out greatly here. In Ezekiel the prophet gets a look at this city, Here in the Book of Revelation we begin to see that this is a picture of the glorious expansion of the Kingdom of God.

Ezekiel 47 beginning in the first verse reads:

Then he brought me back to the door of the temple; and there was water, flowing from under the threshold of the temple toward the east, for the front of the temple faced east; the water was flowing from under the right side of the temple, south of the altar. ² He brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me around on the outside to the outer gateway that faces east; and there was water, running out on the right side.

³ And when the man went out to the east with the line in his hand, he measured one thousand cubits, and he brought me through the waters; the water *came up to my* ankles. ⁴ Again he measured one thousand and brought me through the waters; the water *came up to my* knees. Again he measured one thousand and brought me through; the water *came up to my* waist. ⁵ Again he measured one thousand, *and it was* a river that I could not cross; for the water was too deep, water in which one must swim, a river that could not be crossed. ⁶ He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen *this*?" Then he brought me and returned me to the bank of the river.

⁷ When I returned, there, along the bank of the river, *were* very many trees on one side and the other. ⁸ Then he said to me: "This water flows toward the eastern region, goes down into the valley, and enters the sea. *When it* reaches the sea, *its* waters are healed. ⁹ And it shall be *thatevery* living thing that moves, wherever the rivers go, will live. There will be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters go there; for they will be healed, and everything will live wherever the river goes.

Now please notice the similarity between these two descriptions, but also I think it is important to notice the differences. In Ezekiel we see many trees lining both sides of the river. Here in Revelation the tree is specifically named the Tree of Life. The idea we are meant to see here is that the tree of life is not merely one tree, but literally the sides of the river is a forest of trees of life. Going back to Genesis 3, we see a tree of life in the middle of the Garden. After Adam's sin and the fall of man, access to the tree of life was cut off. Now after Christ's victory, access has once again been granted, but not only has it been granted it is actually given in increased glory, and the story of the Kingdom is that it continues to increase.

Now, the thing we have to understand is the whole portrait here in Rev. 22 is a picture of the Kingdom of God in its glorious growth. Growth is indicated by speaking of the way the Kingdom reaches beyond it self and expands. The tree is said to bear 12 different fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month.

This is speaking of the ongoing and continuous production of the tree. It will never cease. Ezekiel 47:12 says of this:

“Along the bank of the river, on this side and that, will grow all *kinds of* trees used for food; their leaves will not wither, and their fruit will not fail. They will bear fruit every month, because their water flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for medicine.”

The thing that I think is most amazing about this is the continuity. People then, and even today could not imagine a tree that continually brought forth fruit. This is the reason that Isaiah speak of the Kingdom of God in terms of its increase. “Of the increase of His government and peace, there will be no end. “

Now notice in Ezekiel, the leaves of the tree are to be used for medicine. I would ask a question here, “What need is there of medicine for healing if this passage is speaking of only eternity?” Why, once the final enemy has been defeated, death, will there be any need for medicine, for doctors, for healing at all? The answer is there would not be. The city that is being spoken of here is clearly the city of the Kingdom of God, and we have shown this, I believe quite adequately over the last several messages. In Revelation it is even more specific, the leaves are for the healing of the nations.

How are the leaves used to heal the nation?

Well, this is a great question, but how do we answer it. If we look around right now in our country alone we see bits of chaos all around. We have inner city violence in sometimes staggering proportions, we have two political parties that are great at finger pointing and placing the blame, and at the moment the two leading candidates for the Presidency of the United States make you wonder if you have stepped inside some dark, sick and twisted comedy. Meanwhile, the Church of Jesus Christ, who has access to the leaves of the tree of life for the healing of the nations generally wallows in the mud with the other pigs.

The reason is we forget our basic duties. We are to love God, obey His law, and when we do this, as this Book has told us over and over again, we are named amongst those who overcome. The tree of life is what sustains believers. I have said this before and I will certainly say it again, our only hope is found in Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of John Chapter 5 tells us

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. ²⁵ Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.”

Let me be clear we have been given life. We have passed from death into life, and our citizenship is in heaven. We are from above. The answers to the problems that ail the nation, we have them, but we have to have the confidence to use them.

Verse 3 4 and 5 tell us that the curse is no more, it has been defeated. And that the throne of God and of the lamb dwells in the midst of the city. Who are the citizens of this city? Well the text tells us they are the ones who see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads.

This verse takes us back to two of the great men of God in the Old Testament. In Numbers 12 we read about how God spoke to Moses Face to Face out of His Glory cloud, now here we see the Servants of the Lamb identified as those who shall see His face. Aaron, the brother of Moses, who was the High Priest wore upon his forehead the name of the Lord inscribed on a crown.

In 1 Peter 2, speaking of the church of Jesus Christ we are told, that we a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; ¹⁰ who once *were* not a people but *are* now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

We who once were not a people are now the people of God. We are chosen, but chosen with a purpose, and that purpose is to represent Christ and His Kingdom to a world that is lost and dying. We are overcomers. The Church of Jesus Christ is made up of people who have been called out from all the nations of the world and they are made a new nation, a nation of priests and Kings.

IN a moment we will sing a song titled "Jesus Shall reign"

The words of the first verse are:

Jesus Shall reign, where ere the sun dost His successive journeys run

His Kingdom stretch from shore to shore Till moon shall wax and wain no more.

This song is often misunderstood because people read it or sing it as though the reign of Christ is something that will one day happen, but if we read the words carefully we see that Christ is reigning now, and will continue until the moon waxes and wain no more.

The fifth verse of our text tells us ⁵There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.

Remember as the kingdom of God grows darkness and night are driven away. Let us as the people of God press forward and press the crown rights of the ruling and reigning King.