

## **Rivers of Living Water** **(John 7:14-39)**

Expository Lessons from the Gospel of John

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### **I. Background from Prior Lesson: Jesus Goes to Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem (from John 7:1-13)**

- a. Before going to the Feast, He said, “The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil.” (**John 7:7**, NKJV)
  - i. Recall that Jesus warned his disciples repeatedly that if they were following Him, later on they would be treated the same way that He was (rejected by most, hated, persecuted, some even killed).
  - ii. If we bring the light into people’s lives, address sin and call people to repent, we will not be popular. We have friends in other countries who face severe persecution. While we don’t see this in the United States at this time, that could change at any time.

### **II. Jesus Says His “Doctrine” Comes from God (Read John 7:14-19)**

- a. What do you think of when you hear the word “doctrine”?
  - i. Most of us think “theology.” Some examples might include:
    - 1. Trinity
    - 2. Inerrancy of Scripture
    - 3. Virgin birth of Jesus
    - 4. Resurrection of the body
    - 5. Real presence of Christ in Lord’s Supper
    - 6. Whether a Christian can lose his or her salvation
    - 7. What is going to happen at the return of Christ? Will there be a literal 1,000-year reign on earth?
    - 8. Role of baptism in someone becomes a Christian and has their sins forgiven
    - 9. Whether Holy Spirit literally *dwells in* Christians
  - ii. However, the word translated “*doctrine*” here means “*teaching*,” not “*theology*”!

1. Consider the definition for the word “*doctrine*” provided in Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*. (Note: Noah Webster was a very famous linguist and translator from New England. He understood many languages. He wrote his dictionary in part to help the average person understand the meaning of words used in the Bible, generally the King James Version. So he would give definitions for words that included the ordinary plain meaning and what the word meant when used in the Bible. This is important because the meaning of words change over time; we need to understand the meaning of a word as it was understood by the Bible author who was writing.)
  - a. First entry under “*doctrine*” is: “In a general sense, whatever is taught...whatever is handed down by an instructor or master.”
  - b. The other four entries focus on: “learning... knowledge... truth, especially truth of the gospels”
  - c. There is no sense in that dictionary that the meaning of the word “*doctrine*” is focused on abstract theological concepts. It just means teaching; in this case (**John 7:16-17**), it refers to teaching what is true.
  - d. Consider how the same word is used by Paul: “for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine (= teaching),” (**1 Timothy 1:10**, NKJV)
    - i. In this example, the term “teaching/ doctrine” clearly refers to teaching in general; in this case to *a life of sin*. In context, seems clear to me that this word is not referring to bad theology!
- iii. Why does this matter? I have seen this word and concept misused in the past.
  1. From the King James Version: “Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.” (**1 Timothy 4:16**, KJV 1900)
  2. This wording has been maintained in some more modern translations, such as the New International Version, which renders the passage: “Watch your life and doctrine closely.”

Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (**1 Timothy 4:16**, NIV)

- a. If you understand “*doctrine*” here as referring primarily to *theology* (which is not correct), then this passage could be understood to say, “watch how you live, and *your theology*.”
    - i. In the past, I was taught this perspective to support a theological agenda that was being pushed in certain church circles. The case being made at that time: if one’s theology is incorrect on certain “doctrinal” points (for example misunderstanding the theology of baptism at the time one is baptized), then a person would be lost.
    - ii. **Question:** Putting aside whether that conclusion is right or wrong, is that *really* what Paul was trying to communicate to Timothy *in this passage*?
    - iii. **Question:** Was *Paul’s point* in **1 Timothy 4:16** that without proper *theology* you can lose your salvation and cause others to lose their salvation as well?
  - b. Instead, if we see the word “*doctrine*” as referring to *teaching*, then Paul is telling Timothy “watch both the way you live, and *what you are teaching others*.”
    - i. This passage emphasizes 1) how you live and 2) what you teach others. It is *not* about having perfect theology.
3. I certainly want to make sure that my theology is correct, to the best of my ability. I want to check everything against the Scriptures, striving to understand how the Scriptures were understood in the beginning. I do want to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” (**Jude 3**, NKJV)
- a. I am by no means trying to lower the standard of teaching Christian theological doctrines as they were handed down by Jesus and the apostles.
  - b. Nor am I going to “water down” what Jesus said in **John 3:3-5**, or what Peter said in **Acts 2:38**.

- c. However, there is NEVER an excuse to twist any Scripture (including **1 Timothy 4:16**) into meaning something different than what was originally intended; no matter how “noble” we consider our objective.
- 4. This is also a good reason to rely on more than one version of the Scriptures.
  - a. “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (**1 Timothy 4:16**, ESV)
  - b. From the 1901 American Standard version, considered by many to be among the most literal English language translations: “Take heed to thyself, and to thy teaching. Continue in these things; for in doing this thou shalt save both thyself and them that hear thee.” (**1 Timothy 4:16**, ASV 1901)
- 5. In the context of the passage we are reading here, Jesus is saying “My doctrine (teaching) is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine (teaching), whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.” (**John 7:16-17**)
  - a. This applies to all of Jesus’ teaching (including Sermon on the Mount, and everything he taught his disciples). This includes his teachings on sin and repentance.
  - b. For example, Jesus brought teachings on sexual immorality (do not even lust) that went beyond what Moses had taught before (do not commit adultery).

### III. Back to the ‘Healing on the Sabbath’ Controversy (**John 7:19-24**)

- a. Back in **John 5**, Jesus had healed a paralyzed man at the Sheep Gate pool in Jerusalem.
  - i. “For this reason, the Jews persecuted Jesus and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath.” (**John 5:16**, NKJV)
  - ii. *Working on the Sabbath* was a violation of the Law of Moses, punishable by death (**Exodus 35:2**). However, what Jesus did here (curing a crippled man miraculously) is not quite like what we would normally think of as “work” (such as chopping wood or plowing a field)!
- b. Jesus is now back in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles, and the same people are still out to kill him. He knows this and confronts them on the

previous issue, when they were trying to kill him for healing on the Sabbath. Jesus challenges his opponents by pointing to Moses.

- i. Jesus accuses the Jews in Jerusalem of all breaking the Law of Moses.
- ii. Jesus accuses them of wanting to kill Him.
  1. This is a charge which His opponents deny.
- iii. Jesus tells them that after all, they all circumcise boys on the Sabbath, to comply with the Law of Moses.
  1. Moses (author of the Five Books of the Law, including Genesis) wrote in **Genesis 17:9-14** that when God gave the covenant of circumcision to Abraham, it was required that all males be circumcised on the eighth day.
  2. That means that if a boy was born on a Friday, he would have to be circumcised on the following Saturday, which would be on the Sabbath. Otherwise, he would be cut off from God's people!
  3. It specifically mentions in the New Testament that the following were all circumcised "on the eighth day," establishing that they were bona fide Jews:
    - a. John the Baptist (**Luke 1:59**),
    - b. Jesus (**Luke 2:21**) and
    - c. Paul (**Philippians 3:5**).
- iv. Jesus concludes, "If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath, so that the law of Moses should not be broken, are you angry with Me *because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath?* Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment." (**John 7:23-24**, NKJV)
  1. Here Jesus provides a brilliant response: He uses the Law of Moses to counter his enemies' accusations that he is violating the Law of Moses!

#### IV. Argument Over Whether Jesus is the Christ

- a. (Read **John 7:25-27**) A dispute breaks out among the Jews: Is this man the Christ?
  - i. On the positive side (supporting the idea that He *is* the Christ):
    1. He performs great miracles

2. Teaching with authority
  3. Leaders have not (yet) shut Him down.
- ii. On the negative side (advanced by the skeptics who doubt):
1. We know where He is from (*Nazareth*, a small village in Galilee; otherwise of no account).
  2. However, when the Christ comes, "no one knows where He is from."
    - a. **Question:** Why would they think that? Is there anywhere in the Old Testament Scriptures where it says (or implies) that *no one will know where the Christ comes from*?
    - b. **Scriptures to Consider:** There are prophecies about the Christ many places in the Hebrew Scriptures, such as: **Psalm 2**, **Daniel 9:25-27**, **2 Samuel 7:12-17** and **1 Chronicles 17:11-15**. Yet none of them suggest we *won't know* where the Christ comes from.
    - c. However, consider the following:
      - i. **Psalm 110:1-4** (numbered **Psalm 109** in the LXX)
        1. He would be a priest *like Melchizedek*. Could this suggest that no one would know where he came from (in view of **Genesis 14:17-20** and **Hebrews 7:1-3**)? (Melchizedek appeared, in a sense, "from nowhere". Would the Christ be like him in that respect?)
      - ii. **Micah 5:1**.
        1. "And you, O Bethlehem, House of Ephrathah, though you are fewest in number among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to me the One to be ruler of Israel. *His goings forth were from the beginning, even from everlasting.*" (**Micah 5:1**, LXX, OSB)
        2. Perhaps the mysterious element at the end of this prophecy suggested to some Jewish readers that the true origin of the

Messiah would be unknown (“even from everlasting”)?

3. Early Christians pointed to this prophecy as showing the eternal pre-existence and divinity of the Word of God who became flesh in Jesus, consistent with what it says in the New Testament (including in: **John 1**, **Hebrews 1** and **Colossians 1**).
- d. Although it may not be obvious to us what made them believe that *no one would know where the Christ would come from*. However, that was brought forth as a reason to question whether Jesus could be the Christ.
- b. More confusion among the Jews. (Read **John 7:28-36**)
  - i. Jesus challenges the crowd that they know who He is, and where He is from. As a result, many believe.
  - ii. The Pharisees and religious leaders see His impact on the crowd, feel threatened, and try to take Him.
    1. Jesus’s response to them: I am about to leave. He tells them that He is about to depart to somewhere that they cannot go.
    2. He tells them they will not be able to find Him.
    3. They assume he plans to travel abroad, perhaps to visit Jews scattered in other lands.
    4. I assume that Jesus here is referring to his impending death and descent to Hades, followed by his ascension to the throne in heaven. Later, He uses similar language when speaking to His disciples in **John 13-16**.

## V. Rivers of Living Water (Read **John 7:37-39**)

- a. Jesus here speaking on last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, in Jerusalem.
- b. Invitation issued by Jesus: if anyone is thirsty, come to Him to drink.
- c. Reminiscent of what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well, in **John 4:10-15**
  - i. He is the One who gives “living water.”
  - ii. Those who come to Him would never thirst again.

- iii. He would give water that shall “become in him a fountain springing up into eternal life.”
- d. The invitation to the thirsty
  - i. This reminds me of one of the beatitudes in Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled.” (**Matthew 5:6**, NKJV)
  - ii. Reminds me of invitation to the thirsty issued in Isaiah (Read **Isaiah 55:1-11**).
    - 1. Only God can satisfy our spiritual hunger and thirst.
    - 2. Listen to the word of the Lord and be satisfied.
    - 3. God will make a new covenant that will include the Gentiles.
    - 4. We must abandon our sinful ways.
    - 5. God will forgive us our sins if we turn to Him.
    - 6. The word proceeding from the mouth of the Lord will accomplish amazing things on the earth. (Like the rain and snow which come down from heaven and bring life: seed, crops and bread for food.)
  - iii. This also reminds me of the opening of **Psalms 42** (**Psalms 41** in the LXX), “As the deer longs for springs of waters, so my soul longs for You, O God. My soul thirsts for the living God.” (LXX, OSB)
    - 1. Our love for God which is satisfied by God alone.
- e. Jesus appears to be referring to some prophecy in the Old Testament here. But from where?
  - i. “He who believes in Me, *as the Scripture has said*, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” (**John 7:38**, NKJV)
    - 1. Literally it says, “out of his *belly*” (as opposed to “out of his *heart*”) here. The term is general referring to one’s inside parts within the trunk of a person’s body, including the heart, the stomach and even a woman’s womb.
  - ii. Jesus says, “*as the Scripture has said.*” Where in the Hebrew Scriptures does it say that? That question troubled me for weeks as I was preparing to teach this lesson. I struggled to find a clear and direct reference to this!
    - 1. First, I searched the Old Testament, including the LXX version.



2. Even tried “digging up” some old, long-deceased teachers from the distant past to ask. I started with the Ante-Nicene Fathers (writing before 325 AD), but found no answer to my question there.
3. I even checked with John Chrysostom (bishop in Constantinople and preacher, c. 347-407 AD), who taught an expository series of sermons going through the **Gospel of John**. Addressing this question what Jesus was referring to in **John 7:38**, John Chrysostom concluded, "But where have the Scripture said, that 'rivers of living water shall flow from his belly'? Nowhere." (Source: John Chrysostom, *Homily 51 on the Gospel of John*)
4. One possibility: **Isaiah 44:2-4** (LXX), particularly if sentence structure in the LXX is punctuated differently from how modern translations handle it (and original manuscripts had no punctuation; had to be discerned by translators).
  - a. However, my Greek teacher said that while such alternate punctuation might be possible grammatically, he thought the standard translation (such as by Brenton) was correct, in view of how the same phrase appears in **Isaiah 44:24**.
5. Therefore, perhaps Jesus was using the reference to the Old Testament either in a figuratively or allegorical way. Or perhaps He was combining a few passages. With that in mind, some other passages that may be related here are worth considering, such as:
  - a. **Isaiah 43:18-21**
    - i. God says He will do something new.
    - ii. The Lord will make rivers flow in waterless places to give drink to His people, His chosen ones.
  - b. **Isaiah 48:21** (note future tense used in the LXX)
    - i. “If they shall thirst, He will lead them through the desert, and water shall flow from the rock for them. He will split the rock, the water shall flow and My people will drink.” (**Isaiah 48:21**, LXX, OSB)

- ii. Note that this was written by Isaiah, about 700 years *after* the Lord had provided water to the nation of Israel in the Wilderness under Moses (**Exodus 17:1-7, Numbers 20:11, Deuteronomy 8:15, Psalm 78:16**).
  - 1. Paul refers to this story from Israel's past to make a point to the Christians: "and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ." (**1 Corinthians 10:4, NKJV**)
  - 2. The Christ is foreshadowed in many other places in Scripture as a *rock* or *stone* (consider **1 Peter 2:4-8, Isaiah 8:14, Isaiah 28:16, Psalm 118:22, Daniel 2:34 & 2:44-45**).

c. **Zechariah 14:8-11**

- i. "in that day, *living water will come forth* out of Jerusalem"

d. **Jeremiah 2:13**

- i. "For My people have committed two evils: *They forsook Me, the fountain of living water*, and hewed for themselves *broken cisterns, unable to hold water*." (**Jeremiah 2:13, LXX, OSB**)
- ii. As someone who makes his living as a water engineer (environmental engineer designing drinking water treatment plants, groundwater wells, water storage tanks, etc.) this passage resonates with me, personally!
- iii. When you try to fill a broken cistern, the water just runs out and is lost. It does not satisfy; the water is gone, and the cistern is useless.
- iv. God describes Himself here as "the fountain of living water" in contrast to all the empty, broken cisterns that people turn to instead. (I think of other gods, but also money, power, living for pleasure – all the things people pursue in vain attempting to satisfy themselves.)

- e. **Ezekiel 47:1-13** provides a vivid account of living water flowing from the temple.
    - i. Recall that *body* is referred to as *temple* in the New Testament (**John 2:19-21, 1 Corinthians 6:19**).
  - f. Regarding prophecies about the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, consider **Ezekiel 36:26-27**.
- iii. Regardless of which Scripture or combination of Scriptures from the Old Testament Jesus had in mind here, there is much that speaks of those who thirst turning to God, the only one Who can satisfy that thirst.
1. Jesus provides the water, the Holy Spirit that will well up inside of us and satisfy our thirst like nothing else can, until the end.
  2. Seek the living water that only God provides, and do not settle for the empty cisterns of this world!