

The River of God - a one-off study for small groups

Further copies from: Adrian H Reed - Email: ahr@blueyonder.co.uk

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Thames Water is applying for a drought order in June 2006 while posting record profits of £346.5M and increasing charges to customers by 31.5%. Meanwhile it has failed to meet government targets to cut leakage for the third year running in losing water equivalent to 350 olympic size swimming pools every day (250 litres per household). (source: Daily Mail 22 June 2006) Water is very useful to human life! Obviously there would be no life on the planet without it. But we don't spend a week's holiday on the shores of a lake in case we have a great thirst to assuage. And if our holiday is at the seaside, the water won't be of much use to drink, yet we seem to enjoy the sight of a great expanse of water.



Q1 What do we use water for apart from drinking? What leisure-time use do we make of water?

Q2 What spectacle of flowing water has ever captured your imagination, or just made you stop and look? Discuss this in the group.

Water in scripture is quite often used to paint a picture of the life-giving resource of the Holy Spirit (there are other pictures of the Holy Spirit as well, like wind and fire), and this is to be the theme of this study. We'll look first at one or two short readings in the Old Testament:

Read Psalm 46:1-7 The city in this passage can only be Jerusalem, but there certainly isn't any river that flows through Jerusalem.

Q3 What could this river (v4) possibly be?

Read Psalm 36:5-9; Isaiah 33:20-24; 44:1-5. It is suggested that it is in the heart of God that his people should enjoy his river of abundant supply. But what is this river of God? Look at the passage in Isaiah 44 again and see how in verses 4 and 5 the narrative takes the form of the poetic books of the Old Testament where the Hebrew is arranged in statement pairs and the second of each pair amplifies what the first says. This is the norm. Psalm 100:4-5 says: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures for ever; his faithfulness continues through all generations" There are three couplets in this quotation. Now return to Isaiah 44:3 and see clearly what is this mysterious River of God!

The Holy Spirit was at work in creation (Gen 1:1-2) and symbolised in his presence with mankind in the Garden of Eden by the river which watered it (Gen 2:8-15). This abiding presence of the Holy Spirit was lost through the fall (Gen 3:22-23) but is still looked forward to in eternity (Rev 22:1-4). Meanwhile the influence of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament situation was by the Spirit coming upon the people of God specifically to enable his servants to accomplish certain tasks (eg Samson Judges 14:6,19;15:14-15).

In the New Testament the symbolism linking water to the Holy Spirit is taken up again at the baptism of Jesus (Matt 3:11,16). Jesus seemed to indicate to the woman at Jacob's Well that it was possible now to enjoy the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (John 4:10-14) symbolised by water. This is confirmed in his statement to the people in Jerusalem at the time of the Feast (John 7:37-39) when he invited his hearers to come to him for their spiritual thirst to be satisfied and foreshadowed the receiving of the Holy Spirit by the church at Pentecost.

Q4 Are we aware, as Christians, of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and how is the experience of the Holy Spirit best to be compared, using the symbolism of water: a flood, a gushing stream, a trickle, a drop? Discuss this together, perhaps praying that the Holy Spirit will have greater freedom in our lives.