

John 7:1-39 - Group Discussion Guide

TEXT - READ John 7:1-39 (ESV)

Key Verses - John 7:37-39 - *On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' " 39 Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*

What is going on in this text (retell the story or summarize main points)? What is the context that Jesus speaks into in verses 37-39?

THEOLOGY - What do we learn about God from this text?

- a) God is the source of all life. The Father gives the Son, and the Son pours out the Spirit upon us. Jesus is the source of living water. When we put our faith in Jesus, we are also given the gift of God's Holy Spirit dwelling within us. We can receive the Holy Spirit because of Christ, death, resurrection, and ascension. The Spirit is a gift to be received and experienced by all God's children. The Holy Spirit works in our hearts to teach, convict, encourage, empower, and guide us. We do not live according to external regulations but rather by the leading of the Holy Spirit.
- b) God is a generous Father who accomplished our salvation in the Son and applied that salvation by the Spirit. The resurrected and victorious Jesus sends forth the living water of the Spirit from heaven into our hearts. The Spirit brings true satisfaction to our souls and to empowers us to extend that blessing to others. The presence of the Holy Spirit produces fruit in our lives regardless of the circumstances that come our way.

Anything else we might learn about God from the text?

LIFE

What are some of the present challenges you are facing? How are you experiencing the effects of life in the wilderness?

What parallels do you see with the Exodus story and your own spiritual journey? How can we learn from the Israelites journey through the wilderness?

How does this text lead you to love God and others more?

How do you sense the Spirit leading you to respond in obedience? How does what you learned call you to change?

PRAYER

Confess your sin to God in prayer and ask Him for strength to respond in obedience to his word.

What is one personal need you have that we can pray for you as a group?

Pray for one friend, family member, or coworker who you want to share the love of Jesus with.

Consulting the Scholars¹ -The proclamation of Jesus recorded in these verses, with its dependence on a water metaphor, is entirely appropriate to its setting in the Feast of Tabernacles with its well-known water-pouring rite. There is another thematic connection with the immediately preceding verses. Jesus has just spoken of his departure, of going to a place where his opponents cannot come (vv. 33–36). Those who have read this Gospel before will recognize that the bestowal of the Spirit is directly consequent upon Jesus’ departure—a theme developed in John 14–16, but now coming to explicit articulation here.

7:37–38. The opening words, On the last and greatest day of the Feast, suggest a different and later day from that on which the events described in the previous verses occurred. Perhaps once word of the arrest warrant became known (vv. 32–34), Jesus kept quiet and out of sight until the time came for this dramatic pronouncement, and then its audacious authority prevented the temple guards from carrying out their assignment (vv. 45–46).

But on what day did Jesus so speak? It could have been the seventh day, the final day of the Feast proper, or the eighth day, the closing festival (cf. notes on v. 2). In favour of the former is the fact that, so far as we know, the water-pouring rite (cf. notes below) and the lights ceremony (cf. notes on 8:12) did not extend beyond the seventh day. Moreover, by Old Testament standards the Feast of Tabernacles itself lasted seven days: it seems odd to refer to the eighth day as the ‘last and greatest day of the Feast’. On the other hand, in favour of the eighth day is the fact that at least some Jews in the first century so linked the eighth day with the preceding seven that they thought of the Feast of Tabernacles as an eight-day feast (Jos., Ant. iii. 245). Moreover, on any reckoning the eighth day really was a great day, distinct from the others, a rest day (i.e. a special Sabbath) distinguished by particular sacrifices, the joyful dismantling of the booths, and the repeated singing of the Hallel (Pss. 113–118). Moreover, if Jesus’ public pronouncements (7:37–38; 8:12) are informed by the rites of the Feast of Tabernacles, there may have been special force to his words if he spoke them on the eighth day, immediately after the ceremonies themselves had ceased. The water and the light of the Tabernacles rites pass into memory, year after year; his claim to provide living water and light for the world is continuously valid.

On the seven days of the Feast, a golden flagon was filled with water from the pool of Siloam and was carried in a procession led by the High Priest back to the temple. As the procession approached the watergate on the south side of the inner court three blasts from the *šôpār*—a trumpet connected with joyful occasions—were sounded. While the pilgrims watched, the priests processed around the altar with the flagon, the temple choir singing the Hallel (Pss. 113–118; cf. Mishnah Sukkah 4:9). When the choir reached Psalm 118, every male pilgrim shook a *lûlāb* (willow and myrtle twigs tied with palm) in his right hand, while his left raised a piece of citrus fruit (a sign of the ingathered harvest), and all cried ‘Give thanks to the Lord!’ three times. The water was offered to God at the time of the morning sacrifice, along with the daily drink-offering (of wine). The wine and the water were poured into their respective silver bowls, and then poured out before the Lord. Moreover, these ceremonies of the Feast of Tabernacles were related in Jewish thought both to the Lord’s provision of water in the desert and to the Lord’s pouring out of the Spirit in the last days. Pouring at the Feast of Tabernacles refers symbolically to the messianic age in which a stream from the sacred rock would flow over the whole earth (cf. J. Jeremias, TDNT, 4. 277f.).

Thus, although the words If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink inevitably call to mind Isaiah 55:1 (cf. also Rev. 22:1–2; Jn. 4:10–14; 6:35), the particular association of the water rite with this Feast demands that we seek more focused significance. It is clear that this Feast was associated with adequate rainfall (cf. Zc. 14:16–17—and interestingly enough, this chapter from Zechariah was read on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles in the liturgy prescribed in B. Megillah 31a), not surprisingly in light of the harvest connections. Although the water rite was not prescribed by Old Testament law, its roots go back at least a couple of hundred years before Christ, and perhaps earlier (cf. 1 Sa. 7:6). Thus in addition to the numerous ‘water’ passages in the Old Testament, some of them associated with this Feast (cf. Is. 12:3, ‘With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation’), the water rite

¹ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (pp. 321–328). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

itself symbolized the fertility and fruitfulness that only rain could bring. This would be especially clear if we could be certain that a number of Jewish beliefs, recorded later, reflect traditions that reach back to the first century. These specifically connect the eighth day with great joy in the light of God's faithful provision of rain, and also interpret the day as a festive anticipation of God's promises to pour out spiritual 'rains' in the messianic age. The water-pouring ceremony is interpreted in these traditions as a foretaste of the eschatological rivers of living water foreseen by Ezekiel (47:1–9) and Zechariah (13:1). In these traditions the water miracle in the wilderness (Ex. 17:1–7; Nu. 20:8–13; cf. Ps. 78:16–20) is in turn a forerunner of the water rite of the Feast of Tabernacles.

In general terms, then, Jesus' pronouncement is clear: he is the fulfillment of all that the Feast of Tabernacles anticipated. If Isaiah could invite the thirsty to drink from the waters (Is. 55:1), Jesus announces that he is the one who can provide the waters. But the details of these words turn on a difficult decision regarding the punctuation of the Greek text. The principal options are two. (1) The traditional interpretation places a full stop at the end of v. 37 (as in the niv). The result is that it is most natural to take the 'streams of living water' (v. 38) to be flowing from within the believer (i.e. 'from within him', referring back to 'whoever believes in me'). (2) The more recent, so-called 'Christological interpretation' places a comma after 'to me' (v. 37), with no full stop after 'and drink'. This results in rough parallelism:

If a man is thirsty, let him come to me,
And let him drink who believes in me.

The result is that the next words, 'as the Scripture has said', need not be taken with what precedes; they may just as easily be the introduction to the following words. If that is the case, the text from 'As the Scripture has said' to the end of v. 38 may be an explanatory aside provided by the Evangelist, and the 'streams of living water' might then be thought to be flowing from within Christ (i.e. 'him' then refers to Christ—which is why this is called the 'Christological' interpretation).

Decision is difficult, and there are several mediating positions, but these two dominate the landscape. Before deciding what interpretation seems best, however, it is important to appreciate how much the two options have in common. Both interpret the water as the Spirit, both insist that the blessing is something believers will enjoy only later (from the standpoint of Jesus' ministry), both relate the promise of the Spirit to Jesus' invitation at the Feast of Tabernacles, and both make Jesus the one who supplies the 'drink' and quenches thirst. The principal differences between the two are that the first says that streams of living water will flow from the believer, while the second says they will flow from Christ; and the first continues Jesus' words to the end of v. 38, while the second sees them ending with the first clause of v. 38.

Even here, the difference must not be exaggerated. Perhaps the greatest strength of the second view, as the two are commonly set forth, is that in the Fourth Gospel believers are never the source of 'living water', the Spirit who will come on them after Jesus is glorified. The Holy Spirit comes from God or Christ. The nearest thing to an exception is 15:26–27, but here all that is said is that believers witness to the world with the Spirit's help. Only in this very derivative sense are believers said to be the source of the Spirit for others. The extraordinarily strong Christological focus of the entire Gospel therefore commonly serves in many modern commentaries to rule out the first view and justify the second.

But this is probably a false antithesis. Even under the first view, there is nothing in the text to necessitate the conclusion that believers are the source of the Spirit to others. This point is more easily appreciated in the Greek text. Whether 'from within him' refers to Christ or to the believer, it is the niv's rendering of *ek tēs koilias autou*, lit. 'from within his belly'. As the Greek expression here refers to the centre of human personality, niv's paraphrase is acceptable and reasonable. In terms of the two major interpretative options before us, the question becomes, 'Whose belly?' The believer's, or Christ's? Those who favour the second view are inclined to see a partial fulfillment in

19:34—when Jesus' side was pierced the spear brought forth 'a sudden flow of blood and water'. But the word *koilia* ('belly') does not show up in 19:34, and the *lxx* provides ample evidence that *koilia* had become by this time a fairly close synonym for *kardia*, 'heart'—and that word surely applies to believers as well as to Jesus. If on grounds still to be provided we conclude that the 'belly' is that of the believer, the closest parallel is 4:13–14: 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.' Here there is no suggestion of the believer supplying water to other people. Similarly on the first interpretation of 7:37–39: the image of streams of water from the believer's heart or belly places the accent 'on the rich abundance of the Spirit's life and power in the heart of the believer, like a self-replenishing stream' (Michaels, p. 126). On this reading, the source of the stream is Jesus, regardless of whose 'belly' is in view in v. 38, regardless (in the *niv* text) of the antecedent of 'from within him'. If it is agreed, then, that the first view does not make the believer the source of the Spirit for others any more than the second view, then on a variety of grounds the first option seems preferable. Although the second provides a chiasm (a literary form favoured by John), yet in the Greek text it is rather rough (as even Dodd, *IFG*, p. 349, who favours this view, admits). Conceptually, the parallelism required by the second view makes 'anyone who is thirsty' to parallel 'anyone who believes in me'—a peculiar (though certainly not impossible) pairing, for one would have thought that thirst better describes an individual's life before belief, at which point the thirst is quenched (cf. 4:13–14; 6:35). Moreover, it is a peculiarly Johannine feature to begin a clause or sentence with 'Whoever believes in me' (*ho pisteuōn*) or the like (forty-one occurrences), a feature preserved under the first interpretation. There is no instance of *ho pisteuōn* attaching itself to a previous conditional clause, as the second interpretation requires. The textual evidence supports the first view, including the important papyrus P66, and all modern critical editions of the Greek New Testament adopt it. So, too, do virtually all the Greek Fathers. Many other arguments could be adduced in favour of the first view. Most telling, perhaps, is the observation by Fee, that the first words of v. 39 ('By this he meant', *touto de eipen*) typically in John refer to Jesus' words, not the words of someone else or of Scripture. And if it is Jesus and not the Evangelist who is speaking in v. 38, then the words 'from within him' cannot refer to Jesus but to someone else—and the only other candidate is 'whoever believes in him'.