

Water of Life

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 29th of August 2004.

The preacher is Andrew Moody. His sermon is entitled Water of Life and is based on Genesis 2.4-14.

Dear Lord, we thank you so much for giving us the Bible. Thank you for the true things that tells us about you, about us, about your plans for the future. Please open our eyes to receive your truth.

Please soften our hearts to be receptive to the guidings of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you'll help me to speak clearly and truthfully and help us all to respond to your spirit as you speak to us through your word.

In Jesus' name, Amen. In 1493, Christopher Columbus set sail for his second journey to the Americas. He took with him a fleet containing sailors in large part from the nobility.

[1 : 1 1] The fall of Granada had meant that a lot of the Spanish nobility didn't have too much to do, so they thought they'd go with Christopher Columbus to settle the new world and find wealth and plunder.

One of the young men who went with Columbus on that journey was a man named Juan Ponce de Leon, a young nobleman in his early 30s, who remained behind after Columbus set sail again from the Americas at the end of his journey and helped the conquest of the Americas.

He participated in the settlement and overtaking of Puerto Rico, eventually amassing personal wealth and developing schemes of his own for conquest of South America.

Somewhere along the line, he heard a rumour that there was an island somewhere to the north, somewhere to the east, an island of fabulous wealth, an island with gold and jewels, an island where there was located an amazing spring of water, a fountain of youth from which you could drink and have your youth restored to you.

So in 1512, Juan Ponce de Leon sought and obtained permission from Charles V of Spain to set forth with a fleet of three ships to look for the island of Bimini.

[2 : 4 1] That was the name of the island that he'd heard of. To find the treasure, to find his paradise, to find the fabled fountain of youth that would keep him young forever.

Well, maybe there's some doubt about the story of Juan Ponce de Leon. We know he existed.

We know that he was the governor of Puerto Rico. We know that he went searching for the island of Bimini. We're not too sure about the story of the fountain of youth, but if it's true, if he really did go looking for a fountain of youth that would restore his youth, if he really did go looking for an earthly paradise, an island of Bimini, then he was a fool and he should have spent more time reading his Bible.

Because if he had, he would have seen, just by the time he got to the second chapter of the Bible, that the only place that corresponds to the paradise he was looking for was a place in the east, in Eden, located long ago north of Mesopotamia.

A place of great abundance, of ample food, of great beauty, of every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.

[3 : 53] A place which had a special tree called the tree of life which would supply life and health for humanity forever. A place of such super abundance that out of it flowed a mighty river which separated into four headwaters, four rivers flowing out into the world.

The Garden of Eden, as it's described in Genesis 2, is paradise. A place where God lives with his people in perfect plenty, in prosperity, in super abundance, with everything that people could ever want in terms of pleasure or satisfaction or fulfilment.

And at the centre, the rivers. A river flows out of Eden toward the garden and from there it divides and becomes four branches.

The name of the first is Pishon. The second flows around the whole land of Havilah where there is gold and the gold of that land is good. Delium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second is the Gihon.

It is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris which flows east of Assyria and the fourth is the Euphrates. Maybe it's difficult for us to grasp what has been got across to us here in these verses from Genesis 2.

[5 : 12] We live in a dry country but clustered on the coast. We have access to lots of water. We can turn on the tap and get hold of the stuff pretty easily even with water restrictions.

But for people who live in the desert, for people who live in near arid conditions, whose only way of accessing water is to draw it up out of the ground in a bucket and that's the only way they can give themselves and their crops and their animals water, the abundance of water described here in Genesis 2 is almost unimaginable.

This is a place of incredible life, of incredible lushness. There's an old story from just after World War II of some Saharan elders, tribesmen, who were taken to France to meet their benefactors and were given a tour around France to see what it was like there.

At one stage their guides took them up into the mountains and showed them a cascade, a waterfall, coming down from the rocks above them. The tribesmen stood there for a long time, just stood there looking up at the waterfall and they stood there so long that eventually their guides tried to talk them into moving on.

I wouldn't, isn't it time that we went and saw something else? But the tribesmen didn't want to move and when they were finally pressed it turned out that they were waiting for the waterfall to finish. The idea that a waterfall could keep going for, well, indefinitely, was just beyond them.

[6 : 38] For people who lived in the desert, the idea that water could just fall from the sky or fall over the edge of a cliff and just keep on going for thousands of years was something they couldn't imagine. Well, here in Genesis 2, though, we have something that's even more spectacular than that.

Not simply one waterfall, but a river which turns into four mighty rivers. Whether this place is exactly meant to be an entirely literal place geographically, it's unclear.

We don't know where two of the rivers are. The Pishon and the Gihon are lost to us now. Perhaps changes in names, perhaps changes in geography. The Tigris and the Euphrates, of course, are well known to us.

If we look at our news in the evening, we're likely to see them turn up in Iraq. These two rivers are still flowing and have been for thousands of years now. But what is clear, if the geography is not entirely clear, if what is clear is that this is the place where God lives with his people and where God lives with his people, there is life, life in such abundance that it overflows into the rest of the world, producing life and treasure in the land of Havilah, gold and bedelium and onyx, great things, great riches.

God is the God of the whole world and where he lives with his people, blessing and life flow out into the whole world. So if Juan Ponce de Leon had his Bible open, he might not have wasted so much time travelling around the Caribbean.

[8 : 18] He might have gone to Armenia, Mesopotamia, somewhere like that, in search for the paradise, the land of the fountain of youth. But of course, if he'd actually been reading his Bible, then by the time he got to the next chapter, he would have realised that it was a fruitless search.

In Genesis 3, we read that the Garden of Eden is closed to humanity. By the end of the next chapter, our ancestors have rebelled against God, decided to go their own way and have been exiled from God.

Eden, the land of plenty and life, is the place where God lives with his people. When we choose to rebel against God and go our own way, we lose contact not simply with God, but we miss out on the garden itself.

And so by the end of the chapter of Genesis 3, humans are exiled to a world where there is hardship, where water is short, where life is hard, where there's conflict and suffering, and finally death.

And the way back into Eden is guarded by cherubim, angelic beings which guard the way to the garden with a flashing sword, according to Genesis 3. There is no way back into Eden.

[9 : 39] One, Ponce de Leon's dream, was a delusion. But it's a delusion, isn't it, that resurfaces again and again. The idea that humans can get back to Eden, that things are getting better, that we can make it on our own.

One of the great myths and delusions of the past century was the evolutionary or humanistic idea that things are getting better and better and that we could fix the world by ourselves, that science would overcome the problems of age and death and sickness, that science could solve the problems of hunger, that economics would solve the problems of poverty, that united political movements could solve the problems of war and injustice, that social campaigns and campaigns for justice would eventually overcome our greed or the oppression of the poor.

Things are not getting better and better. They are mired in suffering. There are pockets of prosperity and peace.

Sometimes things do get better for a while. But outside of Eden, things never last. Kingdoms fall. Justice passes away.

Oppressors rise. New sicknesses come. All of us die eventually. And this is true in the Bible too.

[11 : 16] We might think that, yes, that's the normal human pattern, but surely in God's economy, in the way God works, things will get better. God's purposes will change the world bit by bit.

The kingdom of God will grow in the world. If that works, it doesn't work simply in the Old Testament. The confusing and disturbing pattern of the Old Testament is that even God's acts of salvation seem to come to nothing.

God rescues Noah and his family from the universal flood. And his descendants, their descendants, proceed to build a tower to worship themselves and make a name for themselves.

God worships the Hebrews from the famine through Joseph in Egypt. A few hundred years later, those people are all enslaved and have to be rescued again.

God does countless miracles through Moses and through Joshua. But the people rebel again and again, choosing to doubt God's goodness, choosing to pursue their own gods.

[12 : 26] The same pattern turns up in Judges. God saves, the people soon forget his salvation and turn away. Eventually, God creates a kingdom. The great kings, David and Solomon, are the golden age of Israel.

It seems like everything's going to go well. But there again, it all kind of leaks away. Generation after generation, God's people grow cold and turn away from him.

They're seduced by the gods of the surrounding peoples. They become less and less faithful, more and more faithless. Even the temple, the great sign of God's presence that he gives them, is corrupted and they set up shrines to other gods.

Eventually, things become so corrupt that God destroys his people, destroys his temple, sacks Jerusalem and sends his people into exile.

But in the midst of this, there is another pattern that emerges too. The story of the Bible, you see, isn't like the story of King Arthur, a brief shining moment of Camelot followed by adultery and betrayal and everybody getting hacked to pieces.

[13 : 41] There is that too, from a human perspective. But alongside that, God begins to make promises of a new beginning, of a radical new start, of a time when he will change everything and live with his people again and this time it won't go wrong.

So in the prophet Ezekiel, for example, a book of prophecies that have been given just as Jerusalem is falling and the temple is being destroyed, we begin to see new promises, a vision of a new temple, bigger and better than the last one, a new and renewed sign of God's presence with his people even as the old one is being wiped out.

That happens in chapter 40 of Ezekiel and then in chapter 47 of Ezekiel, suddenly the river reappears, the river from Genesis 2.

This time it flows out from the temple in Jerusalem. It flows out from Jerusalem, out into the land around about and where it flows, deserts turn into forests and salt water becomes fresh, filled with, teeming, teeming with fish and prosperity and health and wealth and fulfilment follow.

In Revelation, the same vision appears except this time it's better. In Revelation, there's no temple. In Revelation, God lives with his people and the whole city where God lives with his people is the temple.

[15 : 15] In the centre of the city is a throne, the throne of God and of the Lamb, Jesus Christ who was slain. And out from the throne room, out from the throne itself, flows the river once again.

Listen to Revelation 22, 1-3. Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city.

On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore.

But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it and his servants will worship him. Eden is lost, but God promises that the river will reappear.

That if we belong to him, there will come a time when we will enjoy that same abundance, that same life, that same fulfilment that was present in Genesis 2.

[16 : 28] And the great and amazing thing is that if we trust in God, then that fulfilment is already beginning in us. The river flows out from the presence of God where he lives with his people.

Where God lives with his people, there the source of the waters begins. There's the source of life. The message of the New Testament is that well, if we trust in Jesus, if we accept his forgiveness that he offers to us, if we accept him as our Lord, then already God lives in us through his spirit and already the river begins to flow out from our hearts.

So Jesus says to the Samaritan woman in John 4 who he meets at a well that he has a greater source of water and can offer her a much better drink than she can offer him from that well.

He says to her, everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.

The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. Jesus says much the same thing in John 7 verses 37-39.

[17 : 49] Standing up in the temple of Jerusalem, he suddenly cries out, on the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, let anyone who is thirsty come to me and let the one who believes in me drink.

As the scripture has said, out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water. Now he said this about the spirit which believers in him were to receive.

if we trust in Jesus, then the river of Eden is restored in us already. A new life that will be completed one day when Jesus returns has already begun in us if we believe in Jesus.

What a tragedy for Juan Ponce de Leon. He went with his three ships and his provisions and his armed men looking for the island of Bimini, looking for the fountain of youth.

If he'd bothered to read his Bible, he could have known that he could have had the fountain of youth, the water of life flowing from within him by trusting in Jesus. As it was, he never found the island.

[19 : 02] He did find a place that he thought was an island. It was Florida. He tried to create a settlement, got into a fight with some of the indigenous people and was wounded, ended up dying in Cuba.

A tragic waste, a waste of time, a waste of resources, a waste of a search. The waters of life cannot be had in this world except through trusting in Jesus.

What a tragedy. But what a tragedy for us too because so often we too are distracted away from this great promise that Jesus gives us.

whether we are Christians or non-Christians, whether we trust in Jesus in theory or haven't yet decided whether to respond to Jesus, there are so many other things that we are tempted to find satisfaction in.

False sources of water, false fountains of youth, aren't there? We can try and find fulfilment in work or in study or in our careers or in romance.

[20 : 10] in the idea of love, in the pursuit of pleasure or beauty or the approval of other people. We can try and find fulfilment in this world through financial security, for being people of taste, good food, art.

we can try and find satisfaction in music, in reading books, in trying to prolong our health and be as fit as we can.

So many things we try to fill up our lives with, so many things that are really distractions if we let them be from the real source of life that can flow from within us when we trust in Jesus.

God says to his people in Jeremiah 2 verse 13, my people have committed two evils. They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water and dug out wells for themselves, cracked wells which cannot hold water.

but Jesus calls us to return to him, to return to God and receive the waters of life which will flow out from us when we trust in him.

- [21 : 28] The Holy Spirit living within us, changing us, flowing out in such super abundance that it affects those around us as well. We all need to be encouraged, each of us, myself included, we all need to be encouraged to believe that Jesus is telling the truth, to believe that if we trust in him our lives will be filled with the Spirit's power and work, that the water of life can flow out from us.

Let's live for that river that flows out from us, let's put our trust in Jesus. Let's live on it, let's not try and find our satisfaction or quench our thirst from other things.

A few years ago the great journal, British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge at the peak of his career realised that his life was going nowhere and after a visit to Mother Teresa, I think it was in India, became a Christian.

His whole outlook on life was changed. He wrote later on, I may, I suppose, regard myself as a relatively successful man.

People occasionally stare at me in the streets. That's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for admission to the higher slopes of the internal revenue. That's success.

- [22 : 55] Furnished with money and a little fame, even an elderly man, if he cares to, may partake of diversions, and that's pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heated for me to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time, and that's fulfilment.

Yet I say to you, and I beg you to believe me, multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing, less than nothing, a positive impediment measured against one draft of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are.

What a great encouragement we have then as we look at Genesis 2, as we trace the river through its promises, through Ezekiel, into Revelation, the great river that awaits us when Jesus returns.

What an encouragement to put our trust in Jesus and receive even now the streams of living water that will flow out from us. Let's ask God to make these things real in our lives and expectations.

Lord God, we thank you for the great promise we have when you will make all things new. Please forgive us for trying to satisfy our thirst with false sources of water.

- [24 : 27] Please help us to trust in Jesus and have the abundant life that you promise. Please help us to believe his words and to live for the life that you give.

We pray these things in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.