

Performance: He Empowers You

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West Side Church of Christ
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Scripture Reading

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying [this] to you, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water...Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks from the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (John 4:10-13 NIV)

INTRODUCTION

Tonight I want to talk about “Living water.” Our Lord Jesus, in speeches recorded in the Gospel of John, provides powerful imagery that is meant to shake our foundations. We know there are no married bachelors, there are no round squares, and while water helps keep me alive and provides life for so many other things, we just know there’s no such thing as living water.

Which makes this conversation understandable. There is a woman who has come to the well to fetch a pail of water. Jesus, tired from his journey, is resting at the very same well. Jesus looks at the woman and says “give me drink.” The request is unusual for a number of reasons. There are so many boundaries being crossed that didn’t happen in public, in polite society, in situations like this. There is the man-woman boundary; there is the Jew-Samaritan boundary. But Jesus is really setting up the scene to discuss not what he wants to receive, but what he wants to give.

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying [this] to you, you would have asked him, and he would have given you *living water*...Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks from the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (John 4:10-13)

Three chapters later, on the last day of the Feast, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of *living water*.’” (John 7:37-38)

There it is again. *Living water*. It has to be a metaphor. Of course it is. Jesus isn't talking about physical water that suddenly comes alive. He's talking about something that you take in—something that fills you up (like water), something you can drink deeply of, something you need to sustain your life, to give you energy and vitality. And John doesn't even make us guess. He adds this in John 7:39: “Now this he said about the *Spirit*, whom those who believed in him were to receive.”

There is an Old Testament background to all of this. In Jeremiah 2:13 & 17:13, God calls himself “the spring of living water.” And when Ezekiel and Zechariah prophecy, they say one day there is going to be a stream of living water; it'll flow in summer and winter, to the East and to the West, and where the river flows everything will live (Ezek 47:9; Zechariah 14:8). You can see the metaphor at work, can't you? God is the spring of living water, but only some people some of the time get the presence of God; but one day, when God sends forth his Holy Spirit, the presence of God will be available 24/7 for Jew and Gentile, slave and free, and will give eternal life to all on whom He rests. The phrase even shows up in Revelation, where the Lamb at the center of the throne is described both as a lamb and as a shepherd; and echoing Psalm 23, it says “he will lead them to springs of living water” (Rev 7:17).

Can you see how the language of metaphor works? Living water is a metaphor for the active presence of God, which we learned weeks ago is what it means to have the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit is *not* like water in many ways. But *having* the Spirit is *like* taking in water in some ways. In these ways—it's life-giving, you can be full of, drink from, and get strength and energy from. That's why he chose this imagery.

It's not the only comparable image or metaphor used by John. He uses another one that might seem shocking at first in chapter 2. This is Jesus' first miracle in Cana of Galilee, and it's a story only recorded by John. That is the first clue that this story is being used for a reason. No, it's not John saying “lets add one more power story to your list of Jesus power stories found in other gospels.” It's not to teach a moral lesson about all actions of the participants or to answer all of our questions about what to eat and drink. No, like any parable, it's being used to make a point, and being used by John to make a point crucial to the Gospel of John.

In this story, people have come to the wedding and, as is typical in weddings all over the world, the wine is flowing. But they run out. Enter Jesus, stage right. John says there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification. He even tells us how much: each stone jar held 20 or 30 gallons (that is enough for each to fill about 3/4th of a

modern bathtub). Multiply 8 by 30, and you have 240 gallons, that’s over 900 liters, or 960 quarts. But we are supposed to think not of tubs, but cups. If we are talking about drinking water, 240 gallons is 3,840 cups! That’s a LOT of water!

The first thing John wants you to know is that we are talking about an ABUNDANCE of liquid.

Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars, and John says they filled them “to the brim.” The second thing John wants you to know is that we are talking about FULLNESS. No room left for anything else.

You know the story. The master of the feast is given a taste, and it turns out, Jesus has changed the water into wine. I’ve heard lots of sermons on this, but very few seem to realize that this is NOT the point of the story. It’s not about wine. The master’s reaction is very telling: “everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.” From this reaction, I see two more things John wants us to know. One is that Jesus has changed the water into GOOD wine. In fact, the BEST wine. We are talking about something GOOD; in fact, something BEST.

Abundance. Fullness. Good & Best. What’s the last thing? There is a reason people bring out the poor wine “when people have drunk freely.” Wine is intoxicating. It affects your tastebuds. That’s not all it affects. It has the potential to change your mood. It can affect how you think, how you act, how you look. It can become so powerful that too much can make it master you. So the fourth thing I see in this story is OVERWHELMING POWER.

We already know from John 4 and John 7, that stories about water that “come alive” are stories about the Spirit. Look again at the four things we found here in this text. Abundance. Fullness. Good & Best. A Power that Changes and Overwhelms. This is how we are supposed to think about what God provides. And What God provides for his people is His Holy Spirit. It’s not a coincidence that we meet that abundant, full, good and best changing power of the Spirit when we go down into the gallons of water.

Paul actually makes this connection in one of his prison letters (Ephesians 5:18): “Do not get drunk with wine,” says Paul, “because in that is debauchery” (he means “filling yourself up with wine can lead to a change of behavior that is not what God has in mind). But, in contrast, “be filled with the Spirit.” The comparison is apt.

Sin is a master. It isn’t just an infection; it’s a disease. Romans 8 says whatever we yield our bodies to is our master. So don’t yield your bodies to sin. Instead, yield them to

God’s Holy Spirit. Why? We know why. Because the Spirit represents abundance. Fulness. It is God’s good and best gift. And the Spirit is the overwhelming power that can change how we think, how we act, and (on the day of Jesus) how we look (1 John 3:2). To paraphrase Paul, “Don’t look to wine to change your life; instead, be intoxicated with the Spirit.”

We have already had a lesson in this series about “power.” We know the Spirit works in us and for us. But I wanted to highlight an important corollary: He EMpowers us.

I want to use a very simple illustration that is not original with me. If you take a work glove—one designed for work—and leave it on the table, it won’t do any work. If you try to give it an inspirational talk, it still won’t do any work. If you let it fellowship with other gloves, it still won’t do any work. It needs a living hand to come inside and energize it. The same is true for us when it comes to living in the Spirit rather than in the flesh. We don’t have the resources; but God gives us what we need.¹

In his earthly ministry, Jesus Christ, full of the Holy Spirit, empowered his apostles. He gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases (Luke 9:1). He also prayed that God would protect them “by the power of your name” (John 17:11). That same Spirit now lives in us, and he’s not through empowering us.

Paul says this on several occasions. To the Ephesian church, he prayed that God “may strengthen you with power through his spirit in your inner being” (Eph 3:16). Just a few verses later, Paul says “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Eph 3:20). And in 2 Timothy 1:7, Paul says “the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love, and self-discipline.”

There is power, power, wonder-working power in the blood of the Lamb. And we should not be afraid to speak of His power at work within us.

I can face temptation because the Spirit empowers me. Do you know what Matthew and Luke tell us about how Jesus got to his temptation showdown in the desert? They say the *Spirit* led him out there. And Luke, gives us even more. He entered that desert “full of the Spirit.” And after that story, Luke says he returned *from* there “in the power of the Spirit.” The Spirit both guided and empowered him to face his temptations. Oh we don’t want temptation. And there is certainly something bad about it. James says God doesn’t tempt anyone. Jesus taught us to pray “lead us not into temptation.”

¹ Illustration taken from Brian Wilkerson, Senior Pastor of Grace Chapel. Available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5k1741uj2c&ab_channel=GraceChapel

Because we are weak. Because we fall. But “testing” is not the same as tempting. And God is with us and aware of all that we face. That is why he could give us the assurance that “no temptation” will come your way that isn’t common to humanity; and God is faithful, and with every temptation will provide a way of escape. The Spirit gives us power and presence so that you and I can face temptation. The same spirit that led and empowered Jesus in the desert now lives in and empowers you.

I can live a life pleasing to God because the Spirit empowers me. There is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. We know that. But we are under the “law of the Spirit of life” says Paul. And we were saved so “the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.” I think the first time I read this, I thought he was talking about ME walking like I walk any other time and in any other way, but after the pattern of truth set forth in the Bible. That is, “we who choose to do right things that the Spirit tells me I should do.” But what if we read it differently? What if “we who walk according to the Spirit” refers to the power, energy, and ability to walk? That is, we used to do our daily life by the power and energy of our own will, blood, sweat, tears, and self-reliance; but now, we are led by, energized by, controlled by the Holy Spirit. It’s His power at work within us that empowers us to do right. That seems right, because just a few verses later Paul shifts his language from ‘by the Spirit’ to “in” the spirit. “You are not in the flesh, but you are in the Spirit, if the Spirit dwells in you.” As John says it over in 1 John, “whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him.” And if that’s all we had to go on, we might think he’s saying “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps and just try harder!” But he’s not finished: “And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us” (1 John 3:24). The Spirit empowers right living! And the Spirit of Christ is the Spirit that pleases God. Christ is the righteous one, and we are IN him. And He is in us. How do we know that? Because of the Spirit whom he has given us.

I can see good in every situation, because the Spirit empowers me. When Paul says “whatever things are true or noble, right or pure, lovely or admirable—if there is anything excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things,” he says that in a context (Phil 4:8). He’s not leaving you to your own devices. Both before this verse and after this verse, he says the God of Peace will keep your minds where they need to be, and He will be with you. Because you and he can do all things—but *only through him* who gives you strength (Phil 4:13). By his power, I can see the whole world, and my circumstances, through a Spirit lens. That is the secret to being content, says Paul. The God of Peace will be with you.

When I go through difficult times, I can trust that God will use even this to His glory, because the Spirit empowers me. In Romans 8, Paul says in all things God works for the good of those who love him. But there’s a context. Just a few verses earlier, he says

“the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses. When we don’t know what to pray for, the Spirit speaks for us. When we don’t know how to express our heart, or even when we doubt our heart, the Spirit searches our heart, and intercedes for us. Which means your situation is a God-filled situation; a place where the works of God might be displayed.

Finally, I don’t have to rely on my own strength, because God is with me and the Spirit empowers me. “Some trust in chariots, and some in horses” writes the Psalmist, “but we trust in the name of the Lord our God” (Psalm 20:7). “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding,” says Proverbs, “in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight” (Prov 3:4-6). When Psalm 139 tells us about the omnipresence of God, he begins by saying “where can I go from your Spirit?” but he adds that wherever I go, “even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me” (Psalm 139:10). God promises so. Hear God speak in Isaiah 41:10: “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” And that is a good thing. “My flesh and my heart may fail,” says Psalm 73, “but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:26).

The Spirit gives life and power to his people. Praise God!

May I leave you with Paul’s prayer for the Roman church in Romans 15:13: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen.