

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
7:37-39

37. On the last day, that great *day* of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirsts, let him come to me and drink. 38. He who believes on me, as the scripture has said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. 39. (But this he spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing on him should receive; for the Holy Ghost was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified.)

37.--[*On the last day...feast.*] There seems to be an interval of three days between this verse and the preceding one. At any rate, it is certain that our Lord went to the temple and taught "about the midst of the feast." (v.14.) There seems no break from that point but a continuous narrative of teaching and argument up to this verse. There is, therefore, no account of what our Lord did during the three latter days of the feast. We can only conjecture that He taught on uninterrupted, and that a restraint was put by Divine interposition on His enemies so that they dared not interfere with Him.

Whether this "last day of the feast" means the eighth day or the seventh is a question not decided.

(1) Some, as Bengel and others, think it must be the seventh day, because in the account of the feast of tabernacles given by Moses there is no special mention of anything to be done on the eighth day (Lev. xxiii.33-43); while on each of the seven days of the feast there were special sacrifices appointed, a special reading of the law once every seven years, and also, according to the Jewish writers, a solemn drawing of water from the pool of Siloam to be poured on the altar in the temple.

(2) Others, as Lightfoot, Gill, Alford, Stier, Wordsworth, and Burgon, think it must be the eighth day, because in reality the feast could hardly be said to be finished till the end of the eighth day; and even in the account of the feast in Leviticus, it is said that the eighth day is to be "a holy convocation" and a "Sabbath." (Lev. xxiii.36 and 39.)

The point is of no practical importance, but of the two opinions I incline to prefer the second one. The words seem to me to indicate that all the ceremonial of the feast was over, the last offerings had been made, and the people were on the point of dispersing to their respective homes when our Lord seized the opportunity and made the grand proclamation which immediately follows. It was a peculiarly typical occasion. The last feast of the year was concluding, and before it concluded our Lord proclaimed publicly the great truth which was the commencement of a new dispensation, and Himself as the end of all sacrifices and ceremonies.

The objection that no drawing and pouring of water took place on the eighth day appears to me of no weight. That our Lord referred to it is highly probable. But I think He referred to it as a thing which the Jews had seen seven days running and remembered well. Now on the eighth day, when there

was no water drawn, there seemed a peculiar fitness in His crying, "Come unto Me and drink. The water of life that I give may be drawn, though the feast is over."

[*Jesus stood and cried.*] These words must mean that our Lord chose some high and prominent position where He could "stand" and be seen and heard by many persons at once. If, as we may suppose, the worshipers at the feast of tabernacles were just turning away from the last of its ceremonies, one can easily imagine that our Lord "stood" in some commanding position close by the entrance of the temple. When it is said that "He cried," it means that He lifted up His voice in a loud, and to Him, unusual manner in order to arrest attention, like a herald making a public proclamation.

[*If any man thirsts, let him come to Me and drink.*] These words can have but one meaning: they are a general invitation to all who are athirst about their souls to come to Christ in order to obtain relief. He declares Himself to be the fountain of life, the reliever of man's spiritual needs, the giver of satisfaction to weary consciences, the remover and pardoner of sins. He recommends all who feel their sins and want pardon to come to Him, and promises that they shall at once get what they want. The idea is precisely the same as that in Matt. xi.28, though the image employed is different.

It is probable, as almost all commentators remark, that our Lord chose this figure and imagery because of the Jewish custom of drawing water from the pool of Siloam during the feast of tabernacles and carrying it in solemn procession to the temple. And it is thought that our Lord purposely refers to this ceremony of which the minds of many would doubtless be full. "Does anyone want true water of life, better than any water of Siloam? Let him come to Me and by faith draw out of Me living waters, even peace of conscience and pardon of sins." But it is fair to remember that this is only conjecture. This custom of drawing water from Siloam at the feast was a human invention, nowhere commanded in the law of Moses or even mentioned in the Old Testament; and it admits of doubt whether our Lord would have sanctioned it. Moreover, it is evident from John iv.10 and vi.35 that the figures of "water" and "thirst" were not infrequently used by our Lord. The figures, at any rate, were familiar to all Jews, from Isaiah lv.1.

Some have thought that because the feast of tabernacles was specially intended to remind the Jews of their sojourn in the wilderness, our Lord had in view the miraculous supply of water from the rock which followed Israel everywhere, and that He wished the Jews to see in Him the fulfillment of that type, the true Rock. (1 Cor. x.4.) The idea is deserving of attention.

The whole sentence is one of those golden sayings which ought to be dear to every true Christian, and is full of wide encouragement to all sinners who hear it. Its words deserve special attention.

We should note *the breadth* of the invitation. It is for "any man." No matter who and what he may have been, no matter how bad and wicked his former life, the hand is held out and the offer made to him: "If any man thirsts, let him come." Let no man say that the Gospel is narrow in its

offers.

We should note *the persons* invited. They are those who "thirst." That expression is a figurative one, denoting the spiritual distress and anxiety which anyone feels when he discovers the value of his soul, the sinfulness of sin, and his own guilt. Such a one feels a burning desire for relief, of which the distressing sensation of "thirst," (a sensation familiar to all Eastern nations), is a most fitting emblem. No further qualification is named. There is no mention of repentance, amendment, preparation, conditions to fulfill, new heart to be got. One thing alone is named. Does a man "thirst"? Does he feel his sins and need of pardon? Then the Lord invites him.

We should note *the simplicity* of the course prescribed to a thirsting sinner. It is simply, "Let him come unto Me." He has only to cast his soul on Christ, trust Him, lean on Him, believe on Him, commit his soul with all its burdens to Him, and that is enough. To trust Christ is to "come" to Christ. So "coming," Christ will supply all his need. So believing, he is at once forgiven, justified, and received into the number of God's children. (See John vi.35,37.)

The expression "drink" is, of course, figurative, answering to the word "thirst." It means, "Let him freely take from Me everything that his soul needs--mercy, grace, pardon, peace, strength. I am the Fountain of Life. Let him use Me as such, and I shall be well pleased."

We do not read of any prophet or apostle in the Bible who ever used such language as this and said to men, "Come unto me and drink." None surely could use it but one who knew that He was very God.

38.--[*He who believes on Me, etc.*] This verse is undoubtedly full of difficulties and has received very various interpretations. Not the least difficulty is about the connection in which the several expressions of the verse ought to be taken.

(1) Some, as Stier, would connect "He who believes on Me" with the verb "drink" in the preceding verse. It would then run thus: "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and let him drink who believes on Me." I cannot think this is a right view. For one thing, it would be a violent strain of all grammatical usage of the Greek language to interpret the words thus. For another thing, it would introduce doctrinal confusion. Our Lord's invitation was not made to him "who believes," but to him who is "athirst."

(2) Some, as Chrysostom, Theophylact, Pellican, Heinsius, Gualter, DeDieu, Lightfoot, Trapp, and Henry, would connect "He who believes on Me" with the following words, "as the Scripture has said." It would then mean: "He who believes on Me after the manner that the Scripture bids him believe." I cannot think that this interpretation is correct. The expression "Believe as the Scripture has said," is a very strange and vague one and unlike anything else in the Bible.

(3) Most commentators think that the words, "as the Scripture has said,"

must be taken in connection with those that follow, "out of his belly," etc. They think that our Lord did not mean to quote precisely any one text of Scripture, but only to give in His own words the general sense of several well-known texts. This, in spite of difficulties, I believe is the only satisfactory view.

One difficulty, of a grammatical kind, arises from the expression "He who believes on Me" having no verb with which it is connected in the verse. This cannot be got over. It must be taken as a nominative absolute, and the sentence must be regarded as an elliptical sentence which we must fill up.

Another difficulty arises from the fact that there is no text in the Old Testament Scriptures which at all answers to the quotation apparently given here. This difficulty is undeniable, but not insuperable. As I have already said, our Lord did not intend to give an exact quotation but only the general substance of several Old Testament promises. Wordsworth thinks Matt. ii.23 a similar case. Jerome also maintains that frequently the inspired writers contented themselves with giving the sense and not the precise words of a quotation. (See also Eph. v.14.)

Another difficulty arises as to the application of the words, "Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." Some, as Rupertus, Bengel, and Stier, would apply this to our Lord Himself and say that it means, "Out of Christ's belly shall flow rivers of living water." But it is a grave objection to this view that it totally disconnects the beginning of the verse from the end, makes the expression "He who believes on Me" even more elliptical than it needs to be, and throws the latter part of the verse in the form of a precise quotation of Scripture.

I venture to think that the true interpretation of the verse is as follows: "He who believes on Me, or comes to Me by faith as his Savior, is the man out of whose belly shall flow rivers of living water, as the Scripture has said it should be." It is a strong argument in favor of this view that our Lord said to the Samaritan woman, that the water He could give would be in him who drank it "a well of water springing up into everlasting life." (John iv.14.) The full meaning of the promise is that every believer in Christ shall receive abundant satisfaction of his own spiritual needs; and not only that, but shall also become a source of blessing to others. From him instrumentally, by his word, work, and example, waters of life shall flow forth to the everlasting benefit of his fellowmen. He shall have enough for himself and shall be a blessing to others. The imagery of the figure used is still kept up, and "his belly" must stand for "his inner man." His heart being filled with Christ's gifts, shall overflow to others, and having received much shall give and impart much.

The passages to which our Lord referred, and the substance of which He gives, are probably Isaiah xii.3, xxxv.6,7, xli.18, xlv.3, lv.1, lviii.11, Zech. xiv.8,16. Of these passages, our Lord gives the general sense but not the precise words. This is the view of Calvin, Beza, Grotius, Cocceius, Diodati, Lampe, and Scott. It is a curious, confirmatory fact that the Arabic and Syriac versions of the text both have the expression "Scripture" in the plural, "As the *Scriptures* have said."

It is a curious fact which Bengel mentions, that the 14th chapter of Zechariah was read in public in the temple on the first day of the feast of tabernacles. If this is correct, we can hardly doubt that our Lord must have had this in mind when He used the expression "As the Scripture has said." It is as though He said, "As you have heard, for instance, during this very feast from the book of your prophet Zechariah."

That almost every believer whose life is spared after he believes becomes a fountain of blessing and good to others, is a simple matter of fact which needs no illustration. A truly converted man always desires the conversion of others and labors to promote it. Even the thief on the cross, short as his life was after he repented, cared for his brother thief, and from the words he spoke have flowed "rivers of living water" over this sinful world for more than eighteen hundred years. He alone has been a fountain of blessing.

Bloomfield quotes a Rabbinical sentence: "When a man turns to the Lord, he is like a fountain filled with living water, and rivers flow from him to men of all nations and tribes."

The favorite notion of some, that our Lord in this place only referred to the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost to be given on the day of Pentecost, is an idea that does not commend itself to me at all. The thing before us is a thing promised to *every believer*. But the miraculous gifts were certainly not bestowed on *every* believer. Thousands were evidently converted through the Apostles' preaching who did not receive these gifts. Yet all received the Holy Ghost.

Luther paraphrases this verse thus: "He who comes to Me shall be so furnished with the Holy Ghost that he shall not only be quickened and refreshed himself and delivered from thirst, but he shall also be a strong stone vessel from which the Holy Ghost in all His gifts shall flow to others--refreshing, comforting, and strengthening them even as he was refreshed by Me. So St. Peter on the day of Pentecost, by one sermon as by a rush of water, delivered three thousand men from the devil's kingdom, washing them in an hour from sin, death, and Satan." Hengstenberg, after quoting this, adds: "That was only the first exhibition of a glorious peculiarity which distinguishes the Church of the New Testament from the Church of the Old. She has a living impulse which will diffuse the life within her, even to the ends of the earth."

39.--[*But this He spoke concerning the Spirit.*] This verse is one of those explanatory comments which are so common in St. John's Gospel. The opening words would be more literally rendered, "He spoke this concerning the Spirit."

Let it be noted that here, at any rate, there can be no doubt that "water" does not mean "baptism," but the Holy Spirit. St. John himself says so in unmistakable language.

[*Whom those believing on Him should receive.*] This means, "Whom believers in Him were about to receive." There is an inseparable connection between faith in Christ and receiving the Holy Ghost. If any man has faith, he has

the Spirit. If any man has not the Spirit, he has no saving faith in Christ. The effectual work of the Second and Third Persons in the Trinity is never divided.

Rupertus thinks that our Lord had specially in view that mighty outpouring of the Spirit on the Gentile world which was to take place after His own ascension into heaven, and the going forth of the Apostles into the world to preach the Gospel.

[*For the Holy Ghost was not yet given, etc.*] This sentence means that the Holy Ghost was not yet poured out on believers in all His fullness, because our Lord had not yet finished His work by dying, rising again, and ascending into heaven for us. It was not till He was "glorified" by going up into heaven and taking His seat at the right hand of God that the Holy Ghost was sent down in full influence on the Church. Then was fulfilled Psalm lxxviii.18--"You have ascended on high, You have led captivity captive; You have received gifts for man, yes, for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them." Before our Lord died and rose again and ascended, the Holy Ghost was and had been from all eternity one with the Father and the Son, a distinct Person of equal power and authority, very and eternal God. But He had not revealed Himself so fully to those whose hearts He dwelt in as He did after the ascension; and He had not come down in person on the Gentile world or sent forth the Gospel to all mankind with rivers of blessing as He did when Paul and Barnabas were "sent forth by the Holy Ghost." (Acts xiii.4.) In a word, the dispensation of the Spirit had not yet begun.

The expression "the Holy Ghost was not yet given" would be more literally rendered "the Holy Ghost was not." This cannot, of course, mean that the Holy Ghost did not exist and was in no sense present with believers in the Old Testament dispensation. On the contrary, the Spirit strove with the men of Noah's day, David spoke by the Holy Ghost, Isiah spoke of the Holy Spirit, and John the Baptist, now dead, was filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb. (Gen. vi.4, Mark xii.36, Isa. lxiii.10,11, Luke i.15.)

What the expression does mean is this: The Holy Ghost was not yet with men in such fullness of influence on their minds, hearts, and understandings, as the Spirit of adoption and revelation, as He was after our Lord ascended up into heaven. It is clear as daylight, from our Lord's language about the Spirit in John xiv.16,17,26, xv.26, and xvi.7-15, that believers were meant to receive a far more full and complete outpouring of the Holy Spirit after His ascension than they had received before. It is a simple matter of fact, indeed, that after the ascension the Apostles were quite different men from what they had been before. They both saw, spoke, and acted like men grown up, while before the ascension they had been like children. It was this increased light and knowledge and decision that made them such a blessing to the world, far more than any miraculous gifts. The possession of the gifts of the Spirit, it is evident, in the early Church was quite compatible with an ungodly heart. A man might speak with tongues and yet be like salt that had lost its savor. The possession of the fullness of the graces of the Spirit, on the contrary, was that which made any man a blessing to the world.

Alford says: "St. John does not say that the words were a prophecy of what happened on the day of Pentecost, but of the Spirit which the believers were about to receive. Their first reception of Him must not be illogically put in the place of all His indwelling and working, which are here intended."

I am quite aware that most commentators hold that the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost was specially meant by St. John in this passage. But after carefully considering the matter, I cannot subscribe to this opinion. To confine this verse to the day of Pentecost appears to me to cramp and narrow its meaning--to deprive many believers of their interest in a most precious promise and to overlook all the special language about the inward teaching of the Comforter as a thing to come on believers, which our Lord used the night before His crucifixion.

Bengel remarks that the use of "to be" instead of "to be present" is not uncommon in the Bible. Thus (2 Chron. xv.3.) When therefore we read "the Holy Ghost was not," we need not be stumbled by the expression. It simply means "He was not fully manifested and poured out on the Church." Peter, James, and John no doubt had the Spirit now, when our Lord was speaking. But they had Him much more fully after our Lord was glorified. This explains the meaning of the passage before us.

We should note, in leaving these three verses, what a striking example they supply to preachers, ministers, and teachers of religion. Let such learn from their Master to offer Christ boldly, freely, fully, broadly, unconditionally to all thirsting souls. The Gospel is too often spoiled in the presentation of it. Some fence it round with conditions and keep sinners at a distance. Others direct sinners wrongly and send them to something else beside or instead of Christ. He only copies his Lord who says, "If anyone feels his sins, let him come at once, straight, direct; not merely to church, or to the sacrament, or to repentance, or to prayer, but to Christ Himself."