

A River Runs Through It:  
Living Life in the Spirit  
By John Ortberg

In the Apostle John's gospel, the picture Jesus uses for life on His Way is the picture of a river. He tells us, living in the flow of the Spirit, this river will flow out of the core of who you are. Ever find that a bizarre image? A river of life flowing out of you? Does it even sound appealing?

It seems to be a big deal to God, though. This image of a river is used about 150 times in scripture, most often as a picture of spiritual life. And there is good reason. Israel is a desert country where rivers mean one thing: life.

When Jesus speaks of this central metaphor for our life with Him, the river is grace. The river is *gift*. To we desert people, the river is *life*. We don't know much about the Garden of Eden, but we know this: a river ran through it. Genesis 2:10 says, "*a river watering the Garden flowed in Eden*" and everybody in Israel who hears that verse knows what that means; that's life, that's grace. Beyond Genesis, other references to a river will bring tears to your eyes and hope to your soul if you let it.

**“THERE IS A RIVER WHOSE STREAMS MADE GLAD THE CITY OF GOD.”  
{ PSALM 46 }**

Where the river flows, life will flourish. Where a river dries up, life does as well. Psalms 42 reads, "*As the deer pants for the water, so my soul pants for you, O God.*" When I used to sing the praise chorus based on this verse, I often had a mental image of a little deer like Bambi walking through a green forest—a little thirsty, but otherwise fine. That's not the picture in this psalm, though. Remember, Israel is desert country. The waters are dried up. This deer is going to die if he doesn't find water—and that's me. That's every human being. To be cut off from the Spirit of God means a life of perpetual unsatisfied desires, spiritual dryness, emotional death.

There is a river at the very beginning of the Bible. And in the Psalms. And there is a river at the very end. In Revelation, John writes, "*then the Angel showed me the river of the water of life as clear as crystal... a beautiful thing in that day... flowing down from the throne of God and of the Lamb.*"<sup>1</sup> Of course, the water that flows from the Father, from the Son, down the middle of the great street in that city—right through the heart of the community of God—is the flow of *life*.

On each side of the river stood the tree of life. Soaking up nourishment on the banks of *this* river, it flourishes in a most unusual way: bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding fruit *every* month. This is a remarkable tree. We do not have trees like that, even in California. These trees yield their fruit every month; not just a crop of fruit but *twelve* crops of fruit. Now, when anybody in Israel heard "twelve crops of fruit," what would they think of? Most likely the twelve tribes of Israel. We, too, think of the twelve tribes and, of course, the twelve disciples. This is a reference to the people of God. *This is God taking care of His people*. Of course, God would do that. Bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; God is being abundant and good with His people.

The next sentence is the one that will take your breath away: "*and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*" Let me ask you a question. Could the nations use a little healing today? Can Iran use a little healing today? Could the Gaza Strip? Could Dabar? Could Washington use a little healing today? Your home? Your neighborhood? Your apartment? Your office? Jesus says, "*This is your life and a river runs through it and it's not just for you. Your flourishing is for the healing of the nations.*"

The Jesus Way has become the way of the Spirit and a river runs from the book of Genesis to the book of Revelation and it will run through your belly... *rivers* of living water.

**BUT WHAT IS SPIRITUAL LIFE?**

Most people, *even most people in the church*, do not understand either what it is that Jesus offers or what is

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<sup>1</sup>. Revelation 22:1 NRSV.

at stake as a result. Recently David Kinniman and Gabe Lyons, who authored the book *UnChristian*, have done a lot of research about what people think of “the faith” in our day. He and his team found the lack of understanding about the spiritual life to be as common *among church people* as it was with folks outside the church. In fact, when it comes to spiritual growth, many people are not even able to say what spiritual maturity or spiritual growth *is*.

For example: in their findings, half the people who go to church are not able to say what their church thinks of spiritual maturity. The highest number of people defined spiritual maturity as “trying hard to follow rules in the Bible.” Not surprisingly, the two biggest personal barriers to growing spiritually people reported were (1) “I’m not motivated to grow spiritually” and (2) “there are too many distractions that get in the way.” Furthermore, a majority of people who responded in the survey said they were already satisfied with the level of spiritual maturity they were experiencing.

In other words, people don’t know what spiritual growth is and even if they knew, they are not motivated to pursue it and even if they were, they’ve already got enough.

### **PERFECT PITCH**

When we moved out to California, Ned Coletti, who was with the San Francisco Giants at that time, asked if I would speak at a chapel. And then he said, “Would you like to take some batting practice?” He said there is a guy named John Yandle who threw batting practice for Barry Bonds who would throw me some pitches. John was a little younger than me and never actually pitched in the Major Leagues, so it wasn’t like facing a young major league player in his prime. But he does professional batting practice, and so I thought this would give me a good chance to benchmark my athletic skills.

Now, I never played organized baseball, but we played on a vacant lot as a kid and when I was growing up the best pitcher in our neighborhood was Steve Snail. When we were in the fifth grade, I could hit him better than anybody else in the neighborhood. There was only one other kid in the neighborhood, and she was in the first grade, but I was still the best. Since I thought I did pretty good with Steve, I said yes to Ned and decided I’d see how it went.

The first time, John wound up, and let go, and I heard the sound of a ball hitting the net *behind* me. I was shocked to realize he was not just “lobbing” these pitches to me; he wanted to make this a contest. *He’s throwing as hard as he can!*, I thought. He wants to show me up and see if I can hit his best stuff.

He wound up again. This time I swung but the ball had already been in the net several seconds by the time my bat got to the plate. I kept starting my swing earlier; eventually, I would begin my swing about the same time he started his wind up. I got several foul balls and I was feeling pretty good about myself, and then he said, “Do you want me to put a little zip on one?”

Those had been his lobs.

So, full of bravado, I said, “Sure, it’s been kind of hard to time these slow balls.”

He wound up and threw one more. I didn’t even see it.

I asked him if that was his best pitch. He said, “No, you wouldn’t even want to see my best pitch.” I asked him, “Where do I stand? What level of player would hit that really well?”

“A good high school player would crunch it,” he answered.

So, a good college guy would be *above* that? Oh, yeah, John said. A good college guy would strike out a high school guy with his eyes closed and a minor league guy would throw shut outs to college guys and you put a major league arm against minor leaguers and it would be ugly.

Until that day, I had no realistic idea of where I stood in this athletic arena—and, I got his assessment in writing! He actually sent a scouting report to Ned Coletti, who forwarded it on to me and he said, “John Ortberg bats right, throws right, took ten minutes of batting practice. As a hitter, John makes a good pastor.”

### **THE GRACE GAP**

There are many areas in life where we are incompetent without any idea of our incompetence, but nowhere does our blindness to reality affect the human condition as much as it does when it comes to seeing our own lives compared to what they could be in the Holy Spirit. The distance between the “without-God life” and the life lived with a holy and righteous and perfect God. The first gap that we become aware of is when we look and see, here’s God ... and here’s me. There is this gap between us, and it’s caused by sin, and it’s a huge gap. That gap, we all know, cannot be bridged by human effort. It takes grace.

Yet even with God’s grace, I’m still left with a gap. Only now the gap is between me, as God made me

to be, and me, as I exist right now. Many, many, many people still think that this gap is one I am supposed to bridge by direct effort. It's about trying harder to follow the rules. A lot of people think they can close the gap if they will just be heroic in their spiritual efforts. *I'll read another book. I'll listen to another talk. I'll learn some new disciplines. I'll serve more. I'll work harder. I'll try to be nicer to people.*

You hear about somebody who gets up at 4:00 in the morning to pray and you feel guilty because you think you don't pray enough and you resolve to do that, too, even though you are not a morning person. Even though, at 4:00 in the morning, you are dazed and confused and foggy and grumpy and no one wants to be around you at 4:00 am. Even Jesus doesn't want to be around you at 4:00 in the morning. *But, you think, well, this is hard and exhausting and miserable and I don't like doing it, but it must be God's Will for my life.* It must be spiritual and you keep it up for several days or weeks or months but not forever, and eventually, you stop. And maybe the cycle begins again later with new resolve when you hear about some other discipline that someone is undertaking enough to make you feel horrible about yourself.

This is just what so many people in our churches experience when they think about what spiritual life is: they feel guilty, and so they try harder, but it's not working, and then they get fatigued and then eventually, when the fatigue builds up enough, they quit. And then after quitting for awhile, they start to feel guilty. Anybody here ever experience something like this? If we get honest about what people actually experience, they just get tired.

### **A NEW WAY**

What if Jesus really meant what He said? That the Spirit of God is like a river and flowing all the time? What if your job as a follower is not to try harder or run faster or get up earlier or rev up your emotions? What if God really is at work in every moment; in every place? What, if in a sense, my job is to learn simply *not* do those things that close me off from the Spirit? Instead of needing to *do* something else, what if it's about how I keep myself aware and submitted so that rivers of living water are flowing through my being? Paul puts it like this and in some ways, the spiritual life is that simple. Just don't quench the Spirit. The Spirit is already at work. He is bigger than you. He is stronger than you. He is more patient than your failures. He is committed to helping you 24/7, so just don't get in His way. Don't quench the Spirit. Don't grieve the Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

We are *always* either opening ourselves up—walking in the Spirit—or quenching the Spirit. I'll give you an example. Over the holidays, Nancy and I had dinner with two other couples... some of our best friends. At one point, I was talking about me and Nancy gave my hand a little squeeze. Nobody else could see it. I was the only one that knew. It was a little signal meaning, "You're talking too much. Give someone else a turn."

It was a "squeeze play." We had not worked out that signal before. It was just spontaneous. And I immediately thought, "I don't like the squeeze play." I think that what I was saying about me was really interesting. I think Nancy is being overly directive.

Now, here's the biggest problem. After dinner was over, I didn't say anything to her; I just said to myself, "Well, you know, it's not a big deal. We don't need to talk about it." And I decided, without quite putting it into these words, "I would rather avoid a potentially unpleasant conversation than honor my relationship with my wife, learn more about myself, and wrestle with being honest." Just a little bit, I cut myself off from the flow of the Spirit. In just this one area, I quenched the Spirit's leading in my life.

The next day, I spent time with a real good friend and we talked about our families and our marriages and the incident from the previous night came up and immediately I knew, I'm going to have to talk with my wife about the squeeze thing. Hopefully before 2010.

No, I did it! And she was very gracious. We actually both learned from the conversation—it made me grateful for the squeeze! By having that conversation, I returned to the flow of the Spirit. The Jesus Way has become the way of the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, Paul says, there is freedom.<sup>3</sup>

### **SEE OTHER JOURNAL**

There is an adventure and a mystery to the life in the Spirit that is unique to every human being. Disciples are hand crafted, not mass produced. This is how growth works. What would grow an orchid would drown a cactus.

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<sup>2</sup>. Ephesians 4:30.

<sup>3</sup>. 2 Corinthians 3:17.

What would feed a mouse would starve an elephant. There are certain similarities. They all need light, food, air, water but in different amounts and different conditions. The key is not treating every creature alike.

It's finding the unique condition that will help every creature grow. How that works for every individual depends partly on how I learn, what my temperament is, what are the sins that I wrestle with, what are my gifts, what season of life am I in. The old word for this is *discernment*. But, here's the deal. It will take freedom and experimentation for every person to learn how the Spirit wants to grow them up. One of the great problems in churches is that when people listen to someone else describe what they do for spiritual growth, often the pastor, they tend to think they are supposed to do whatever he does.

We used to be at a church where the pastor was big on journaling. The pastor would talk *a lot* about journaling. My wife hates to journal. She *really* hates to journal. So she had big gaps in her journal and felt guilty about that. There would be days, weeks, months, years between entries. I finally said, "Get two journals and if the gap is too big in one of them, just write, 'see other journal' in it."

One of the best days of Nancy's spiritual life was when she learned that Jesus never journaled. Did you know? It is possible to love God and not journal. In fact, in C.S. Lewis' little autobiography, *Surprised By Joy*, he tells how he used to keep a journal before he became a Christian. When he was converted, he realized that same process was now making him too self-preoccupied. So one of his spiritual disciplines was that he *stopped* writing a journal after he became a Christian.

If writing a journal helps you to be connected to the Spirit, write a journal. I often find it a helpful thing to do, but you can love God and not write in a journal. It is not about writing in a journal. It is about the fact that Jesus said, "whoever comes to me, rivers of living water will flow out of your belly." Your real life.

Because the Spirit is here, because the Kingdom is here. Whatever is going on in your life—maybe things are going great, maybe there is pain, maybe you ache for another person, maybe you yourself are in a deep depression—but this life, this Jesus life, these rivers of living water, they are right here, right now. That longing that you have inside you is a longing for the eternal Spirit, for eternal life for God has set in the hearts of man.

## **DANCING ALL THE WAY**

The high point for me at my niece's wedding a year or so ago was a dance they did afterwards when all *married* couples were invited out on the dance floor area. As the music played, couples then left the dance floor in reverse order of how long they had been married. So, naturally, my niece Courtney and her new husband Patrick, a beautiful, strong, young couple, were the first to leave the dance floor. Then everybody that had been married for a year, and then five years, and so on until it hit 25 years. Nancy and I hit 25 years last year and we were one of the last couples left on the floor. We stepped down. And, then, finally, there was just one couple left: a tall, white-haired guy and a real short little wife. They had been married for 53 years. My Mom and my Dad. It was the strangest thing to see. You could just tell that when they looked at each other, she did not see this aging, white-haired old guy; she saw that young, bronzed tennis champion that she married 53 years ago. And when my Dad looked at my Mom, he didn't see this aging, little woman, he saw that young, radiant bride. For somehow, all eternity has been set in the soul of the human being.

Then the master of ceremonies said, "Now, Courtney and Patrick, you take a good look at that man and that woman out there on the dance floor because this is your job. In 53 years, let that be you. In 53 years, let that be your dance."

I thought about how quickly 53 years will go by; to my Mom and Dad, it was a blink of an eye. And so it will be 53 years from now. In 53 years, my father will be gone; in 53 years, my mother will be dead. In 53 years, Nancy will be dead. In 53 years, I'll be 104 years old.

God has set eternity in the hearts of men and women. The deepest longing—the deepest thirst—that you have is one that only Jesus fulfills. The way of Jesus has become the way of the Spirit. May those rivers of living water flow way down in the belly for all of us who thirst; may it be true of us that a river runs right through.

*Scripture quotations marked (NRSV) New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.*

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