

The River of Life

Bible Background • REVELATION 22:1-7

Printed Text • REVELATION 22:1-7 | Devotional Reading • GENESIS 1:1-13

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will RESEARCH the biblical references to the “river of life” to learn its spiritual, symbolic, and material effect on creation, IMAGINE God’s provisions to be found in the river of life, which will nourish and heal people and nations in the New Jerusalem, and RESPOND to the river of life through acceptance, faith, and entrance into the fullness of God’s kingdom.

In Focus

Ms. Cattie knew growing old was a blessing. She had accumulated plenty of wisdom and experience throughout the years. However, growing old had its share of challenges too. Joints began to ache. Strength and speed diminished. Wrinkles and gray hair became her prominent features. One of the main problems with growing old, Ms. Cattie thought, was suffering a lot of loss. At 95 years old, Ms. Cattie had seen her share. She had buried both of her parents and two of her four children. Most of her closest friends had passed, and those who remained struggled to remember the great times they had together.

Most recently, she had lost her husband of 70 years. However, as God would allow it, she was eagerly preparing to celebrate the arrival of her first two great-great-grandsons. Twins! It was a tangible reminder that one day God would wipe away all tears and ease sorrows, replacing them both with all things new. These days, Ms. Cattie thought a lot about heaven. As grateful as she was for the life she lived, the experiences she had, and the family she had raised, she yearned for the day when all of the pain and heartache of this life would be left behind. She knew it was coming sooner rather than later. And she was ready. One day all things would become new.

In this lesson, we will learn about God’s redemptive plan for heaven and earth. What is the thing you most look forward to in God’s new heaven and new earth?

Keep In Mind

“And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.” (Revelation 22:1, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Fruit (Revelation 22:2) karpos (Gk.) – A product of plants or trees; figuratively, a product of work or effort, such as offspring, wages or moral attributes

B. Quickly (v. 7) tachy (Gk.) – Imminence (“soon”) or suddenness (“quickly”)

Say It Correctly

Johannine. joe-HAH-nine.

Apollyon. ah-PAH-lee-on.

KJV

Revelation 22:1 And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.

2 In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

3 And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him:

4 And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads.

5 And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever.

6 And he said unto me, These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done.

7 Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book.

NLT

Revelation 22:1 Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.

2 It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations.

3 No longer will there be a curse upon anything. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him.

4 And they will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads.

5 And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever.

6 Then the angel said to me, "Everything you have heard and seen is trustworthy and true. The Lord God, who inspires his prophets, has sent his angel to tell his servants what will happen soon.

7 "Look, I am coming soon! Blessed are those who obey the words of prophecy written in this book."

The People, Places, and Times

Lamb. In the book of Revelation, the designation "Lamb" occurs many times in symbolic reference to Christ and unites the two ideas of redemption and kingship. On one side are statements referring to a Lamb that has been slain (5:6, 12); those who "have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14); and "they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony" (12:11). The stress here falls upon the redeeming work of Christ as the Lamb of God. On the other side, also connected with the title is the idea of sovereignty. It is the Lamb that was slain that has power to take the book and loose its seals (5:6–7); there is reference to the wrath of the Lamb (6:16); and the Lamb is seen in the midst of the throne (7:17). In the general term, "Lamb," two ideas unite: victorious power and vicarious suffering. At the heart of God's sovereignty, there is sacrificial love.

Background

The first part of Revelation 22 portrays, in visions and images, the wonderful future awaiting God's people in the new heaven and the new earth. Drawing heavily on the book of Isaiah, John's vision concludes by showing the certainty of the promise. Just as the prophecies of the Old Testament have been fulfilled in Christ's first coming, so the prophecy of Revelation will be ultimately fulfilled through Christ's Second Coming. And just as Christ's first coming was great news for some (the poor in spirit who believed in Him) and bad news for others (the proud of heart who rejected Him), so also His unstoppable Second Coming will be wonderful news for those who belong to Christ, and woeful news for those who spurn the message of His Gospel. Revelation, like the Bible as a whole, is a book of both promise and warning. John's remarkable vision calls the Church to take comfort in the incomparable power and mercy of Christ, who comes for the redemption of His own.

At-A-Glance

1. God's Glorious People (Revelation 22:1–2)
2. God's Glorious Presence (vv. 3–5)
3. God's Glorious Promise (vv. 6–7)

In Depth

1. God's Glorious People (Revelation 22:1–2)

The new heavens and new earth are a place of perfect abundance, a world fit for God and His people to reign. This is true, redeemed urban living! To paint a picture of the greatest possible abundance and blessing, John's vision returns to the place of God's original purpose: the Garden of Eden. Just as in Eden (Genesis 2:10), a life-giving river flows in the New Jerusalem. This "water of life" symbolizes the everlasting life given by Jesus through the Spirit (see John 7:37–39) and the "abundant life" He promised (John 10:10).

Just as the tree of life stood in Eden (Genesis 2:9), it will also stand in the New Jerusalem amidst the river, represented by 12 trees (a number symbolizing divine government and completeness). Here, God will provide to heal and bind up all wounds—especially sin and spiritual brokenness (21:3–4), washed away as the nations partake of the water and the tree of life (22:2). Humanity was not commanded to leave the earth as an untilled garden, but to work the ground and produce good things, thereby mirroring the creativity and benevolent reign of God over His creation. God brings about this purpose, redeeming not only His chosen remnant, but also the earth itself!

In what ways might the tree of life be used "for healing of the nations"?

2. God's Glorious Presence (vv. 3-5)

All this Edenic abundance is possible, because, like Eden, the New Jerusalem does not suffer from the curse anymore! The curse has been canceled out by the very presence of God. In the new city, God now dwells in perfect purity with a pure people. Even as God exists in loving fellowship with Himself in three persons, so now all His people will be enfolded in that perfect triune love and communion. He claims us as His own with His name on our foreheads. Even though throughout the Scriptures, seeing the face of God had been a frightful thing, now we are pure enough to meet His gaze, which illuminates heaven.

Jesus is the light of the world, and of heaven. How have you seen His light in your life?

3. God's Glorious Promise (vv. 6–7)

God in His mercy frequently gives added testimony to the certainty of what He reveals. To call the Lord the “God of the holy prophets” (v. 6) is to show that these words, just like the prophets’ words, are breathed out by God and cannot be false. Just as the prophets were able to say, “Thus says the LORD,” so also the angel, with the same authority, promises that these words are “faithful and true,” and that these things “must shortly be done” (v. 6). Likewise, when John is commanded not to seal up the prophecy, but write it down, God shows us that the vision is true. The record of that vision is also inspired by Him, and utterly reliable.

The promise is also given a specific urgency. Christ promises to come quickly, signaling to the believer that the words of the book should be not only read but immediately obeyed. This admonishes all believers to expect Christ’s return and the glorious fulfillment of God’s promises.

How do we know that God’s words are trustworthy and true?

Search the Scriptures

1. How will we benefit from the curse being removed from everything (Revelation 22:3)?
2. How would you evaluate your awareness and expectancy that Jesus is coming soon (v. 7)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. What did God mean by saying these things “must shortly be done” (v. 6), when this was recorded so long ago?
2. Why is it often hard to have a true longing for heaven?

Liberating Lesson

The human race continues to encounter injustice, oppression, and misery. In particular, the African American community possesses a history of oppression—one that continues today through racism and economic injustice. God provides opportunity to redress wrong and injustice through political or social means. Although we should act and live as God’s agents for present change, social justice can become an idol; bitterness may ensue when cruelty and oppression continue. This passage reminds us that hope for a paradise on this earth is a misguided hope.

We will face setbacks and difficulties in trying to perfect systems run by flawed humans. We must not lose heart, though. We do what we can now, and trust that in the end, God will fix everything better than we ever could manage ourselves. The Christian’s hope is set immeasurably high. In the new heavens and new earth, God’s bride, the Church, becomes as perfectly radiant as the New Jerusalem; there will true healing take place.

Application for Activation

Think about circumstances or relationships in your life that leave you feeling bitter or resentful because of the way you’ve been treated. How do you respond when you feel slighted? Does a focus on making things right in this world keep you from longing for the next? Take this opportunity to repent of your misplaced hope and turn to Christ for forgiveness. In light of the incredible promises of

God about your identity and your abundant inheritance, take time each day to intentionally rejoice and give thanks for the glory that awaits you in God's presence.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Revelation 22:1–7

1 And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.

John's vision in the Spirit continues (cf. Revelation 21:10). He is given a panoramic view of the Holy City. He is shown a pure river containing the water of life. The Greek word translated "river" is potamos (poh-tah- MOCE), which means running water, like a stream, flood, or river. The Sons of Korah spoke prophetically of this river: "There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High" (Psalm 46:4). It is the water of life that brings the life of God.

This river had been foreshadowed by the river in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:10), watering the plants and animals so they can flourish in the garden paradise. The river from the millennial Temple (Ezekiel 47:1–12) also foreshadows this river. Ezekiel's river grew ever deeper as it flowed from the Temple and brought life to all creatures wherever it flowed, even as it filled and purified the Dead Sea. Zechariah also prophesied the issuing out of "living waters" from Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:8). A figurative reference to this river that Jesus makes describes one of the greatest spiritual realities of the Christian faith: the outpouring, deposit, and flow of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer (John 7:38–39). In each of these descriptions of the heavenly river, its source is the presence of God. **God Himself is the life-giving stream, and Jesus is the "living water" with which it flows (John 4:7–15).**

2 In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

The Bible metaphorically calls four things the tree of life: wisdom (Proverbs 3:18), the fruit of righteousness (Proverbs 11:30), fulfilled desire (Proverbs 13:12), and a wholesome tongue (Proverbs 15:4). These things are all described as giving life to those who partake of them. The same can be said of this tree in Revelation, except that the life that this tree gives is eternal.

The New Jerusalem is prefigured by the Garden of Eden, the first place where humans lived in their innocence. Both have rivers, and Eden is the first place where the tree of life was mentioned. Everything in the Holy City is of the greatest proportion, being the most perfect reality compared to other references or similarities in the Bible, which are mere foreshadowings. For instance, the Bible talks about one tree of life in the middle of the Garden of Eden, but here numerous trees abound on both sides of the river.

The tree of life conferred immortality on anyone who ate its fruit, hence its name (Genesis 3:22). In Ezekiel's vision, he revealed that the fruit of the tree of life was meant for food and healing (Ezekiel 47:12). Here John tells us the same thing: The fruit and leaves are for the healing of the nations. This tree is said to bear 12 kinds of fruit every month. As a tree of life, it bears fruit to confer immortality on its eater and maintain life in the Holy City. The monthly harvest of fruit from the tree of life and the availability of its leaves to heal the nations (see Revelation 21:24, 26) indicate that the blessings of the New Jerusalem have neither chronological nor geographical limitations. God's people do not have to wait for a specific harvest season, but can enjoy a bountiful crop at any time of year. The leaves are available not just to those who happen to live near the Temple, but to all the nations.

3 And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and the Lamb shall be in it: and his servants shall serve him: 4 And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads.

The worst thing a person can say to someone else is a curse. The Greek word translated "curse" here is *katanathema* (kah-tah-NAHtheh- mah), meaning a wish that evil may befall a person. Curses served as protective and punitive measures against violating the terms of a treaty; they were intended to doom a person to calamity or destruction. Linguistically there is no indication as to which curse is no longer at play. However, the statement about the absence of a curse or accursed thing immediately follows mention of the tree of life. Since Adam and Eve were barred from the tree of life (Genesis 3:22– 24) immediately after curses were pronounced for consumption of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the audience is primed to think of the first and greatest curse on humanity. The Curse in the Garden of Eden was a divine judgment against humankind's disobedience. But in the Holy City, even that Curse has no place. The occupants of this city are not objects of divine wrath and punishment, so no disaster can come upon them. They are the redeemed who have qualified as occupants of the New Jerusalem by their faith in Christ and have distinguished themselves with lives above sin, curse, and calamity. The New Jerusalem will offer ultimate bliss to the believer, the greatest rewards and privileges that are not available in our present world. The throne of God and Christ will be there, bringing the habitation, presence, and direct government of God to the redeemed.

John notes that the throne is shared by both God and the Lamb. Here again is an element of Johannine theology that permeates his Gospel, his epistles, and his apocalypse: Jesus is God. The Son and the Father are one and the same. Revelation shows many scenes of worshipers around the throne of God. Once the Lamb is introduced in the visions, however, praise is always given to both the one on the throne and to the Lamb. With this in mind, John is also told twice in his visions to worship only God, and not the angel who is showing these things to him. With the repeated instruction only to worship God and the repeated worship of the Lamb, one can only conclude that Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, is God.

Most blessedly of all, the divine prohibition will end God's order that forbids humanity from seeing His face will no longer exist. This Old Testament order, communicated by God to Moses, stated: "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live" (from Exodus 33:20). Over the ages, the physical sight of God had been denied to humans, because the consequence was death. But in

the New Jerusalem, there will be a new order: God's servants will serve Him, and they will see His face and behold Him physically. This is because those who live in the Holy City will be completely transformed to be like God (1 John 3:2). They will be absent of sin, and their bodies will be changed (1 Corinthians 15:51–53).

His name will be on their foreheads as a seal of allegiance. When 144,000 of the tribes of Israel are sealed (Revelation 7), God's mark is placed on their foreheads. These people are then protected from the judgment of the fifth trumpet, which is a swarm of locusts from the abyss under a king named Apollyon (9:1–11). God's mark on His elects' foreheads is in contrast to the marks the Beast forces people to take either in their hands or their foreheads (13:16). Those who avoid taking the Beast's mark are those who reign with Jesus during the millennial reign (20:4).

Two seals on the forehead are significant in this context from the Old Testament as well. First, the high priest wore a medallion across his forehead sealing him as "HOLINESS TO THE LORD" (Exodus 28:36). This mark let the priest take Israel's sin on himself and absolve them before God, so that the people could commune with the Lord (v. 38). Second, John perhaps has another vision of Ezekiel's in mind (Ezekiel 9). In this one, God is angered by the idolatry being practiced in Israel and even in the Temple itself. He sends one servant throughout Jerusalem to mark the foreheads of those who have not partaken of the rampant idolatry. That faithful remnant is spared as six other divine servants follow after the first servant and slaughter all whom he does not mark, that is, all the idolaters. This vision's resonances with the Passover cannot be missed. God's mark on one's forehead labels you as His own faithful servant and protects you from His judgment.

5 And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign forever and ever.

Both water and sunlight are necessary for the growth of trees and other forms of plant life. John has already noted the water source in heaven, and now he tells about the light source. In the beginning, God created light. On day four, the sun and moon were specifically given their functions to bring about day and night (Genesis 1:14). Here the passage says there shall be no night. Figuratively, the night stands for various periods and conditions in human life: a time of ignorance and helplessness (Micah 3:6), the depraved condition of humankind (1 Thessalonians 5:5–7), and also a time of inactivity or death (John 9:4). In the Holy City, there will be no ignorance, the depraved conditions of humankind will not exist, and death will be no more. Here we see the fulfillment of Christ's teaching that He is the Light of the world (John 8:12).

6 And he said unto me, These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done.

This is the second time the angel used the words "faithful" and "true" (21:5; 22:6), which also are applied directly to Christ (Revelation 3:14; 19:11) As Christ is faithful and true, so are His words sent via prophets or angels also faithful and true. The apparent redundancy here must indicate the special importance to the church of these particular words—even while underscoring that God always has, in the same trustworthy manner, revealed the future through His prophets. The phrase translated as "the Lord God, who inspires his prophets" in the NLT literally means that the prophets' very breath and spirit (Gk. *pneuma*, puh-NEW-mah; breath, spirit) comes from God. (KJV's reading of "holy prophets" is based on a different set of manuscripts that exchange *pneuma* with *hagion*, HAH-gee-on, holy. Those that read *pneuma* are older and more reliable.) This points to the authority of John's vision, connecting John's prophecy to the prophets of the past as originating from God

The hinge phrase “must shortly be done” (v. 6) has been translated many ways, yet all clearly concur that the Greek word tachos (TAHkhos) means quickness or speed. The original Greek did not intend “quickly” as commonly understood. Few would say 2,000 years is “quickly,” but “suddenly” could happen at any time, even the distant future. This rendering also agrees with other verses that describe His coming as a thief in the night, taking a self-indulgent, self-absorbed world by surprise (Matthew 24:38–41; 1 Thessalonians 5:4).

Ever since John penned his vision, these words of imminent hope have been available for all to see and react to as they choose. When Christ finally does return, no one will be able to claim total surprise, and they also will have no one to blame if His coming isn't welcome.

7 Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book.

After reinforcing this element of surprise, the angel encourages believers, but subtly implies that those who do not “keep the sayings of the prophecy in this book” will not be “blessed” at Jesus' sudden appearance. In this Revelation beatitude, believers will be blessed, more likely ecstatic, as our time of vindication and the completion of our redemption will have come at long last. In stark contrast, the unbelieving world will be judged and condemned. Here translated “sayings” but generally translated “words,” John uses the Greek word logos (LOWgoce), a word he used multiple times in 36 verses of his Gospel, to refer to the entire Word of God (see especially John 1).

Each succeeding generation must anticipate, prepare, watch, and be ready for Jesus' return. Nothing in our present world can give us enduring comfort and eternal joy; we must place all our hopes on Jesus Christ, serving Him wholeheartedly. He has prepared a wonderful and glorious future for those who put their trust in Him.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

My Soul Thirsts for You
(Psalm 63)

TUESDAY

Living Waters Shall Flow from Jerusalem
(Zechariah 14:6-11)

WEDNESDAY

Jesus Promises Living Water
(John 4:4-14)

THURSDAY

Worship God in Spirit and Truth
(John 4:15-26)

FRIDAY

Rivers of Living Water
(John 7:37-40)

SATURDAY

Water on the Thirsty Land
(Isaiah 44:1-8)

SUNDAY

For the Healing of the Nations
(Revelation 22:1-7)