

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Are you looking for the perfect Mother's Day gift for next Sunday?

What about a "fruit-of-the-month club"? Harry and David advertise at least eight different "fruit-of-the-month club" options, including: Signature Classic Fruit; Signature Light Fruit; Presidential Fruit; Medley Fruit; Organic Fruit; Fresh Fruit and Cheese; Favorites; and Chocolate Covered Fruit.

According to HarryAndDavid.com, "You couldn't always get fresh fruit year-round. Especially if you didn't live where it grew. That's why Harry and David found a way to ship the finest fruit all over the country with the Fruit-of-the-Month Club® Collections. A new favorite fruit handpicked and delivered fresh each month makes the perfect gift for anyone." The fruits for the next three months are: May — strawberries; June — honey mangoes; July — Cherry-Oh!® cherries.

The HarryAndDavid.com website also says, "Fueled by innovation, brothers Harry and David introduced ***the world's first monthly fruit Club*** in 1936." (emphasis added) The folks in the advertising department at HarryAndDavid.com must have forgotten to read Revelation 22:2! "On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month. . ." Surely ***that*** is the world's first monthly fruit Club, on the banks of the river of the water of life!

Last Sunday we went back to the garden, all the way back to the time of creation, as we said "Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!" in response to the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2. Today we find ourselves looking at the holy city of Jerusalem, the ***new*** Jerusalem, and it sounds a lot like the garden of Eden. Listen to the description of ***that*** garden in Genesis 2:8-14: "And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is 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 river is the Euphrates."

A river runs through it, and the hope is held out before us that we shall gather at the river. In his book of meditations written over a seven year period of sabbath reflection, the farmer and poet, Wendell Berry writes:

*To sit and look at light-filled leaves
May let us see, or seem to see,
Far backward as through clearer eyes
to what unsighted hope believes:
The blessed conviviality
That sang Creation's seventh sunrise,
Time when the Maker's radiant sight
Made radiant every thing He saw,
And every thing He saw was filled
With perfect joy and life and light.¹*

“Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod, with its crystal tide forever flowing by the throne of God? On the margin of the river, washing up its silver spray, we will walk and worship ever, all the happy golden day. Ere we reach the shining river, lay we every burden down; grace our spirits will deliver, and provide a robe and crown. Soon we'll reach the shining river; soon our pilgrimage will cease; soon our happy hearts will quiver with the melody of peace. Yes, we'll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river; gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.”

On a hot July afternoon in 1864, Pastor Robert Lowry, professor of literature, Baptist pastor, and music editor at Biglow Publishing Company who wrote almost 500 hymns, was resting on his sofa. He began to think about the bright golden throne room of God and the multitude of saints gathered around the beautiful, cool, crystal, river of life. He reported being filled with a sense of great joy, but also wondered why so many hymns made reference to the river of death, but not the river of life. As he lay there on his sofa, the words and music of *Shall We Gather at the River?* came to him.² After his hymn became popular at camp meetings and baptisms, Rev. Lowry said, “It is brass band music, has a march movement, and for that reason has become popular, though for myself I do not think much of it.” And yet, Rev. Lowry tells two stories about when this hymn moved him.

First, “Going from Harrisburg to Lewisburg once I got into a car filled with half-drunken lumbermen. Suddenly one of them struck up ‘Shall We Gather at the River?’ and they sang it over and over again, repeating the chorus in a wild, boisterous way. I did not think so much of the music then as I listened to those singers, but I did think that perhaps the spirit of the hymn, the words so flippantly uttered, might somehow survive and be carried forward into the lives of those careless men, and ultimately lift them upward to the realization of the hope expressed in my hymn.”

Dr. Lowry's second story: “A different appreciation of it was evinced during the Robert Raikes' Centennial. I was in London, and had gone to meeting in the Old Bailey to see some of the most famous Sunday-school workers in the world. They were present from Europe, Asia, and America. I sat in a rear seat alone. After there had been a number of addresses delivered in various languages, I was preparing to leave,

when the chairman of the meeting announced that the author of ‘Shall We Gather at the River?’ was present, and I was requested by name to come forward. Men applauded and women waved their handkerchiefs as I went to the platform. It was a tribute to the hymn; but I felt, when it was over, that, after all, I had perhaps done some little good in the world, and I felt more than ever content to die when God called.”³

“Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod, with its crystal tide forever flowing by the throne of God? Yes, we’ll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river; gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.” The song is written in the future tense — “**Shall** we gather at the river? Yes, **we’ll** gather at the river.” — but the song offers hope and direction for our present lives, just as John’s vision of “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” offers hope for the present.

In a commentary on John’s vision of the new Jerusalem here at the end of Revelation, Brian Peterson writes, “This is the promise of life with God brought out of the long story of human sin, rebellion, and suffering. From God comes light; from God comes the tree of life; from God’s throne flows the water of life; God is the temple, sanctifying the entire community; and God’s own presence is given. We know that presence in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We know that presence of God at the font, and the table, and in the proclamation of good news. We know that presence of God dimly reflected in our own imperfect communities. This text holds before our eyes the goal to which God is bringing all of human life, and calls us on to that reality.”⁴

Just as I was getting ready to write these very next words on Thursday, I realized what was playing on my Pandora playlist — “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” That was certainly an appropriate backdrop for writing and preaching about the river of the water of life. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well, “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.” (John 4:14) “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” is in the Baptism section of our hymnal, *Glory to God*. “Come, thou Fount of every blessing; tune my heart to sing thy grace; streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise. Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above; praise the mount! I’m fixed upon it, mount of God’s unchanging love!”

That hymn expresses the call to praise God now and the hope for living now in the assurance of God’s unchanging love and never ceasing streams of mercy. In the same way, Revelation talks about the future in order to give hope and encouragement for life in the present. Revelation is not an escape hatch from our present life. Instead, Revelation gives us a vision of God’s reality that shapes our present and gives us encouragement to live and worship faithfully.

Streets of gold, pearly gates, the book of life — this picture of “heaven” comes straight from these verses at the end of Revelation. John takes what is most precious in our sight here on earth and exaggerates it beyond belief to try and describe the inde-

scribable — the glory and radiance of God who reigns forever and ever. Some day, some day, we shall gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river that flows by the throne of God.

In the meantime, here we are. What are we supposed to do? We could put our lives on hold and try to wait it out until the day when we gather at the river. We could cling to the hope of “going to heaven” and be content as long as it’s just about “me and Jesus.” We could turn a blind eye to the problems and challenges of this life because, after all, God is going to restore everything one day, so what’s the point of being concerned about present suffering and injustice?

But that’s not how God calls us to live in Jesus Christ. One writer has put it this way: “Christians have often been criticized for paying too much attention to the next world, and ignoring the problems of our present world. However, there is no reason to believe that a focus on the new heaven and new earth detract from efforts to redeem our present world. C.S. Lewis, in his book, *Christian Behavior*, says, ‘If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were . . . those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this (world). Aim at Heaven and you will get the earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you will get neither.’” The writer continues, “That comment might seem natural for a Christian author, such as C.S. Lewis — but Gordon Allport, an eminent psychologist and longtime member of the Harvard faculty, expressed similar sentiments in his book, *The Individual and His Religion*: ‘We could probably prove that throughout history those Christians who have accomplished the most practical benefit in this world are those who have believed most fervently in the next.’”⁵

One day in September 1999, in the early aftermath of Hurricane Floyd, the roads into Wallace finally opened up and the grocery stores were restocked. I was at the store getting some much needed items when I bumped into Virginia Troy (Ann Carter’s mother) near the meat section. She was shaking her head as we talked about the devastation of Floyd and the challenges facing our community. As we got ready to part ways and continue our shopping, Ginny looked at me and said, “Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days, for the living of these days.”

That’s the promise of gathering at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river that runs through the new Jerusalem. **Some day** makes a difference for **today**. Shall we gather at the river, where we’ll find the original Fruit-of-the-Month Club? “Yes, we’ll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river; gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.” In the meantime, that promise gives us the reason and the courage to keep on keepin’ on today. “God of grace and God of glory, grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour, for the living of these days, lest we miss thy kingdom’s goal, serving thee whom we adore.”

Let us pray: Dear God, as we worship you in spirit and in truth, may our hearts overflow with praise. May we be cleansed by the waters of your grace and forgiveness. May we be refreshed and restored by Jesus Christ who promises us the waters of life through his resurrection. Amen.

NOTES

¹Wendell Berry in *Sabbaths* (San Francisco: North Point, 1987), p. 9.

²www.sharefaith.com/guide/Christian-Music/hymns-the-songs-and-the-stories/shall-we-gather-at-the-river-the-song-and-the-story.html

³Jacob Henry Hall, "Robert Lowry: Baptist Preacher and Hymn Writer," at www.wholesome-words.org.

⁴Brian Peterson, "Commentary on Revelation 21:10, 22 - 22:5," at www.workingpreacher.org.

⁵Comments found at "Revelation 21:10, 21:22 - 22:5," at www.lectionary.org.