

Hello, my name is John—oh, I'd better explain, since there a bunch of Johns around. I live in Ephesus, and I'm getting on a bit. It's about 50 years or so since Jesus was around here on earth, and I had the immense privilege of being one of his close followers—the Twelve or the apostles, we were called. I've lived here for a while in the big city, overseeing a group of churches here.

So don't confuse me with any other John, like John Mark, who hung out with my dear friend Peter and wrote down Peter's memories of Jesus in his Gospel book. He was a bit of a pioneer, young Mark, as I still think of him, since no-one had thought of writing a biography of Jesus before him. He's living in Rome these days, I gather.

In fact, I'm thinking about following John Mark's example, and writing my own reminiscences of Jesus for the believers here in Ephesus—and that book might be useful for other churches around the Mediterranean too. It's a bit tricky of course, since I would have to be very selective in what I write—the usual papyrus roll is about 20 sheets glued together, and even if I use three or four of them, I'll be struggling to fit everything in. You might say that the world itself couldn't contain an account of everything Jesus did (John 21:25; cf. 20:30).

I want to tell you about one particular thing Jesus said, and when it happened, to illustrate the problem I have with length. A group of Jesus' brothers had gone to Jerusalem for *Sukkot*, the Feast of Tabernacles or Tents (7:1). It happens in the autumn from the 15th to the 21st of the month of Tishri. This Feast is both a thanksgiving to our God for the harvest, and a time to remember the way God guided our ancestors through the wilderness from Egypt to the promised land, when they lived in tents. We men go to Jerusalem with our sons who can manage for a week without their mothers. There, we live, sleep, and eat in *sukkah*—booths made from branches and cloth—for eight days, as Deuteronomy commands (Deut 16:13), to celebrate and to pray for the

next rains, that God will provide for next year's crops. (The women can come, but aren't required by the torah to do so.) Jewish people come from all over, including from the Jewish diaspora spread around the Roman empire—Jerusalem is stuffed to the gunwales in this period. So people put up booths anywhere and everywhere—it's one time when those flat rooves on houses are incredibly useful.

It's quite an event! The priests and Levites set up four big menorahs—the seven-branched candlesticks—to light up the court of women in the temple. This means we can dance all night to the music from the Levites playing their flutes and other instruments and singing! As well as the great joy, there's a serious side too, of course. There's the procession with willow branches around the altar of burnt offerings for six of the days. We also meet daily in the temple for a water ceremony, which is quite something in its own right. The priests have to get up early to be down at the Pool of Siloam at daybreak to fill up a golden jug with about 1.6 litres (just under 3 pints) of water. Oh yes, speaking of the Pool of Siloam, I must remember to include the great story of Jesus healing the man from a visual impairment by putting mud on his eyes and then sending him to wash in that pool—just a second while I make a note (scribbles).

Now, where was I? Oh yes, the priests go to the Pool of Siloam at daybreak to collect the water, and then there's a great procession to the temple. It picks up Isaiah 12:3, 'With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.' At the morning sacrifice, the Tamid, a priest chosen by lot pours out the water into a bowl on the altar of sacrifice. The bowl has a hole in the bottom, so that we can see the water being drained out around the altar. It makes us think of God's promises, not least Isaiah 44:3: 'For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.' We pray for that day when God will pour his Spirit

on us and internalise the torah into our hard, stony hearts (Ezek 36:24-27).

We read the Scriptures too, of course. There are special readings chosen for the Feast, including Ezekiel 47, that amazing picture of living water flowing from the temple and getting deeper and deeper as it goes further away, until it reaches the Dead Sea and brings life even to that place. And we read Zechariah 14, which prophesies that when God comes and stands on the Mount of Olives, he will provide living water to flow from Jerusalem both to the west toward the Mediterranean, and to the east to the Dead Sea. Jewish people rejoice in God's promises and look forward to the day when God comes to live with his people. Living water—*mayim hayim*—that's vital to the Feast, as we rejoice in the harvest, pray for the rains for the next harvest, and look forward to these prophecies being fulfilled.

And that brings me to what Jesus said, for it was amazing. He hadn't gone to Jerusalem with his brothers—there was a real threat to his life at this time (7:11-13), and he'd said something about it not being his time yet (7:8). I only understood later that his time or his hour meant the time for his death on the cross, which led to his glorious resurrection on the third day. But halfway through the Feast, Jesus turned up (7:14), but quietly and undercover initially. Then, he felt confident enough to teach publicly in the temple (7:14), although this got him into great debate with the rabbis and priests. And while he was in the temple, he saw the water ceremony, and I wonder if that gave him the idea for what he said.

Here's what he said: 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from their stomach' (7:37-38). Some of this, I understood straight away: the Master was claiming that he fulfilled Scripture, that he was the one who would provide the rivers of living water promised

in Ezekiel and Zechariah. This alone was pretty amazing, for he was claiming to do what the prophets had said *God* would do. That meant that we were seeing the promises of God living among his people fulfilled as the Lord walked among us. That alone was pretty staggering.

But as I thought about it, I realised there was more to it. There's the story the Master told us of what happened when we went shopping for food in Samaria (4:8) while Jesus waited by the well in Sychar (4:4-6). It's a great site for us Jews since that's where our ancestor Jacob dug a well—it's still there to this day (4:5-6). Jesus told us he met a Samaritan woman and had a conversation with her about water. She turned out to be, as we say, a woman of ill repute—she'd been married five times and was living with another man. But that didn't seem to bother Jesus: he asked her for water, and she was really surprised because he, a Jew, was asking for a drink from a despised Samaritan. Jesus responded to her and said that he could give her living water (4:10)—and she, poor woman, took him literally, and asked if he was greater than Jacob, who dug the well (4:11-12). That's not what Jesus was talking about, of course—he was using water as a metaphor for eternal life: 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life' (4:13-14). So water is about the life of the world to come, but experienced now, and Jesus enabled that woman to have that. Yes, I must include that story too. Just a second: I'll make a note of that (scribbles).

I also thought of my friend Luke's second book, where he uses the image of pouring out concerning the Spirit. He tells the story of Peter's sermon at Pentecost, where Peter quoted Joel 2:28-29, which twice prophesies, 'I will pour out my Spirit' (Acts 2:17-18). And then when the Roman centurion Cornelius' household hear the gospel message from Peter, the Spirit is poured out on them (Acts 10:45)—and that's on gentiles, unclean *goyim*. So I can see how water and the Spirit are connected: the water being poured out at the Feast is a metaphor for the Spirit being poured out on people.

What finally caused the denarius to drop for me happened much later. We were gathered in the upper room on the evening of the third day after Jesus had been crucified. It had already been a strange day. Peter and I had already visited the tomb of Jesus because Mary Magdalene had told us that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance (20:1). Peter and I ran there, and I got there first. Looking in, I could see the linen strips which had been wrapped around Jesus' body, and the cloth which covered his head, but they were lying flat on the stone—the body was gone! And then later, Mary herself came and said that she'd seen the Lord, and he was alive (20:18). We were pretty scared of the Jewish authorities—we thought they might do the same to us as they did to the Master. So we kept the doors locked. But Jesus came and stood among us and greeted us with peace (20:19). He showed us the marks of the crucifixion in his wrists, and the spear wound in his side, so that we were sure it was him. The joy we felt at that time was far

greater than the joy of any Feast! This story is a must for my biography!
(scribbles)

And that was when he said something which explained this mysterious saying in the temple. He told us that he was sending us in the same way the Father had sent him, and then breathed on us and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven' (20:21-22). The Master was giving to us the Spirit of God, and through the Spirit's power we were going to be able to announce and pass on the forgiveness of sins which we'd received from him. So that's what Jesus meant when he talked in the temple about being thirsty and drinking, and about rivers of living water flowing from the stomachs of those who believe in him. He meant that thirsty people—people dissatisfied with life as it is in its ordinariness and struggle—should come to him. But now that he's not here on earth, it's not coming on foot, but by faith, by trusting him.

When I write this story up, I must make it clear that this never stops being true for those who follow Jesus. I love the Greek language for this reason: I can write about the time of beginning to trust Jesus using one verb tense, and continuing to trust Jesus using a different tense. So how shall I put Jesus' words into Greek? I know, I'll explain Jesus' words with a comment. I'll write, 'By this Jesus meant the Spirit, whom those who came to believe in him would later receive.' That should do it—I'm writing my biography to invite people to believe that the Messiah is

Jesus, and then to have live in his name (20:31), so my hearers should get that. If they want to be transformed, to experience the living water which Jesus brings, to have their sins forgiven, then they need Jesus to give them the Spirit to do that. That's one important way my readers can respond to this saying of Jesus—by beginning to trust him and follow him, and therefore having the Holy Spirit enter their lives and begin to make them into the people God intends them to be.

But I should also put what Jesus himself said in the continuous form: 'If anyone is thirsty, then let that person keep coming to me and keep drinking.' That should do it—it makes clear that the promise of the Spirit isn't just for the start of following Jesus, but a regular requirement. I want my readers who are already believers to realise that they should be spiritual dipsomaniacs—always thirsty and so always coming to Jesus and always drinking the Spirit from him. They need to drink the Spirit regularly, so that they can fulfil Jesus' commission to announce and offer forgiveness to others (20:21, 23). Rivers of living water flowing from their bellies—wow, that's quite an image! Free and generous forgiveness for sins through Jesus and experienced by the Spirit—that's an amazing reality! And by the Spirit believers will be sources for this refreshing, renewing living water to spill out and wash, renew and refresh others too.

So how about it? Which of those people are you? Are you someone who has not yet experienced the refreshing, renewing living water of the Spirit which Jesus offers? Are you ready to begin a journey with Jesus? If

you are, it's straightforward: recognise your need to be washed by the Spirit as the Spirit applies the cleansing power of Jesus' death to you, and come by faith to Jesus and ask him for the living water.

If you're someone who is already a believer, remember to keep recognising your thirst and keep coming and drinking from Jesus. Yes, you may be full of the Holy Spirit at one time, but remember that you leak! You sin, you fail to be the person Jesus calls you to be, and so you need fresh forgiveness, fresh washing, fresh cleaning. You need the rivers of living water to flow into your stomach again, so that those rivers will flow out to others.