

August 21 Lesson 12 (NIV)

THE RIVER OF LIFE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Revelation 22:1–9

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Revelation 22:1–7

REVELATION 22:1–7

¹ Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³ No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. ⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

⁶ The angel said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.”

⁷ “Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll.”

KEY VERSE

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

PARTNERS IN A NEW CREATION

Unit 3: The Great Hope of the Saints

LESSONS 10–13

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- B. Lesson Context

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HOW TO SAY IT

Alpha *AI*-fa.

Ezekiel *Ee-zeeek-ee-ul* or *Ee-zeeek-yul*.

Galatians *Guh-lay-shunz*.

Omega *O-may-guh* or *O-mee-guh*.

Zechariah *Zek-uh-rye-uh*.

Introduction

A. Life Extenders

How long do you expect to live? A person born in 1850 in America had an average life expectancy of fewer than 40 years. That statistic is skewed, however, by a high infant mortality rate. Those born in 1850 who managed to live to be 5 years old (thus avoiding the many deadly illnesses that claimed young children) could expect to live to their mid-50s.

Today's US life expectancy is about 78.6 years, but it varies depending on race, gender, location, and other factors. The sharp increase is due to better medical treatment, chlorination of drinking water, etc. Yet some people want to extend their lives even further. They work hard to eat healthy food and maintain high fitness levels. Predictions are that we will continue to see a greater percentage of our fellow citizens live to their 90s and 100s than ever before.

The Bible tells the story of the paradise of Eden that was lost to humanity because of sin. In that garden was the tree of life, and the eating of its fruit would allow people to live forever (Genesis 2:9; 3:22). When Adam and Eve sinned, they were expelled from the garden and denied

access to this tree (2:17; 3:22–24). Death has been a certainty for every child born ever since (with the two exceptions in Genesis 5:24 and 2 Kings 2:11). What if we could have that life-giving fruit? Today’s lesson offers truth in that regard.

B. Lesson Context

A feature of the New Jerusalem drawn from the Old Testament is the tree of life. This mysterious tree is referred to in three books in the Bible. It first appears as an important part of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:9; see above).

A tree of life is also mentioned four times in the book of Proverbs as a metaphor for divine wisdom (Proverbs 3:18), the fruit of righteousness (11:30), desire fulfilled (13:12), and a properly used tongue (15:4). We should note that this is *a* tree of life, not *the* tree of life.

The tree of life mentioned in Revelation is a primary feature of “the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7). Some have referred to this paradise as Eden restored, as people eat the fruit of the tree with God’s blessing.

Water is closely associated with this tree in today’s lesson. The image of water is used in both physical and spiritual senses in the Bible. In a physical sense, fresh (sweet) water has as its opposite water that is brackish (bitter). Fresh water sustains life (Judges 15:18–19; Job 38:25–27); brackish water—or lack of water altogether—yields the opposite (Deuteronomy 8:15; 2 Kings 2:19–22). The ultra-salty Dead Sea is aptly named!

The prophets Ezekiel and Zechariah had visions that bear similarities to John’s vision of the New Jerusalem. A feature of the city foreseen by Ezekiel and Zechariah was a river flowing out of it. The water of this river is so refreshing that it not only nourishes life; it changes the ultra-salty Dead Sea into a freshwater lake (Ezekiel 47:8; Zechariah 14:8; compare Joel 3:18).

In Revelation, the concept of spiritual water includes the property of eternal life. Such water is seen as a divine gift, an ever-flowing fountain that provides life to those who drink from it (Revelation 7:17; 22:17).

I. What John Saw

(REVELATION 22:1–5)

A. Water of Life (v. 1)

1a. Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal,

As we pick up where last week’s lesson ended, we see John still inside the holy city, the New Jerusalem, of his vision. He is still being guided by an *angel* of the seven bowls of Revelation 21:9.

As John beheld *the river*, his descriptions of it signify two things. First, the river’s purity and clarity indicate that anything that might pollute

it had been banished from the city. The water was not muddy or cloudy. It did not have the greenish tinge of algae, as stagnant water might have. We can imagine that it gave off no bad smell (contrast Exodus 7:21). The city of pure gold streets (Revelation 21:21) featured a river of pure water.

Second, the river’s designation as *water of life* implies much more than a refreshing source of water for a parched throat. The water featured divine qualities, and we do not sense that John

was surprised by this. He seemed to expect to find this river of life in the new city. His vision was that of a great urban complex combined with a garden paradise. No garden would be lush and inviting without an appropriate quantity and high quality of water.

1b. flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb

Looking upstream, John saw the river streaming from the central feature of the city. As such, the vision again defies our expectations that are grounded in the daily experiences of life. A cube-shaped city is hard to imagine (Revelation 21:16). Pearls large enough to be carved as city gates are unknown to us (21:21a). Streets of transparent gold have never been seen (21:21b). Likewise, a spring on a mountaintop city, which results in a river that flows from a seat of authority, is something we can only wonder at. As we do, we acknowledge that in the New Jerusalem there may be new laws of physics that will defy current textbook science.

B. Tree of Life (v. 2)

2a. down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life,

This verse also describes something difficult for us to visualize: *the river* of life, which comes from the throne, flowing in the middle of the main street of the city. We need to imagine an immense street, a boulevard or parkway so broad that a river with lush, fertile banks divides its lanes.

To propose dimensions is speculative. But perhaps we can imagine a street that is 200 yards wide (double football-field length) with a tree-lined river taking up the middle 100 yards of it (single football field), and golden lanes (Revelation 21:21) that are 50 yards wide each on each side of the river. This may give an idea of proportions, but it is likely that the scene John witnessed was much grander than this.

This river of living water leads to *the tree of life*, known to us from Genesis 2:9 (see the Lesson Context). This is similar to Ezekiel's vision of a great river flowing from a restored Jerusalem temple to transform the Dead Sea (Ezekiel 47:1–12). The prophet saw this river lined on both sides with many trees (47:7, 12). Some scholars believe that is what John saw here, and that we should take *tree* in a plural sense as being a forest or grove of trees. But that is not what John describes.

Somehow, the tree of life is on both sides of the river, perhaps spanning it and towering over it. This is a gigantic tree, not a dwarf variety. Its powerful roots spring up from each side of the river and support a mighty trunk with branches that droop to the banks on each side of the river. This makes its fruit and leaves easily accessible to the residents of the city. No tree can grow like this naturally, and we do not need to expect such growth in the here and now. This is a supernatural tree, planted by the Lord.

2b. bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month.

The tree John saw was fruit-bearing, but in a way unlike that of any fruit tree of our experience. We know of different months for picking various fruits (cherries in June, peaches in

July, apples in September, etc.), but we know of no tree that bears 12 varieties of fruit with a different one ripening each month!

Even so, an ever-bearing multi-fruit tree is one more feature of the New Jerusalem that exceeds anything in our experience. The practical aspect of this is that the life-giving *fruit* will be available to citizens of the city daily, without interruption or times of shortage. The eternal city will have an eternal tree that provides eternal life.

C. Leaves of Healing (v. 2c)

2c. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

In modern city life, we do not associate tree leaves with healing. The closest we may come is using the gel of aloe vera leaves to treat burns. But aloe vera is a plant, not a tree.

Yet consider that tea leaves are dried and boiled to obtain a liquid with healthful properties. Tea leaves come from the tea shrub, which is considered by some to be a small tree. The idea presented in the verse before us seems to be that *the leaves of the wondrous tree* of life can be used to produce a healing elixir of some sort.

This healing is not stated to be for the curing of individual wounds, viruses, etc. Rather, it is *for the healing of the nations*. A key idea is that of spiritual healing for all the peoples from many nations, for Revelation 21:24 depicts the kings of the earth streaming into the new city. This indicates, among other things, a final and lasting peace among all nations. In this light, the city is truly the New Jerusalem, given that the word *salem* means “peace.”

D. Absence of Curse (v. 3a)

3a. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city,

The holy city is just that—utterly holy. It admits neither anything that is accursed nor anything that needs to be cursed (compare 1 Corinthians 12:3; 16:22; Galatians 1:8–9). The curses of humanity are gone.

We often think that the first *curse* resulting from the first sin was the cursing of Adam and Eve. But the first two curses were on the serpent (Genesis 3:14) and on the ground itself (3:17; compare 5:29; 8:21). There will be no Satan-serpent in this city, for he will have been consigned to the lake of fire (see Revelation 20:2, 10). There will be no cursed ground, for the fertile soil and water of life allow the tree of life to thrive with its year-round fruit and healing leaves.

Proverbs 3:33 tells us that “The Lord’s curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the home of the righteous.” Yet there will be no wicked people in this city! Any and all things that would bring divine condemnation will be absent, for the city will be overwhelmed by God’s *throne* and inhabited by His righteous servants. At long last, humanity will be freed from the stain of sin that ended residence in the original Garden of Eden.

E. Servants of God (vv. 3b–5)

3b–4. and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

The psalmist asks, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (Psalm 42:2). The answer is right here! Everyone living in the city will have access to the throne. All residents of the city are God’s *servants*, and John describes them in three ways: what they do, what they see, and how they are marked.

What they do is *serve him*. The Greek verb behind this is sometimes translated “worship” (Acts 24:14; Philippians 3:3; compare Revelation 7:15). The servants are engaged in acts of worship before the throne of God.

What they see is *his face*, which John does not describe. (We will have to wait to see for ourselves; 1 John 3:2.) To see the face of a king in the ancient world was a gift of fellowship (compare Esther 1:13–14; contrast Exodus 10:28). This will be a fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to those with pure hearts (Matthew 5:8; compare Psalm 17:14–15).

How they are marked is with God’s *name ... on their foreheads*. This is a divine marking placed by either Jesus (Revelation 3:12) or God’s angels (7:1–3). It is a beautiful image of acceptance and possession by God. It is the opposite of the mark of the beast that is placed on unbelievers (see 13:15–17; 14:9–11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4).

5. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

We encounter this *no more night* description also in Revelation 21:23, 25. There as here, *light* given off by *God* himself illuminates the city.

But now we see an important addition: the never-ending light is accompanied by the never-ending *reign* of God’s people. This fulfills the prophecies and promises of Daniel 7:18, 27 and Revelation 1:6; 5:10. As Christ will “reign for ever and ever” (11:15), so shall we with him!

II. What John Heard

(REVELATION 22:6–7)

A. Angel Speaks (v. 6)

6. The angel said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.”

The speaker is still *the angel* of the bowls (Revelation 21:9), John’s guide to the holy city. The angel’s statement touched on several things we have read previously. First is the emphasis that what John heard as being *trustworthy and true* are the same two affirmations made by him “who was seated on the throne” at the beginning of the vision of New Jerusalem (21:5; compare 3:14; 19:11).

Second, the reliability and importance of *these words* are underlined by reference to their source as being *the Lord, the God who inspires the prophets*. This fact serves to (1) include John in the ranks of earlier prophets and (2) emphasize the nature of the book of Revelation as prophecy (Revelation 1:3; see 19:10; 22:19).

The third concerns visions described as God's showing *his servants the things that must soon take place*. The wording in the Greek is precisely the same as that found in the book's opening lines (Revelation 1:1). There are 15 verses left in the book as we come to the verse before us, but the final mention of showing—which is about the holy city—is right here. Thus the initial showing of Revelation 1:1 and the final showing of Revelation 22:6 serve as bookends to the showings in between them (compare 4:1; 17:1; 21:9–10).

We may wonder why the angel promised that *the things* would happen shortly when, from our perspective of some 2,000 years later, they are yet to occur. Many explanations have been proposed. One idea is that all the events of Revelation happen invisibly and are known only to a spiritually elite group. Another theory is that these events are symbolic ways of describing the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 as the new era of the church began.

A more likely explanation is that these events will happen quickly when they do come, but they are being delayed for reasons we understand only partially (compare 2 Peter 3:9). God is not controlled by time in the ways we are (3:8), and we are wise to use that reality to temper our desire to know details of the future.

The message of Revelation is faithful and true even if we are inadequate to comprehend all of it. Let us believe that when these events do take place, those who are witnesses and have read Revelation will think, "Of course! Now it all makes sense."

B. Jesus Speaks (v. 7)

7. "Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll."

The voice of the Lamb breaks through to deliver a promise and a blessing. He will return. He has not abandoned his people. In the midst of suffering, whether from the ancient Roman government or modern persecutors, he is with us. The initial blessing of Revelation 1:3 is repeated—directed to those who keep *the words of the prophecy*. That leads to the great question prompted by Revelation: What does keeping these sayings entail?

The book does not hide the answers to this question. Faithfulness is the primary answer, and that concept includes repentance (Revelation 2:5, 16; 3:3, 19; 9:20–21; 16:9–11) and patient endurance in the face of opposition (2:10; 13:10; 14:12).

To be faithful is to keep the words of the prophecy!

To repent is to keep the words of the prophecy!

To endure is to keep the words of the prophecy!

There is an abiding message here that transcends any confusion we might have about the details of Christ's second coming. When he comes, may he find us faithful (compare Luke 18:8).

Conclusion

A. The Beginning and the End

Many things have clearly defined beginnings and ends. We begin reading a book, then finish it. We buy a house, then sell it. We begin a job, and then the job ends. Transcending all our starts and stops of life is the timelessness of God, who was there at all the beginnings and will be there at all the endings. He is the Alpha and Omega, the A and Z, but with an enduring nature that stretches beyond the range of any human alphabet.

All this is illustrated by the New Jerusalem, a city to feature a physical size that is beyond our comprehension. It will be a city with unending day, an ever-flowing river of life, an ever-bearing tree of life, ceaseless worship, and priceless building materials. It will be ever new.

Such will be our relationship with the Lord. That relationship will be eternally consistent, pure, and true. Yet this description fails to describe the relationship fully, for there is a limitlessness on God's side. Nonetheless, we are blessed by John's revelation to us of his visions. May we be faithful in keeping the lessons we learn.

B. Prayer

Father, we barely understand the marvels of your promised holy city, a place where you will provide all the light we need for our eyes and hearts. May we hold these promises tightly so that when your Son returns, he will find us faithful and ready. We pray this in his name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Seek and share the living water now!¹