

Water of Life

A Four Part Bible Study

John Birch

Contents

Introduction	3
Study 1: The Oceans	5
Study 2: Rivers and streams	9
Study 3: Springs and wells	13
Study 4: A precious resource	17
Using images prayerfully	21
References	22

Leading the studies

There is a lot of information in these studies, so planning ahead is possibly important if you are not to run out of time in your meeting!

It is suggested that the group reads through the introduction and the first part of each study (our use of water) in their own time, allowing you as leader to pick out what you consider the most salient points and discussion questions to use during the meeting. Then consider the related Bible passages together.

And discussion questions not tackled could be considered 'homework'.

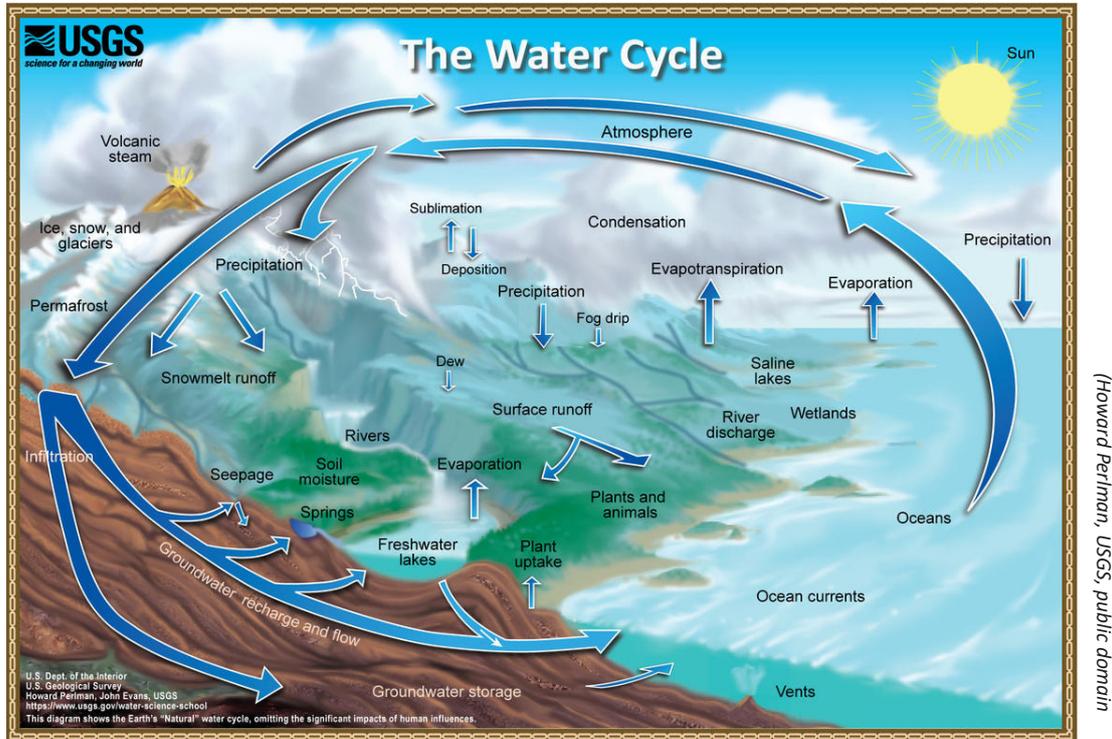
Additional online resources are suggested at the end of each session.

Cover image: Incoming tide ©John Birch

©2021 John Birch. Permission is given to reproduce copies of this Bible Study for individual church usage. If used over several churches, it would be lovely if you could purchase one per church! It should not be published in any other way or offered for sale without the express permission of the author.

Introduction

The Water Cycle



Genesis tells us, 'Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.' (Genesis 1:2)

Science tells us that at one time earth would have been a spinning globe of magma (hot, liquid rock) with an atmosphere resembling that of today's volcanoes, containing a mix of gases including small amounts of H₂O. Water set free from the molten rock eventually cooled the atmosphere until it reached a point where it could settle on the surface as a liquid. Water still enters the atmosphere through volcanic activity.

The diagram above shows as clearly as it can the water cycle on which life very much depends. Technically, it has no beginning, but we start with the ocean as that is where we find most of earth's water. The sun's heat drives the cycle as water vapour rises into the air, accompanied by moisture from plant transpiration and evaporation from the soil. Eventually the rising vapour cools and condenses into clouds, which

are moved around the globe by air currents whilst growing, colliding, and falling out of the sky as rain or snow.

Accumulations of snow can freeze and form glaciers, which store water for long periods of time. In warmer climates snow from hills thaws in spring and provides water for crops and livestock. Rain falling to the ground will eventually find its way back into the ocean, but on the way can seep underground and replenish natural underground storage known as aquifers.

There are around 332.5 million cubic miles (1,386 million cubic kilometres) of water on earth, 96 percent too salty for humans to drink. Ice and glaciers account for 70 percent of freshwater, with the rest mainly found within the ground. Fresh surface-water such as rivers and lakes, from where our drinking water originates, comprises only around 0.007 percent of the total water on earth.

So why do some people have so little, and others too much?

Many factors play their part in changing weather patterns across the world, and the availability or not of water. These include human activities, which are contributing to the gradual warming of our oceans and an acceleration of the melting of ice sheets.

If everyone had an equal share of the world's rainfall, then it would equate to around 100 cm (39 inches) each year. If the earth's surface were uniform, then rainfall would occur in latitudinal

bands around the earth, but complications occur with global trade winds, atmospheric pressure, cyclones and anti-cyclones, distribution of landmass, oceans, and mountain ranges. These affect the rising and cooling of moist air and its distribution as rain, particularly in desert areas, where air warms and dries during descent, or the intensification of moist airstreams that cause tropical rains in some areas of the world.

Water and its impact on human life

- 💧 2.2 billion people lack access to safely managed drinking water services. (WHO/UNICEF 2019)
- 💧 Over half of the global population or 4.2 billion people lack safely managed sanitation services. (WHO/UNICEF 2019)
- 💧 Water scarcity already affects four out of every 10 people. (WHO)
- 💧 Approximately 1.2 billion people worldwide drink water that is not protected against contamination from faeces. (WHO/UNICEF)
- 💧 90 percent of natural disasters are weather-related, including floods and droughts. (UNISDR)
- 💧 Agriculture accounts for 70 percent of all freshwater withdrawals globally (FAO)

Water makes up between 60-70% of our bodies, depending on our age. We lose water through sweating, excretion, and breathing, so must replace it by drinking and eating or risk becoming dehydrated and dying (approximately one third of our water intake comes from food we eat). How long it takes to die without water depends upon where you are, but in high temperatures and with physical exertion that can be just a few days. The longest recorded time without water was that of an 18-year-old Austrian accidentally left in a police cell for 18 days in 1979 after officers on duty forgot about him. His reward was to make it to the Guinness Book of World Records.

Further Reading

<https://www.britannica.com/science/climate-meteorology/World-distribution-of-precipitation>

<https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/water/>

<https://www.un.org/en/events/waterdecade/>

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20201016-why-we-cant-survive-without-water>

https://www.usgs.gov/special-topic/water-science-school/science/fundamentals-water-cycle?qt-science_center_objects=0#qt-science_center_objects

Study 1: The Oceans

'And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.' (Genesis 1:9-10)

Icebreaker

Why is a walk within sight and sound of the sea considered to be such a positive experience?



Christian Mølsted, *Fishing boat in rough seas near Dragør, pre 1920*

So much water!

If we are to start anywhere with our thinking about water, it should be the ocean, as it covers over 70 percent of the Earth's surface. It absorbs the sun's heat, alongside providing us with rain and drinking water, and acting as a heat store to help regulate temperature on land. It is home to a vast array of animal and plant life, from single-celled organisms to blue whales.

Much of the oxygen we require for life (perhaps 50-80 percent) comes via oceanic plankton — drifting plants, algae, and bacteria that can photosynthesise, floating on the surface of the water. A bacterium called *Prochlorococcus* produces up to 20% of the oxygen in our entire biosphere.

The impact of humans on the oceans is extensive. Overfishing reduces diversity (UN Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates around 30 percent of fish stocks are either fished to capacity or over-fished.) But fishing also leaves discarded fishing nets which kill fish, birds, and marine mammals.

Oil spills from merchant shipping and tankers, fertiliser runoff from farmland, pesticides and fertilisers, can all be lethal to sea life. Human waste (particularly plastics) is everywhere, as seen in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch between Hawaii and California, estimated at 79,000 metric tonnes of plastic, of which a large percentage began life as fishing nets, now broken down into tiny particles. Plastic waste is being found in washed-up carcasses of birds and mammals.

A 2018 survey (Foresight Future of the Sea, for the UK government Chief Scientific Advisor) paints a gloomy picture of plastic pollution tripling by 2050 unless we take active steps to prevent these materials reaching the oceans.

Climate change, and increasing levels of greenhouse gas, are warming the oceans, leading to rising sea levels (threatening coastal populations). Sea levels worldwide have risen by around six-tenths of an inch per decade since 1880.

Warmer waters may promote the development of stronger storms in the tropics, causing property damage and potential loss of life. Alongside this, freshwater from melting glaciers is gradually slowing the circulation of sea currents

around the world, which if it continues will eventually cause a general cooling of Western Europe and North America.

Discussion

Q) Based upon your own knowledge and insight, list the ways you can see the oceans as a valuable resource.

Q) Have you walked along the strandline on a beach where the incoming tide has pushed seaweed, driftwood, shells, and other debris, before leaving it and retreating? What do you recall seeing there?

Q) Scientists warn us of the potential problems arising from rising sea levels and temperature. Do you believe the world is attentive to this call, and is there more the Church, or we as individuals, could do to engage with issues such as this?

Water - as a Blessing

(Read Deuteronomy 8:6-18)

It is perhaps easy for Christians to consider the provision of water as a blessing from the Creator. But is there more that we need to understand?

The relationship between God and the people we read about in the Old Testament was one of a cycle of obedience and disobedience, often depending upon how comfortable, or difficult, life was at any

moment in time. Moses warns them that prosperity often leads to forgetfulness. Not that God looks down on those who have wealth, as well-known characters such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job and David were all wealthy people. It is more about how what we have, or do not have, affects our attitude to God and our behaviour toward others.

Discussion

Q) How do the last two verses speak into the human situation, both historically and today?

Q) How easy is it to take the natural resources that this world provides for granted, and how can that impact on faith (Read Proverbs 19:17)?

Q) Why might the condition and health of our oceans have received low priority in the past?

Water - as a route to trade, wealth and downfall

(Read Ezekiel 27:1-7, 12-27)

We have considered that prosperity might lead to forgetfulness, and this passage is a lament for the downfall of Tyre, which was a major Phoenician seaport on the Mediterranean coast of southern Lebanon, just a few miles north of the modern border with Israel.



Hiram, king of Tyre, provided building materials for Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem in the 10th century BC, although the political influence of wealthy merchants somewhat limited his power.

Ezekiel’s lament is over the pride that led to its downfall, presuming itself to be ‘perfect’ through all its acquisitions and business connections. One thing that God does not like is a pride that is full of self-conceit and lives that are centred purely on self.

At the end of this passage is a picture of a sinking ship, laden with all the accumulated wealth of the nations and the pride of this people. A heavily laden ship disappearing beneath the very waves which had enabled its owners to build such a profitable empire.

Discussion

Q) Control of the seas has been important throughout history and its many wars and disputes. In what ways are our lives enriched today by those who sail the seas?

Q) Historically, can you think of examples in which powerful merchants have used the seas for profit at the expense of others, and where evidence is visible even today?

Water - to be treated with respect

(Read Acts 27:13-44)

Luke gives us a detailed account of first-century seamanship and conditions on the eastern Mediterranean, as Paul and some other prisoners find themselves in the custody of a centurion called Julius setting sail toward Rome.

As a Roman citizen, Paul would enjoy more comforts on the voyage than many, and here he has the company of Luke and Aristarchus (Acts 27:2). It is not the best time of year to be sailing, and a poor

decision regarding over-wintering leaves them vulnerable to hurricane force north-easterlies which endanger the ship, its crew and passengers.

The sailors and soldiers work tirelessly to maintain control of the ship, and the situation was frightening and exhausting for all involved. Paul has a word from God and now he acts on it, particularly as the crew are attempting to flee in the lifeboats, and the centurion Julius assumes control. Luke

mentions that these tired men had gone without food for days (v. 33), so there is prayer and a breaking and sharing of bread.

Despite the ship running aground and breaking up, and a host of nautical detail from Luke, no-one loses their life, and they reach land as God had promised.

There are some similarities with the scene on Lake Galilee (Luke 8:24) when Jesus calms the storm and the growing panic of

his disciples in the boat. Jesus could have prevented the storm from causing his friends such distress, but their understanding would become that it was during the storm that Jesus was with them and this is true with our own lives.

God allows us to weather the storms of life and is there with us when needed.

Discussion

Q) Paul's faith is strong enough to cope with all that life's storms throw at him, and he is quick to use the situation as a mission opportunity, calming the soldiers, getting them to eat rather than panic, using his God-given authority to take control of the situation. Is there a lesson here for Christians?

Q) Oceans can be calm, but when stirred up by the energy of a hurricane or earthquake can be terribly destructive. Where do you see the destructive power of the ocean, and how should those who govern respond?

Q) Has your understanding and respect for the oceans that surround us increased, and will that change anything in your life?

For further thought, prayer and reading

Pray for the continuing involvement of governments around the world in tackling the issues that are increasing global warming and causing sea levels to rise. Pray also for those islands and coastal regions who are seeing an increased frequency of extreme weather, flooding, and erosion.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/topic/oceans>

<https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/ocean-oxygen.html>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/habitats/ocean/>

<https://www.epa.gov/climate-indicators/oceans>

<https://scied.ucar.edu/learning-zone/climate-change-impacts/melting-arctic-sea-ice-and-ocean-currents>

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/join-and-donate/donate/appeals/sealife-guardians/our-work-for-sealife/why-our-seas-are-vital/>

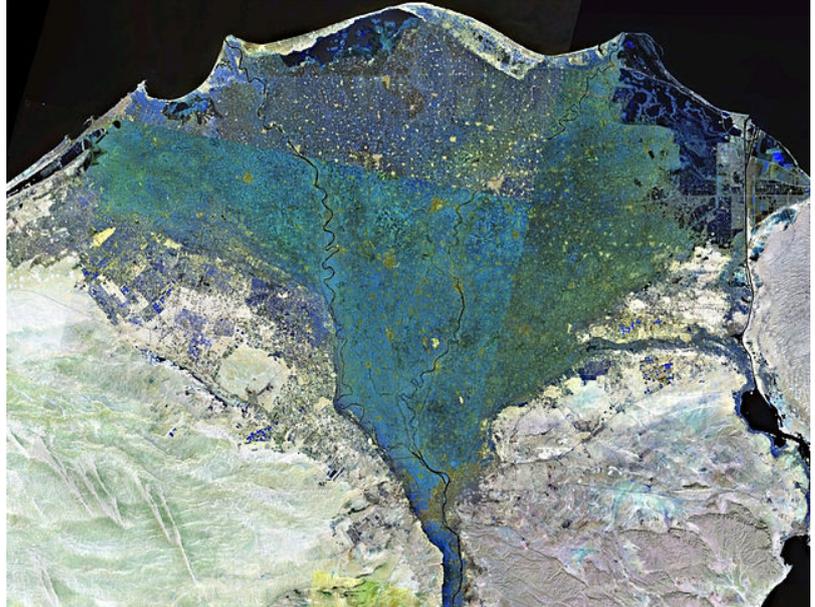
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/saving-our-seas-president-obama-oceans-conservation>

Study 2: Rivers and streams

'Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows, everything will live.' (Ezekiel 47:9)

Icebreaker

How close do you live to a river or stream, and how 'connected' do you feel to it?



Nile delta, landsat image, false color, NASA

Where the river flows...

Rivers, streams, creeks, or brooks are those ribbon-like flows of water directed by gravity from higher to lower ground and their eventual destination in a lake or ocean. Formed by rain runoff from nearby land and fed by underground springs they can be thousands of miles long or relatively short, all-year-round, or seasonal, and within them is the power to carve out the V-shaped valleys we see in hills and mountain ranges.

If a river flows to an area surrounded by higher ground on all sides, a lake will form, and if the obstruction is a deliberate human construction such as a dam, we have a reservoir.

Along a river's journey water will evaporate, and people living or farming nearby may divert some of its content. Unlike oceans, this is freshwater with less than one percent salt, providing nutrients for the plant and animal life that inhabit the diverse habitats that surround them.

Along with nutrients, the flowing river also carries stones and sand which eventually

sink to the bottom and may form deltas and floodplains, such as those in Egypt around the Nile, or California's Central Valley, providing exceptionally fertile agricultural land. Rivers provide valuable transport routes and a source of food that feeds many millions of people worldwide. Lakes and wetlands also give us flood protection and valuable habitats for wildlife.

For many centuries humans have engineered systems to transport water for irrigation of crops, provide drinking water, and more recently to produce hydroelectric power. Canal networks distributed material and goods by barge to and from centres of manufacture where river transport was unavailable. Villages, towns, and cities have grown up alongside river networks for thousands of years (at least 6000 years ago along the Nile).

Human interaction with rivers has not always had positive effects. Household, trade, farming, and industrial activities have had a negative impact on water with sewage, grey water, debris, pesticides, herbicides,

fertilisers, and untreated industrial waste all finding their way into rivers and affecting life within them. This tainted water then drains into the oceans.

Less than 100 years ago the mighty Colorado river flowed unhindered from northern Colorado through the Grand Canyon, Arizona, and Mexico, before pouring into the Gulf of California. By the year 2000 it had disappeared into the desert sands, irrigation and human use sucking it dry, the last few drops used by farmers in Mexico.

If we add to this the changes caused by rising ocean levels affecting weather patterns, already being suggested as a cause for increasing periods of flooding along rivers,

then the issues become more complex. It is important, however, to note that industry and farming are only a part of the problem. Individuals also play their part, and all need to work together to address the issues involved.

All is not gloom and darkness though! In the Loess plateau in northern China (almost twice the size of France) a dry, barren desert landscape is being restored through terraced landscaping and tree planting, the addition of organic material to the soil and controlled grazing, into green and productive farmland. Even the weather above this vast area has changed, rain is now falling again, and being stored.

Discussion

Q) How good is your knowledge of the rivers in the area around which you live? Do they provide a positive experience for those living nearby or can you suggest room for improvement?

Q) Is it important to consider all who make use of our rivers, both human and wildlife, and can one benefit the other?

Q) How conscious are you of where your household water comes from? Are you happy with the quality or tempted to buy bottled water for drinking?

Q) Does a story like that of the Colorado river have anything to say to us about the way we use our natural resources?

The river of life

(Read Ezekiel 47:1-12)

Ezekiel is a prophetic book. Throughout the covenants God made with the people via Abraham and Moses, there was a promised blessing of the land of Canaan.

However, during the Old Testament story, the people consistently broke the Mosaic covenant and found themselves exiled among the surrounding countries, particularly Babylonia. Ezekiel is encouraging

hope of restoration to their Promised Land, cleansed, given a new heart and hope, along with the salvation they seek.

So, in the concluding chapters, we find vision and a hope for the future. There will be a new temple and a new land. In this chapter we find a divine messenger showing the prophet a river that would heal the land. In a vision, Ezekiel finds himself at the temple

entrance where he can see water streaming eastward, past the south side of the altar of sacrifice, through the outer court and away from the temple as a stream. Ezekiel and the messenger follow its path and at intervals test the water, which increases from ankle depth to knee, waist, and higher. It continues to flow down to the Dead Sea, where the saline water is so diluted that it becomes fresh enough to host life. It waters the trees lining its side, enabling them to bear fruit throughout the year.

Everywhere the river runs, it brings life. It is a picture resembling that in Revelation 22:1 of 'the river of the water of life' flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb.

This is a lovely description of the birth and life of a river, but of course there is also a spiritual message, one which pictures the spread of the gospel, and the increasing work and gifting of God's Spirit.

Discussion

Q) What do you read in the words of this lovely vision?

Q) The passage describes a future Messianic age, but does its description of a time of plenty with the river at its centre speak to the here and now?

Q) If you extend this imagery to see this river as the outpouring of God's Spirit at Pentecost, does it present a challenge to Christians?

Water for cleansing

(Read Hebrews 10:19-25)

Washing hands is second nature to so many people. It is more than simply rinsing off dirt, it is about cleanliness, not spreading disease or contaminating food. At the heart of Old Testament teaching are purification rites based upon the 'the water of cleansing', associated with the killing of sacrificial animals and in the handling of human corpses (check out Numbers 19:1-22 if you have time).

We are familiar with water used in baptism, echoing John the Baptist's call to the people to undertake this symbolic cleansing in a river, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus himself led by example.



Baptism of Christ by David Zelenka, 2005. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.' (Mark 1:9-11)

In Hebrews, the writer has laid out the theology of his argument and now turns to the 'doing' bit, where he encourages his readers to embrace all he has taught them about Jesus Christ and

display it in their daily lives. In the past it was only the High Priest who on the Day of Atonement could enter the Most Holy Place in the temple and remain for a while in the presence of God. But now there is a new way, through the sacrifice of Jesus, whereby every Christian can approach God with confidence, not fear and trepidation.

So, says the writer, draw near in worship, but with a 'sincere heart', thinking of all that Jesus Christ has done for you. The reference to 'hearts sprinkled' and 'bodies washed' in verse 22 may refer to baptism, but Christian

baptism is more than simply walking through a river, or a sprinkling of water. That is the outward sign of much more important inner cleansing, and a desire to encourage one another toward a life that speaks of the love of Jesus.

As Jesus himself said, 'The time has come, the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!' (Mark 1:15)

Discussion

Q) Revelation 22:1 describes the water of life. Ezekiel talks of water feeding trees whose leaves are for healing. The writer to the Hebrews talks of being washed with pure water and spurring us on towards 'love and good deeds.' Water lends itself to symbolism, so what else can you see or hear within a stream or river that might feed into your faith?

Q) When the writer talks of having confidence to enter the Most Holy Place, he is talking about Christians standing in the place where previously only the priest stood, as Jesus becomes our High Priest in this 'new and living way opened up for us'. What does that mean to you?

Q) How important is the meeting together that our reading encourages, and what do we miss if we do not?

Q) Rivers on a map are rarely straight lines. What does their meandering flow across the country tell us about our own lives?

For further thought, prayer and reading

Pray for those whose lives and livelihoods depend upon a river for irrigation, drinking, food or transport. Pray also for those tasked with keeping rivers clean and free of pollution.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/river/>

<https://www.wwf.org.uk/updates/why-are-rivers-so-important-and-what-are-we-doing-protect-them>

<https://www.wwf.org.uk/where-we-work/rivers-and-wetlands>

Study 3: Springs and wells

‘Sir,’ the woman said, ‘you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?’ (John 4:11)

Icebreaker

Have you ever followed the age-old tradition of dropping a coin into a well, and if so, why?

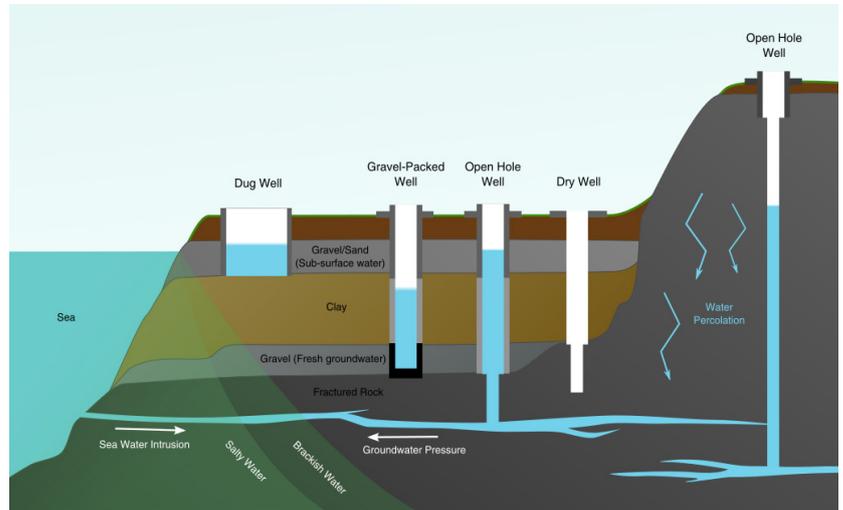


Diagram of water well types, Creative Commons Attribution 3.0

Water from below...

The water we use in our homes comes from a variety of sources. Along with rivers there are also springs and wells, both of which have a history of human usage stretching back thousands of years.

A spring is simply a place where moving water underground finds its way through an opening to the surface, perhaps only as a trickle or after rain, but also as a continuous daily flow. This can be where the water table is higher than the ground surface at a particular point. If the water passes deep through rocks that are heated, particularly in areas of recent volcanic activity, then they give rise to hot springs.

The quality of water from a spring will depend on the quality of the local groundwater (water found beneath the ground surface) and the rock that it passes through. Location also plays a part as houses with septic waste systems, grazing animals, or farmland nearby may be potential sources of pollution by coliform bacteria or nitrates that render the water unfit for drinking.

A well is perhaps more clearly understood as an underground source of freshwater, particularly in areas where piped water is

scarce or unavailable. It is basically a hole drilled or dug into the ground deep enough to access water from groundwater or an aquifer (an underground layer of permeable rock).

The oldest and most common type uses a pump or bucket to bring up the water. Some of the earliest texts describing wells come from China, revealing that they had the skills to dig deep wells as early as 6-7000 years ago. They are best placed uphill from potential sources of pollution, particularly latrines and cesspits.

In the United States, some 42 million people rely on wells to supply water for the family, and worldwide the figure is closer to two billion. Maintaining the quality of this water supply is essential for the continuing good health of its consumers.

A US study (Groundwater Quality in Principal Aquifers of the Nation, 1991–2010) states ‘Contaminants from geologic or man-made sources were a potential human-health concern in one of every five wells sampled in the parts of aquifers used for drinking water.’ and ‘Our actions today are determining groundwater quality for decades to come.’

Both springs and wells depend upon rainwater entering the ground and filtering down to 'recharge' the aquifers used for drinking water and irrigation. Climate change may change global rainfall patterns and therefore the amount of water entering the aquifers unless we capture exceptional rainfall and store it for later use.

Winter rains usually recharge aquifers in the UK and similar countries and may be

vulnerable to reduction in total rainfall over successive winters. Human interaction, both in population growth and water use plays a part. In Palestine's Gaza Strip, only 4 percent of groundwater from the coastal aquifer is fit to drink because of over-extraction, pollution, and increased salt content.

Discussion

Q) Are there dangers in taking our access to fresh water for granted, and should we waste less, or recycle more, of this essential resource?

Q) How easy would it be for you to use less tap water around the house and garden?

Q) If estimates of 2 billion people worldwide dependent on wells for their water supply are correct, what are the chief concerns for the future with both rising temperatures and population growth?

Wells and springs - healing and wishing

There are also healings and other miracles associated with wells, and these occur in a wide variety of cultures. In Christianity these often have an associated saint.

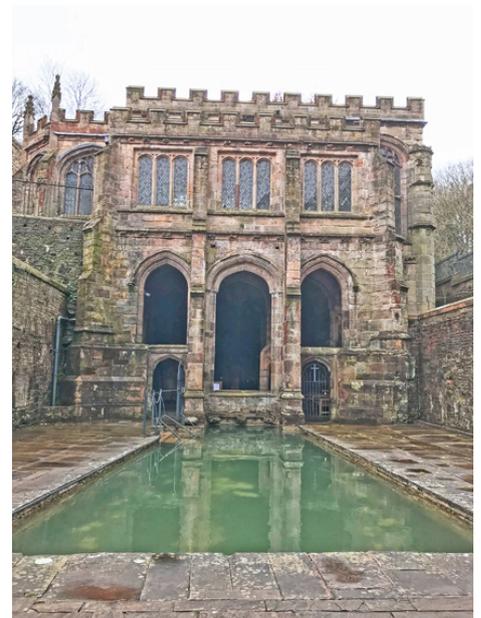
The beautiful St Winefride's Well at Holywell in North Wales claims to be the oldest continually visited pilgrimage site in Great Britain. In its 1300-year history, this healing well was second only to Lourdes. In 1189 Richard I, the Lionheart, made a pilgrimage to the Well. Pilgrims throughout the centuries have scratched their thanks for healing on its walls, and in the visitor centre is a collection of discarded crutches.

A Celtic tradition is of Cloutie wells, where a nearby tree has strips of cloth (dipped in the water) tied to its branches, each a prayer for healing or honouring the spirit of the well.

So, what about wishing wells?

It might seem rather trivial to consider wishing wells in a Bible study, but it is worth briefly thinking about their origins and purpose.

Writing in the second century, Pliny the Younger tells us he came across springs converging into a still body of water where, at the bottom, he could clearly see gleaming pebbles and coins that



St Winefride's Well, photo ©John Birch

people had thrown in. Folk tales abound throughout Europe regarding wells and associated deities. Why? The most likely explanation seems to be that water was often a scarce commodity and an essential one for life. It was a divine gift. But there was also an ingrained belief that the deities or guardians living within a well could grant wishes for a price.

Discussion

- Q) Have you visited a healing well and if so, what were your impressions?
- Q) Do you believe God can, and does, use water for healing?
- Q) Do you see a connection between healing and wishing wells, and if so, can you understand why these traditions remain alive today?

Jacob and a well

(Read Genesis 29:1-14)

Jacob is one of the major characters in Scripture. The grandson of Abraham and son of Isaac, he inherited (by deception) his father's property and received the blessing rightly due to his brother Esau. Later, ten of his children would become founders of the tribes of Israel, but before that he had to distance himself from his brother who was threatening to kill him.

Whilst journeying to his mother's brother Laban in Haram, he came across some shepherds and their flocks gathered around a well. It is a lovely pastoral scene, but at the well Jacob meets Rachel, and begins the next stage of his journey with God by single-handedly moving the large stone covering the well, no doubt impressing Rachel with a display of strength, but also allowing her to water her uncle's sheep.



Luca Giordano, Jacob and Rachel at the Well, c1690

Discussion

- Q) This seems to be a well-used source of water, but why use such a large stone over the mouth of the well?
- Q) Rachel would no doubt remember this moment. Do you have locations which hold a special place in your own faith journey?

Jesus and the Samaritan woman

(Read John 4:1-15)

The Jacob's Well in this story is not the same as that mentioned in Genesis 29. Although there is no surviving town called Sychar, it is possible that the town's name developed from Shechem where, in Genesis 33:18 Jacob bought a plot of land. There is no record of him digging a well there, but it would have been a reasonable thing to do.

Shechem is located traditionally near Nablus in the Palestinian West Bank, where a well-known as the Well of Jacob is located. It is deep and fits with John's description. Saint Jerome mentions a cruciform church at the site in AD 384, which has subsequently become a location for pilgrimage. Water finds its way into this well both from deep aquifers and percolating surface water.

The well is an important focal point in the story of Jesus, as here, to avoid conflict with the authorities, he takes time out from

Judea and heads northward to Galilee. Jews would mostly have avoided the direct route through Samaritan territory (because of historic and mutual distrust) but that was no problem for Jesus, who wanted to break down such barriers of hate. We see this in his willingness both to talk to the Samaritan woman and to drink from her cup. Her response in verse 9 may have a trace of sarcasm ('Happy to talk to someone like me when you want something then?') but Jesus was not there to win arguments, simply to share good news, the promise of 'living water' which required neither bucket nor hard labour to access, but welled up from within, fed by God's Holy Spirit.

As with so much of Jesus' teaching, he took the familiar things that were around, using them as a picture to speak of the spiritual.

Discussion

Q) Jesus uses the term 'living water' (v 10) to describe that which he offered, which would fully satisfy people's thirst (v 13). How do you understand the meaning of these words?

Q) The Samaritan woman needed time to digest what Jesus had said to her, returning later with townsfolk and a question, 'Could this be the Messiah?' (vv. 28-30). Do you have suggestions how we might better understand what Scripture is saying to us today?

For further thought, prayer and reading

Oxfam estimates that women and children in developing countries walk 3.7 miles and carry 5 gallons everyday day to bring clean water home to their families. Pray for this and other charities whose aim is to make water more available for them.

<https://www.usgs.gov/special-topic/water-science-school/science/springs-and-water-cycle>

<https://www.usgs.gov/mission-areas/water-resources/science/groundwater-quality-principal-aquifers-nation-1991-2010>

<https://www.carbonbrief.org/climate-change-impact-groundwater-environmental-timebomb>

<https://www.bgs.ac.uk/geology-projects/groundwater-research/resilience/>

<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Jacobs-Well>

Study 4: A precious resource

'The nobles send their servants for water; they go to the cisterns but find no water. They return with their jars unfilled; dismayed and despairing, they cover their heads.'
(Jeremiah 14:3)

Icebreaker

Have you suffered from a period of drought, and if so, how long did it last and what effect did it have on daily life?



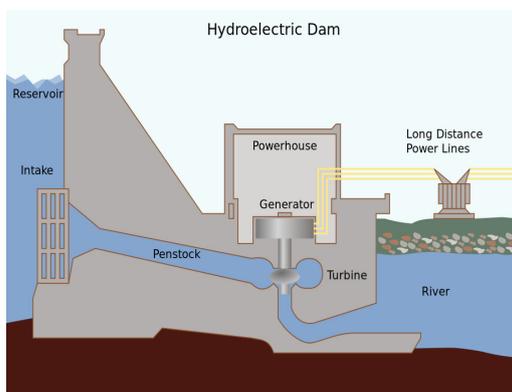
Hoover dam from the air, image in public domain

Storing water

Where the flow of water varies over a time, it is useful to have storage that can help to even the supply, prevent flash floods caused by rain or snowmelt, help farmers downstream to irrigate crops and provide water for businesses and households.

Natural lakes occur where the geography of a region allows, in bowl-shaped depressions in the earth's surface, called basins, fed by rain, snow, melting ice and groundwater seepage, and therefore mostly contain freshwater. They vary in size from small ponds to huge lakes such as the Sea of Galilee and the Caspian Sea, the world's largest lake covering an area of 143,000 square miles (370,000 square kilometres), and Lake Baikal in Russia with a depth of over 1 mile (2 kilometres) in places.

Where need arises, constructing a dam across rivers to provide a reservoir has been one solution in use for thousands of years. The Jawa Dam in Jordan, built around 3000 BC, is the oldest known dam in the world, positioned in one of the driest areas in the country as a protection against flash floods, and which enabled a city to survive for 1500 years.



Reservoirs can have a secondary purpose, being used to generate electricity, and provide space for recreational activities. The downside is the area that they cover, with entire communities sometimes being uprooted before their construction. The largest by surface area is Lake Volta in Ghana, which covers some 3280 square miles (8,500 square kilometres). The biggest by volume is Lake Kariba on the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe, storing 44 cubic miles of water (185 cubic kilometres).

Smaller storage systems, often called cisterns, dug into the ground, or elevated on hilltops or within water towers serve a similar use of ensuring a continuous supply of water. Water towers are common in India, where the electricity supply can sometimes be erratic.

Issues

Natural lakes have a life cycle, as their basin gradually fills with sediment and decaying plant and animal material, and the lake will eventually become a bog or swamp. The natural process of aging and decay is extremely slow but can be much quicker with human interference.

Reservoirs can affect the life cycle of fish and the biodiversity of an area, particularly where subject to seasonal or even daily lowering of water levels. Flooding an area of land can create conditions that favour the conversion by bacteria of natural levels of mercury in soil and vegetation into methyl mercury, which is toxic and accumulates to high levels in fish.

Water quality problems, particularly with cisterns and tanks in developing countries, can lead to health issues with faecal

contamination because of pipe damage and leakage in the distribution system.

There are also political issues with dams. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is a current example. The dam will be the largest hydroelectric power plant in Africa when fully operational (filling began in 2020 and may take 7 years to complete). It has meant the resettlement of up to 20,000 people living in the construction area.

For Sudan, just a few kilometres away, this is wonderful news as it should regulate the water flow that their farmers currently struggle to control. It is a different story for Egypt. A spokesman for the government said that if water coming into Egypt reduced by just 2%, they would lose around 200,000 acres of farming land.

Discussion

Q) How might human interaction with a lake or reservoir shorten its lifespan and the life within it?

Q) Storing water is not only something for government/industry/town planners to consider. How can individual homeowners conserve and better use this natural resource?

Q) The provision of water is becoming more political as populations increase and single rivers flow through several countries. Realistically, is there any way to avoid this?

Water as a symbol

Read Psalm 69:1-2, John 7:37-39, 2 Peter 2:17)

In the previous studies we have read of water being a blessing, bringing life, cleansing, and healing, and through the Bible narrative water gains symbolic meaning, as seen in these three readings:

Psalm 69:1-2

Phrases like 'Up to my neck in it' or 'in deep water' are often used to describe difficult situations that we find ourselves in, and here the Psalmist writes a lament to God as

he finds himself the victim of a conspiracy just at a time God has chastised him for an unnamed sin.

The experience has worn him down physically, spiritually, and mentally, such that he feels totally out of his depth and in need of rescue. His throat is hoarse from all the prayers which he feels remain unanswered, and desperation sets in as he describes what could almost be a shipwreck.

John 7:37-39

Here are the words of Jesus inviting anyone who is spiritually thirsty to 'come to me and drink.' The occasion was the seventh or eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths), which remembers the days when the Israelites wandered through the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt, living in huts and reliant on God's provision of water for drinking and watering crops.

The festival included a daily procession of priests from the temple to the Pool of Siloam, from which they draw water to be used at the altar with the words 'With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation' (Isaiah 12:3). Jesus speaks into this traditional celebration, claiming that he is the living water that the people now need to quench their spiritual thirst. He is the fulfilment of this festival.

Jesus takes the symbolism of the Old Testament and applies it to the gift he is offering to believers after the Cross and Resurrection.

2 Peter 2:17

Peter is directing his anger not only at the false teachers within the fledgling churches he was writing to, but also those who claimed to be prophets. Peter has little good to say of people who 'secretly introduce heresies' or exploit the believers with 'stories they have made up'. The message is simple and stark. A thirsty traveller approaches a spring expecting a drink of refreshing water but finds it dry. These people promise much and deliver nothing, like the mist that comes and blows quickly away. This verse contrasts well with the two from John's Gospel, where Jesus offers 'living water'.

Discussion

Q) How hard can it be to ask for help when we find ourselves in 'deep water' and is there scope for the local church to be more aware of the pastoral needs of members and others who live nearby?

Q) How important is the passage from John 7 for the Church and do we as individual members really understand its implication regarding mission?

Q) For those not familiar with Biblical language, Jesus' promise that 'living water will flow from within' might seem difficult to understand. Can you think of an alternative way to describe what Jesus is talking about?

Q) False promises and scams are unfortunately a part of our daily lives, mostly via social media and phone calls, not about things spiritual but possibly monetary or political. Does Peter's description fit these people, and how have you learned to deal with them?

A living lake

Read Matthew 4:18-22)

The Sea of Galilee, also called Lake Tiberias, Kinneret or Kinnereth, is the lowest freshwater lake on Earth at 636 feet (212 metres) below sea level, and fed partly by underground springs but mainly by the Jordan River. In the past this was the country's major source of drinking water, but today only provides around 10 percent, mainly because of investment in water conservation and the desalination of sea water.

Water levels in the Sea of Galilee had been steadily falling to an all-time low in 2018, possibly not helped by water diversion for agricultural purposes and resulting in increased salinity. Two wet winters following helped to restore levels.

In Jesus' day the lake was a source of food and the livelihood of many locals, including the disciples Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Fishermen still operate from its shores.

The story of the calling of these first disciples seems, at first glance, both an impulsive and even reckless decision by these young men, to leave their way of life and their living, after just a few words from a stranger. However, John's telling of this calling to follow (John 1:35-42) tells us that Peter and Andrew had already met Jesus, and indeed Peter had become a disciple of John the Baptist. So, perhaps their hearts were prepared for the challenge that faced them.



Colour lithograph, Sea of Galilee, anon, c1900

Many saw Jesus as a teacher and in those days, it was conventional for disciples to choose a teacher, not the other way round. Jesus was never one to be constrained by convention.

Following Jesus physically, and being 'hearers' of his words were both important, as the disciples were to become trainees in mission work.

Discussion

Q) What does the reaction of these disciples tell us about both them and Jesus?

Q) Compared to the lives of Peter, Andrew, James, and John, how much do you feel you have had to give up in following Jesus, and if a lot, has that been easy?

Q) The disciples learned through following, so how important are role models in life (do share examples if appropriate)?

For further thought, prayer and reading

Pray for those struggling 'in deep water', that they might find the help and support they need.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/reservoir/>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/lake/>

<https://www.iisd.org/ela/blog/research-highlights/impact-reservoirs-dams-fresh-water-health/>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-43170408>

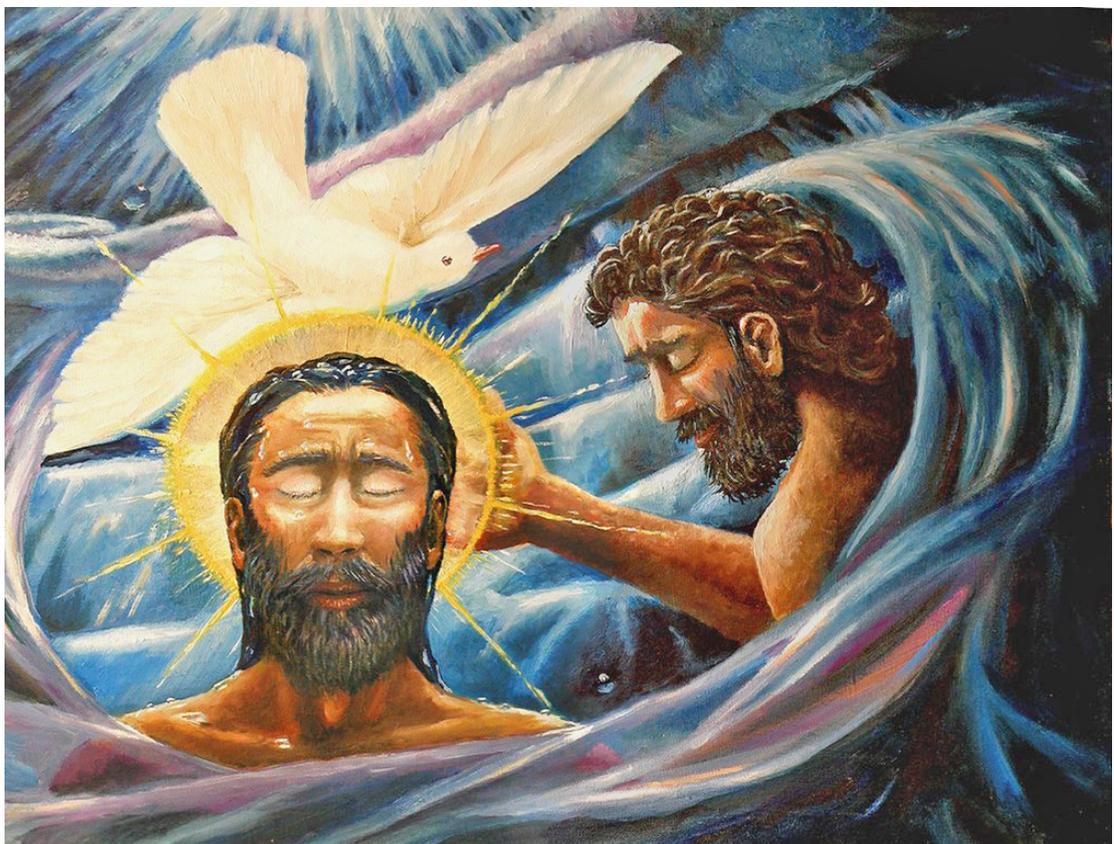
Using images prayerfully

There are quite a few images within these studies, and you may like to try this way to use them prayerfully.

It is called Visio Divina, or 'Divine seeing' and all it requires is a few minutes of quiet, while we look at the images, what the artist might say to us, even putting ourselves into the artwork, and allowing God to speak to us.

The four stages of Visio Divina, assuming we are relaxed, quiet and with a copy of the picture in front of us, are:

Here is an image you might like to begin with. The stages are the same.



Baptism of Christ by David Zelenka, 2005. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

1. Look at the picture slowly, noting the colours, people, places, and things. Start in one corner and work your way around it. Remain with the image for one to two minutes. If you would like, jot down a few words about what you see, particularly anything you missed at first glance.
2. Take a second, deeper, look. Where is there movement? What relationships do you see? Engage your imagination. Where might you be within the picture? What do you see from that perspective? What deeper meaning emerges?
3. Respond to the image with prayer. Did the image remind you of an experience, person or issue for which you'd like to offer thanksgiving or intercession? Offer that prayer to God.
4. Be still. Breathe deeply. Relax your shoulders, arms, and legs. Rest in this quietness and let God speak.

References

Holy Bible, New International Version® Anglicised, NIV® Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Expositor's Bible Commentary (Abridged Edition): Old Testament, Zondervan (1 Jan. 2004)

Expositor's Bible Commentary (Abridged Edition): New Testament, Zondervan; Abridged Edition (1 April 2004)

Zondervan Bible Commentary (One Volume); Zondervan 2008.

NKJV MacArthur Study Bible, 2nd Edition; TN Bibles; 2nd edition (31 Oct. 2019)

NIV Quest Study Bible, by Zondervan 1994, 2003, 2011.

Quotes from brainyquotes.com

All images are, to the best of my knowledge, free of copyright restrictions, in the public domain or used with permission.

You can find more Bible studies at www.faithandworship.com