



Shall We Gather at the River

Then the angel showed me 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. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.

Rev 22.1–5 (NRSV)

Important things happen in and around rivers in the Scriptures. In fact, the biblical narrative is bookended by the presence of a river. The first appearance is noted in Genesis where a river is flowing from within Eden; in the Revelation to John the river of life flows directly from the throne of God. The latter seems to signal the new-heaven-and-earth restoration of the former—the original creation full of glory, wonder, and wholeness.

Other examples are likely familiar. The Israelites arrive (finally!) at the long-sought place of promise after passing across the Jordan (on dry ground no less). Moses is saved as an infant in a wicker basket floating in the midst of the reeds in a river—the Nile—that would serve as the opening stage for the grown Moses' God-empowered encounters with Pharaoh. The prophet-foretold voice, preparing the way for Messiah, was baptizing in the aforementioned river Jordan; Jesus would step into those waters with him for his own inaugural moment.

This old gospel song has immense appeal. It's hard to resist the invitation to join the children of Israel, Moses, John, and Jesus down on the banks. And surely God and Lamb will greet us there as well. All of the narrative moments between Genesis and Revelation keep our feet moving—away from what was lost in the first humans' conversation with a serpent and toward that day which is coming when the woman's offspring strikes the final blow on the serpent's head.

So, the river of life awaits us . . . shall we gather?

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