

## Water in the Bible

Let me start off this first session and our forum by raising the question that’s often asked when Christians talk about environmental issues: Why? Why don’t Christians just talk about God and Jesus and heaven and faith and worship and prayer, and leave water and climate and forests and pollution and energy and endangered species to the ecologists and hydrologists and meteorologists and engineers and politicians? One answer that’s often given is that those issues affect human health and social justice and other moral dimensions of life in community that *are* generally thought to be appropriate concerns for people of faith. But there’s another reason that’s more central to EarthCare’s purpose and our forum today. We talk about water and air and climate and wildlife and forests because we don’t see them just as natural resources, or necessities of life, or biological or meteorological phenomena, or commodities: We see those things as works of God, precious creations of a loving creator.

So this morning I’d like to spend our first few minutes together talking theologically about water. What does the Bible say about water? How is it important in our way of understanding God and our relationship to God?

Just a quick word count—computers are *so* handy—shows that water is mentioned 719 times in the Bible: less often than God or Jesus, a little less often than heaven or love, but much more often than faith, hope, prayer, or worship. So maybe it’s not such an odd thing for Christians to talk about.

What’s the very first image or scene in the Bible? It’s the spirit of God, brooding over the face of the waters. Before there was light or sun or moon or earth there was water. What’s the very *last* image in the Bible? It’s the river of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God in the new Jerusalem. And almost the very last *words* in the Bible are, “Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.”

So the Bible begins with God and water and ends with God and water, and between the beginning and the end—the alpha and the omega—the Bible is chock full of testimony that links God and water in his creating, blessing, and saving work.

After God’s spirit hovers over the waters at the beginning of creation, water continues to be the setting and even the medium of creation. After creating day and night, God turns again to the waters. He creates a sky to divide the water, then gathers the water under the sky into one place so the dry land can emerge. God calls the dry land earth, calls the waters seas, and then for the first time observes his work and pronounces it good. Then, after creating heavenly bodies and vegetation, God begins day six of creation by declaring, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures.”

Having called the earth into being out of water, and created the sky in the midst of waters, and summoned living creatures to life out of water, God continues to bathe his creation with water as a sign of his care. He planted a Garden in Eden, with a river flowing out of it to water it. That river was the source of all the great rivers that water the earth. Psalm 65 says, “You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water. . . .” Job’s friend Eliphaz says God must be good and just because “He gives rain on the earth and sends waters on the fields.” When the Israelites were crossing the desert of Sinai after leaving Egypt, they complained that they were thirsty, and God told Moses to go to Horeb and “Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.”

Many of the prophets saw water as a sign of God’s providence in nature, but also as a symbol of God’s greater mercy to his people. Joel proclaimed, “O children of Zion, be glad and

rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before.” And Isaiah wrote, “Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, ... for I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring. They shall spring up like a green tamarisk, like willows by flowing streams.”

When Isaiah talks about water as a blessing from God, it’s hard to tell sometimes whether he means it literally or metaphorically. In Chapter 41 he wrote, “When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.” In Isaiah 35, water is clearly a metaphor for God’s kindness in restoring Israel: “For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.”

Water also has both literal and figurative significance as a means of purification. In Exodus, Moses provided a bronze basin of water for the priests to wash their hands and feet when they entered the tabernacle. In Leviticus, Aaron was instructed to bathe in water before offering sacrifices. In Ezekiel, a ceremonial washing symbolizes greater purity, when God says, “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.” The writer of Hebrews, in the New Testament, says that Christians can approach God with the assurance of faith, “with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” And in John 13, Jesus tells Peter that he is physically clean, since he has bathed, but he must let Jesus wash his feet as a spiritual preparation for the coming kingdom of God.

In Exodus, water becomes a means of deliverance when Moses is hidden in a basket in the Nile. On discovering him and taking him home to raise him, Pharaoh’s daughter names him Moses “because I drew him out of the water.” Later, God makes water a powerful means of both salvation and judgment when he uses the Red Sea to destroy the Egyptian army and complete the liberation of the Israelites from slavery.

In the story of the Flood in Genesis, water is also the instrument of both deliverance and destruction. Genesis 7:17 describes how the flood waters bore up the ark and saved Noah and his family and the animals on the ark, while the next paragraph says “everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. [God] blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground.”

Now, if water can be a sign of God’s grace in the Bible, lack of water can also be a sign of God’s displeasure. Elijah told wicked King Ahab that God would send neither dew nor rain on Israel as punishment for the people’s sins. The prophet Jeremiah vividly described a drought in the land of Judah:

The word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah concerning the drought: Judah mourns and her gates languish; they lie in gloom on the ground, and the cry of Jerusalem goes up. Her nobles send their servants for water; they come to the cisterns, they find no water, they return with their vessels empty. They are ashamed and dismayed and cover their heads, because the ground is cracked. Because there has been no rain on the land the farmers are dismayed; they cover their heads. Even the doe in the field forsakes her newborn fawn because there is no grass. The wild asses stand on the bare heights, they pant for air like jackals; their eyes fail because there is no herbage.

The cause of the suffering, Jeremiah says, is that the people have broken their covenant with God. “They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.”

Now, I don’t think we should be too quick to jump to moralistic conclusions about why we’re experiencing an extended drought here in Georgia and Tennessee, but it certainly wouldn’t hurt to take the drought as a cue to humble ourselves before God. Jeremiah’s prophecy about leaky cisterns also suggests that building tanks and dams and reservoirs isn’t going to solve our water problems unless we also confess that our water is the gift of a gracious God.

In the Psalms and in Ephesians, water symbolizes God’s word. In Isaiah, the expanse of water in the sea is a simile for knowledge of God. In Hosea, spring rains are a sign of the presence of God himself. And in Amos water represents social justice in one of the great similes in the Bible: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Now, most of the passages I’ve mentioned have been in the Old Testament, with an Epistle or two thrown in. But water is also significant in the gospels, in the words and actions of Jesus. Water is sometimes the setting and sometimes the material for miracles, as when Jesus walks on water, calms the storm on the Sea of Galilee, and turns water into wine. In these cases, Jesus’ mastery of water reveals his God-given authority and his power to control and transform the forces of the universe. In John 9, Jesus heals a blind man by instructing him to wash in the pool of Siloam.

Jesus gave water enormous symbolic weight, especially in John’s gospel. He made it a metaphor of conversion when he told Nicodemus that “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” The act of washing the disciples’ feet became a sign of his upcoming death and of their readiness to become part of his ministry.

In his conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, in John 4, Jesus used water as a metaphor for the salvation he offered the world. “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.” And in John’s account of Jesus’ crucifixion, blood and water issued from his pierced body—a sign of the gift of eternal life bound with Jesus’ death.

Finally, all the meanings of water—creation, blessing, rescue, cleansing, new birth, initiation, Christ’s death and resurrection—are gathered into one great miracle of water in the rite or sacrament of baptism. First Peter says, “Baptism, which [the building of the ark] prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Well, there are 690-some more references to water in the Bible, but I think we’ve got the idea. Water *is* a key concern for Christians. It is a premier—one might even say that it is *the* premier—earthly means by which God reveals his power and his grace. It sustains life; it purifies and transforms the world and us; it reminds us of our creator and our savior and unites us with the Spirit of God. When we take water for granted, waste it, or spoil it we suffer spiritually as well as physically; when we respect and cherish it as God’s gift we not only find our rivers and reservoirs full, but we draw with joy, as Isaiah said, from the wells of salvation.