



## Stay in the River

Jonathan K. Dodson | John 4: 7 | September 25, 2020

Church, I know many of you are struggling. 2020 will, no doubt, be one of the hardest years of our lives. For that reason, we are going to pause our current series to reflect on the times we find ourselves and how to respond.

### The Valley

These are painful, confusing, lonely, and heartbreaking times: single who feel abandoned, families overwhelmed with school and work, people who feel misunderstood or hurt, those walking away from their faith. And that is not the half of it. We are in a valley, stumbling through the shadows. Valleys are places of sorrow, suffering, and loss. And the normal reaction to a valley is to escape, to numb the pain. Get out of town, sleep in, bury yourself in work, a few extra drinks. *But the only way to get out of the valley is through.* Not to escape but to move attentively, listen, and *wait*. In the valley, God seeks to strip us of things that weigh us down, to lighten our load. But often we don't want to part with our possessions. That, too, is part of the pain of the valley. God wants to take away things and give new things, but to receive them we must wait. I don't want to wait. I am tired. I am hurt. I am sorrowful. What is God saying? This week Danielle Irving picked Psalm 62 for our staff devotional. I couldn't get past verse 1: **For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.** Someone asked me why I was stuck on that verse. I said, Because it says For **God alone** my soul waits. Many of us want God + something. We're willing to wait for God as long as he gives us our +. They kindly asked what is my +? I thought about it for quite a while, and then realized. For me, it isn't a plus; it's a minus. I want God minus the pain. I don't want to be in the valley. I don't want to suffer, and I don't want to be stripped of things. I don't want to wait on God *alone*. What would you put next to God? God plus what? For some of you it is God plus racial justice; for others God plus gender rights; others God plus political agenda. Me? God minus pain. God is asking all of us, church, to wait on him *alone*. Not him plus or him minus, *just Him*. And with good reason. The psalmist says we should wait on him: for **from him comes my salvation**. We don't use that word much today—**salvation**—our egos are too big for that. But in reality, we're all seeking salvation. Salvation from injustice, from loneliness, rescue from our political mess, deliverance from



pandemic and pain. Here's the deal: *Whatever your soul waits for will be your salvation.* So what you *wait for* better be worth it. Think of your salvation like a natural spring. There are many springs that are worthwhile but not entirely satisfying: springs of justice, politics, entertainment, family, church service. These springs, CSL says, were never meant to satisfy, but that doesn't mean that we should despise them. They should be valued, we should cup our hands and drink. But we must also never mistake them for the thing they echo, the source they come from. So drink of these things but don't expect them to satisfy. Why? The most probable explanation is that we were not made for these springs. We were made for another world, a world where its water *always satisfies.*

## **The River**

Every summer we go to Colorado where I walk the mountain and pray each morning. And on this particular morning this August, God spoke to me about the coming year. I walked out on the edge of the mountain, looked out on the sprawling Avon valley, nestled by two mountain ranges, and the Gore river shimmering as it snaked through it, and God said, When you get back to Austin you're going to go through a valley. I was like, great. Did I hear you right? But it's been true. This has been one of the most difficult years pastoring CL in all my 14 years. *But the truth is we're all in a valley aren't we?* Then God said, don't look at the valley. I want you to *stay in the river.* That's my emphasis. Not the valley but the river. *Stay in the river.* What is the river? When speaking with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus said "[Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.](#)" **The river is life in the Spirit and the Son** (Jn 7:37-39). We must come to Christ, and drink of the Spirit. But here's the issue, church; You're jumping out of the water, walking away from the refreshment Jesus gives, seeking satisfaction, security, healing, hope in polluted, insufficient springs. Some of you are climbing out of the river and building political bunkers and hurling insults. Others are climbing up trees, looking down, and hurling racial judgments. Others are so disconnected from God and the church wandering about the valley. Is it any surprise you're disillusioned, dissatisfied, parched, angry, depressed? Jesus says you drink of that water you'll be thirsty again, *but if you drink from the water I give you, you'll never thirst again.* So God said to me, Jonathan, Go back and call City Life church off the mountainsides. Beckon them back into



the river of life. That, friends, is my calling. It's just especially difficult in this season because many don't want to be called back. God has not called me to be an activist; he has not called me to be a politician; he has called me to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. A gospel that values activism, politics, and all the other springs, but is not the spring. It is the river. So that is why I critique the right and the left, not because I dislike good causes or noble springs, but because you are tempted to swap the river for the spring, to live for country but not for King. I see you chasing springs that do not satisfy. *You weren't made for the spring but for the River.* Not for the creation but for Christ. And Christ meets us in this self-imposed misery. He wants to lighten our load in the valley. But we must endure the momentary pain of repentance, feel our attachments stripped away, and walk with him through the valley. If we do not, we will not emerge with the new things: more wisdom, more grace, and most of all, more of Christ. But if we own up to our sins, church, and come back to the river Christ will satisfy us. He will make us Christlike in how we deal with the pain and advocate for the springs. He will lead us through the valley in the river and speak to our souls.

### **Conclusion.**

Listen to Jesus, *If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.* Are you thirsty? Drink of Christ. *Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'* " Now this he said about the Spirit (Jn 7:37-39). drink Christ and be filled with the Spirit. When we do this over and over, morning and evening, day after day, month after month, *we will live a Spirit-filled life.* We will be renewed, satisfied, and concerned for others. But, *we have to come to Christ,* to allow him and him *alone* to be our salvation. For God *alone* my soul waits. And if we come Jesus promises the water: *will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life*" (Jn 4:13-14). The word spring doesn't mean trickle, flow; it means to leap forth like a geyser. Effusive life-giving, joyful faith. We have privileged access to this water. The water the whole world is looking for! Jesus is calling us to not only *stay in the river* but to *give the water to one another.* To creatively connect, fellowship, and minister to one another *especially in a pandemic.* To worship on Sundays at 10 am as a people who are jumping in the river together to drink in Christ. And there's more. Ezekiel has a vision of a temple with water trickling out of it; it begins to build, then



rush out of it. What is the temple? The church; we are the living stones; Christ—Christ—is the cornerstone. And the water turns into a river flowing right through the temple to irrigate the world. New creation springs up: new trees, new life, new humanity, new justice. Where does the river flow? Through the temple, through the church, through you to irrigate the world. But we have to drink. We have to stay in the river. City Life: let's drink continually of Christ, *stay in the river*, and irrigate the world.