

THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

Volume 68, Number 03

Editor ~ Joshua Riggins

Publisher ~ Doug Twaddell

March, 2026

SHALL WE GATHER AT THE RIVER

Charles Fry

When I was a child, it was typical that whenever someone wanted to be baptized, most of the congregation drove out to Hart Park, where the Kern River made a small lake, and the baptism was there, a few yards offshore. The church members would bring along a few songbooks, and the group would sing, “*Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod, with its crystal tide forever flowing by the throne of God? Yes, we’ll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river, gather with the saints at the river, that flows by the throne of God.*”

Often, baptisms were a night scene, lit only by headlights on the water in the evening after a church meeting. I don’t recall ever singing “Shall We Gather At The River” in the regular gatherings of the church when I was a child, nor do I remember ever singing more than the first verse and refrain for a baptism. It was a well-established custom to sing the one verse of that particular song for baptisms, and that’s how folks thought of that song.

I did wonder sometimes whether the lake at Hart Park, with its murky water and large duck population, really fit the notion of “the beautiful river” where angels tread. When I finally really looked at the verses of the song as a young adult, I realized the author certainly wasn’t thinking about baptism when he wrote those words. Rather, he had in mind the scene in **Revelation 22** when John saw the throne of God at the center and peak of the heavenly city, which is the bride of Christ. The songwriter was visualizing the gathering of the redeemed in glory and trying to convey the joy and beauty of that grand assembly by the river of life.

Robert Lowry, who wrote “Shall We Gather At The River,” later reminisced that he’d written it on a hot, muggy day in Brooklyn when it was exhausting just to lie still and sweat. He pondered the better future God had promised and considered

that a lot of songs made reference to the “river of death” and to grief and hardship, but he knew of none that celebrated the river of life. So, that day in 1864 when the American Civil War was raging, and New York was suffering a deadly typhoid epidemic, he wrote the words and tune that have been sung at countless baptisms in the 160 years since. He didn’t envision it as a baptismal song, but it quickly caught on. It was soon sung at baptisms in both the north and the south, including in military camps where a spirit of revival led to many baptisms even under enemy fire. I still occasionally see “Shall We Gather At The River” sung at a baptism, though it is much less common now than it once was, and perhaps riverside baptisms are less common too.

Only God can fill people with joy and peace, and only believers can abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. The world has no path to peace or hope or joy.

It is a curious phenomenon of human nature that a hymn written in Brooklyn in such tumultuous times would spread so quickly north and south, and that people who were literally waging war in a nation bitterly divided, were simultaneously singing the same trendy new song at baptisms, as well as singing the same traditional hymns in general and reading the same scriptures in their assemblies and Bible studies. It is tragic when a nation is divided against itself, and even more tragic when people professing to serve the Lord Jesus Christ take up causes that lead to conflict among Christians.

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THE CITY OF REFUGE

Ben Fry

When Paul wrote about Christians singing praises together in Romans 15:9-13, he quoted verses from Deuteronomy and Psalms and Samuel and Isaiah, citing praise as a unifying force for believers from all nations under the rule of Christ. He concluded his scriptural exposition about unity in praise with the benediction, *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."* Only God can fill people with joy and peace, and only believers can abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. The world has no path to peace or hope or joy. The causes men rally around cannot produce such a unique gift as that which God provides believers. Such divine gifts must not be squandered on conflicts that stir within the kingdoms of this world.

Paul often mentioned significant things he left behind to be a servant of Jesus Christ, and his ardent Jewishness, a kind of nationalism, was one of the things he surrendered. He accepted Jesus' admonition to take up his cross and follow, and he firmly instructed Christians to die to the world in order to know peace in Christ:

But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. (Galatians 6:14-16 ESV)

Crucified to the world, and the world crucified to me. That's a radical departure from the demands and imperatives of the marketplace of commercial and political ideals, which cannot fill anyone with joy or hope, and certainly not peace. His prayer, in **Galatians 6:16**, for peace and mercy upon all who walk by the rule of being alive to Christ and dead to the world, and upon the Israel of God, that's a prayer worth praying, seeking gifts worth receiving in every generation and every place.

Shall we gather at the river? Come to the throne, take His cause above all else, be a peacemaker, let his peace rule in your heart, and pray for the peace of all God's people.

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Long ago, when the Israelites were headed toward the promised land, the Lord, through Moses, told the people to set apart six cities. These cities were to be designated as cities of refuge. The purpose of these cities was to provide safety. The specific people that it was intended to provide safety for were those who had accidentally killed someone else.

In **Numbers 35**, we can read about some of the specific requirements that went along with these cities. First, they were spread out so that everyone had access to them. Second, they did not keep people from their just punishment. If they had intentionally committed murder, then they were still to be put to death, but they would have a trial first. Third, even if the murder was unintentional, they were required to live their lives in the city of refuge until the death of the current High Priest.

From these verses, we see that when someone was murdered, their next of kin became the avenger of blood, and the avenger of blood could put the murderer to death. This concept goes back to God's covenant with Noah. In **Genesis 9:6**, the Lord states, *"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image."* And as the writer of Hebrews reminds us, *"Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins."* (**Hebrews 9:22**)

The cities of refuge are for the protection from the avenger of blood, but the function of the avenger of blood is also important. The avenger of blood upheld the requirements to keep the land from being polluted by the shedding of blood. They were the ones who fulfilled the statement of God. However, throughout the scriptures, there are very few places where the avenger of blood is mentioned or talked about outside **Numbers 35** and **Genesis 9**.

In fact, if you look at the underlying Hebrew, you learn that this word, which is translated 'avenger' in **Numbers 35**, is nearly everywhere else translated as 'redeemer'. He who avenges and he who redeems are the same. And the most common person for this word to refer to is God. We see this in the dual roles that He fulfills. The Lord brings His people out of Egypt, but He also punishes the wicked and grumblers.

We see this most strongly through Jesus Himself. In **Revelation 19**, we see a depiction of the Lord Jesus sitting on

WHOSE BUILDER AND MAKER

Joshua Riggins

a white horse with a robe dipped in blood. From His mouth comes a sword that He will use to strike down the nations, and He will trample out the winepress of the fury of the Lord. As the souls beneath the altar ask, “*O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?*” (**Revelation 6:10**) He answers that it will be a little while longer, but His vengeance is not sleeping. But we also see Jesus as the one who redeems and saves His people through the shedding of his own blood, reconciling all things to Himself, making peace by His blood on the cross. (**Colossians 1:20**)

Indeed, through Him we are able to enter into the Heavenly Jerusalem, the true City of Refuge, where we are safe from the wrath of God. And in this city, we will stay until the death of the High Priest. But our High Priest is the Son of God, who will live forevermore. There is no safe place except within the city that He has designated. But this city is not like the cities of refuge that the Israelites had. They had to travel to get to those. This city is one that we can enter right now and remain on this earth. This city is one that is not bound by geographical location, for it is a heavenly city.

When we are baptized, we have our debt cancelled (**Colossians 2:9-14**), and this makes us free in a way that we were not before. Our baptism makes us a part of His people, His church, which is the New Jerusalem. This isn't some promise that is far off, but one that is near, which we can lay hold of right now.

But, as with many of the promises of God, there is also a future fulfillment as well. When He comes again, He will take us to the place He has prepared for us. (**John 14:1-3**) This will be a place much grander and greater than what we have here. And at the center of the city will be our Lord. This will be the greatest joy we have ever known, to live with our Lord, with His glory uncovered before us, speaking with us face to face.

Outside the city, the avenger brings terror to all who oppose him, but inside the city, we will find rest for our souls. If we want to be in the city, then we must listen to Him and obey Him. He leaves the choice to us.

Revelation 22:12-13

“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

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By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

Hebrews 11:8-10

God called Abraham from the life he knew. There is a certain comfort in the familiar. Stepping into the unknown requires great faith. Abraham chose to trust God, believing His sevenfold promises (**Genesis 12:1-3**) were perfect in every way.

All seven of these promises were fulfilled, just as God offered. Abraham became a great nation through his promised son (**Genesis 15:4, Exodus 1:7**), he was blessed by God in every way (**Genesis 24:1**), his name became great (**Genesis 14:18-20, John 8:39**), he became a blessing for others (**Genesis 14:14-16, Genesis 19:29**), those who blessed him were blessed by God (**Genesis 14:20, Hebrews 7:6-10**), and those who cursed him were cursed (**Numbers 21:21-35**).

The final promise to Abraham finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and in Him we, too, may find confidence in God. Paul writes in **Galatians 3:7-9**,

Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.

In the two preceding articles, we have been encouraged to remember the joy, peace, and refuge found in gathering at the river in the Heavenly Jerusalem. Let's take up the faith of Abraham, leave the ways of this world behind, and look forward to the city whose builder and maker is God.

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Please check your expiration date!

Here and There

The brethren meeting on **North 14th St, New Castle, IN** praised God on January 4, 2026 as **Mike and Virginia White** placed membership with the congregation.

There was much rejoicing among the saints in **Blue Springs, MO** on January 9 when **Ivan Garbi** was immersed for the remission of his sins.

The congregation in **Bloomfield, IN** gladly welcomed Adam and Laura Bucher who placed membership on January 18.

May the Lord bless and watch over all of these souls as they seek to serve and please him.

Let all those who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; let such as love your salvation say continually, 'The Lord be magnified!'

Psalm 40:16

The congregation in **Summersville, MO** plans to host a weekend meeting April 25-26, 2026. Brother Tad Morris will share additional information in the near future.

Details about reservations and registration for the Midwest Bible Campout can be found on **Prince Road, Alton, IL** website: <http://princeroadchurchofchrist.org/campout/>

Special Meetings

2026

- March 7.....Ladies Day, Smart Rd, Greenwood,MO
- March 22.....Gardner, KS
- April 25-26.....Summersville, MO
- June 29-July 3.....Midwest Bible Campout
- July 26-31.....One-Week Meeting, Riverside Rd, Ozark, MO

Additional details for these and other upcoming meetings can be found by visiting the Gospel Message website. You can use the QR code below to navigate to the relevant page.



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THE GOSPEL MESSAGE (USPS:576-040) (ISSN:1054-7991) is published monthly for \$10 per year by **THE GOSPEL MESSAGE**, 1700 S. Ann Ct., Independence, MO 64057. Periodicals Postage Paid at Independence, MO. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to **THE GOSPEL MESSAGE**, 1700 S. Ann Ct., Independence, MO 64057