

**“The River of Life”**  
**Ezekiel 47:1-12**  
**April 19, 2009**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

The final passage we will be looking at in our series of studies on Ezekiel lies within a larger prophetic vision Ezekiel experienced. The vision started back in chapter 40 and features a new temple. The old one had been destroyed after the Babylonians got fed up with the Jews’ constant rebellions against Babylonian rule. So the Babylonian army set about to obliterate the city, destroying its walls and, most importantly, its temple. That had occurred in 586 B.C., and now Ezekiel is in Babylon with many other exiles. It’s hard to overstate how significant the destruction of the temple was to Ezekiel and his nation. The temple was the heart of their national identity, since they prided themselves in being the nation in which the God of the universe, Jehovah, had taken up residence. So the destruction of the temple wasn’t just the destruction of an important architectural feature of their city that would have to be rebuilt at great cost. It represented the loss of their central identity, combined with a theological challenge arising from the fact that they thought that since God lived with them, things like this wouldn’t happen. Their foundations were shaken to the core. That’s what makes Ezekiel’s vision of this new temple so significant. God was promising a restoration of all these things. There was hope for these exiles living so far from home.

The chapter before us today features one aspect of this new temple. Ezekiel describes a trickle of water that flows from within the temple. A guide takes him by the hand, and they begin to follow the trickle of water. The further they walk, the bigger it becomes. After 500 yards it was ankle deep. Another quarter of a mile found it knee-deep, and then waist-deep and then an impassable river, all after the same interval of 500 yards each time. Several other things are noted about this river. First, its destination is the Dead Sea, where the salt water is made fresh, allowing an abundance of fish to dwell there, resulting in a thriving fishing industry along its banks. Second, the river runs through a desert and makes everything green. Along its banks as it flows to the Dead Sea, the most amazing trees grow. They bear fruit monthly, rather than the annual harvest of normal trees. And their leaves have amazing medicinal properties, providing healing for those who use them.

It’s not hard to see how Ezekiel’s vision would be a hope-filled message for his original readers. They are living in exile and beholding the ruin of their past lives. But God is not done. The temple will be restored, and the river flowing from within will give life to the land. For those living in an arid climate, where it may not rain for weeks or even months, rivers are cherished for their abundant supply of life-giving water. The Bible uses this image of a river to speak of

God's blessings. The first river appears in Genesis 2, where a river flowing from the paradise of Eden splits and brings life to all the land. The last chapter of the Bible also features a river, complete with a tree of life that brings healing to the nations. This river applies to us as well, speaking of the refreshment God brings to us in the ruin that sin makes of our lives. Is there some area in your life where you feel the ruin of sin? Perhaps it's a relationship with someone else, or maybe it's your marriage or your family. Maybe your selfishness has caused you to be isolated and you are beginning to shrivel on the inside. Maybe your faith has shriveled, your heart is plagued with doubts and your spiritual life feels like a desert. The good news is that there is a river of life flowing from the temple. Since this is such a common image in the Bible, there is a great deal we could say about this river. I want to point out three of the distinctives in Ezekiel's vision of it.

## **I. The Development of the River**

One of the clear distinctives of Ezekiel's vision of this river is its development from a small trickle as it comes from beneath the threshold of one of the doors of the temple, to become this great river that brings life everywhere it flows. Before we can appreciate the significance of this, we need to take just a moment to understand the fulfillment of this vision of the river. Like much prophecy in the Bible, it has three fulfillments. First, it is fulfilled in Ezekiel's day with the return of the Jews from exile and the rebuilding of the temple. Second, it is fulfilled with Jesus, who is portrayed in the New Testament as the temple because he is the real dwelling of God with man. As an extension of this, the church and even individual believers are also portrayed as part of this temple because we have been made holy in Christ. Finally, Ezekiel's vision reaches its ultimate fulfillment in heaven, where the river of life provides water for the tree of life which brings healing to all.

The development of this river from its small beginning speaks of the normal way God's work is carried out. It normally starts out in small, seemingly insignificant ways, but then develops into a power as unstoppable as a mighty river. One of Ezekiel's colleagues was the prophet Zechariah, and he said that we should not despise the day of small beginnings (4:10). Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed as it begins, but then becomes a mighty tree (Matt. 13:31).

The application of this principle of small beginnings is for us not to be discouraged when the church so often seems little and insignificant. The normal way God works is to begin small and then to work to see his kingdom grow and spread in influence. Small groups of Christians can have a significant impact. For example, four of us had the privilege a couple of weeks ago to attend a prayer conference in Vancouver, British Columbia. Vancouver is a very secular city that is not at all friendly to biblical Christianity. But there is a

small group of Christians there from a variety of churches who are seeking to take the gospel to their city and to be a blessing in that place in every way. The pastor who led our seminar, John Smed, said that he believed that if the Christians were removed from the city, even though they are such a small number, that the city would soon be in grave trouble. While we were there, we witnessed the closing of a brothel house that the churches had been praying for years would close.

The number one video on YouTube this past week shows the appearance of Susan Boyle on the British equivalent of American Idol, a show called “Britain’s Got Talent.” She is a 47 year old single woman who is a bit frumpy in appearance. As she walked onto stage to perform, the audience and the judges cynically laughed at her as she spoke of her ambitions to be a singer. Everyone just knew this was going to be another of those laughably bad singers who don’t really seem to know the degree to which they cannot sing. Then she started to sing, and everyone was shocked at first and then delighted. She had a wonderful voice that led the audience to erupt in applause throughout her performance. This river is similar, beginning as just a small trickle, a volume of water not much greater than that of a leaky pipe. It is easy to overlook something so seemingly trivial. But it doesn’t finish the way it starts, ending up bringing great delight to many, which brings us to our next point.

## II. The Benefits of the River

This river does two things, one of which is easy to see, while the other not so easy. First, it brings life to the dry and lifeless places, transforming the desert to a paradise. Ezekiel mentions two places where it flows, both of which are among the most inhospitable places on the planet for life of any kind. It flows through the Judean desert, and brings abundant life to that place. Second, it flows into the Dead Sea. This body of water is remarkable in several ways. It is 1300 feet below sea level, making it the lowest point on the surface of the earth. That means that water flows in, but it never flows out. But it is also located in a very hot, dry atmosphere, with the result that the rate of evaporation is very high. The result of this lack of an outlet and a high evaporation rate is a very high salt content of the water. It has been measured at between 26 and 35 percent salinity today, making it completely inhospitable to all life except a few salt-loving plants. But notice what happens when this river flows into the Dead Sea. **“When the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh”** (v. 8). It doesn’t happen that way in normal life, does it? If you add fresh water to salt water, the fresh becomes salty, not vice-versa. This river brings freshness and life. The language of verse 9 is deliberately reminiscent of Genesis 1: **“And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish.”** This language is meant to portray this as a new creation.

There is a second thing the river does that is not so easy to see. Verse 1 explains that the water was flowing from the south side of the temple. In Solomon's temple, this was the location of a massive bronze pool simply called the "Sea." In the Bible and in much of ancient literature, the sea is the symbol of chaos. So the sea in the temple represented the forces of chaos that had been tamed and brought into an orderly world. So another benefit of this river is to bring order back into our lives after the chaos brought by sin. There are some verses in the well-known Psalm 46 that talk about this order from chaos that is brought by the river of life. **"Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God"** (Ps. 46:2-4).

There are abundant applications to this, but we only have time for a few. First, God is an environmentalist. His river of life brings restoration to the creation. There is a curse on creation at the present time, due to the entrance of sin into God's world. But God is beginning to lift that curse, and its lifting will have a positive effect upon the creation, restoring it to its God-intended purpose. Of all people, Christians ought to care for the environment for the simple reason that God does.

A second application is that the answer to this world's needs has been entrusted to the church. We are the new temple of God, according to the New Testament, and we serve as the agent of life to a world suffering under the curse of sin and death. What will bring true life and healing to this world isn't greater technology or better government, but the church. Greater technology and better government is a gift from God that ought to be pursued, but apart from the church, even these good gifts will bring death rather than life. The most significant building in a city is the church building, not City Hall. I don't say that just because I'm the pastor of a church, but because I think that is what is being taught in this passage. The river of life flows from the temple, and we are that temple. The application is to value the church as God values it. Even those who labor in small ways in the church are helping to bring life to this world.

Third, those of us who follow Christ have a desperate need for this renewal for ourselves. Have you ever felt your soul to be just as dry as the Judean desert through which this river runs? Have you ever felt the deadness of your own heart, as dead as the Dead Sea, and just as toxic to all life? I need the life brought by this river. How do we get the renewing life of the river for ourselves? The answer to that question concerns our next point.

### **III. The Source of the River**

The clear point of the vision is that the river's source is the temple, which is the glorious presence of God. Since God is the source of the river, everything about it is supernatural. Notice, for example, that the river increases in size as it flows, though there are no tributaries feeding it. It has been pointed out also that the path the river would have to take from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea would require it to go up over a mountain, which of course rivers do not do. And then this river feeds the fruit trees in such a way that they become hyper-fruitful, bearing fruit every month, something far beyond what is natural. And their leaves bring healing. Finally, the water from the river desalinates the Dead Sea. All of these things are supernatural. God's renewal of our lives requires just that kind of supernatural work, work that is beyond us. We are dependent upon him and cannot work ourselves up to renewal.

The second thing I notice about the source of this river is that it flows past the altar of the temple. The altar speaks clearly of Jesus' death in payment of our sins, because it was on the altar that all the sacrificial animals were put to death in payment for the sins of Israel. Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. What this passage is telling us is that the renewal God brings to us must include our confession of sin, our agreeing with God about our sin. This renewal comes to us, then, as we acknowledge ourselves completely dependent on God for it, and as we confess our sins to him.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Let me try to wrap this all up by pointing out a passage from John's gospel where Jesus refers to this river. Jesus was in attendance at the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. **"On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, 'If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. 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, whom those who believed in him were to receive"** (John 7:37-39). Note that Jesus promises here not just one river, but multiple rivers of living water. It flows from those who believe, as the Spirit enters their hearts. Let's pray for this Spirit-given renewal now. As we do so, remember that prayer is the hard work God asks of us in renewal. There was a time when the Israelites were attacked by the followers of Amalek while crossing the desert to enter the Promised Land. Moses went up on a hill to pray, while Joshua went with the army to engage the battle. As he prayed, Moses held his staff up. Whenever he did so, Israel would prevail on the battlefield. But as his arms tired, they dropped and the Amalekites would prevail. So Moses sat on a rock and had Aaron and Hur help hold his hands up. In this way Israel prevailed that day. This teaches us that prayer is harder than anything else, but also more definitive than anything else. Let's pray now and ask God for an outpouring of his Spirit, that rivers of water may flow from us.