

## The River Flowing from the Temple

### **Ezekiel 47:1-12**

***47:12, “Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.”***

With the current chaotic political and social climate, I started out writing this message with a heavy heart, but through reflecting on today’s passage, God filled me with his comfort and hope. Right now, our nation is going through turbulent days of a worldwide pandemic and ongoing protests, demanding justice. People are angry about the countless black lives that have been lost, and worry about their future security. We are longing for a world where all broken relationships are mended. We are longing for a world that is free of racism, hatred, death and fear. We thirst for forgiveness, healing, and salvation. Where can we find the fulfillment of our longings?

Today’s passage is about a vision of hope given to the prophet Ezekiel who lived in exile for 25 years in Babylon (40:1). Let me give you the context of the passage. The temple in Jerusalem had been devastated because of their idolatrous sins and social injustice. God’s people were taken into exile and scattered, while the rest were living in their own ruined land. There was no hope and no future. (Only judgment and destruction.) At this point, Ezekiel saw a series of visions. In his earlier vision, he saw abominations in the temple and the glory of the LORD departing from the temple (Ch.8-11). But in his final vision (Ch. 40-48), Ezekiel sees a vision of a new temple. He witnesses the glory of the Lord returning to fill his temple (43:1-12). Ezekiel’s vision zooms out even further to describe the new city and land (Ch. 47-48). The new temple is in the very center of this new city. Correlating with the book of Revelation, Ezekiel 47-48 addresses the consummation of all human history in a symbolic way.

Today’s passage (Eze 47:1-12) describes a marvelous river flowing from the temple to bring life and healing to the land. This vision reveals God’s heart for a broken world and testifies about the gospel of Jesus. God wants us to know his heart and to give us a river of life that flows out to heal our broken hearts and our violent world.

### **I. The Source of the River: The Presence of God**

Look at verses 1-2. **“The man brought me back to the entrance to the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for**

**the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. 2 He then brought me out through the north gate and led me around the outside to the outer gate facing east, and the water was trickling from the south side.”**

Ezekiel's visionary temple tour continues as the angelic guide brings him back to the entrance of the temple. Facing the main temple door toward the east, Ezekiel witnesses an amazing sight -- water coming out from under that door. Coming from the presence of God, trickling water flows east and passes southside of the altar and then out the eastern gates.

What significance does the water have? In the Bible, water stands for life, blessing and fruitfulness. (We may forget the importance of fresh water, because in Chicago, we are abundantly blessed with water from Lake Michigan.) But if you live in dry lands like the Middle East, water is truly precious. If there is no water, there is no life. Ezekiel's vision of the river alludes to the Garden of Eden. Before man's fall, Eden was a beautiful garden where Adam and Eve were placed. Genesis 2:10 describes a river that flowed out from Eden, watering the entire garden . It was a place of complete bliss, delight, and peace; it was truly blessed because God's presence was there.

In Ezekiel's vision, water was flowing out from the temple. The temple was central to his vision. Why does the temple matter so much? In the Old Testament, the temple (tabernacle) represented God's gracious dwelling among his people. Originally, human beings were created to enjoy God, who is the source of life and joy. In the Garden of Eden, people enjoyed his presence in harmony and in a perfect relationship with God. But when people rejected the truth and listened to the devil's lies, they lost paradise. People without God are slaves to sin, injustice, addictions, and the broken world. God chose to save slaves and dwell in their midst by entering into a covenant with them. At the heart of this covenant is the temple. What is unique about the temple in the Bible? It is not something that we do for God; instead it is something that God does for us. Yet, because Israel broke the covenant with their God, they were driven out from the Promised Land and the temple was destroyed. Israel completely failed because of their unfaithfulness and injustice. But in Ezekiel, God gave the vision of the new temple. Through this vision, God is promising, "I will accept you and once again dwell in your midst. I will completely reverse the misery of your sin."

This vision of the temple has been fulfilled by Jesus Christ. He is called Immanuel, God with us. The eternal Son of God became flesh and made his dwelling among sinners (Jn 1:14). By shedding his precious blood and rising from the dead, Christ himself has become the perfect temple for us (Jn 2:13-22; Heb). This is God's crazy love for us. In

the new heaven and new earth, there is no physical temple, because God's very presence is the temple (Rev 21: 22). From the throne of God and the Lamb, the river of life flows (Rev 22:1). We are all longing for paradise, harmony, joy, and fulfillment. Our thirsty souls yearn for life-giving water. We can find this water in Jesus, the root of the rivers of eternal life (Jn 4).

## II. The Power of the River

Verses 3-5 describe the increasing depth and size of the river from the temple. From the outer east gate, the angelic guide leads Ezekiel to follow the stream as it flows east. The guide measures a thousand cubits (about a third of a mile or about 530 meters) and leads Ezekiel through ankle-deep water (3). Again, he measures another thousand cubits and leads him through the knee-deep water (4). Again, the guide measures another thousand cubits and leads him through the water that comes up to the waist (4). By the fourth measurement, the water becomes a deep flood that Ezekiel cannot pass through (5). What is surprising is the rapid increase of the stream's depth. Normally, without additional streams that feed into the headwater, the farther a tiny stream flows, the smaller it becomes. But in this vision, what was initially a small trickle out of the sanctuary, like the water flowing out of a bottle, miraculously turns into the powerful river in the span of about 1.2 miles. This evidently shows the supernatural origin of this river.

Let us continue to observe this river. After being led back along the riverbank, Ezekiel is astonished to see so many trees growing along both sides of the river (7). The angelic guide shows Ezekiel what the river does to its surroundings (8). As it flows east, the barren desert becomes a vibrant, flourishing landscape in paradise. Eventually, it empties into the Dead Sea, turning it into the life-giving water. Where the river flows, everything comes alive. In verse 6, the angelic guide asks the Prophet, "Do you see this?" What did this mean to Ezekiel and the people living in the hopeless exile? It gave them God's wonderful promise about future restoration. What do we learn from this river? It gives us a vision about the new creation in the future. God will renew, revive, and recreate everything through his life-giving presence. This is not only a vision of the future; it is already being realized today through the gospel of the kingdom. We can learn three things about the power of this river.

### **First, the river grows unstoppably.**

Ezekiel's vision started coming to life when God came down to our world. This river started like a trickle at the cross of Jesus where he was crucified, pierced, and shed his precious blood (Jn 19:34). Soon after, with the coming of the Holy Spirit sent by the risen Christ, the blood of Jesus became a powerful river. This river flowing from Jesus is the Holy

Spirit, that is the very presence of Christ (Jn 7; 14). This river is the power of God. This river is the mercy of God. His mercy flows like a river, which is powerful enough to redeem whoever believes in Jesus. The powerful rulers of this world -- the Romans and the communists -- wanted to stop it. Still, secularists try to stop it. But this water of the Spirit is unstoppable.

Due to the pandemic, we are still in a lockdown and are confined to our homes. But the gospel of Jesus cannot be confined. The river of the Spirit moves forward no matter what. God is doing a new thing in our confined situation. Through the 24/7 prayer relay, prayer movements are being ignited all around the world. Many of us are sharing the gospel of Jesus through phone calls, social media, and online platforms. The river flowing from the Lamb is still flowing powerfully. Jesus said, "the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14). The river of the Spirit makes Christ real to us. Once you taste the Spirit of mercy, this fountain will never run dry. You may run out of your strength and power, and your zeal and passion may run dry. But the river from our Savior will never dry. It flows not by our might, nor by our power, but by the Spirit of God.

### **Second, the river transforms.**

What happens as the river flows? It transforms everything that it touches. Eventually, the river from the temple enters the Dead Sea, which is the lowest place on earth, 1292 feet below sea level. The Dead Sea is very dead as the name suggests. It contains about 25 percent of minerals compared to the normal sea water (4-6 percent). Because of this extremely high mineral content, the water is toxic, and therefore no fish or other sea life can survive in it. However, as the water from the sanctuary flows into the Dead Sea, the toxic water is transformed; it is filled with swarms of living creatures, because the water from God brings healing. Verse 9 says, "**so where the river flows everything will live.**"

This transformation vividly illustrates the power of God's life-giving presence to heal and transform. When the Spirit flows, the barren becomes fruitful, the empty becomes filled, the dry becomes watered, the wounded are healed, and the dead become alive. As this water can reach even the depth of the Dead Sea, the lowest depression on earth, it can also reach down to the deepest places of our despair and bitterness.

Amid the covid pandemic, the unrest is sweeping our nation in the wake of the tragic death of George Floyd last week. We feel hurt and upset by the racial prejudice and social injustice that is deeply imbedded in our society. Some have called racism the origin of sin in our nation. But this sin of pride, exclusivism, and human contempt starts in our hearts. When people cry out for justice, where is justice? Though we try, this world can

never be the perfect paradise we long for because of our corrupt hearts. So, where is our hope? Who can heal this land and mend our broken society? Jesus can. Where the gospel of Jesus flows, there is healing and salvation. During the protests, I was encouraged to see some hints of hope: Some police officers and protesters joined in a prayer circle. Many offered heartfelt prayers to God on behalf of those mourning and hurting. On March 30, 1863, in the face of the nation deeply divided by the civil war, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a National Day of Humiliation, Fasting and Praying to “depend upon the overruling power of God and to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon.” God heard their sincere prayers and has guided our nation thus far. Let us lift our nation up to the throne of God and the Lamb who can redeem us. The river of mercy flowing from our Savior can heal us and forgive us. The river of the gospel can take away our racial prejudice and injustice; it has the power to transform our hearts and heal our society. We can find hope in the new creation that God’s righteousness dwells in.

In our broken society, the church is the channel of the river of life. Our church is especially blessed with Bible studies and one-to-one teaching. What we offer to our society is primarily hope and life, not moral teaching. It is all about God’s life-giving presence. Based on God’s word, we can ask: Are we pursuing the presence of God in all what we do? Many of us are trained to keep ourselves busy, being driven by many activities. Sometimes, we are stretched too wide and too thin. During the pandemic, many feel uneasy and even guilty because our lives have suddenly become slow and simple. But busyness is the devil’s idea, not God’s. Eugene Peterson, the pastor-author-theologian who wrote The Message version of the Bible said, “Busyness is the enemy of spirituality.” We should stop glorifying busyness. Our identity is not defined by our work or performance, or by the size of our church. Our identity is in God our Father who loves us regardless of our performance. As we take time every day to come into God’s presence, our hearts can be transformed; we can be strengthened to be the channel of the gospel in our world; then, we can closely follow Jesus and lead more people to him.

It is also important to remember that church starts in our families -- in our own house churches. Thankfully, in this unprecedented time of lockdown, many families are experiencing a restoration through prayers, conversations, and Bible studies. However, still many families are broken, and children are suffering. But God can restore those broken relationships. He is the God of redemption. There is hope in Jesus; he is the river of mercy that heals and restores! Let the river of mercy flow in your family through Bible reading and prayer. When God’s word is received, he transforms death into life. This

blessing is made available to us all through Jesus Christ. May you invite the life-giving presence of God into your family every day.

### **Third, the river brings life and joy.**

Look at verse 12. **“Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.”** We see here a beautiful image of paradise, designed by God. This picture looks back to the Garden of Eden at the creation (Gen 2) and looks forward to the new creation in the future (Rev 21-22). The trees here are the trees of life. There will be a perfect redemption including an ecological renewal. In this world, we see so much pain and sorrow. But in the new creation, all broken relationships will be mended, and all wounds will be healed. It will be full of life and joy. What makes this possible? It is **“the water from the sanctuary that flows to them.”** It is the presence of God that brings life and joy! This is the place where we belong. Just meditating on this vision brings me joy. How much more joy will it bring when we are there in person to fully experience it!

The French mathematician and philosopher Pascal said, “Everybody seeks happiness without exception.” Where do you find happiness and satisfaction? Wealth, fame, drugs, endless entertainment, human love, and success cannot satisfy our souls. Sin makes our souls desolate, dry, shameful, and miserable. We are not made for this. God implores us, **“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters... Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?”** (Isa 55:1).

In his book *Desiring God*, John Piper beautifully interpreted the first statement of the catechism like this: “The chief end of man is to glorify God by *enjoying Him* forever.” And yes, we are made for this—to enjoy God’s presence forever. Worship or praise cannot be forced; for worship means to delight in God. As we enjoy God the most, he is most glorified. His presence is the source of our joy. The British writer/theologian C.S. Lewis said, God is truly the “all-satisfying Object.” You may have doubts about this; you may wonder if God is really enough. You may feel uncomfortable in the presence of God. If you are not comfortable with a person, you cannot enjoy their presence. On my journey of faith, I struggled with this concept of glorifying and enjoying God. When I became a spiritually dry workaholic, God brought me back to him. Whenever I came to the cross of my Savior, my heart was healed and filled with joy. God is holy and he is full of mercy and love. He is a good Father, unlike me since I make many mistakes; but He knows everything about me and still loves me. If you doubt his presence, come to the life-giving river, to the throne of the Lamb who was slain to redeem you and me. Then, we can say along with the writer of Psalm 16, **“In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your**

**right hand are pleasures forevermore”** (Ps 16:11, ESV). The most valuable human experience is to know God and to enjoy him. His presence fulfills our lifelong desire we are made for.

Are you going through a difficult stage in your life, yearning for healing and salvation? Maybe you live in dryness and bitterness. Is there no river flowing within you? God wants to give us his water, his abundant life and blessings. Jesus promised, **“Whoever believes in me, rivers of living water will flow from within them”** (Jn 7:38). Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit who is the very presence of God. Are you thirsty for the Spirit? Come to the river. The mercy of our God flows like a rushing river. His presence is healing, sanctifying, and fulfilling. Wherever the gospel of Jesus is accepted, everything will live. While living on earth, we struggle with our brokenness. But we have hope in the new creation, our eternal home. May the Spirit flow over and flood our lives, our families, our church communities, campuses, and our cities! May God bless our nation with the river from the temple! Amen.