

Ezekiel 47:1-12; John 7:37-39 – Streams of living water

I want us to capture a fresh vision of God's purpose in the Lord Jesus Christ; his purpose to flood this dry and dying world with streams of living water.

Ezekiel the Prophet – Some Background

First some background about the prophet Ezekiel.

Ezekiel was a prophet of the Exile. God had warned his people that if they continued to turn away from him and worship idols, he would banish them from the Promised Land, the land God had promised to Abraham and that was to be a sign of God's presence and favour, a sign of the covenant. Judah had watched as the Northern kingdom of Israel was swept away by the Assyrians some 150 years earlier because of their idolatry, but Judah had failed to learn the lesson. So, in 597 BC Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, came and captured Jerusalem and took the Jewish leaders off into exile. Among them was a priest called Ezekiel.

In Babylon, Ezekiel received a prophetic call from God. He was given a remarkable vision of the glory of God, but he was also enabled to see the sinfulness and idolatry of Judah. This sinfulness not only brought about the exile and the current captivity of the Jewish leaders in Babylon, it was also continuing amongst those left behind in Jerusalem. Ezekiel was given a vision of the glory of God leaving the temple in Jerusalem and was told that Jerusalem will again be besieged by the Babylonians and its temple will be destroyed.

But the prophecy of Ezekiel is not merely about judgment. Ezekiel speaks of a time when God will restore his people. God's people are pictured in terms of a valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37). These lifeless bones are brought back to life by the word of God and by the breath of God. God who in the beginning created all things from nothing simply by the power of his word, can revive his people by the same power; it is new creation; it is resurrection – life from the dead by the power of God.

Restoration is pictured also in terms of a new Temple and a renewed land. Nor will this be simply for the tribe of Judah; God's purpose of restoration will encompass all the tribes of Israel, all the people of God. Beyond the present judgment and exile, Ezekiel prophesies that God will forgive, restore and bless his people.

These visions of a renewed city of Jerusalem and its Temple take the form of a man appearing to Ezekiel and showing him what God has done. Ezekiel 40:1-4 tells us:

In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning of the year, on the tenth of the month, in the fourteenth year after the fall of the city – on that very day the hand of the LORD was on me and he took me there. In visions of God he took me to the land of Israel and set me on a very high mountain, on whose south side were some buildings that looked like a city. He took me there, and I saw a man whose appearance was like bronze; he was standing in the gateway with a linen cord and a measuring rod in his hand. The man said to me, 'Son of man, look carefully and listen closely and pay attention to everything I am going to show you, for that is why you have been brought here. Tell the people of Israel everything you see.'

Ezekiel's vision of the Temple

It is Ezekiel's vision of the Temple that I wish to focus on this morning. The restored temple in Ezekiel's vision is once again filled with the glory of God (43:1-5); God has returned to dwell with his people.

And in Ezekiel 47:1-12, we read:

The man brought me back to the entrance to the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple towards the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. He then brought

me out through the north gate and led me round the outside to the outer gate facing east, and the water was trickling from the south side.

As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist. He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in – a river that no one could cross. He asked me, ‘Son of man, do you see this?’

Then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. He said to me, ‘This water flows towards the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live. Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds – like the fish of the Mediterranean Sea. But the swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they will be left for salt. 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.’

Ezekiel sees a stream of water flowing from the temple. It is a stream that appears to have its origin at the altar. But it's a stream like none you have seen before. It is a supernatural stream that, without any other source, gets deeper as it flows on further and spreads out wider. It's a stream of life-giving water, bringing life where previously there was death. The waters flow into the Arabah, i.e. the Jordan valley and then flow down into the Dead Sea. It's streams will be teeming with life and the banks of the rivers will be populated by trees that bear fruit that is good to eat and leaves that promote healing. The once dead sea is now full of fish and fishermen ply their trade upon it as they did in Lake Galilee.

This is Paradise restored with its streams of living water flowing out into the surrounding regions; with its swarms of living creatures; with its trees laden with fruit and all hurts healed. It is Paradise restored and the earth renewed.

And it is a picture picked up at the end of the book of Revelation where John writes:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. [Revelation 22:1-5]

In John's vision the picture of blessing brought by this river has expanded beyond the confines of Israel; "the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." Here is the fulfilment of the promise made long ago to Abraham that "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Jumping to John's Gospel

And it is this picture which seems to be picked up in such a remarkable way by Jesus as he addresses the crowds gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles in John 7.

Tabernacles recalled and celebrated God's provision for his people during the 40 years when they wandered in the wilderness, travelling from Captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land. Though they

were a rebellious people God had provided them with shelter and clothes, food and water. He had provided water for them miraculously when they were in the desert – water from the rock; water of his creating.

The festival of Tabernacles included the drawing of water from the pool of Siloam followed by pouring it out in the Temple. By this act they not only remembered God's provision in the past but also anticipated the abundant gift of living water that would flow from the Temple and from Jerusalem when the kingdom of God would come – in fulfilment of Ezekiel 47:1-12 and also of Zechariah who says:

On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half of it east to the Dead Sea and half of it west to the Mediterranean Sea, in summer and in winter. The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name.
[Zechariah 14:8-9]

John records that it is against this background that Jesus addressed the crowd. Here's how John records it in John 7:37-39:

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.' By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

Jesus is declaring himself to be the source of living water. He is the reality to which this ceremony points. He is the one who fulfils the Old Testament prophetic scriptures. He is the one who satisfies the thirsty with a never-failing stream of life more wonderful than the water that was miraculously provided for Israel in the desert. In him the kingdom of God has arrived.

In this sense, then, *Jesus* is the new temple that Ezekiel spoke of. He is the one who said, "Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19). He is the one in whom God now dwells among humankind. He is Immanuel, God with us. He is the one in whom God's glory has at last returned – the one in whom that glory appears in all its fulness. For John, Jesus' glorification is tied up with the cross. In his death the age of death, of lifelessness, is brought to judgment – the wilderness is at an end. In his resurrection a new age has dawned, a new creation has sprung into life.

And with Jesus' ascension the Spirit is poured out bringing life to all who believe in him – the cross becomes the Tree of Life from which we may now take and eat and live for ever. He is the one who was given for the healing of the nations. It is *in him* that all nations on earth shall be blessed for it is from him that streams of grace flow out to bring life to the world.

Shine, Jesus, shine,
fill this land with the Father's glory;
blaze Spirit, blaze,
set our hearts on fire.
Flow, river, flow,
flood the nations with grace and mercy;
send forth your word, Lord,
and let there be light.

But there is more

But wait, that's not quite what John says. Look again at John 7:38 where Jesus says, "Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow *from within them*." The life-giving streams flow not only *to* those who believe in him; Jesus' mission to bring life to a dying world is accomplished *through them*.

This is the picture echoed in John 14:12 where Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." This is the life of heaven flooding the earth bringing

transformation and new life – through the lives of those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is how the kingdom of God grows, as depicted in the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast in the dough. This is the history of the church with its numerical and geographical expansion from a small group of disciples meeting in secret in an upper room to the billions from every nation on earth who now gladly confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

And this also is our calling. We are not to hold the fort until Jesus returns – to cling onto and conserve what we have got. We are to flood the world with the transforming life and power of Jesus. We are to capture the vision!

How are we going to do that?

Let me take you back to John chapter 7. Did you notice how John himself adds words of explanation to those spoken by Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles? "Whoever believes in me" says Jesus, "as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." And then John adds, "By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified."

The outpoured Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, is that stream that flows from the risen Christ into the lives of those who believe in him. And that Spirit flows through them and from them to bring life to others also.

Jesus is the new temple: the place where God and humankind meet; the one in whom the final, perfect and unique sacrifice is made for sin and we are reconciled to God. The risen Christ is the source of the outpoured Spirit. But we too have become temples of the living God. We too are a people in whom God dwells by his Spirit and through whom he is at work to reconcile the world to himself.

It was the Holy Spirit poured out on those disciples in the upper room that transformed them from those hiding away for fear of persecution into those who spilled out on the streets and could not be stopped from speaking of what they had seen and heard in the Lord Jesus Christ. It was the Spirit who worked through them to add to the church daily those who were being saved. It was that Spirit of the risen Christ who appeared to Saul and transformed him from a persecutor into a preacher. It was that Spirit who worked through him to turn many others from the worship of idols to worship and serve the living God and wait for his Son from heaven. It is that same Spirit who works in us and through us today.

This is the vision I want you to capture this morning. From Ezekiel we need to capture the vision of God's purpose to transform the world through the outpouring of his grace. God is at work to renew his world and put things to rights. And from Jesus we see that this outpouring of God's grace flows from Christ and his sacrifice of himself, and is poured into us that it might flow out into the world.

John Ortburg, in his book, *God is Closer than You Think* expresses it like this:

God does not reveal himself to us just to make us happy or deliver us from loneliness. He also comes to us that we may be conduits of his presence to other people. He invites us to join him in making things down here the way they are up there.

Conduits may not be a happy term for a conduit is not affected by what flows through it. A better word might be transmitters: we are ourselves to be transformed by the work of the Spirit within us and then to become those from whom that transforming power flows out to others. As a people who have come to know the love of God in Christ, we are to love others in similar extravagant ways. As a people who have known the forgiveness of God, we are to forgive others who have hurt us. We are to pray "May your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as in heaven" and we are to work for its coming.

Capture the vision. Hear the call of Christ upon our lives. Be the people into whom, through whom and from whom the blessing of God pours into a needy world. Capture the vision for what God can and will do through you.