

Ezekiel 46:19-47:12
Psalm 46
Revelation 22

“The River of Life”

April 17, 2011

We don't usually think very much about where we are going to get water.

I became aware of this when I was in Eritrea.

In Ghinda, I had to go to the cistern every day to get water.

(I had it easy, because I just walked across the courtyard to get water.

Many had to walk miles and fill their large water skins,

which they would then bring home on the back of their donkeys!)

So I would go over to the cistern and pull up several large buckets of water –

doing my best to avoid the dead frogs which were floating on the surface!

Every now and then a live one would jump into the bucket...

I must say, though, that I really appreciated the frogs – especially the dead ones!

They reminded me, every day, to boil the water!

(One day I used “fresh” water to rinse my salad –

and a few days later I was in the hospital with giardia)

Where does your water come from?

Psalm 46 says,

“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.”

This is a curious thing to say –

because there *is* no river in Jerusalem!

Indeed, the main problem with Jerusalem in times of siege

was that there was no water supply that could “gladden” the city of God.

A city without water cannot survive,

and so King Hezekiah went to great lengths to dig a 1600 foot tunnel through solid rock

in order to connect the Gihon Spring with the Pool of Siloam.

But the Gihon Spring is hardly a river!

Nonetheless, the Gihon Spring points us in the direction of the answer.

The Gihon Spring seems to have been named after the river Gihon from Genesis 2 –

the river that flowed around the whole land of Cush.

In Genesis 2 there is a river that flows out of the Garden –

out of the sanctuary in Eden –

and waters the whole earth.

Psalm 46 (like Ezekiel 47) looks forward to the eschatological city –
the heavenly temple –
and the river of living water that will make glad the city of God.

Let's sing Psalm 46
Read Revelation 22

Revelation 22 speaks of the river of the water of life.
Plainly this is a future river – right?

And yet!
Verse 17 says “let the one who is thirsty come;
let the one who desires take the water of life without price.”
This is a future river with a present reality!

The heavenly river is already flowing –
the water of life already streams forth from Jesus Christ –
in the middle of the heavenly temple!

It is a present reality because Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of the Father.
And so therefore we partake of this living water by faith –
though not yet by sight!

But how?
How can we partake of this living water?

The last part of Ezekiel 46 sets us up –
just as Revelation moves from the sacrifice in the temple
to the water flowing from the temple;
so also Ezekiel.

1. Holiness and the People (46:19-24)

The end of Ezekiel 46 returns us to our temple tour –
but the emphasis on the kitchens and the preparation of the sacrifices
definitely connects with what we have just been talking about.
Two weeks ago we talked about the peril of the “contagion” of holiness –
the danger that the holiness of the temple would be transmitted to the people
and therefore destroy them!
Last week we talked about the prince and his role in the feasts and offerings of Israel.

Now we look at how the structure of the temple was designed to maintain holiness,
while still properly including the people in worship.

In order to understand verses 19-24, you need to understand the different offerings.

There are five basic offerings:
the burnt offering, the grain offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering,

and the peace offering.
What do you do with the burnt offering?
The priest cuts it up and burns the whole animal
(therefore there is no reference to how to cook the burnt offering!)
What do you do with the grain offering?
The priest offers a handful in the fire,
and the rest is baked for the priest to eat.
The sin offering and guilt offering have some variation depending on the occasion,
but a portion would be burned in the fire, and the rest would go to the priest.

The peace offering is unique.
After the priest offers the fat, the liver, and the kidneys in the fire,
a portion is then given to the priest (the breast and the right thigh),
and the rest is given to the worshipers to eat.

We often use the word “sacrifice” interchangeably with the word “offering,”
but in Hebrew, the word sacrifice is almost always used to refer to the peace offerings.

When the scriptures talk about a “sacrifice”
they are not talking about burnt offerings, sin offerings, or guilt offerings.
The sacrifice is invariably a peace offering –
the one offering where the people would partake as well as the priest.

And that is why there are two different places in verses 19-20 and 21-24
for the offerings to be prepared.

a. Protecting the People from Holiness: Boiling the Sin & Guilt Offerings and Baking the Grain Offering away from the People (v19-20)

¹⁹Then he brought me through the entrance, which was at the side of the gate, to the north row of the holy chambers for the priests, and behold, a place was there at the extreme western end of them. ²⁰And he said to me, "This is the place where the priests shall boil the guilt offering and the sin offering, and where they shall bake the grain offering, in order not to bring them out into the outer court and so transmit holiness to the people."

The first place is inside the inner court –
on the far western end of the northern chambers for the priests.

So now we have a clear picture of how the grain offering
and the sin and guilt offerings would be handled.

The offerings would be brought to the gate of the inner court,
where the Levites would take charge of them and bring them to the priests.
The offerings would be slaughtered at the tables in the inner court,
and then the priest would take the portions to be burned
and offer them on the altar. (chapters 42-43)

Now we know what would happen next:
the priests would take the rest of the meat and boil it,
and the rest of the grain offering and bake it,
at the extreme western end of the inner court.

Why?

So that they would not transmit holiness to the people.
Again we see the radioactive character of holiness.
Holiness is perilous.
The holiness of God is deadly to sinners.

I've always loved R. C. Sproul's retelling of the story of Uzzah
in his video series on the Holiness of God.

He talks about the time when Israel brought the ark of God to Jerusalem,
only they disobeyed God in *how* they brought the ark back.

Rather than having the priests carry the ark with poles,
they put the ark on an oxcart.
And when the oxen stumbled, and the ark nearly fell off the cart,
Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark,
but when he touched the ark, God struck him dead on the spot.

Sproul rightly points out that Uzzah's mistake was in thinking that his hand was cleaner than dirt
Yes, Adam was formed from the dust of the ground – and so in a sense, we *are* dirt!
But we have sinned against God,
and so if God's holiness comes in contact with our sinfulness,
the only result can be our utter destruction.

That is what Ezekiel's temple is designed to prevent.
Because it is not as though our sinfulness – our uncleanness – can defile God's holiness.
God's holiness cannot be defiled!

And so God's holiness will incinerate anything unclean that comes in contact with it.

You see this in Revelation 22 as well,
as John says in verse 15 that “outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral
and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.”

I've had to chuckle at the recent rumblings over Rob Bell's rejection of hell.
Every century or so, there is another wave of this.
RJ Breckinridge had to deal with the Universalists in the 1830s –
who used *exactly* the same arguments!
And before them it was the Free Thinkers and the Socinians.

All these movements tend to put *our* standards of what is just and fair

above God's standards.
We don't want to admit that sin is really that bad!

But one central reason for the existence of the temple
was because sin really *is* that bad.

Sin *must be* dealt with before man can have fellowship with God.

And that fellowship is the point of verses 21-24:
Because while the people may not partake of the "holy things" –
the sin offering and the guilt offering –
they do partake of the sacrifices – the peace offerings –
which express the fellowship that we have through the blood of the covenant.

b. Making the People Holy: Kitchens for Boiling the Sacrifices (v21-24)

²¹Then he brought me out to the outer court and led me around to the four corners of the court. And behold, in each corner of the court there was another court—²²in the four corners of the court were small courts, forty cubits long and thirty broad; the four were of the same size.²³On the inside, around each of the four courts was a row of masonry, with hearths made at the bottom of the rows all around.²⁴Then he said to me, "These are the kitchens where those who minister at the temple shall boil the sacrifices of the people."

Verses 21-24 take us back to the outer court –
the courtyard where the people could gather for worship.

As we have already seen,
there are chambers encircling the outer court where the people could gather
to partake of the covenant meal together.

Now we discover that in the four corners of the outer court there were four kitchens –
four places where the Levites could boil the sacrifices of the people.

Once the priests had finished offering the fat, the liver and the kidneys,
and had taken their portion of the meat,
they would give the rest of the meat to the Levites,
and they would bring it out to the kitchens in the outer court,
where they would boil the meat and give it to the worshipers.

Notice how the whole process is entirely in the hands of the priests and Levites.
Through the work of the Levitical priests
the people are enabled to partake in the sacrifice.

When you consider how Hebrews talks about Jesus as the great high priest,
you can see that Jesus is the priest who has offered himself once for all
as the sin offering – the guilt offering – before God.
And Jesus is the priest who has offered himself as the peace offering – the sacrifice.

And now, week by week, we partake of that sacrifice (of that peace offering)
as we come to him in faith.
If you think about the Lord's Supper as a peace offering,
then you can see that my role here is not so much a priestly role
(I have nothing to do with the offering of Christ as the atoning sacrifice)
but more as a Levitical role,
administering to you the sacrificial meal.

The difference is that we do not have to go to the outer court to do this!
We can gather in the holy of holies –
and the high priest himself, the Lord Jesus –
is the one who feeds us and nourishes us with his own body and blood.

We have seen clearly how the holiness of the altar must be protected.
But Ezekiel 47:1-12 shows how the holiness of the temple cannot be contained in the temple!

2. The Healing of the Land (47:1-12)

a. The River Flowing from the Temple (v1-7)

¹Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. ²Then he brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and behold, the water was trickling out on the south side.

³Going on eastward with a measuring line in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits, and then led me through the water, and it was ankle-deep. ⁴Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was knee-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was waist-deep. ⁵Again he measured a thousand, and it was a river that I could not pass through, for the water had risen. It was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through. ⁶And he said to me, "Son of man, have you seen this?" Then he led me back to the bank of the river. ⁷As I went back, I saw on the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other.

As we have gone through Ezekiel 40-48 we have seen a number of clues
that this is not to be taken as a literal earthly temple.

The river of chapter 47 is yet another example.
Verses 1-7 describe a river that flows from the temple.

This river starts as a trickle from the threshold of the temple,
which flows south of the altar,
out through the east gate –

but of course Ezekiel isn't allowed to go through the east gate,
so his guide takes him out through the north gate and around to the outer gate,

and there he sees the water “trickling out on the south side” of the east gate.

But this trickle begins to get deeper.

After a thousand cubits (about a quarter mile),
the water is ankle deep.

After another thousand cubits (another quarter mile),
the water is knee deep.

After another thousand cubits (another quarter mile),
the water is waist deep.

After another thousand cubits – now we are a mile from the temple –
the water has become a river that could not be forded.

And along this river are trees on both sides of the river.

What should we make of this?

There are a few things we should say even before we look at the explanation.

First, we should not be surprised to find water in the temple!

Solomon’s temple had a large sea in it – a huge basin of water.

And not only that, but Solomon’s temple had “water chariots”

smaller basins with carved wheels that pointed in an easterly direction.

In light of Ezekiel 47, we can begin to see what that was about.

Second, the connection between a flowing stream and trees
should be firmly planted in our minds!

Psalm 1 speaks of the blessed man

as one who is like a tree planted by streams of water,

who bears fruit in season, and whose leaf does not wither.

These images are coming alive in Ezekiel’s vision!

In verses 8-12 we then here the guide’s explanation of this:

b. The Life-Giving River and the Tree of Healing (v8-12)

⁸And he said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, and enters the sea; when the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh. ⁹And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes. ¹⁰Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From Engedi to Eneglaim it will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. ¹¹But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. ¹²And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing."

There is a minor geographical problem with this account.

All water from Jerusalem flows *west* toward the Mediterranean!
But Ezekiel's vision does not conform to geographical realities!

When the water reaches the sea – the Dead Sea –
this water will make the Dead Sea alive!

The Dead Sea is 10 times saltier than the ocean –
so salty that no fish could possibly survive there today –
but Ezekiel says that the water that flows from this temple could make the Dead Sea live.

(Note the importance of salt, however!
Ezekiel insists that the swamps and marshes will be left for salt!)

And the trees that grow on the banks of this river of life
will also be life-giving –
there will be all kinds of trees for food –
“Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail,
but they will bear fresh fruit every month,
because the water for them flows from the sanctuary.
Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.”

Water that flows from the temple is life-giving water.

Moses had cleansed the water of Marah.
Elisha had made the waters of Jericho sweet.

Now Ezekiel sees the waters of the Dead Sea transformed.

In other words, the most God-forsaken place on earth –
the Dead Sea –
will become fruitful!
God will restore his creation by water from the temple.

Notice that it starts as a trickle but becomes a torrent (God often starts small!)
Zechariah 4:10 will warn us “do not despise the day of small things”!
Small beginnings are often precisely how God accomplishes his purposes.

After all, think about how this river is fulfilled in the Gospel of John.
It starts with Jesus asking the Samaritan woman for a drink –
and telling her that the water he gives will become a spring of water
welling up to eternal life (John 4:14)
But then at the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus says to the Jews in Jerusalem,
that if they are thirsty they should come and drink from him,
promising that streams of living water will flow from within him –
by which, John says, “he meant the Spirit” (7:38-39)
Perhaps not accidentally, it is in John's Gospel that Jesus spits on a man's eyes –

the living water that flows through Jesus gives sight to the blind.
And in John's Gospel Jesus says, "I thirst" –
the living water dries up!

And most powerfully, in John's Gospel, when they pierce his side,
blood and water flow.

Jesus had said, from his heart will flow streams of living water!
And indeed, that is what happens!

From the heart of Jesus a river of living water flows.