

Ezekiel's Vision

Devotional Reading: Revelation 7:9–17

Background Scripture: Ezekiel 47:1–12

Today's Scripture: Ezekiel 47:1–9, 12

I. Guiding Ezekiel 47:1–2

¹ 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.

1. The *man* in view (perhaps an angel) is the one who has been guiding Ezekiel's visionary temple-tour from the beginning. Previously, the man had taken Ezekiel to the temple's "portico" and "entrance." Now they are back again at *the entrance to the temple*. Like Solomon's temple before it, Ezekiel envisions this temple facing *east*, the direction from which the sun rises.

On arrival, Ezekiel witnesses a bizarre sight: *water flowing down from under the south side of the temple*. We think of a *threshold* as the small gap between the bottom of a closed door and the floor. That flow of water is to *the south side* of the altar.

2. The guide now leads the prophet outside the envisioned Jerusalem. To get

to the *outside of the outer gate facing east*, they first head *north* to exit the city by the *gate* there. They then move clockwise until they reach their destination. We may wonder why they don't just go out the east gate rather than take a long way around.

II. Wading Ezekiel 47:3–5

³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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.

3. The man leads Ezekiel *eastward*, the direction toward which the waters flow. The man has *a measuring line in his hand*. This may be the same "measuring rod" mentioned at the beginning of the vision. Walking a distance of *a thousand cubits*, the two find themselves in *ankle-deep* water.

4a. The computation of possible distances is the same as in the previous verse. Wading through the water at a rate of one mile per hour means it takes 17 to 20 minutes, depending on the cubit-length used, to reach this segment of the visionary tour.

4b. By this point, it is surely apparent that the source of the water cannot be Jerusalem's Gihon Spring or any other naturally occurring flow! And this contributes to an issue of what to expect. Some commentators believe that the imagery of Ezekiel 40–48 depicts a literal, physical temple that is yet to be rebuilt. In that case, Ezekiel is foreseeing God's plans to alter the topography (landscape) and hydrology of Jerusalem miraculously.

5. With walking and wading a total distance of 4,000 cubits now, the prophet and his guide have covered a distance of between 1.14 and 1.33 miles in the vision, depending on cubit length. But now the two must turn back because of the river's increasing depth as the flow of *water* continues unchecked.

III. Leaning

Ezekiel 47:6–9, 12

6 He asked me, “Son of man, do you see this?” Then he led me back to the bank of the river. ⁷ When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. ⁸ He said to me, “This water flows toward 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. ⁹ 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.”

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.”

6. On the address *Son of man*, see commentary on Ezekiel 3:10 in lesson 11. The guide's question may be posed as an exclamation of wonder: “Son of man, look at this! Isn't all this something?”

After an unspecified time of experiencing their amazement, Ezekiel and his guide seemingly head back to the point where they had begun wading into *the river*. They are back on dry land.

7. The book of Ezekiel speaks of trees in about 30 verses—more than any other Bible book; about half of those 30 verses are in the prophet's vision of Ezekiel 40–48. The imagery of *trees* in this verse finds a parallel in the vision of Revelation 22:2, given more than 600 years later. The author of Revelation envisions the trees of Ezekiel's vision as trees of life (Genesis 2:9). Verse 12 will provide the reason for this connection.

Taking the book of Ezekiel as a whole, the prophet's reference is usually to ordinary trees. But the prophet also refers to the trees of Eden. Tree imagery occurs extensively in Jesus' teachings centuries after Ezekiel.

The Babylonians' devastation of the land during the siege of Jerusalem included the cutting of trees for the building of siege ramps. The Israelites were constrained in the use of trees for such purposes, but the Babylonians knew no such constraint. Since Ezekiel's vision speaks to renewal of the land, that includes renewal of trees, both those that produce fruit and those that don't, as signs of recovery.

8. The two-word phrase *eastern region* is unique in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word translated *region* is quite rare. In two of its four occurrences elsewhere, it designates general areas of non-Israelite habitation. In Ezekiel's vision, however, the territory must be Israelite. This is because *the sea*, which is *the Dead Sea*, is receiving water flowing from Jerusalem. The *Arabah* region that intervenes is Israelite territory.

The city of Jerusalem lies at almost exactly the same latitude as the northernmost tip of the Dead Sea. Therefore, the waters flowing from Jerusalem's temple toward this sea have to flow a bit to the south as well as east in order to go into the sea rather than end up connecting with the Jordan River.

The Dead Sea is several times saltier than the oceans. The vast majority of aquatic creatures cannot survive in an environment such as that of the Dead Sea. In Ezekiel's vision, however, the waters become *fresh*, allowing life to flourish not only in the water but all around its banks. The sea that symbolizes sterility and death comes to symbolize vibrant life.

9. A consequence of the healing that occurs *wherever the river flows* is that marine life is able to exist and flourish where it previously could not, especially in the once "dead" sea. We could say that the "River of Life" has created the "Sea of Life." *Fish*, which could not have survived in the overly salty waters of the old Dead Sea, are now described as being *large numbers*. *Fresh* water will yield abundant life in the formerly brackish water and on the land that is near the water.

12. Ezekiel's "tour guide" now returns to describing the trees seen earlier in the vision. That their produce *will not wither* speaks to the fact that the fruit will not be susceptible to disease or anything else

that would make it inedible. The prediction that *every month* each tree *will bear fruit* means that these trees will bear fruit every month—quite unlike ordinary trees, with their dormant cycles—because of the effect of the *waters* flowing from *the sanctuary*. The leaves of the trees have life-giving properties, just as the waters do. All this reminds us of the presence of "the tree of life" in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:9), only here there are numerous trees of life!

There is much here that is also reflected in Revelation 22:1–2, 14, 19. Like Ezekiel, John points toward a world made Eden-like, fit for the redeemed as their new home. Both use the imagery of a perfect place that is connected with a restored and perfected relationship between God and his faithful people. Revelation 22:1–2 also says that the tree of life will provide fruit for God's people, and its leaves will bring healing.

In a figurative sense, the prophet Ezekiel sometimes sees trees as valuable symbols of the return to wholeness that awaits God's people. An example is the extended vision of renewal in Ezekiel 34:11–31. There, the revival of forests, fields, and pastures accompanies the end of the Babylonian domination of the land of Israel and the return of the people to their homeland. In part, this was because invading Assyrian and Babylonian armies systematically and deliberately felled trees in order to oppress the local populations they attacked (see comments to Ezekiel 47:7, above). The fruitful nature of the trees reflects God's pleasure to provide for the repentant and faithful. The fruit does not run out before the next crop comes along, so abundant is it. Ezekiel attributes this great abundance of the stream flowing *from the sanctuary*. The temple becomes the symbol of God's great generosity.

Involvement Learning

Ezekiel's Vision

Into the Lesson

Identify benefits and problems related to the use of water in its liquid and solid (ice) forms.

liquid benefit _____

liquid problem _____

solid benefit _____

solid problem _____

Although water isn't always beneficial in either form, today's lesson uses an image of water that is of great benefit.

Into the Word

Read Ezekiel 47:1–9, 12. Identify the source of the water and to which direction it flows.

Explain what is happening in the progression of verses 3–5.

Identify a result of the river flowing.

Explain the effect the flowing river has on things in its path.

Explain the relationship between the river and the trees.

Key Verse

"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 47:12

Into Life

Identify at least one item from the Into the Word list that encourages you about your future. Write down how this encourages you and gives you hope.

Thought to Remember

Our current situation isn't permanent.