

The River of Life

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning comes from the book of Ezekiel, chapter 47, verses 1 to 12, and then we'll skip over to the last verse of chapter 48, that's on page 881 of the Church Bibles.

The river from the temple. 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.

[1 : 30] 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 arbor where it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into the Dead 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 Eglone. 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.

[2 : 32] 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. And the name of the city from that time on will be, The Lord is There.

This is the word of the Lord. Thank you, Alan, for reading. And let me add my welcome to Jamie's. It's good to see you.

I was saying earlier on that it's a dangerous day when Adam and ten of those books arrive in town. There's so many good deals on books. And it takes a heroic restraint to avoid coming out of here with a wheelbarrow full of books.

But I'll get in trouble, so if I do. So let's turn to prayer now as we ask for God's help as we come to the book, the word of God.

[3 : 34] Let's ask for God's help. Father in heaven, we pray that you would refresh us this morning. Give us ears to hear that we may draw deeply from the font of your precious word.

And as we drink in these words of truth and meditate on all that you reveal to us this morning by the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, would your words percolate deep within our souls and transform us from within.

Would you satisfy our deepest thirst? For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. We live in a city called Glasgow.

Glasgow means Green Hollow, a green glen in Gaelic, Green Valley. And it's thought that that's where Glasgow gets its nickname, Dear Green Place.

The ample amount of rainwater that we're blessed with in this part of the country means that Glasgow lives up to its reputation as a dear green place with lush trees and greenery throughout its Victorian parks and streets.

[4 : 58] But spiritually speaking, it's another matter. Our city and nation is fast becoming a spiritual desert as people turn away from God, rejecting the Christian faith and dismissing the rich Christian heritage of a country once renowned throughout the world as the land of the book.

It's a barren wilderness, spiritually speaking then, a parched desert landscape in which we live. And the winds of change, the sandstorm of secularism has blown in faster than many of us could have expected or anticipated.

It's not just secular atheism. Only this week, an historic day was hailed in the Scottish Parliament on Tuesday as a pagan druid addressed MSPs during time for reflection in Hollywood on Tuesday.

The first pagan address in Scottish Parliament history. Time for reflection indeed. People around us are thirsty, spiritually dehydrated, looking for something, anything to quench their thirst.

Maybe that's you this morning. Maybe that's why you're here, looking in on the Christian faith to see if it can offer something to satisfy your spiritual longings.

[6 : 28] Many of us here, of course, are trusting in Jesus, but for some of you, that might be your experience too, going through a dry season, spiritually speaking, and in need of spiritual refreshment for your soul.

In all of us, I hope, a desire to see our city revived and spiritually flourishing again. Let Glasgow flourish.

In Ezekiel chapter 47, verses 1 to 12, we have this amazing picture, don't we? A spectacular description of a river flowing from the temple, bringing life and fruitfulness and productivity and flourishing wherever it goes.

It's an incredible picture of flourishing and renewal and restoration. If we were to ask ourselves, how do we apply these verses, this picture, to ourselves, to the Christian church today, we'd be asking an important question, and we'll come on to that.

But it's not the most important question. Better, how can we read these verses, this description of the life-giving river, in such a way that we absorb it, that we drink it and internalize it, and are moved by it, such that it captures our imagination and calls up into our imagination the vision which Ezekiel passes on, and respond ourselves in the way that Ezekiel wanted his first hearers to respond.

[8 : 01] So we want to be immersed in this picture that Ezekiel's painting, and thinking first what it meant for God's people in exile before coming on to think what it means for us today.

So we've got two headings this morning. They're in the notices, if you find that helpful. First heading, From a Trickle to a Torrent. That's the first six verses.

From a Trickle to a Torrent. And then, secondly, From Death to Life. So firstly then, From a Trickle to a Torrent.

The first thing we're told, the first thing that we find out about this water of life is we're told where it's coming from. In Ezekiel's vision, we're told where the source of the river comes from, but it issues from a strange place.

So verse one, the man, that is the angelic guide in Ezekiel's vision, the man brought me back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple.

[9 : 15] The river originates right here in God's own house, the temple building, and flows out from there. Now it's important for us to realize that these 12 verses we just read in chapter 47 are part of a much larger vision that spans chapters 40 to 48.

And we don't have time to go into that in detail. It might be worth your while reading that at home. But keep a finger in chapter 47 and just flick back to chapter 43 in page 876.

chapter 43. So Ezekiel's been transported in a vision back in the beginning of chapter 40 and carried to a high mountain overlooking the new Jerusalem, 14 years after Ezekiel received the terrible news of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple.

And in this final vision in chapters 40 to 48, he's given a guided tour of this new city. And it's doors open day because he gets to see inside the restored temple.

By the way, we know it's not a literal description. The dimensions of it don't fit with anything. We know about Solomon's temple and later temples that were built by Herod and then Ezra and Nehemiah's day.

[10:39] The scales off the charts. So it's not a literal description. It's a symbolic description. And then amazingly, in chapter 43, Ezekiel sees the return of God to dwell in the temple.

So in verses 4 to 5 of chapter 43, the glory of the Lord entered the temple through the gate facing east. Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court and the glory of the Lord filled the temple.

So the glory of the Lord comes back into the temple exactly the same way that the glory of the Lord had earlier abandoned the temple in chapters 10 and 11. And the vision ends in verse 35b of 48, which we read already.

Jerusalem gets a new name, Yahweh Shammah. The Lord is there. So imagine that you're there in Babylon in exile.

You've been dragged out of your home into exile, far from the home you've always known into a culture that's not interested in you or your faith. You receive the awful news, the unthinkable happened, the temples in ruin, Jerusalem's been flattened, and your hopes of returning home are in ruin too.

[11:59] It's been a rollercoaster of emotions, but imagine how you've been feeling now when you hear this new vision about God returning to the temple and the source of the river from beneath the threshold of the temple coming right from where the glory of the Lord has just entered the temple.

The river flowing from Ezekiel's temple follows exactly the same route eastwards from the inner court as the glory of the Lord went into the temple.

You put two and three together, you realize the source of the river of life must be the Lord God himself. So that's the first thing.

The source of the river of life is God, the source of life itself. The water issues from a divine fountainhead. The second thing to note in this first main section is that it starts off and it's pretty unimpressive, isn't it?

So in verse 2, we're told Ezekiel was led round to outside the temple court and the water was trickling from the south side. It's barely just a minimal flow.

[13:14] And what you'd expect in a hot, arid climate like that is for this minimal flow just to gradually peter out and disappear to nothing. But instead, something remarkable happens.

So in verse 3, the angelic guide gets out his trundle wheel and takes Ezekiel on a gorge rock measuring off distances a thousand cubits a time. I think that's about half a kilometer, a thousand cubits.

A third of a mile, something like that. So after a thousand cubits, verse 3, Ezekiel's led through water that was ankle deep. Verse 4, he measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee deep.

Another thousand led me through water that was up to the waist. Another, but now it was a river I couldn't even cross because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in. A river that no one could cross.

And it's this that the guiding angel gets most excited about in verse 6. Son of man, do you see this? And so Ezekiel's to pause here and to ponder its significance.

[14:24] Now with no mention of tributaries, the stream that starts off so unimpressively small miraculously becomes progressively larger and deeper and more powerful and awesome.

The trickle becomes a torrent. Now what are we to make of this? What are we to do with this? What has this got to do with us?

The key to understanding this river is found in John chapter 7. So why don't we turn there now, John chapter 7, page 1072.

John 7, verses 37 to 39. Page 1072. Jesus, on the final day of the feast, gets up and says, in effect, I am the fulfillment of Ezekiel chapter 47.

So in verse 37, Jesus says, let anyone who is thirsty come to me. Whoever believes in me, rivers of living water will flow from within them.

[15:41] And then John helpfully interprets this for us. By this, he meant the Holy Spirit, whom those who believed in Jesus were later to receive.

So Ezekiel's vision points to Christ as the true temple of God, who after his death, resurrection, and ascension, sends out the Holy Spirit.

And so Ezekiel's river of life anticipates the Holy Spirit dwelling in the hearts of God's people and in the life of the church.

We'll see when we come to the next section that this is only a partial fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy. But Ezekiel 47 is in part a picture of Pentecost and the subsequent outpouring of the Spirit down through the centuries, down through the ages.

So that's pretty amazing, isn't it? The indwelling Holy Spirit turns you, individual believers, and collectively as the church, into a temple of the Holy Spirit.

[16:50] So if that's you, if you're a believer, that's you. You're to be a source of blessing to all those around you by bringing them the life-giving message of the gospel.

It starts with a trickle. At St. Silas, it's easy for us to get used to a busy, thriving, growing church, streams of people coming through the doors each and every week.

That's not the norm. If we're thinking as a church about planting in the east end of Glasgow, then we need to get used to the idea that it's often weak-looking and it's often unimpressive.

What does it look like? It's you inviting your friends and colleagues to the life course. It's you persevering in prayer for your family members and your friends.

It's taking time today, a one-to-one Bible study. It's handing out flyers to your neighbors and inviting them to church. It's you willing to be rejected for the sake of the gospel time and time again.

[18:01] But know that God can use the weak and the unimpressive and turn the trickle into a torrent. Back in 1972, a pastor inherited a downtown church and what he described as a woeful condition in a run-down part of town.

About as far from impressive as you can get. Barely a dozen people attending, the whole place falling apart, quite literally. During one of his early sermons, the pew cracked and split and dumped five people, about half a congregation, onto the floor of the church.

It was falling apart. And sometimes the pastor would despair. The embarrassing truth, he said, the embarrassing truth was that sometimes even I didn't want to show up for a service. That's how bad it was.

But they stuck at it. Nothing fancy. Just faithfully preaching the word of God and earnestly praying for revival in that city. And eventually, some progress was made.

Little by little, lives began to be impacted by the power of the gospel. People were converted as they heard the good news about the Lord Jesus Christ. And the trickle became a torrent as God poured out his spirit and dozens and dozens and hundreds eventually, hundreds of lives had changed with new people added to Christ's kingdom every day just about.

[19:26] Today, something like 10,000 people every week attend the Brooklyn Tabernacle in downtown Brooklyn. Obviously, it doesn't always pan out like that.

And the temptation is for us to be impressed by large numbers and not appreciate the slow, steady work of the Holy Spirit in building Christ's church individual by individual.

Our task, whether we're experiencing the church grow like a mighty river or more like a dripping tap, our task is to keep returning and returning to the source of the living water, for it's only in Christ Jesus that our lives will bear gospel fruit.

So this leads us on to our second main heading, From Death to Life, verses 6 to 12. There's something in us, some primordial instinct, I guess, that draws us to the sound of running water. Wherever water flows, there is life. And we can see from a satellite photograph there the effect of the River Nile on the surrounding countryside.

[20:41] And if we zoom in onto the next slide, we can just about see the irrigation channels there. Near the riverbed, the land is rich and fertile. Further away, the land becomes a desert.

I was once involved in a competition to design a museum in the desert in Oman. And one of the striking things about the desert landscape there in Oman is a feature called the Wadi's.

And the Wadi is basically a dried-out riverbed. So most of the year, it's a dry ravine that then comes to life only during the rainy season.

And this next slide, I think, helps us visualize the picture that Ezekiel's painting for us. Again, not a literal, but a symbolic depiction in verses 7 to 9.

Ezekiel writes, 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 into the Dead Sea.

[21:50] Well, he's describing a stunning oasis of trees. An abundant array of many fruit-bearing trees, we're told in verse 12.

An abundant array of many fruit-bearing trees, perennially fruit-bearing with leaves for the healing of the nation, growing in the wilderness of Judah between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea.

Even the Dead Sea can't resist the life-giving power of this river. So look at the effect the river of life has on the Dead Sea.

We go to verse 8, end of verse 8. When the river 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.

[22 : 57] So do you see how extraordinary this is? When the river Jordan flows into the Dead Sea, it becomes too salty to support life.

Nothing lives in the Dead Sea. Remember on honeymoon in a part of the Mediterranean coast of Italy, Alice, my wife, came up out of the water of the sea and declared that this sea is too salty. And I looked at her and I said, of course it's salty. It's the sea. But as I turned out, I was wrong. The part of the Mediterranean rain, the Ligurian Sea, is apparently the most salty part of the Mediterranean Sea, which is apparently quite a salty sea.

And the salt levels aren't constant throughout the world's seas. And the sea that she's used to, the Baltic Sea, it doesn't even count as a proper saltwater body of water.

It counts as brackish water. It's less salty than the Arctic Ocean. The Ligurian Sea and the Mediterranean couldn't support my wife in its waters.

[24 : 08] But the Dead Sea can't support any kind of life in its waters. The saltiness of the Dead Sea here, though, in Ezekiel's vision, it doesn't affect the water's purity.

Instead, the reverse happens when this river flows into the Dead Sea. You see, when this river flows into the Dead Sea, it transforms the death of the Dead Sea into the water of life.

A body of water teeming with life, supporting all sorts of life, while retaining some useful salt deposits. Now, if you're an exile in Babylon, one of the first hearers of Ezekiel's prophecy, you're longing for home.

You're longing to return to the promised land. But isn't it interesting that while there's mention of Jerusalem and the Dead Sea and the Arabah, Ezekiel's description of this river is more evocative of Eden than it is of Israel.

It's a description full of Eden images. It brings to mind Genesis 2.10, and the river watering the land flowing from Eden, separating into four headwaters. Rivers that bring forth fruitfulness, the trees, the fruit, the swarming living creatures.

[25 : 28] You see, in Ezekiel's vision, the river of life flowing from the temple sanctuary heals the land and transforms it into a paradise, renewing it, revitalizing it, bringing life, making it into a garden of God.

And along its banks are vital signs of abundant life and productivity and prosperity. Life as it's meant to be. This is Eden restored.

In fact, it's more than Eden. It's a better than Eden. Instead of just two people, instead of just Adam and Eve, there are loads of people, verse 10. Fishermen all around the sea, formerly known as dead.

This is a vision then that describes not so much a return to the promised land as a picture of what it will be like for us in the new creation when the world will be restored to how it's meant to be.

So we've seen then that there's two perspectives to the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy. Two perspectives that merge in Ezekiel's vision.

[26 : 33] On the one hand, we have the work of Christ who gives life-giving water. And this is a work that's already begun in this age that we live in, the age of the spirits and of the church.

On the other hand, we look forward to the final fulfillment of this life-giving river in the age to come. By the way, when we come to Revelation 22 in our evening sermon, we'll see just how the river of the water of life and the new creation draws so much of its language from that of Ezekiel here.

So what do we do with these two perspectives? What do we do with them? Well, surely they should produce in us a yearning, a yearning like the exiles for home, home to the promised land of the new heavens and the new earth where life and fruitfulness abound, a yearning for life as it's meant to be. A yearning to be in the presence of God, the place where the Lord is there, Yahweh Shema, the new creation where death has no hold.

And at the same time, this yearning, that this vision should produce in us for our heavenly home should also produce in us a desire, a yearning for Christ, even now, to pour out streams of living water, waters of life that flow from the very throne of God himself to revive our city and the land

around us for dry bones to come alive, for our dear green place, Glasgow, to flourish once again spiritually, that the thirsty world around us would find in the Lord Jesus the one who satisfies every thirst and transforms wasted lives into fruitful ones.

[28 : 33] More than a century ago, this was the yearning of John Payton to see the east end of Glasgow flourish. Now, many of you, of course, here will know John Payton.

If you're not familiar with John Payton, then ten of us have a biography at the back there. You might want to familiarize yourself with him through that. But John Payton had this deep-seated desire to see people come to faith in the Lord Jesus in the east end of Glasgow.

Remember, it starts with a trickle. He writes, Meeting in a hayloft in the east end of Glasgow after nearly a year's hard work, I still only had six or seven non-churchgoers attending regularly.

About the same number meeting midweek. The directors of the city mission wanted to shut him down seeing that a year's hard work showed such small results.

Payton pleaded for a six-month extension as he had gained the confidence of many of the folk there and had an invincible faith in his own words that the good seeds sown would soon bear blessed fruit.

[29 : 43] In the next meeting he told them, If they didn't grow, they'd be closed down. He writes, Each one there and then agreed to bring another person to our next meeting.

Both our meetings doubled their attendance. Next week they made another effort and again doubled their attendance. And this meant they kept on growing and growing like that with a hundred attending a midweek Bible study in the east end of Glasgow.

And lives were radically transformed. Destructive addictions were overcome and by God's blessing they flourished and gave evidence of the fruitfulness of the Spirit's work in their lives transforming them.

As God has done it before, would that he do it again and revive this dear green place with rivers of living water. To that end, let's pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[30 : 46] As the deer thirsts for streams of water, so my soul thirsts for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

O Lord God, you are the source of life. Would you refresh us and revive us with living water, fill us afresh with the Holy Spirit and make us fruitful for the gospel throughout the seasons.

Would you make us into fishers of men and women and use us, we pray, to bring forth gospel growth. May St. Silas continue to bear abundant fruit and may Glasgow flourish by the praising of your name, by the preaching of your word, by the prayers of your people and by the power of your spirit.

Amen. It's in Jesus' name we ask. Amen.