

The Temple and the River
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Ezekiel 47:1-12

Ezekiel is one of the more unusual books in the Bible. It's not much preached on. That's because it consists mostly of severe prophecies of judgment against Israel, and wild visions of heavenly things. Many of the judgments are so graphic that you don't want to read them around children. The visions are so wild that we're not sure what to do with them, we're not sure how to apply them to our life. Today we read a little bit from one of those strange visions. I chose the least strange part, just to make it easy on you. Ezekiel 47 is part of a huge vision God gives to his prophet, a vision that takes up the last 8 chapters of the book. God takes Ezekiel up onto a high mountain, and on that mountain, an angelic being with a measuring rod in his hand shows Ezekiel a temple. The man with the measuring stick becomes Ezekiel's tour guide and he takes the prophet on a tour of every corner, every nook and cranny of this heavenly temple. It's an unusual tour.

What makes the tour unusual? These chapters are full of measurements. As Ezekiel is led through the heavenly temple, absolutely *everything* is measured. The length and the width of every room, the length and the width of every wall. Here's a taste of that from chapter 41: "I saw that the temple had a raised base all around it, forming the foundation of the side rooms. It was the length of the rod, 6 long cubits. The outer wall of the side rooms was 5 cubits thick. The open area between the side rooms of the temple and the priests' rooms was 20 cubits wide all around the temple. There were entrances to the side rooms from the open area, one on the north and another on the south; and the base adjoining the open area was 5 cubits wide all around." It goes on like that verse after verse after verse. It's pretty tedious. You read it and you wonder: 'Why, in heaven's name do I need to know all these measurements?'

A second strange thing is the size of the temple. It's enormous. Commentators estimate that it is almost a mile long and a mile wide. That's WAY bigger than Solomon's temple. Its dimensions are otherworldly.

A third strange thing is the river that flows out of this temple. It starts with a little ankle-deep stream that a child can wade through. But just a mile downstream it is a mighty river that no one can cross, this despite the fact that there are no tributaries or secondary rivers feeding it!

And a final bit of strangeness: even though the description of the temple seems very precise and detailed, if you try to reconstruct the details in a drawing or in a model, you will find it to be an exercise in frustration. Gregory the Great, the scholarly 6th century pope, in a noble attempt to make sense of Ezekiel's vision, once set out to draw the whole vision on paper. He gave up. He couldn't make all the measurements and descriptions fit together. "It is not possible to work out the construction of this complex according to the letter of the text!" he exclaimed. And so he put the book down and went on to other less frustrating tasks. So, what do we do with this heavenly temple vision? Is it just a Biblical curiosity, or is there a word for us here?

I think there is a word, and to hear that word, let's remember the context. Bible scholars: Do you remember where Ezekiel is when he has this vision? What is Ezekiel's situation when he sees all this stuff? He is an exile. He is in Babylon with his Jewish countrymen. They are in servitude. They have been in servitude for 25 years, so it's been a while since they've seen the temple. For these exiles, the last images they had of the temple was a traumatic picture of

Babylonian soldiers laughing as they tore down the curtains of the Most Holy Place, smashed the Ark of the Covenant, put the high priest to the sword, and burned the place to the ground. What do you think this would do to the spirit of this people?

This is a discouraged people. This is a broken people. There's no direct description of this, but you can imagine the drudgery of their day. The men doing their hard labor. The women going down to the Chebar River to draw water for their masters. Feeling powerless and feeling like life was pointless, feeling like God had pretty much forgotten them.

Ezekiel's prophecy is aimed squarely at their disappointment. The whole book is aimed at the exile whose hope is on empty. The book starts with judgment. That judgment explains to them why God allowed this terrible thing to happen to them, why he abandoned the earthly temple: it was because of their sin: their failure to do justice! It was their selfish, consumptive lifestyle. And this huge temple vision at the end is meant to re-invigorate and encourage them. God wants to give new hope to these broken people. God wants to change their dreams. God wants to change the temple pictures in their mind from images of destruction to something new and hopeful.

I can almost imagine Ezekiel gathering with a group of Jewish men and women on the Sabbath day in some small room. There are a few candles lit. Most people are sitting on the floor. The men have worn faces and calloused hands. The women are tired. Even in the low light of the candle light, Ezekiel can see their worry. There's a heaviness in the room. Ezekiel stands up, straightens himself and says: "Listen to what the Lord says! Hear the word of the Lord: 'Do not be discouraged! Do not be afraid. I know you are tired. I know you think your world has ended. I know you wonder if I've lost my power, that I'm not ruler of this world anymore. But don't be deceived! That earthly temple was just a copy of my heavenly temple. Solomon's temple was nice, but it was a shadow of the glory of my temple in heaven and that temple is standing as strong and secure and as mighty as ever.'"

I can imagine Ezekiel leaning forward, "I've seen this temple. Its walls are thick. Its courts are secure. It is eternally strong. The glory of the Lord fills the place. And there is a miraculous river there. It starts out small but it keeps getting deeper and deeper. It starts out like almost nothing, but it becomes eternally deep and eternally wide. I tell you: beside that river, the rivers of Babylon are like muddy sewers!! And the river in this water, where it flows, the desert bursts into bloom and the Dead Sea turns into a paradise of birds and fish and green trees. Don't give up my people! You are a tiny trickle of water, but God's promises are a mighty river, an eternal sea."

Do you see how these strange words are exactly what these tired people needed to hear? With this word planted in their hearts, with this word planted in their imagination, they could face their struggle with hope. They lived in the shadow of Babylonian temples, but the eyes of their heart were fixed on the eternal temple with the thick walls. They might be drawing waters out of the Chebar River as they ran errands for their Babylonian masters, but the eyes of their hearts were fixed on that river of living water that turned the desert green.

I think our hope today as Christians still works in something of the same way. We still keep our eyes on the temple and the river. Not Ezekiel's temple so much. I'm pretty sure that not very many of us walk through the streets of our city, or beside the Grand river and think of Ezekiel's temple and its river. But we keep our eyes on a different temple. In this story, God helps his people in distress by lifting his prophet up into the heavenly places to see a vision of His glory. But about 500 years later, God does something slightly different. 500 years later, instead of coming down and living in a temple, the glory of God is embodied in a person. The glory of God

walks around the streets of Jerusalem. The glory of God smiles at us with a human face. The glory of God embraces us with human arms. The glory of God reaches out to us with human hands. We have seen his glory, the glory of a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. Jesus isn't an enormous person. Physically he wasn't a mile long and a mile wide, he was just a regular sized guy, but because of his death and resurrection, in him there is a love and a grace that goes on forever, from him there flows a river of life that is eternal.

So now, in our trials and tribulations, we don't get our hope by meditating on some mystical temple; we get our hope by fixing our eyes on the ascended Jesus. He is our temple. That's where all the New Testament Christians fix their eyes. That's how they find the strength to keep going in the face of their stuff.

You see that pattern throughout the New Testament: Hebrews: Let us run with perseverance the race set out before us, setting our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. Colossians: Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things, because you died and your life is hidden with God in Christ. Acts: Stephen is being stoned to death for professing Christ and what does he say: "I see heaven opened and Jesus sitting at the right hand of God." All that heavenly focus doesn't mean we are escapists who pay no attention to the needs of the world around us. Just the opposite: it is that vision which keeps us persevering in the way of peace and love.

Here's a story. It was only recently that I learned about a man named James Zwerg. Have you ever heard of James Zwerg? In 1961, he was one of The Freedom Riders. The Freedom Riders were a group of white and black college students from Nashville who rode a bus through the south as a way to fight for Civil Rights. They would go to towns and commit acts of civil disobedience that challenged segregation in the South.

Everywhere they went they encountered angry resistance. But when they got to Montgomery Alabama, they encountered something more serious. A large and very angry mob surrounded the greyhound bus on all sides. And these men weren't just shouting and waving fists; they were waving baseball bats and lead pipes. Everyone was really nervous and nobody wanted to be first off the bus, to face the wrath of the mob. James Zwerg was nervous too, but "unfortunately" for him he had been reading his Bible the night before. He'd been reading Psalm 27:1 which said: "*The Lord is my light and my salvation, of whom should I be afraid. The Lord is my light and my salvation, what can men do to me?*" He'd been reading the psalms and the eyes of his heart were on the ascended Jesus. The eyes of his heart were on the temple.

So James Zwerg, along with John Lewis, another Freedom Rider, got out of their seats and stepped off the bus. As the mob reached for him and their curse rang in his ears, Zwerg reports that he kept saying to himself: "*The Lord is my light and my salvation, of whom shall I be afraid.*" They beat him. Zwerg was hit in the face with a suitcase and then another man held him while different people in the crowd took turns beating him. He was soon unconscious, but the crowd continued to beat him to within an inch of his life. The next morning the press took a picture of Zwerg at the hospital. His face was a bloody pulp and the image of him was so shocking that it became one of the things that turned the tide of public opinion against segregation. His beating didn't stop the movement, it made it wider.

Mr. Zwerg is an ordinary guy. A regular Joe. But that day, with the help of Psalm 27, he fixed his eyes on Jesus. God used that little trickling stream of a life, that little bit of faithfulness, to help create a movement, to help create a river of change and grace so wide that it can't be crossed. A river so fertile that trees of justice and hope continue to spring up along its banks and burst into bloom.

You will not be asked to step off a bus and into an angry mob this week. I'm pretty sure that won't happen. But God will put you in a place where you can choose either to live out of the sewer of your disappointment and fear or you could drink from the life-giving river that flows from Christ's throne. I don't want to be too much of a nag, but if I were you, I would drink from the river.

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