

Ezekiel's Vision

Devotional Reading: Revelation 7:9–17
Background Scripture: Ezekiel 47:1–12

Ezekiel 47:1–9, 12

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.

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. 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.”

Key Text

“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

Judah, from Isaiah to the Exile

Unit 3: Ezekiel and the Exile of Judah

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List some key features of Ezekiel’s vision.
2. Explain the nature of prophecy, whose fulfillment can arrive in unexpected or surprising ways.
3. Identify one image of the vision that he or she finds most encouraging and explain why it gives hope.

Lesson Outline

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- A. Mirage or Hope?
- B. Lesson Context

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- B. North and East (v. 2)

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- A. First Thousand Cubits (v. 3)
- B. Second Thousand Cubits (v. 4a)
- C. Third Thousand Cubits (v. 4b)
- D. Fourth Thousand Cubits (v. 5)

III. Learning (Ezekiel 47:6–9, 12)

- A. Numerous Trees (vv. 6–7)
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- B. Flourishing Fish (vv. 8–9)
- C. Productive Trees (v. 12)

Conclusion

- A. Hope for Abundant Life
- B. Hope for Eternal Life
- C. Prayer
- D. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Mirage or Hope?

A character in a movie is alone in a hot and arid place. He is parched with thirst and nearing heat exhaustion from the blazing sun. Suddenly, he sees a glimmering pool near a tree. Water and shade! The character experiences a surge of hope. But hopes are dashed when he eventually realizes that he has been fooled by a shimmering illusion. What seemed to support life turned out to be only a mirage.

The presence of water is a sign of life. This incapable fact invites powerful comparisons and imagery in the Bible (examples: Jeremiah 2:13; John 7:37–39). Today’s lesson offers one of the most powerful of those.

B. Lesson Context

Most of the contextual information in the previous lessons from Ezekiel still applies and need not be repeated here. What’s changed about the context is a shift from addressing the Judahites’s then-present situation in Babylon to a vision of the future. All of Ezekiel 40–48, about 20 percent of the entire book, relates this vision. Understanding the meaning and significance of the vision is crucial to appreciate this great book fully. The imagery of the “water of life” river and its surroundings has parallels elsewhere in the Bible. Revelation 22, in particular, offers several points for fruitful comparison.

The vision is meant to encourage God’s people. The exile had decimated their homeland. Their capital had been razed. Their temple was destroyed. The exiles now lived in a strange land under a foreign power. While the prophets had predicted a return (Jeremiah 29:10–14), many feared they would never see Judah again. Ezekiel’s visions offer these exiles reason to hope. The visions concern a new city and a transformed homeland. The glory of this new Jerusalem and Judah will be greater than what was lost.

The vision opens in Ezekiel 40:1 with a record of the date. By comparison with various texts and calendars, that date would likely be around 573 BC. As the reader moves through the text

from 40:1, Ezekiel is seen to receive details concerning a restored city and temple. These prophetic images include particulars regarding the officials to serve in the new temple, allotment of land, and instructions regarding offering procedures for Passover and other special days. Then we arrive at chapter 47.

I. Guiding

(Ezekiel 47:1–2)

A. East and South (v. 1)

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.

The *man* in view (perhaps an angel) is the one who has been guiding Ezekiel’s visionary temple-tour from the beginning (Ezekiel 40:3). Previously, the man had taken Ezekiel to the temple’s “portico” (40:48–49) and “entrance” (41:1–2). 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 (compare with the prophet’s vision of the old temple in Ezekiel 8:16).

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 (south is to Ezekiel’s right side if he is facing east, watching the water flow away from the door). Apparently the waters are flowing in a southeasterly direction. We will see why shortly.

Speaking Compass

I “speak compass,” but my wife doesn’t. On our way to work together one day, we encountered a road-blocking hazard as we traveled south. So, I immediately turned east into a neighborhood that was completely unfamiliar to us. Soon, we turned south and I began trying to decide the best street to turn west on.

When we did turn west, we had driven a few blocks when my wife exclaimed, “I have no idea where we are!” No sooner had those words escaped her lips than we found ourselves right where we should be: at the driveway entrance to our workplace.

Not everyone “speaks compass” in a physical, earthly sense, and GPS can make it unimportant to be able to do so. But what about the spiritual sense? The book of Ezekiel uses the four compass directions about 150 times—far more than any other book in the Bible. Here’s a challenge for your spiritual growth: look up those 150 times and study them to discern their spiritual purposes.

—R. L. N.

B. North and East (v. 2)

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.

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. The answer is in Ezekiel 44:1–3: the Lord has closed that gate.

In his new location, the prophet notes consistency in the direction the *water* flows.

What Do You Think?

How can water, in its various contexts, illustrate the character or actions of God?

Digging Deeper

How do Psalms 23:1–2; 24:1–2; Isaiah 43:20; 48:18; and John 7:37–39 inform your response?

II. Wading

(Ezekiel 47:3–5)

A. First Thousand Cubits (v. 3)

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.

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 (Ezekiel 40:3).

Walking a distance of *a thousand cubits*, the two find themselves in *ankle-deep* water. If the cubits mentioned are the standard ones of 18 inches, they have walked about 500 yards, a little short of three-tenths of a mile. If the cubit used is the 21-inch long cubit of Ezekiel 43:13, then the distance is one-third of a mile. Walking at a rate of two miles per hour requires 10 minutes or less to cover the distance.

B. Second Thousand Cubits (v. 4a)

4a. He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep.

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 (see above), to reach this segment of the visionary tour.

C. Third Thousand Cubits (v. 4b)

4b. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist.

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.

Other commentators believe, however, that the vision of the restored temple and its changed surroundings are figurative. This position may be supported by how Luke 3:4–6 uses the changed topography of Isaiah 40:4 as a metaphor for the

ministry of John the Baptist (compare Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; John 1:23). The leveling of the terrain could refer to the change of peoples’ hearts, receptivity, etc. Images of a temple in Revelation 11:19; 14:15; 15:5–8; etc. are also interpreted as figurative since Revelation 21:22 says that no temple was seen in the heavenly city of Jerusalem.

Another support for this position is that although numerous dimensions are given for the restored temple (and some of its furnishings and surroundings) in Ezekiel’s vision, the height of the temple itself is never specified (contrast Ezekiel 40:5, 12, 42; 43:13).

D. Fourth Thousand Cubits (v. 5)

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.

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 (see above). But now the two must turn back because of the river’s increasing depth as the flow of *water* continues unchecked.

III. Learning

(Ezekiel 47:6–9, 12)

A. Numerous Trees (vv. 6–7)

6. He asked me, “Son of man, do you see this?” Then he led me back to the bank of the river.

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. When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river.

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 (examples: Ezekiel 15:2, 6). But the prophet also refers to the trees of Eden (31:16, 18). Tree imagery occurs extensively in Jesus’ teachings centuries after Ezekiel (examples: Matthew 7:15–20; Luke 13:6–9).

The Babylonians’ devastation of the land during the siege of Jerusalem included the cutting of trees for the building of siege ramps (Jeremiah 6:6). The Israelites were constrained in the use of trees for such purposes (Deuteronomy 20:19–20), 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.



Visual for Lesson 13. *Display this visual as you ask the discussion questions associated with Ezekiel 47:9.*

the sweet potatoes and green beans. The plant was loaded with sweet, juicy blackberries.

Ezekiel’s vision reminds us that our current circumstances do not determine the future God has or desires for us. Things as they are now are not permanent. New life can come to those experiencing an arid deadness of spirit. New life comes when we connect with the source of living water: Jesus (John 7:37–38). Whether in Old Testament times or New, the need for living water doesn’t change. Before you choose your source, read Jeremiah 2:13. —B. R.

What Do You Think?

How can you use tree imagery to illustrate an aspect of Christian faith?

Digging Deeper

Which of Scripture’s uses of tree imagery is the most compelling to you? Why?

The Blackberry Bush That Could

My sister-in-law’s massive, flourishing garden surprised us. When she was first getting it started, someone gave her a blackberry bush. It was small and seemingly lifeless. Without much planning or research, she planted it off to the side with hardly a thought for its growth. She was far more concerned about her peppers and tomatoes, which grew in abundance.

One day, we went to visit so my husband could see the results of her work. We immediately noticed something striking: the blackberry bush had overtaken nearly an entire corner of her garden! It was thriving to the point of encroaching on

B. Flourishing Fish (vv. 8–9)
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.

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 (Joshua 13:2; Joel 3:4). 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 (compare 2 Kings 19–22).

Picking up on the image of water flowing from Jerusalem is Zechariah 14:8. That passage foresees “living” waters flowing not only toward the Dead Sea but also westward into the Mediterranean Sea (compare Joel 3:18; John 7:38; Revelation 22:1–2).

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.

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.

What Do You Think?

In addition to salty water, what other images—biblical and otherwise—strike you as illustrations of one’s spiritual deadness before coming to Christ? Why?

Digging Deeper

What images strike you as illustrations of one’s spiritual life in Christ?

C. Productive Trees (v. 12)

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.”

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

How to Say It

Assyrian	Uh-sear-e-un.
Babylonian	Bab-ih-low-nee-un.
Deuteronomy	Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.
Ezekiel	Ee-zeek-ee-ul or Ee-zeek-yul.
Jerusalem	Juh-roo-suh-lem.
Mediterranean	Med-uh-tuh-ray-nee-un.
Tabernacles	Tah-burr-nah-kulz.

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.

Conclusion

A. Hope for Abundant Life

The most significant word picture found in today's passage is that of *water*. The Old Testament uses water imagery to convey the message that God's "water of life" is never stagnant but always available, active, and life-giving (Psalms 1:3; 36:8; 84:5–6; Isaiah 12:3; 41:18; 43:19; 66:12; Jeremiah 31:9). Jesus used the imagery of water on various occasions to depict the abundant life he came to bring. When he attended the Festival of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, he declared, "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" (John 7:37–38; compare 4:10, 14).

Jesus was not quoting a single, particular Old Testament passage, but the general message derived from several passages, including our text for today. Interestingly, the climax of the Festival of Tabernacles featured the pouring out of water as part of the symbolism. It was in such a setting—perhaps during the pouring-out ceremony itself—that Jesus made his promise of living water.

One observer noted that the water-pouring ceremony at this feast in Jesus' day was interpreted in various Jewish traditions as a symbolic anticipation of the outpouring of the Spirit in fulfillment of various Scriptures, including Ezekiel 47:1–9. The Gospel of John says that Jesus used "living water" to refer to the Spirit (John 7:39). This means that we can now enjoy the benefits of the spiritual refreshment from the Holy Spirit.

What Do You Think?

How will you be a source of "rivers of living water" (John 7:38) in the upcoming week?

Digging Deeper

How will you be attentive to the Holy Spirit's leading in this regard?

B. Hope for Eternal Life

We see Ezekiel's vision reaching its clearest and ultimate expression in Revelation 22. There the apostle John saw a certain river as the source of life. Trees on either side of John's river were fruitful, just like Ezekiel's. And the leaves of the trees that John saw were a source of healing, again just like Ezekiel's. Such parallels indicate how Ezekiel's great vision should be understood. It does not appear that the temple layout shown to that prophet was ever intended to be followed by the exiles who returned or by any other group of God's people. Since the vision portrays something unique and miraculous, we must allow God himself to declare how its fulfillment is to be understood. That is what the New Testament does for us. It points to a fulfillment initiated by Jesus' first coming and climaxed by his second coming. At Jesus' return, his holy city will become inhabited for eternity by his people. It is a city built by God himself (Hebrews 11:10).

What Do You Think?

How does today's text encourage you regarding the hope for eternal life?

Digging Deeper

In what ways will you worship God as a response to that hope?

C. Prayer

O God, we see a world both broken and beautiful. Help us to see your new world, not only in time and space but also in human souls deeply connected to you, our Creator. Help us find ways to live in that world dawning because of Your Son. Amen.

D. Thought to Remember

Our current situation isn't permanent.