

River of Grace

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

Written By: Pastor John T. Anderson

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Our study today comes from the book of Ezekiel, a prophet who lived at one of the worst times in Old Testament history, during the captivity brought by Babylon. His name means “God is my strength,” or “God will strengthen me.” How appropriate for someone living in the circumstance of tragedy. Ezekiel’s first vision contained “wheels within wheels,” which represented the complicated and confusing conditions in which he lived. And yet, above it all, was a throne on which sat One like the Son of man.

Ezekiel’s ministry began before the captivity and continued within it. He himself was taken to Babylon during the second wave of Babylon’s attack, about 597 B.C., along with about 10,000 artisans, craftsmen and skilled workers. This means that God had a representative, a prophet, among the *people* in Babylon (Ezekiel), a spokesman in the *court* of Babylon (Daniel) and an ambassador with the few who *remained* behind (Jeremiah). These three were contemporaries and raised their voices to rebuke, correct and encourage God’s people during these troublous times.

Like that of his prophetic colleagues, Ezekiel’s life was not an easy one. Part of his job was do some very unusual things to visually demonstrate the coming siege and its aftermath of famine. We read about that in chapter 4, where it speaks of him laying on his left side for 390 days, and then on his right side for 40 days. At times he ate a very meager diet that was to impress on the people the privations of the coming war.

During his ministry, he was told that his beloved wife, the “desire of your eyes,” would pass away, but he was forbidden to mourn her death (chapter 24)! This was to illustrate the fact that their beautiful temple, their beloved temple, which was the “desire of their eyes,” was going to be taken away during the assaults of Babylon, but they were not to mourn or weep, because it was their own sins that had caused the removal of God’s protection and allowed the attack.

Despite the terrible sins of the people and the dire circumstances pervading, God had precious messages of hope and encouragement that were spoken by His prophet Ezekiel. I highly recommend reading his story in the book that bears his name. As you read through the account of the things of which God spoke to them, ask the Lord to reveal to your heart wherein your walk with Him might be improved.

In the book of Ezekiel we read this priceless promise of the New Covenant. “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you

shall be My people and I will be your God.” Ezekiel 36:26-28. Some people might be surprised to know that that’s in the Old Testament. It is quoted in the New Testament in Hebrews 8.

In the 34th chapter of Ezekiel we read of God, the good Shepherd Who looks after His sheep and searches for the wandering. Certainly Jesus had this chapter in mind when He spoke of Himself as the Good Shepherd, in John 10.

Beginning in the 40th chapter of Ezekiel, the prophet was shown a vision of an exquisite temple. Precise dimensions were laid out, with his accompanying angel, rod in hand, measuring the spaces and proportions of this temple; its furniture, its grounds and gateways. The gates were to bear the names of the twelve tribes, a thought echoed by John’s vision of Revelation 21. We have no record that this visionary temple was ever built. It could have been, had God’s people cooperated with the divine plan, but it never was. The fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision will have some applications to the Christian church, but the complete fulfillment will await God’s eternal kingdom. However, there are lessons to be drawn from its architecture that are worth studying.

Near the conclusion of his vision, Ezekiel was shown a river, coming from the temple and going eastward. “Then he brought me back to the door of the temple; and there was water, flowing from under the threshold of the temple toward the east, for the *front of the temple faced east*; the water was flowing from under the *right* side of the temple, south of the altar.

“He brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me around on the outside to the outer gateway that faces east; and there was water, running out on the right side. Then, when the man went out to the east with the line in his hand, he measured one thousand cubits, and he brought me through the waters; the water came up to my *ankles*. Again he measured one thousand and brought me through the waters; the water came up to my *knees*. Again he measured one thousand brought me through; the water came up to my *waist*.

“Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross; for the water was too deep, water in which one must swim, a river that *could not be crossed*. He said to me, ‘Son of man, have you seen this?’ Then he brought me and returned me to the bank of the river. When I returned, there, along the bank of the river, were very many trees on one side and the other. Then he said to me; ‘This water flows toward the eastern region, goes down into the valley, and enters the sea. When it reaches the sea, its *waters are healed*. And it shall be that every living thing that moves, *wherever the rivers go*, will live. There will be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters go there; for they will be healed, and everything will live whoever the river goes. It shall be that fishermen will stand by it from En Gedi to En Eglaim; they will be places for spreading their nets. Their fish will be of the same kinds as the fish of the Great Sea (the Mediterranean), exceedingly many.’ Ezekiel 47:1-10.

There are beautiful and important lessons for us today contained within this prophetic scene. It is a **picture of the river of God’s life-giving, healing grace**. In his vision, Ezekiel found himself at the temple at the east side, which faced the arid and sometimes steep regions leading toward the Dead Sea. There were reasons why God had the tabernacle of the wilderness and the temple of Jerusalem built so that it faced eastward. If you look carefully through the Bible you will see that “east” is a

direction that is symbolic of heaven. Remember where God put the Garden in which our first parents lived? It was “planted eastward in Eden.” Genesis 2:8.

Ezekiel watched with reverence as God’s presence filled the temple in his vision. “Afterward he brought me to the gate, the gate that faces toward the east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east. His voice was like the sound of many waters; and the earth shone with His glory.” Ezekiel 43:1, 2. In Revelation 7, the angel who has the “seal of the living God” comes from the east. Jesus compared His coming to lightning which “comes from the east.” Matthew 24:27.

The temple of Ezekiel’s vision is one which faced east, the direction of heaven. What should we learn from this? The “temple,” or church in which we worship must be facing in the direction of heaven; towards heaven’s King and heaven’s truth, for our worship to be acceptable with Him. We must worship Him “in spirit and truth.” John 4:24.

With the entrance facing eastward, it meant that all worshipers had to turn their backs on the rising sun when they came to worship the Creator God. This was most significant for people back then, and its significance has not diminished today. The open and blatant worship of the sun, as being the supposed source of life, was predominant among the religions of the past. Baal worship and its many counterparts was a constant source of temptation to God’s people. Satan knew that if he could persuade them to deviate from the clear and precise commandments of God, that His blessing would be removed and they would fall prey to the devil’s snares. God’s protection would be removed; destruction and devastation would result. It is therefore highly significant that a worshiper of the true God, the God Who created, turned his back on the rising sun as he entered the tabernacle of the wilderness or the temple of Jerusalem.

Today Satan has infiltrated the church with the same policy as in the past; to persuade people to deviate from God’s requirements so that His blessing will be removed. In our culture, the “worship of the sun” may not be as open and blatant as it was back then, but Satan has attempted to supplant the worship of the Creator God, as memorialized by the seventh day Sabbath, with a day whose roots are embedded in the soil of sun worship. “Sun”day is proclaimed to be the “Christian” Sabbath, without a word of Scripture to back it up! The ones who seek His truth and accept no authority other than the Bible will find themselves turning their back on the “worship of the sun” and following God’s explicit command in the matter of worship. Yes, we know that there are many pastors, preachers and professors who say, “It doesn’t matter.” But since when is it true that what God says doesn’t matter?

The water that flowed east came from the “right” side of the temple. In the sign language of the Bible, “right” is the side of favor and acceptance. If you travel to the middle east today and want to make friends, don’t offer your left hand for a hand-shake. The sheep which hear the blessing of the Lord at His coming are found on the “right” side. Matthew 25:33. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was encouraged to note that the angel who spoke with him prior to his son’s birth was positioned on the “right” side of the altar of incense. Luke 1:11. This river of God’s healing grace flows from the “right” side of the temple, indicating His attitude of love and acceptance, His desire to bring life and healing. Through the atonement, we are “put right” with God, and He doesn’t look upon us as enemies. He has made us friends through Christ. That’s the message He’s giving us in depicting the origin of the river of grace on the “right side.”

One of the predominant parts of this picture is the remarkable growth of the river as it extends outward. It begins as a trickling stream but enlarges to a river which cannot be crossed. Did you notice that? At first it was ankle deep, then it came up to the prophet's knees, then up to his waist and finally was so deep you could swim in it. This, while flowing through the most foreboding, dry and rugged terrain! What is the topography going from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea? It's rough and arid. It would be difficult to find an area that is more abrasive. Perhaps it would be comparable to a small rivulet forming in the heights of Mt. Laguna and flowing eastward toward El Centro. What would be the "natural" result if that were to happen? Take a 5-gallon bucket up to the summit and let it spill out eastward. What would happen? Within a very short distance the small rivulet would be swallowed up by the thirsty ground and never make it to the valley floor. That's what would normally happen in the world that we see with our eyes. This river is different. This is the river of God's grace.

This amazing prospect is also brought to view in Ezekiel's vision of the temple structure. Notice how the architecture of the temple reflects this phenomenon. "As one went up from story to story (in the temple), the side chambers became wider all around, because their supporting ledges in the wall of the temple ascended like steps; therefore the width of the structure increased as one went up from the lowest story to the highest by way of the middle one." Ezekiel 41:7. This is not the way buildings are usually constructed, is it? Usually the base is larger than the top, for strength and stability. But this building grows in size as it ascends.

This same lesson is taught by the miraculous feeding of the multitude. What started small, just few loaves and fishes, expanded to feed a crowd. This is how God's grace is spread.

This is the lesson that is taught by the river that gets bigger, starting as a small stream flowing from the temple and then going through the ravines and desert toward the Dead Sea. This is not what we see in the natural world. Paul, when speaking to the Romans about the miraculous character of God's kingdom, said that it was "contrary to nature." Romans 11:24. While there are some things in the natural world from which we can draw similarities, there is nothing there that is exactly like what God wants to do in your life and in mine. The miracle working grace of God's kingdom goes beyond what we find in the natural world. The configuration of the temple and the growing stream teach us of how God's kingdom operates.

Wherever the river went, it brought life. Demonstrating its life-giving vitality, where the river went "were very many trees on one side and the other." The Bible often refers to healthy tree as being a symbol of the developing Christian. Speaking of the godly person David wrote, "He shall be as a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper. Psalm 1:3.

This river not only brought life to the desert but healing to a dead sea. Said the angel, "This water flows toward the eastern region, goes down into the valley, and enters the sea. When it reaches the sea, its waters are healed." Ezekiel 47:8. This is nothing less than a miracle. The "sea" of which this speaks is obviously what we call the Dead Sea, due east of Jerusalem. It's called the Dead Sea because there is no life in it. Fish cannot survive its saline content. It's dead because, while the Jordan River flows into it from the north, there is no outlet, and without circulation there is stagnation and death.

In the Scriptures, what does the term “sea” represent? The “waters” represent “multitudes, nations and tongues.” Revelation 17:15. This is the “sea of humanity,” which because of sin lies dead and dormant. There is no life in it, apart from Christ. Notice this also: it is situated at the *lowest point* of earth, being 1,371 feet below sea level. There’s no point on this planet that is lower than the Dead Sea. Is there a lesson to be drawn from all this? This is what sin does. Sin brings you down; sin brings death. The population of this planet is accurately symbolized by the Dead Sea, low and lifeless.

But God did not leave this planet in its state of despair. God took the initiative and set in motion a plan to bring life and restoration. That’s the picture Ezekiel saw in his vision. God’s life-giving grace healing the dead waters of humanity. That was the message of the tree that fell into the bitter waters of Marah and made them sweet, when Israel left Egypt, recorded in Exodus 17.

This river of grace teaches us several things. It represents your life individually. God has great plans for you. He wants to accomplish great things through you, if you will let Him. You are the “Dead Sea” which has been “healed” by the river of God’s grace. Where there was death, there is now life. Where there was selfishness there is now love. Where there was an obsession with this world, there is now a focus on God’s kingdom. You’re not the person you used to be.

You are also a part of the river of grace as it touches others. God desires to minister His grace through you to bring life and healing to someone else. Jesus said, “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” John 7:38. “*Wherever the river goes*” He wants to bring a blessing to someone through you.

The success of God’s plan is described this way: “And it shall be that every living thing that moves, wherever the rivers go, will live. There will be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters go there; for they will be healed, and everything will live wherever the river goes. It shall be that fishermen will stand by it from En Gedi to En Eglaim; there will be places for spreading their nets. Their fish will be of the same kinds as the fish of the Great Sea, exceedingly many.” Ezekiel 47:9, 10.

The picture of fishermen having success on the shores of the Dead Sea was certainly not descriptive of conditions as they existed back then or as they exist today. Fishermen casting their nets, in a literal sense, would be wasting their time. But in the spiritual sense, God’s miraculous river of grace has brought life and healing “wherever it goes.” What does water do? It *seeks the lowest level*, doesn’t it. So God’s grace is seeking those in the lowest depths of sin. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. He came for the sick and needy. The river of His grace flowed down to the Dead Sea.

In Jesus’ day, He used the image of catching fish to illustrate the growth of His kingdom. No fish could have been caught on the shores of the Dead Sea, as it exists in the literal sense, because there are no fish living there. But in the spiritual realm, when God’s grace touches those “dead in trespasses in sin;” when it contacts the “Dead Sea” of humanity, life is given. The fishermen on the shores and the size of their catches is a picture of the growth of God’s kingdom.

This is a picture of you personally. “*Wherever the river goes.*” Let that phrase sink into your mind. Where will you go this week? How will you touch lives this week, by personal contact; by email;

by telephone. “Wherever the river goes,” He wants to share His love through you. As you travel through life, wherever you go, God wants to minister His river of grace through you to bring blessing to someone else. He wants to bring healing and hope to someone lost in the Dead Sea. You can do that. If you earnestly seek to be a part of His river of grace; if you earnestly ask Him to impart the Holy Spirit into your life, you can be part of that river of grace flowing to the needy. He will show you how; He will tell you what to do, if you are willing.

This can be a picture of our Valley Center Church; a picture of our website. We may appear to be just a “trickle,” but as God uses the internet to “spread” His love, His message can reach beyond our imagination. We have some idea of how many people visit us, but we’ll have to wait till we’re on the other side to see how God has used this technology to be a conduit for His river of grace.

This is a picture also of our Adventist church. The message of life and hope contained in the three angels’ messages is aptly portrayed by this vision. Life-giving waters represented by a message emphasizing the importance of improving our mentality and strength through proper health habits; a return to the worship of the Creator God by honoring His memorial, the Sabbath; a message of hope in a soon-coming Redeemer, Who will end the reign of sin and transport us to the place He’s prepared for us. What began as a small rivulet 160 years ago, with just a few believers, has now spread to become a world-wide movement. Yet there is much work to be done. There is still a sea of humanity lost in sin.

About 25 years ago a man had a dream to build a television station to reach the world with the messages of the three angels. Was he a preacher? No. Was he a television producer? No. He was a carpenter. But God blessed the establishment of the Three Angels Broadcasting Network under the direction of Danny Shelton, and now, from a tiny trickle of a beginning, its beams reach around the world. If you want to read the history of its establishment, see http://www.3abn.org/3abn_history.cfm

You may be living in tragedy, as was Ezekiel. Yet, “God is your strength.” While the outlook might appear as confusing as “wheels in wheels,” there is a throne, there is a God Who oversees all and is bringing order out of chaos, reason from senselessness. This God imparts His grace abundantly, and through His grace there is forgiveness, healing and life. By believing in Him, the river of grace will flow through us and bring hope and healing to someone else, even a home in God’s eternal kingdom. That’s worth more than anything on this decaying earth. That’s what you really want, isn’t it?