

EZEKIEL'S VISION OF HOPE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Ezekiel 47:1–12

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing. (Ezek. 47:12)

Daily Bible Readings

M	Nov. 24	Ezek. 37:1–7	God Breathes New Life
T	Nov. 25	Ezek. 37:8–14	A Resurrection of Hope
W	Nov. 26	Isa. 55:1–9	The Thirsty Will Be Refreshed
Th	Nov. 27	John 7:2–10, 37–39	Rivers of Living Water
F	Nov. 28	Rev. 21:1–7	Hope for God's New Creation
Sa	Nov. 29	Rev. 22:1–5	The Tree of Life

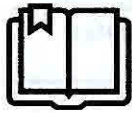
STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Today we begin a new church year and the season of Advent. During this liturgical period, we remember the gift of Jesus' birth, and we anticipate the day when Christ will come again. In looking ahead to Jesus' return, we find that the passage for this week provides us with the same hope and encouragement that it did for the Judeans long ago.

While in exile in Babylon, Ezekiel had a wonderful vision of life restored in Jerusalem, including a temple that was more majestic than ever. Our passage for this lesson hearkens back to Ezekiel 37, where the restoration of Israel and Judah is described in idyllic terms (37:24–28). Moreover, the people would obediently and carefully follow God's law from now on. Because of this, they not only would be restored to the promised land but also would live there forever—"and my servant David shall be their prince forever" (v. 25). Although Ezekiel undoubtedly meant that a king of the Davidic line would be restored politically to rule over the new nation, many Christians have taken these verses another way. In this prophecy, they see the promise of Jesus, the descendant of David, who is also the prince of peace and the ultimate ruler of God's realm.

Moreover, God would establish Jerusalem not *as it was* but *as it was meant to be*. God would once again set the temple in the midst of the people, this time forever, and the people would live as they should. All the promises made about the promised land, Jerusalem, and the temple would come to fruition.

God of new beginnings, we long to place our trust and hope in you, yet it is not easy. Disappointment, fear, and despair sometimes overwhelm us. We feel abandoned when help does not come on our own timeline. With the wonderful message of Advent, help us to hear again the promise of your presence and love. Grant us hope for today, tomorrow, and always. In Jesus' name, Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Ezekiel 47:1–9, 12

47:1 Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there water was flowing from below the entryway of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east), and the water was flowing down from below the south side of the temple, south of the altar. ²Then he brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east, and the water was trickling out on the south side.

³Going on eastward with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits and then led me through the water, and it was ankle-deep. ⁴Again he measured one thousand and led me through the water, and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand and led me through the water, and it was up to the waist. ⁵Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. ⁶He said to me, “Mortal, have you seen this?”

Then he led me back along the bank of the river. ⁷As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on the one side and on the other. ⁸He said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. ⁹Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish once these waters reach there. It will become fresh, and everything will live where the river goes. . . . ¹²On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month,

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing.”

A GLORIOUS VISION

To the best of our knowledge, Ezekiel 40–48 was written around 572 BCE, fourteen years after the fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel and his people are still in the land of exile and doomed to remain there for at least thirty years. This is the context into which God sent an amazing promise to restore the people’s hope.

Indeed, this lesson’s Scripture passage offers a beautiful image of the restored temple in the midst of the rebuilt city. The obvious promise to the people is that they will be returned to Jerusalem at last and their home will be better than ever. More subtly, Ezekiel uses terms that echo language used elsewhere in Scripture to describe a new heaven and a new earth. The dimensions of the temple are a perfect and incredibly spacious square, with waters flowing from all four sides. This image of life-giving rivers flowing from a single source simultaneously looks back to creation (Gen. 2:10) and anticipates the final restoration of the world (Rev. 22:1–5). In the life-giving waters of the beginning and end of the divine plan, we see God’s unending intent to provide abundantly for humanity and God’s promise to sustain this gift forever.

Ezekiel’s imagery is powerful and reassuring in other ways. For instance, the waters he describes are *safe*. The ancient Hebrews feared the destructive nature of water, such as the deadly floods that came every spring and the storms that arose on the seas. In this new era, people would no longer have to risk their lives on boats in order to get fish. Rather, they could get all they needed while staying safely on shore (Ezek. 47:10).

God would provide other bounty as well. Swampy and marshy areas would remain intact so that salt could still be collected (v. 11). This precious mineral not only brought flavor to food but also was essential to food preservation in a culture without refrigeration. In addition, the trees along the riverside would keep foliage all year long and bear fresh fruit every month, so the people would never be without leaves for healing or food to eat (v. 12).

What a hopeful image this must have been for the exiles in Babylon. There, waterways were everywhere, all connecting to

the great Euphrates River, yet there was no joy. The people could only sit by the waters and weep (Ps. 137:1). But not forever. Ezekiel promised that redemption would come and, with it, God's eternal grace and care.



What artists, teachers, or activists have invited you to see an inspiring vision of the future with which you can align yourself? How is your life different because of the vision?

A NEW CREATION

Ezekiel's vision was meant to bring hope to God's people. Their most sacred area lay in ruins, but one day it would flourish again. Water would flow, trees would grow, and the land would come to life. In the new Jerusalem, the people would flourish; they would live forever in the gracious presence of God.

In lesson 8, we read how Jeremiah foresaw a new covenant, one that lived inside the people and was not external to them (Jer. 31:33). Ezekiel goes one step further: The "heart" on which the covenant will be written will not be the stone heart from before. God proclaims through Ezekiel, "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you" (Ezek. 36:26).

The people's greatest hope was not that they would return home but that God would change them into a true community of faith. Their hope, anticipated and kept alive while in exile, is our reality. As Christians, we celebrate what God has already accomplished for us in Jesus Christ. Paul writes of this: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!" (2 Cor. 5:17).

The words of 2 Peter 3 also come to mind. This writer addresses the distress of the early Christian community over Jesus' delayed return. Like the Hebrews in exile, they wondered why God was taking so long and whether the new age would ever come. The resounding word of hope was, "Yes! God will make all things right—in God's time, not ours—so be patient."

From start to finish, the Bible says that our greatest desire as human beings is a world where we are in harmony with one another and our God. I believe this is certainly God's wish for us as individuals, as a community of faith, and as a world. It was true in Eden, true throughout biblical times, and it is true now.

The best way we see this, of course, is in Jesus. In him, we have a picture of God incarnate, but we also get a glimpse of the realm of God. Yes, the Bible speaks about our iniquities. Yes, it speaks

time and again about the ways we fail to understand, accept, or participate in God's plan for us. Far more, however, it speaks of how God does not give up on us. It is the story of how, *despite us*, God keeps striving for this perfect world on earth and will one day bring it about. To that let us say: Hallelujah and Amen!



What gives you hope for the future?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

In putting all these Scripture texts together, what can we see that might make a difference for us? A few key points jump out.

First, Scripture does not shy away from acknowledging the pain and trauma that exist in this world. Homes, security, loved ones—all can be taken from us. In immense grief or despair, our connection to God can be lost. We can find ourselves in emotional, spiritual, and even physical exile. Yet, Scripture always maintains that this is not the end. God desires much more for us, and God will not stop striving to bring us into the moment of fulfillment.

The second point is that God loves us too well to let things continue forever as they are. We can draw hope and strength from knowing that it is God who will have the last say, not evil or suffering or even death. As Christians, we long for and await the day that Jesus will come again and set the world right, once and for all. Anticipating God's final and complete victory gives us the strength to maintain faithfulness, no matter how bleak the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Finally, these texts point out that God's time is not our time. It is difficult to wait for restoration when we are suffering; it can sometimes seem as if God is cruel for not acting faster. Yet Scripture tells us, over and over, that God's timing has a purpose, even if we cannot see it. When God asks us to wait, there is a reason. Advent reminds us that, as with an unborn child, waiting is sometimes a necessary factor in making sure all goes as it should.

Overall, we close this quarter of study with two wonderful affirmations. First, we have a legitimate reason to hope. God intends new life for us and for the world. This new life will come one day in the form of a new heaven and new earth. Second, as the church, we find the impetus and power to act in God's name based on the very hope offered to us. We wait with God's own patience, secure in the promise that one day there will be "new

heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (2 Pet. 3:13). Hopefully, as we put our faith into action while we wait, we “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (v. 18).



In your mind, how does Ezekiel 47 fit with this Sunday's Advent message of hope? What helps you be patient as you wait for God to act?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. The rebuilding of the temple was the centerpiece of a much larger program of rebuilding in the life of God's people in their homeland. A mighty river would rise from the earth (see Gen. 2:6) from beneath the temple and return life to the land. Ezekiel envisions the new Jerusalem as a new creation. See also Psalm 46; Isaiah 55; Zechariah 14:8; John 7:38–39.
2. The river grows deep with abundant fish and vegetation with healing herbs (Ezek. 47:6–12). Compare Revelation 22:1–2, the tree of life growing along riverbanks that brings healing to the nations.
3. The river issues from the temple, indicating the importance of the temple to all of life. Life is recast so that worship (like a water well or cistern) occupies the orienting center for the community.
4. Scholars suggest that Ezekiel found inspiration for his vision of the river in Babylon, which was a city of abundant waterways. The waterways enabled irrigation, agriculture, and therefore civilization. Ezekiel imagines Jerusalem as a city where a river of grace flows.
5. Dispensational interpreters of Ezekiel's final vision (chaps. 40–48) believe that the new temple will be established after the second coming of Christ and will serve as the worship center for the people during the “millennium.” Christ is often identified as “the prince” (46:2), ruling over the millennial kingdom. Others contend that the temple and its worship were to be instituted as a practical renewal program upon the return to Palestine, even as some features of the vision are intended to be symbolic (for example, the river).