

September 5

Ezekiel 43-45

Today we read Ezekiel chapters 43-45 and have brought ourselves to within one day of finishing this great and mysterious Book of Scripture.

This morning, two major ideas dominate the chapters with which we are concerned. The first is the return of the Shekinah Glory, as God re-inhabits His temple. The horror that Ezekiel felt, when in his vision he had watched the glory of God depart from the Temple that Solomon built, is now replaced by joy inexpressible, as he watches, as the Glory that signifies the presence of God among His people, returns. What an encouragement it would be for Ezekiel's listeners to understand that not only would there someday be a new temple, but that the presence of God would return, after Israel herself was cleansed, to a temple even better and even more glorious than Solomon's Temple. I want you to remember this, because when we read later about the return of the Israelites from the Babylonian captivity, and the construction of a new temple, we will find them weeping, not in joy, but in sorrow, at the final result of their effort. They were disappointed, because the temple, which Ezekiel spoke about, was superior even to Solomon's, but the temple they saw reconstructed was inferior.

All the promises of restoration made in chapters 37 and 38 will be fulfilled when God's glory returns, and His throne and residence will be among Israel forever. Israel will never again defile the holy name of God. Israel never again would miss His presence among them. Israel would forever be the people of God.

The atmosphere of holiness dominates everything about the vision of this new temple. It is emphasized by the size of the wall -- that is 10-1/2 feet wide and 10-1/2 feet high - that surrounds the temple. It is underscored by the reference to the former temple, which had the private dwellings of kings adjacent to its walls, and highlighted by the greatly increased dimensions of the temple precincts and by an open zone -- a kind of spiritual 'demilitarized zone' -- that will surround this new temple precinct and separate the "holy" areas" from the secular city. In Solomon's day, the Temple was actually inside the city, but in Ezekiel's vision, the latter-day temple will be outside the city, just as the Old Testament Tabernacle had been outside the camp of Israel. The law of the temple, Ezekiel says, is that it is holy.

The second major idea we encountered here is the reinstatement of the sacrifices in the end-time temple. This poses an almost insurmountable problem for us, as we try to understand and interpret the Book of Ezekiel. I am sure that you already understand and feel the force of the problem. If Ezekiel's vision is of an end-time millennial or heavenly temple, then how can there be literal sacrifices going on. That seems to run absolutely counter to everything we know from the New Testament about the purpose and effect of the death of Christ on the cross. "He," the New Testament teaches very clearly, "is the propitiation -- (the atoning sacrifice) -- for our sins and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." The Old Testament sacrifices, about which we read so much in the Book of Exodus, were the 'types' of which Jesus Christ is the fulfillment. And that, of course, is what creates our problem. If, as the

New Testament says, Jesus Christ died once for all on the cross, then there can be no further need or use for sacrifices for sin. We have not yet read together the Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament, but if you have any knowledge whatever of that book, you will understand how difficult it is to conceive of sacrifices being offered by God's people, who have already experienced forgiveness and adoption by virtue of the once-for-all perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. To me, at least, it is inconceivable, because it seems to deny the efficacy and perfection of the work of Christ on the cross.

Friends, I believe in interpreting the Bible as literally as possible, but to do so with reference to the sacrifices in Ezekiel's future temple would force us to believe that the New Testament teaching on the sufficiency of Christ's death is somehow wrong. That, I cannot do!

Perhaps the solution to our dilemma is to be found in recognizing that Ezekiel -- like the writer of the Book of Revelation -- was compelled to speak of future things in language and images that would have meaning and clarity to the people of his own day -- so he spoke of true worship in terms of sacrifice -- that was how Israel truly worshipped. But Ezekiel's picture of temple worship (and just possibly his picture of the temple itself) was merely a sixth century B.C. symbol of an eschatological reality, which will look different, but accomplish the same thing. That is, that God will be in the presence of His people and they will worship Him continually