

September 6

Ezekiel 46-48

My reading of the Book of Ezekiel has put a sense of great anticipation in my heart with respect to the future. I do not pretend to completely understand all that we have read together in the last few weeks, but I am mightily interested in seeing how these far ranging prophecies will be fulfilled, and I cannot wait to glimpse the heavenly Jerusalem that I think is being described in the passages that we read on Friday and today.

I know that it is debatable whether Ezekiel is describing here an earthly scene during the millennial kingdom in the Jerusalem we know or whether he is telling us about the New Jerusalem that the Apostle John describes in the Book of Revelation, but a couple of things in the last few chapters that we read today may in fact be pointing to the latter idea.

The first is the river that is described in chapter 47. It comes out from beneath the temple and then flows south and east down toward the Dead Sea. (The sea Ezekiel is talking about is not the Mediterranean Sea but the Dead Sea!) As the river flows away from the temple it gets deeper. A thousand cubits from the temple it is ankle deep. Another thousand cubits and it is knee deep. Another thousand and it is waist deep, and another thousand cubits and it is now deep enough to swim in and apparently swift enough that no one can cross it.

Ezekiel doesn't mention any other tributaries feeding into the river to cause it to get so deep and voluminous -- indeed if the idea that its power and purity come from the fact that it flows from the temple then other sources are impossible. This is God's river. I need not tell you that this description is supernatural. There is not a great water source waiting to erupt beneath the temple mount in Jerusalem.

The river Ezekiel describes is a river of life. It turns the Dead Sea into fresh water so that it begins to support an incredible abundance of life -- fish and lush vegetation. Just in case you did not already know it, the Dead Sea is the lowest (1300 ft below sea level) and the saltiest (25%) body of water in the world. It is not now a very hospitable place right now! But Ezekiel says, in my vision it is going to be.

It is impossible to read Ezekiel's description and not think about the river of life that is described in Revelation chapter 22. It flows supernaturally from the throne of God and on each side of it stands the tree of life. Its leaves, John says, are for the healing of the nations. In the case of the Book of Revelation, we are explicitly told that John's vision was "symbolic." Might it not also be the same with Ezekiel's river and might they not both be pointing to the same thing?

A hint that Ezekiel may be using symbols to speak of the new heaven and new earth described by Revelation 22 is the very last sentence of his great prophetic book: "And the name of the city from that time on will be Jehovah-Shammah: the Lord is there."

In Revelation 22 John writes: "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Now the dwelling place of God is with man. He will live with them. They will be his people and God Himself will be with them and be their God." He says in the New Jerusalem there will be no night and no need of sun or lamp because God's presence will be a sufficient source of light and warmth. It may well be that in these last chapters Ezekiel is looking even beyond the millennial age to the new heaven and the new earth.

If that is so then our questions last week about the need for and the function of sacrifices are all answered -- the descriptions of the temple and its worship then become symbolic elements meant to direct our attention to the primacy of worship and to the activity that will be our preoccupation for all of eternity -- the worship of the Lamb and of our God.