

The Exiled Nation (585-535 BCE)

Ezekiel's Great Temple Vision

Readings: *Ezekiel 44:4-48:35*

Reflections:

- Ezekiel's angelic tour guide in the vision now makes it clear that only those who are circumcised in heart and in flesh may enter the temple. Now in Israel, God wanted the sign of circumcision of the flesh to be a reminder for the men that what was really important was circumcision of the heart. As we will discover with the coming of Jesus, the work of the Spirit to change us from the inside out is the only thing to transform our hearts and to make us circumcised of the heart, holy and set apart for God. And with the coming of the Spirit, then all people have the opportunity to be welcomed into intimate relationship with God, not just descendents of Israel. The emphasis of this future temple is a transformed heart.
- The rebellion and idolatry of the Levites have left them under judgment before God. Although God has a desire to restore them, it is only the priests of Zadok, the image of those who are truly faithful to God, that are fully restored as a priesthood. "They alone are to come near my table to minister before me and perform my service." Their whole ministry is meant to be carefully performed. In fact, they are not to wear clothes that make them sweat! ☺ In other words, they are to minister in a way that is rooted in rest, not laboring or striving. Now with this, the laws around being clean and not touching the unclean are reinforced. They were not to marry anyone but a virgin or a priest's widow (interesting small indicator of compassion for widowed women). Now, these laws in Israel which were meant to teach the people about being set apart for God were radically redefined by Jesus. In his story of the Good Samaritan, the priest who passed by on the opposite side of the road because of being afraid of touching something unclean was not the one who understood the love of God. It was the Samaritan, the enemy outcast, who went over, got dirty and actually rescued the man, who understood the love of God. This is a reminder that this prophecy points to something radically different from what the people have known and yet, because it uses many of the same images that were inherent in the Torah, it stills falls short of what God would ultimately reveal through Jesus. It gets us partway there but not all the way there. This makes sense as God was reserving the big, shocking reveal for the coming of his Son.

- The priests were to be the nation's judges, those capable of discerning the mind of God in helping people be reconciled in their broken relationships and conflicts. Here we see a subtle illusion to the role Jesus would call his followers to in being peacemakers and those entrusted with the work of helping people work through their conflicts. Paul picks this up and challenges Christ-followers to serve as judges in disputes within the church (1 Corinthians 6:1-6).
- "I am to be the only inheritance the priests have." This is a powerful truth for those called as priests of God, for all Christ-followers who are now priests to the planet. God has not given his priests of today any wealth or property that is to be held as our own possession. He alone is to be our prized, eternal possession. Once we embrace him as our only possession and only inheritance, he is happy to share with us everything he has. This means that we receive the best that he has to offer. In other words, as we let go of trying to have something to keep in this world, we receive something far, far better. We receive the wealth of the kingdom and the best of everything God has to offer. "The best of all the first fruits and of all your special gifts will belong to the priests." So do the priests have provision and secure land? Yes, but it God's land and God's provision that God is sharing with them, it is not their provision or land. The only thing they really have is God himself. Once you have God, you realize you don't need anything else and the bonus is that he then shares with you the best of what he has!
- The vision then walks through how there is land that is set apart for the temple and for a special holy city for the priests. This is described as a small square plot of land that has a large temple at the center. In Ezekiel 48, the description of the land is fully mapped out. We see that this holy city has twelve gates and is the spiritual hub of this future community. In Revelation 21, what we discover is that the true future city as revealed by Jesus is much larger than anyone ever imagined. The temple has been replaced with Jesus himself and it welcomes all nations into its healing and restoration.
- The prince is highlighted in the role of the high priest. Again this is no doubt a huge shock to Ezekiel's readers. The Passover and the celebrations associated with rest, Sabbath and New Moon (beginning of each month), are the only feasts mentioned. Again we see a significant simplification of the ritual of the new spiritual order. With the coming of the prince, we should expect that a lot of what has been done will no longer be required.
- In terms of the prince's role during the offerings and feasts, we see that he comes in with the people and leaves with the people. He fully identifies with the entire community and is their leader in worship to God.
- The inheritance of the new priesthood is not to pass to their servants but only to their descendents. This is a reminder that God has no grand-children. He only has children. You can be within Christ-following community and receive benefits from being in

community, but until a person becomes a true child of God, they only have these benefits temporarily. "His inheritance belongs to his sons only; it is theirs."

- The grandest aspect of this vision is the vision of the river flowing from the temple. Here are its characteristics:
 - This life-giving river flows eastward from the temple;
 - The river is ever deepening (the reverse of what you would naturally happen – it should be deepest at the mouth);
 - It gets so big and wide that no one can cross it but people can swim in it;
 - The river makes everything come alive;
 - The river has all kinds of fish and swarms of living creatures that can be caught by all the fishermen on the banks of the river;
 - Only those marshes and swamps that want to have the water but don't allow it to flow through them will become dead – a picture of selfish, self-centered attempts to capture and keep God's blessing for yourself;
 - Trees of life will grow on the bank of this river that will produce food and healing for all people.
- This vision of the river is clearly a picture of restored Eden. It is a powerful image of transformed creation and humanity. It is supernatural and miraculous: life explodes everywhere. It is backwards to what you would think: the river gets deeper the farther it spreads out. It is the kind of life we have always wanted: harmony with creation, abundance and peace. Jesus in Matthew 21 and Mark 11 makes it clear that this vision of the temple will never be realized through the religious establishment. Jesus shuts down the sacrificial system for a day, then curses a fig tree (the symbol of rest and life – see Micah 4:4; Zechariah 3:10) and declares that if people have faith the size of a mustard seed they can throw the temple mount into the sea (symbol of total destruction). But does this judgment against the religious system and the hope of this vision being realized through religion mean that the vision itself was rejected by Jesus? Now, in Revelation 20 and 21, this vision is retold. There is no temple but this river flows from the throne of Jesus. The community that surrounds this life-giving river, this holy city is much larger and expansive than anything ever imagined.
- We see in Ezekiel's vision of the temple, the river and the holy city a further progression and step in the development of God's vision for community. The garden for two is replaced by a holy, life-giving town of priests. This town for priests is ultimately replaced by a huge life-giving city for all nations. God's peace (shalom) for humanity, for restored relationship and life expands and includes more and more of his creation. The one condition is whether or not your heart has been transformed by his love and grace. In each case, those that "decide for themselves what is right and wrong" find themselves on the outside.

- God's unfolding revelation is amazing! What a picture of God's power to restore humanity! What a hope we have in Jesus!