

# Ezekiel's River

by Raymond Golsworthy

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*The sermon explores the symbolism of Ezekiel's River, representing the Life of Christ and its transforming effects within us.*

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 30:19, Isaiah 32:2, Ezekiel 47:9, John 7:37, John 11:25, John 14:6, Romans 6:4, 1 Corinthians 6:19, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 5:22, Hebrews 13:13

**Topics:** "Eternal Life", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

Raymond Golsworthy preaches on Ezekiel's vision of the River in chapter 47, symbolizing the Life of Christ flowing from the Altar, representing the cross of Christ, bringing eternal, death-conquering life to those who trust and accept Him. The River, depicted as Christ's life, flows towards the East, symbolizing the coming glory and everlasting splendor for believers. The depth of the river increases, signifying the ever-growing experience of Christ's life within believers, leading to a transformative and creative effect on their lives, producing spiritual fruit and newness. Golsworthy emphasizes the importance of not missing the River, warning of the tragic loss for those who fail to embrace Christ's life and the transformation it brings.

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## Transcript

"Everything shall live whither the river cometh." verse 9

Of the many remarkable visions granted to Ezekiel, that of the River, in chapter 47, is probably the most impressive, and it is certainly full of instruction and encouragement for God's people today.

The River is shown as flowing from the temple courts in Jerusalem, and moving eastwards towards the Dead Sea - all the time increasing in volume and strength, and bringing abundant fruitfulness wherever it goes.

We believe we have a beautiful picture of the Life of Christ, by which we mean not so much His Life History, but the "Life-energy" itself; - its intrinsic essence, and its inherent power. This is what John referred to when he says, "The Life was manifested, and we have seen it ... and shew unto you that Eternal Life which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us ( 1 John 1:2). That Life is eternal, death-conquering, and beyond all human comprehension and measurement, and it is the Life which Christ imparts to those who trust Him, and personally accepts His Lordship. And that Life is depicted for us in Ezekiel's River.

The Lord Jesus declared Himself to be "the Life" (John 11:25; John 14:6), and He even said that out from those who believe in Him would flow "Rivers of Living Water" (John 7: 37,38). We recall too, how Isaiah, foretelling the coming of the Messiah, said He would be "as Rivers of Water in a dry place" (Isaiah 32:2). This, we know, was first realised when Christ was personally in our world, and then, in a still fuller degree, during the early history of the church. It is being fulfilled today wherever Christ is known. The River is flowing on! And it is reaching the uttermost part of the earth.

In the light of the above, we venture to say that real 'Christianity' is not just a 'religion', but rather is it a great flowing river. And, where there is no river, there is no real Christianity. Is the Life of Christ there? That is always the test.

We believe this will become clearer and clearer to us as we continue with our meditation. May God show us the River, and lead us into the blessedness of it.

The first thing we must notice is:

#### 1. The source of the river

While mention is made, in verse one, of the Temple at Jerusalem, and also its "threshold", the real source of the River is finally identified as "the Altar" (Ezekiel 47:1). This would have been the "altar of sacrifice" which stood within the temple-courts - the place of the offering up of the sacrifices, and the shedding of the sacrificial blood. This, of course, represents what we call today, the cross of Christ, where our Dear Lord was crucified, and where He "offered Himself without spot unto God"(Heb. 9:14). We are thus being taught that the all-conquering Life of Christ (the River) issues from the cross.

This, of course, was true historically. The resurrection of Christ was preceded by His crucifixion. Likewise, all that we read about in Acts - the onward march of world evangelism, and the establishing of God's testimony in the nations, all stems from that great Event of Calvary. It is the great Resurrection Result; it is the flowing out of God's River - from the altar of the Cross.

But the same is also true spiritually, and this is the particular aspect we wish to emphasize. Deep in our individual lives, the great principle applies. If we want to know or experience the fulness of Christ's Life flowing through us, we must allow the Cross to do its own deep work within us. In other words, the Altar must be established in us, if the River is to flow through us. To use Paul's terms, we must take the position (fully warranted) of having been "crucified with Christ" if we are to know the blessedness of His great Life within (see Gal. 2:20). As one writer puts it:

"How may I know the victory, so many cry,

Commit thyself to Calvary, consent to die.

God's way of gain is seeming loss - we die to live,

And His Life comes when to the Cross, my life I give."

We can only very briefly touch upon the great Bible facts that lie behind this glorious "exchange". We need to see that our own "natural life" was totally corrupted in Adam's fall, and we have thus inherited a fallen nature. That is why Paul says, "In me, that is in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing" (Rom 7:18) and in the chapter that follows, - "they that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom.8:8)). For us, now, that whole

realm of "Adam " is forbidden territory, and it has to be vigorously abandoned by simple faith. But we have this Glorious Alternative, - The Risen Life of Christ. In other words, as we accept the altar, so we experience the river.

It is interesting to note that Paul spoke of being "always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, - that the Life also of Jesus might be made manifest (2 Cor. 4:11). While Paul was doubtless speaking here of certain physical afflictions he was knowing, the statement can apply to inward things as well. God often has to bring us to a sense of our own personal 'nothingness', in order to make us cry out for those Other Resources that are in Christ. And, at such times, He does not disappoint us, and that 'Other Life' is, indeed, "made manifest". The whole process is God's great mercy to us. He is placing the altar of Calvary within us, that we might know the great Resurrection River.

Yes, the River of Christ's life does flow to us from the Altar. It is at that point that the 'glorious newness' begins. We could say that, 'blessing comes from bleeding', - Life comes from death. The altar is the secret. (See Rom. 6:4)

We now proceed to consider:

## 2. The direction of the river

The passage repeatedly emphasizes that the River flowed "towards the East" (vs. 1,2,3,8) or, in other words, toward the sunrise. Here, surely, is something that stirs the imagination, and should greatly warm our hearts. Travelers tell us that, from Jerusalem, one may get marvelous views of the golden sun rising up behind the Dead Sea, more than 20 miles away, and also colouring the mountains of Moab, a little to the north, beyond Jordan. That, we say, was the direction in which the River flowed!

The East, we know, always speaks of coming glory. It is the direction of 'blessed hope', - happy anticipation of things to come - the days of splendour following nights of darkness. Paul tells us that, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him" (1 Cor. 2:9). Moreover, we read, in Proverbs, that " the path of the just is as the shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day", or, as it could be rendered, "unto the noonday" (Prov. 4:18).

Yes, thank God, the River is carrying us eastward; God is "bringing many sons to glory" (Heb.2:10; also see Math. 13:43 and Dan.12:3). No matter how much some of us may have already tasted of God's goodness, we may be assured that, as Wesley puts it, "There is better on ahead". This is our sunrise, and this is the direction in which God's River is taking us.

The Bible makes it very plain that the true Christian, and the true church, are headed for what will surely be an everlasting meridian of unspeakable glory. With our God there is no such thing as ultimate sunset. Even back in Genesis One, the order was not 'morning and evening' but regular 'evening and morning'. It is all so different from the downward 'course' of this world, where everything is decrease and decline, and where people have "no hope" (Eph. 2:17; 1 Thes.4:13).

How true was John Newton's testimony:

Fading is the worldling's pleasure,

All his boasted pomp and show

Solid joys and lasting pleasure,

None but Zion's children know.

That, we would say, is our 'Eastern outlook' today. And that is the direction of Ezekiel's River. What prospects! How we should thank God that even the dark pages of Old Testament history and with the bright promise of Mal. 4:2: "but unto you that fear My Name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in his wings." Hallelujah! Turn the page, and there is ... the Sunrise Himself!

Our next consideration would be:

### 3. The ever-increasing depth of the river

The passage tells us that the man with the measuring line measured the depth of the river at different stages along its course, and the results were recorded.

After 1000 cubits (1/4 mile) - "waters to the ankles" verse 3

After 2000 cubits (1/2 mile) - "waters to the knees" verse 4a

After 3000 cubits (3/4 mile) - "waters to the loins" verse 4b

After 4000 cubits (1 mile) - "waters to swim in" verse 5

At each of the early stages, the man that had measured, brought the prophet through, but this was not possible at the end. Ezekiel was, as we say, out of his depth, and could not pass through (verse 5). The river, quite evidently, was an ever-deepening one. And here, we suggest, is a very precious message for God's people today. Before we proceed, there is something which, perhaps, should be made clear. The passage is speaking of something that is increasing, and something that is getting deeper and deeper. This therefore cannot refer to the actual essence of Christ's Life, for that is something constant and unchanging. We suggest, therefore, that the emphasis here is rather on the expressions of that Life which do change, and which do get fuller and fuller. And certainly, from our side, thank God, there can be and there should be, ever-increasing experience of that Life. That, we feel sure, is the message for us here. We ourselves may know more and more of the "operating" of Christ's Life within us - until we also are "out of our depth" - and as the hymn-writer puts it, "lost in wonder, love and praise".

Paul, we know, was always pleading for spiritual increase in the churches, and he was always urging the Christians to "go on" - moving from infancy to maturity, and from strength to strength. He wanted them to "abound", and one of his favourite expressions was "more and more" (Phil. 1:9; 1 Thess. 4:1,10).

Peter, too, urges us to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18).

Thank God, we have the promise, "The Lord shall increase you 'more and more', you and your children." (Ps. 115:14)

Certainly, then, our experience of the life of Christ within is intended to grow, and to get "deeper and deeper" as the days go by. At first we may know but little of that Life - only that there is something different and our burdens seem to have been lifted from us. Later, we have a more constant victory over sin, and over the subtle powers of "the world". In the end, we may find ourselves entering into an intimate and

indescribable friendship with God Himself - all through Christ's Life filling and flooding us "more and more"! The phrase "waters to swim in" is, we feel, particularly significant. It suggests the idea of buoyancy with the whole being, somehow "lifted up", and, we may say, "not a toe touching" the dark bed of the River. In a word, we find ourselves spiritually raptured and totally spoiled for this world, and better still, wholly attached to the world to come.

Thank God, then, the River of Christ's life is, in this sense, an ever-deepening one. At present, we cannot tell into what depths it will later take us, and only the Holy Spirit can search out those deep things (1 Cor. 2:10). But He will do so in due time and will bring them also into our experience. All praise to His Name!

The next point for our consideration is what we shall call:

#### 4. The life-giving effect of the river

The second half of our passage (v 6-12) describes a remarkable transformation brought about wherever the river flowed. We read of fruit trees suddenly appearing on either side of the river, and bringing forth the choicest of fruits (v 12). Also the brackish waters of the Dead Sea, hitherto totally sterile and unproductive, suddenly become alive with fishes - "exceeding many". Many other details are given, but, overall, it is a picture of something gloriously new being brought into existence.

Here again, we believe, is a most encouraging message for the Christian. If the River itself portrays that eternal Life of Christ, which God placed in the believer's heart, then the verses now before us give us some idea of the startling effects we may expect it to bring about.

Paul tells us that, "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). He told the believers in Rome that, being in Christ, they now "have their fruit unto holiness" (Rom. 6:22). Likewise, he speaks of the Colossians being "fruitful in every good work" (Col 1:10).

Perhaps the closest New Testament link with the passage in Ezekiel is found in Galatians chapter five, where Paul describes the "fruit of the Spirit". He first lists the typical "works of the flesh" (vs. 19-21), and then gives the beautiful contrast brought about by the Spirit - love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (verses 22,23). We may be sure that moving from the one realm to the other brings about a dramatic transformation indeed; but that is what God plans to do for us as we allow the Life of Christ to flow through us. These are the fruit trees that will appear on either side of God's river.

As far as the Dead Sea is concerned, it could be that some of us who had never even thought of "winning souls for Christ" will find ourselves becoming happy "fishers of men", and experiencing a joy comparable to that of the fishermen of Engedi and Eneglaim.(Ezek.47:10).

We have referred to Ezekiel's river as "a Life-Creating River", and perhaps we should pause here to consider the import of that phrase. Do Christians really receive a life which is creative? Very understandably, we somehow hold back from such a suggestion. Yet, as far as we can see, the phrase is wholly warranted by Scripture. Are we not told that our bodies are "Temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19)? Does not that mean that the Christian is already "a container of Deity", and, indeed, a container of Creative Deity? Would we be wrong, then, to say, (perhaps with bated breath), that the Great God of Genesis once is now resident in our regenerated spirits and our frail bodies? Has He not graciously

"tabernacled Himself " in these "earthen vessels" which we carry with us day by day ( 2 Cor. 4:7)? And, if that be so, who can measure the potential of it? Here are depths unfathomable.

It is important to notice that, in Scripture, Christ is said to be a Life-Giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45 RV). This is in contrast with Adam who, in the same verse, is designated, "a living soul". The difference, we notice, is not only between "soul" and "spirit", but between "living" and "Life-Giving"! Not a small difference, we dare to say.

And this is the Christ who, as Life-Giving Spirit, has surged down into us. And this is the River which now flows through us; a Life-Giving River indeed, and One who Himself possesses "all power in heaven and in earth" (Matt. 28:18).

Doubtless, there are hidden mysteries here, and certain reasonable considerations would apply. We ourselves have no hesitation in admitting that we are quite out of our depth. But the fact still stands; a Life-Creating Christ now resides within us, and carries us along in Himself. Surely, we would all do well to bow down before God, and ask Him to show us something more of the infinite potential of the New Life now given to us - through redemption.

Perhaps the most important thing is to get back to what we said at the beginning about the Source of the River - the Altar, and to acknowledge that the whole dry wilderness of Adam has, in the eyes of God, now been terminated at Calvary - and terminated for ever. And it is because of this, that the fruitful garden of Christ is now ours. (See Isa. 51:11).

We would like to close this section with a quotation from F.B. Meyer. In his comments on this chapter he says, "ever since the river of life issued from the Cross, it has been deepening and extending, bringing life and beauty into the barren wilderness of this world. The transforming effects .... can be compared to nothing less than the fertilizing effect of a mighty River".

And the saintly writer concludes with the prayer, "Flow on, great sea of God, until the Dead Sea of sin is swept away before thy beneficent waters". To all of which we say "Amen".

The final point for us, now, is what we shall call:

##### 5. The cost of missing the river

We have in mind the great loss that will be ours if we distance ourselves from the River, or fail to make, and keep, contact with it. While it is blessedly true that everything touched by the river was gloriously transformed (verses 7-10) the passage goes on to say, "but the miry places and the marshes thereof shall not be healed. They shall be given to salt."

There is surely a very distinct sadness about those added words. The areas referred to were so near the flow and yet they were not "healed" but just given over to salt. (While in God's sovereignty, there could have been some gains even here; it is basically a picture of great loss and tragedy - so near and yet so far!)

Here, surely, is a very solemn warning for us all. It is possible to be very near the powers of Christ's Resurrection Life, and yet to miss it all. Our lives continue to be "marshy swamps" when they could have been so alive, and so beautiful and so productive!

Our Lord met many people of this kind when He was here among us, and He had to say, "Ye will not come to Me that ye might have life" (John 5:40). Even to Jerusalem, He had to say, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered thy children even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not". Then the sad, sad, words, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate." (Matt. 23:27,28)

The rich young ruler is another example of this. In answer to his enquiry, the Lord had set the alternatives before him; he could cling to his riches, or could have Christ. The Lord spoke with great tenderness, and we are told, "Jesus, beholding him, loved him" (Mark 10:21), but the young man still made the wrong decision - he went away sorrowful, "for he had great possessions." (Matt. 10:22) The root tragedy, of course, was that he under-valued Christ. And that is the terrible mistake we are all too capable of making. Had the young man really seen the glory and the loveliness of Christ, he would have, like Paul, "counted all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Him." (Phil.3:8) Even in material things, Christ could easily have given him a hundredfold if that had been good and appropriate in his case. Or better still, he could have been among the "poor in spirit" (i.e. the totally dependent ones) to whom belongs "the Kingdom of God" (Matt.5:3)! But again, "he would not". He just went away with his sorrows and is never heard again - just "given over to salt".

That same choice is before us now as we come to the conclusion of our meditation on Ezekiel's River. Do we want that beautiful transformation described in those verses, or are we content to remain a stagnant marsh? To be more exact, and more to the point, do we really want Christ and His Risen Life? Are we prepared, right now, to identify ourselves with that altar and the resultant resurrection river of Christ's Life?

It comes back, of course, to that matter of our estimate of Christ - at what price do we value Him? How do we esteem that Great Redemption purchased for us at Calvary and that great resurrection victory? And are we prepared, right now, to "go forth unto Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach (Heb. 13:13,14)? God forbid that any of us should still "lie low" in our own foolish pride and our imagined self-sufficiency. To do that would be to go on existing just as a miry swamp.

We are reminded, here, of Laban's question to his sister Rebekkah, "Wilt thou go with this man?" And then, Rebekkah's clear answer: "I will go" (Gen. 24:52). And what a glorious result - married to Abraham's "beloved son" (compare with John 5:20,21)!

Surely, we would do well to listen again to Moses' final word to the nation of Israel, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life that both thou and thy seed may live (Deut.30:19).

May God help us to choose God's River! By doing so, we shall live indeed, and we shall live fruitfully (John 7:37,38 ; Ps. 65:9).

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