

A River That Could Not Be Passed Over: The Fullness of the Spirit

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores Ezekiel 47 as a prophetic vision of the Holy Spirit's life-giving power flowing from Christ and the Church in the present dispensation.

Scripture: Ezekiel 47:1

Topics: "The Holy Spirit", "New Beginnings"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of Ezekiel 47 in relation to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as seen in Acts 2, illustrating how the river symbolizes the fullness of the Spirit that flows from the glorified Christ. He explains that this river, which overcomes death and brings life, represents the new dispensation of the Holy Spirit, offering a transformative experience for believers. Sparks highlights the necessity of being fully immersed in the Spirit, moving beyond mere ankle-deep experiences to a profound encounter with God's presence. He also notes that the Spirit's movement is governed by the authority of Christ and that believers must align with the Spirit's direction to experience true fullness. Ultimately, the river signifies the life-giving power of the Spirit that is essential for the Church's witness in the world.

Transcript

We are coming to the end of our time together, and that means that there is a very great deal in Ezekiel that we shall not be able to consider. So this morning I suggest that we give our attention to chapter forty-seven. As you know, this is the chapter of the river. I think that this chapter is well enough known by you that we shall not have to read it right through. However, we ought to read the second chapter of the Book of the Acts, because I feel that Ezekiel forty-seven and Acts chapter two go together. The second chapter of the Acts is the New Testament fulfilment of what we have here in this chapter in Ezekiel. But there is a passage of Scripture between these two chapters, found in the seventh chapter of John's Gospel, and we will read that. John, in chapter seven:

Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.'" But this He spoke of the Spirit, Whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified (verses 37-39).

Now strict interpretation demands that we observe one point, for that which the Lord Jesus was referring to in John seven, "the last day, the great day of the feast," was not strictly what we have in Ezekiel forty-seven, but related to the Feast of Tabernacles, and that takes us a long way back before Ezekiel; it takes us back into the life of Israel in the old days. You will remember that the Feast of Tabernacles was the commemoration of Israel's coming out of Egypt and living in tents in the wilderness. We need not dwell with the details of that feast because that is not our subject, but it was to that that Jesus was referring.

Ezekiel forty-seven is not a celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, but there are some common features which are in Ezekiel forty-seven, John seven, and Acts two. We know that when Jesus spoke those words He was in the temple at Jerusalem. It was in the temple that the Feast of Tabernacles was being celebrated, and at that time the priest went down to the pool of Bethesda and brought water back and poured it out over the threshold of the temple. Jesus took hold of that and applied it to Himself.

The Source Of The River Is The Man Hidden In The Sanctuary

Now the common feature in these three places - Ezekiel, John, and Acts - is this: the waters are flowing out from the House. And then there is another common feature in these three places: in the House, as we have seen, everything related to the Man Glorified in the Throne. The Man Glorified in the Throne governed everything. Now here in John seven, John makes that comment. He said, "This He spoke of the Spirit, Whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified." So that pointed on to the future when Jesus was Glorified. Undoubtedly, that was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost. Jesus was Glorified and the waters came out from the House. So, you see, we do have some common features in these books.

Now we come to some details of Ezekiel forty-seven, and to begin with, we must note that this whole situation is one that sets forth a condition in this dispensation. As we know, many believe that all this belongs to the Millennium. Well, the situation in this chapter is not a situation in the Millennium. Neither does this fully correspond to the end of the Book of the Revelation. It is true that in Revelation we have the river flowing out from the Throne of God and of the Lamb, and there are many features there just like these features in Ezekiel. However, what we have here in Ezekiel is neither in the Millennium nor in the Coming Age, but it relates to the dispensation in which we are living. As you see, in Ezekiel it is a situation of need, it is a scene of death and disease. These waters are to overcome death, and the leaves of these trees are for medicine to heal disease; it is a scene of great need. In the Millennium death will be suspended for a time, and at the end of the Book of the Revelation, death is no more. Here in Ezekiel death has to be met and overcome. Here an unhealthy condition has to be dealt with. It is important to realize that this chapter in Ezekiel applies to the present dispensation.

Now let us take note of a few other details. First, the Source of the river. The Source of the river is somewhere hidden under the threshold of the House. The Word says that the waters issued from under the threshold of the House, they came out from under the threshold. Perhaps we should conclude that they came out of the threshold and moved toward the side of the House, because it says that they went down toward the east. This seems to have been the movement. Now we shall come to that again in a minute. For the moment, the waters issued from some secret place under the House.

Now we know that the Lord had said the Sanctuary was the place of His Throne and the place of His Glory, the place where the Lord dwelt. I think we are to conclude that the waters came from there. Of course, this is all type and symbol. We are not told exactly where the waters started, but we are told that

they came "out from under the threshold." I think that we can conclude that they started in the place of the Throne and the Glory, and that is a hidden place in the presence of God, for we know that God was hidden in the Sanctuary.

The Man in heaven is hidden in the Sanctuary. He is the Heavenly Mystery. He is on the Throne. He is Glorified, and then the Spirit comes out from Him as in that position and in that condition. We remember that Jesus said, "afterward He would not manifest Himself to the world, HE would manifest Himself to witnesses whom He had chosen." After His resurrection, He did not show Himself personally to the world. So far as the world is concerned, Jesus has gone right out. The world does not know of His personal existence. He is a mystery to the world. He is an unreality to the world because He has hidden Himself from the world. He is hidden in Heaven. But there is a manifestation of Himself, and that is in the Spirit of Life which comes out from the Sanctuary. Christ is not only personally in heaven, He is enshrined within the heavenly Church.

For the world, in this dispensation, Jesus is still a mystery and the Church is a mystery. The Church is not understood, but this is the mystery: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." And perhaps you Bible students know that the literal translation is: "Christ in the midst of you, the hope of glory." Of course, Christ is in us personally and individually, but the Word in Colossians is "Christ in the midst of you" - the Church is the context of those words. The mystery which is great among the nations is Christ in the midst of the Church. That is the hope of glory. So Paul said, "Unto Him be the glory in the Church by Christ Jesus." The world can only know the mystery by the Life which flows out from the Church.

That is what happened on the Day of Pentecost. By the river (the Spirit) which came out from the Church, the world became aware that Jesus is alive; Christ is the only Way in which the mystery is made known. The waters come out from the Sanctuary. That is what it says in Ezekiel 47:12: "because the waters thereof issue out of the sanctuary." In the Sanctuary, they are a mystery. The mystery is made known when they come out of the House. This is all so true to the teaching of the New Testament.

The River (The Holy Spirit) Makes All Things New

So we see that the first detail of the House is the Source of the river, and then the second is that the waters flow toward the east. It says there that the temple was toward the east. So the waters moved by the south to the east. Now that is also an interesting point! Why was the House built with its gate toward the east? Why does everything look toward the east, and why do these waters move toward the east? Well, of course, the east is always the symbol for a new day. The sun rises in the east, the world's day begins in the east. Therefore, the east is the symbol of a new day, and it is quite clear that this River meant a new day for everything and everybody: it is that new day of the Spirit to which the Lord Jesus referred. "But an hour is coming, and now is when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit." When Jesus was speaking about the coming of the Holy Spirit He said, "In that day." How often He used those words, "In THAT day," that is, the day of the Spirit; that is, the new dispensation - the dispensation of the Holy Spirit.

It is in this dispensation that God is offering a new day to everyone. Of course, it is new in many respects. All the old things of that past generation are gone - the old things of types and symbols, the old things of forms and ceremonies. Those old things are passed away: "Behold, all things have become new," and this is the river that makes all things new. It is the day of the Holy Spirit. So it flows toward the east, and the Spirit brings in a New Day.

Then the next thing. "Wheresoever the River cometh, everything lives":

When the Man went forth eastward with the line in His hand, He measured a thousand cubits, and He caused me to pass through the waters, waters that were to the ankles. Again He measured a thousand, and caused me to pass through the waters, waters that were to the knees. Again He measured a thousand, and caused me to pass through the waters, waters that were to the loins. Afterward He measured a thousand; and it was a river that I could not pass through; for the waters were risen, waters to swim in, a river that could not be passed through (verses 3-5; ASV).

This Man of brass measured "a thousand cubits" four times. He measured a thousand, and the waters were up to the ankles. He measured another thousand, and they were up to the knees. Another thousand and they were up to the loins, and He measured another thousand and there were waters to swim in, a river that could not be passed over. Well, I think the symbolism is very simple. This sets forth the progressive fullness of the Spirit, or the progressive fullness of Christ. In the beginning there is immense intrinsic potentiality. It may be small in Jerusalem, it may be small at its beginning, but that is only a comparative matter. Of course, it was a very great thing that happened on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, but compared with what came afterward it is but small. The beginning is small in comparison with all Judaea and Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth. But in that small beginning, there are all the potentialities to meet the whole world. The scope of this river increases. It grows fuller and fuller and wider and wider, but what is here in the waters is sufficient to meet all the need, however great. The Spirit of Jesus is sufficient for all. That is what it says, or that is what it means. There is sufficiency in Christ ministered by the Spirit to meet the greatest need. There is no need, however great, which cannot be met by this river. It does not matter where the river comes: "wheresoever the river cometh, everything lives." If you study Ezekiel forty-seven, you will see that there is no situation for which these waters are not equal. And yet one must make a reservation in that statement. It says later in the chapter that there is something that will not be healed but will be given over to salt. There is such a thing as resisting the Holy Ghost. Judas did not come into the good of the day of the Spirit; and that is in the New Testament, this possibility of sinning against the Holy Spirit. Where that is deliberately and persistently done, then there is not Life but death. But provided there is no deliberate and conscious refusal of the Spirit, the Spirit is equal to every situation. How great is the Spirit, He is altogether incomprehensible!

The prophet said it was a river that could not be passed through. This is something that is altogether impossible to cope with. How true that is in Acts two. The coming of the Spirit is likened to a mighty, rushing wind. The Spirit came like that on the Day of Pentecost. This thing cannot be managed by man. You cannot bring the Holy Spirit within the compass of your ability. Ezekiel said: "a river that could not be passed over." This is too much for man. Oh, that we knew the Spirit like this! And yet in principle, this is what the Spirit does. He refuses to be tied up to our human systems and our human measure. He refuses to be limited to our natural man. He refuses to be limited to our traditions and our prejudices. That is what we find in the Book of the Acts. The Holy Spirit is too much for the people in Jerusalem. He is too much for Peter, and all Peter's prejudices. He is too much for Herod the king. He is too much for everything that gets in His Way - a River that you cannot control.

Now for the Spirit to be like that, to be expressing Himself in that way, two things are necessary; and this is a very true principle. There will only be this fullness and power of the Spirit if these two things exist. The first is the absolute authority of the Throne, that is, the absolute authority of the Man in the Throne. We have said again and again that the Man in the Throne governs everything. Everything in the whole Book comes under The Man in the Throne. In the Book of the Acts, we see the Man in the Throne governing everything. - It is the absolute Lordship and Headship of Jesus Christ.

Now God will not give His Spirit in fullness and in power to something that does not correspond to His Mind. So this thing is essential: the Man governing in the House. Therefore, what this increasing measure says to us is this: the Lord never desires to leave His people ankle deep in the Spirit. It is not the Lord's Will that we should have the Spirit and Life just up to our ankles, neither is it His desire that we shall have the Spirit up to our knees, nor yet up to our loins. The Lord's desire is fullness, waters to swim in, but waters that are too much for us.

Of course, this is rather a terrible situation. I think that you might detect in Ezekiel that he was a bit frightened. To him, this was a terrible situation, and when it gets like this, of course, it is terrible. - We want to keep our feet on sure ground. - We do not want to be swept off our feet; the Church wants to have its feet on this earth, to be quite sure of its ground. Well, you know what that means spiritually, but the Lord's thought is that we should be swept right off our feet, that we should be carried out into depths for which we have no measure. Let us think about that. There are two little words here, "a river that COULD NOT be passed through." There is the great "could not" of the Spirit. That "could not" stands over all human capacity.

He Caused Me To Go

The second thing necessary for fullness is represented by the banks and the trees. The banks of the river are referred to. This is a river that is flowing between banks. It is not just a flood spreading itself all over. This river is running between banks. You know the Holy Spirit has a way, He has a way that He will take, He has His Own Mind as to which way He will take. If the Spirit says, "I am going this way," it is no good our saying, "Well, we are going another way." You have a lot of that in the Book of the Acts. Paul spoke about assaying to preach the Word in Bithynia, and going toward Asia, but he said, "The Spirit of Jesus suffered us not, " and it turned out that the Spirit was going to Macedonia at that time. Now if Paul had gone to Bithynia, or Asia, he would have gone away from the Spirit. The Spirit was saying, "I am going this way at this time. If you want to be with Me, you must come My way." And that is what happened to Peter. The Spirit was moving toward the Gentiles, but Peter wanted to go his way. The Spirit said in effect, "If you want to go with Me, you must go My way. I am not coming your way. I am not coming the way of your tradition and your prejudice. Today this is the way that I am taking." And when Peter went that way, he found the Spirit in greater fullness than he had ever known before.

I think you see the principle. The banks represent a definitely and clearly defined Way that the Spirit is taking. He may change His direction from time to time. The River may not be just one straight line, but it will always flow between banks. The Spirit always knows exactly what He is doing and what He is after. How important it is for us to be in the banks with the Spirit!!

And then we have the trees on either side of the river. Of course, these trees in the New Testament are the living witnesses. I suppose a passage which best sets that forth is this one in Ephesians four:

And he gave some to be apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ; till we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a fullgrown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (ASV).

Here are living witnesses on the banks of the river. Here are those along the banks of the New Testament, and God has had His trees all down the centuries. They are the living witnesses bearing testimony to the fullness of Life in Christ, leading on toward spiritual fullness, the fullness of Christ.

There is a rather interesting thing to note here in verse nine of Ezekiel forty-seven: "And it shall come to pass, that every living creature which swarmeth, in every place whither the rivers come, shall live." I do not know whether you have got a mark in your Chinese Bible against that word, however, in the Hebrew it says, "whither the two rivers come." It is in the plural in the Hebrew, and my Bible gives me a reference in the margin which says, "whither the two rivers come." That is the Hebrew.

Now that seems to upset everything, does it not? But I think again, it is a symbol. Perhaps this river did divide into two, but "two" in the Bible is the number of adequate testimony. Wherever you find the number two, you find sufficient testimony - "In the mouth of two witnesses everything shall be established... Whatsoever two of you shall agree... He sent them forth two by two." You see, two is the number of sufficient testimony. So what we have here by the Spirit is sufficient testimony in the witnesses. So, you see, the effect of it all is Life. Of course, I would like to say a lot about that, but we must leave it. THE TEST of everything is Life. THE TEST as to whether Jesus is Lord is found in the Life. THE TEST as to whether the House is in order will be in the Life. THE TEST as to whether the spirit is having His way will be the Life. The Life is the testimony. Thus the testimony is this, that God has given unto us eternal Life.

And so we close for the time being. Ezekiel had been told to show all this to the House of Israel. In order to show it all to others, the prophet had to be caused to go that way himself. You notice what Ezekiel said, "He caused me to go." You and I must be caused to go this way before we can show it to anyone else. This is not just objective truth for teaching: this is the experience of the servant of the Lord.

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