

BELPRES  CHURCH

**Sermon Title: The River**

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**Scripture:**

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Ezekiel 47: 1-9, 12

**47** The man brought me back to the entrance to the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. <sup>2</sup> He then brought me out through the north gate and led me around the outside to the outer gate facing east, and the water was trickling from the south side.

<sup>3</sup> As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits<sup>[a]</sup> and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. <sup>4</sup> He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist. <sup>5</sup> He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross. <sup>6</sup> He asked me, “Son of man, do you see this?”

Then he led me back to the bank of the river.<sup>7</sup> When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. <sup>8</sup> He said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah,<sup>[b]</sup> where it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh. <sup>9</sup> Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live.

<sup>12</sup> Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.”

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**Transcript:**

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Amen. Go ahead and have a seat. Holy spirit, thank you for being here and ask that as we turn to your word, you would help us live out of it. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen. Well, hello to those of you joining us online. Thank you for joining us as well as those of you here in the room. Great to have you. Great to have Jake back from paternity leave. Thank you, Jake, and all of that, so.

So this fall, you may have heard me mention that I'm sad because my son and youngest daughter are away at college. I might have said that once or twice or 25 times. But we have not been completely empty nesters because our oldest daughter graduated from college in March and got a job in Seattle and decided to live with us for a year to save money. However, she recently got another job at Disney helping with marketing. She has wanted to work for Disney ever since she was seven years old. So this is her dream come true. And they told her that she could work remotely from here. But no, no, no, no. She decided to go to Orlando where the team is based. I don't know why, some nonsense about living her own life and being an adult and all the things that we raised her to do.

So last week she moved to Orlando. Okay. She was supposed to help ease us into the empty nest, right? She was our empty nest training wheels. You know the wheels you put on your bike until you learn how to ride it and you take them off? We have lost our empty nest training wheels. The passage that I'm going to read in just a minute is about taking the training wheels off of our faith to go deeper in our relationship with Jesus. So here's the passage, okay? In scripture. And I just confused our AV people because I was supposed to read that first.

So sorry about that. The scripture, the Ezekiel 47. He's having a vision and it says, "The man brought me back to the entrance to the temple. And I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east. And the water was trickling from the South side. As the man went Eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and led me through the water that was ankle deep, measured off another 1000 cubits and led me through water that was knee deep.

Measured off another 100 and led me through water that was up to the waist. Measured off another 1000, but now it was a river that I could swim in, a river that no one could cross.

He said to me, this water flows toward the Eastern region and goes down into the area about where it enters the dead sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish because this water flows there and makes the salty water fresh. So where the river flows, everything will live. Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit because the water from the sanctuary flows to them." So this is a text about going deeper in our faith with Jesus. This is the last sermon in a series we've been doing on the story in Ezekiel few chapters earlier, where God will brings a valley of dry bones back to life, showing that God revives and remakes all things.

And today's passage, this one that I just read comes several chapters later at the end of Ezekiel, where Ezekiel has this vision of a river flowing from the temple that brings dead things back to life, just like God brought those dead bones back to life a few chapters earlier. And as he says, the water that comes from the temple enters the dead sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. Fruit trees of all kinds will grow out on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Wherever the river flows, everything will live. Wherever the river flows, everything will live. The dead sea is 10 times saltier than any other ocean. So salty, nothing can live there, not even algae. That's why it's called the dead sea. But this river flows from the temple turns the dead sea into fresh water and it brings life. And ultimately, this points to Jesus. Jesus who says, "The water I give people will be coming them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." Jesus is the well that never runs dry, the water that quenches every thirst, the fountain that never stops flow. And the river of life he gives us brings dead friendships, dead hopes, dead joy, dead marriages, back to life if, if we take the training wheels off of our faith and go deeper and deeper with him, more deep in our relationship with him than just coming to church. That's a good start, but there's so much more.

A couple weeks ago, I cited a study from Harvard university, not exactly a pro-Christian place that showed that deeply committed Christians have better marriages, higher life satisfaction scores, even better health. But not just people who go to church, it has to go deeper than that. People who are all in with Jesus. And in this story that I just read, Ezekiel says there was a heavenly man, maybe an angel, probably actually an old Testament appearance of Jesus. And Ezekiel says he led me through water that was ankle deep.

Measured off another cubits and led me through water that was knee deep. Measured off another 1000, waist deep. Measured off another 1000, but now it was a river deep enough to swim in, a river that no one could cross. It's an image of going deeper and deeper into the water of life that Jesus brings. And in order for us to be remade, in order for us to be the people we want to be and have the world we want to have, in order for our family schools, offices, friendships, marriages to be remade, in order to be remade we have to go progressively deeper into our relationship with Jesus.

We can't have a shallow consumer Christian faith and be remade. But when we go deeper with Jesus, a couple of things happen that this river sort of symbolizes. And the first thing is this river starts small and it becomes a flood. It says the water was trickling out from underneath the south side of the temple. Not gushing, trickling. But by the end, it's so deep that Ezekiel can swim in it. When God starts to work in our lives or in our world, it often starts so small we don't even notice it at first. But then it grows.

When God came himself and the person of Jesus, it started very small at first. A woman has a baby in a manger and he grows up to be a broke preacher and gets crucified and raised from the dead, left behind a handful of incredibly incompetent disciples who launched the largest movement in history. Started, but it started very, very small. As I've shared with you before I am a Christian, because when I was an atheist, a Christian coworker bought a bandaid for me to put on a burn on my arm. And that started a process, a year long process of me seeking and exploring that after a year led me to become a Christian and eventually become a pastor because she bought a bandaid.

Okay. When she gave me that bandaid I did not say, "Behold, the bandaid of God. He has just decisively intervened in my life. Nothing will be the same because of this bandaid of God." No, I didn't say that. I didn't think that, it was just a bandaid. It was the turning point of my entire life. But it started very small. So whatever problem you face right now, whatever trial you're going through right now, take hope. God's remaking may have already begun, you just can't see it yet. Second thing about this river that represents our relationship with Jesus. It flows to the lowest places in your life.

The dead sea is the lowest place on earth, 1400 feet below sea level. What's the lowest place in your life? School problem? Relationship problem? A sin that you can't stop sinning? What is it? The good news is water always flows downhill. God's grace, power, love will

flow to the lowest place of your life. That place you don't think any good can come from it, that place you don't think any life can happen there. That place that is so dead, so salty, you think there's no hope. There's nothing that can happen. Nothing God can do.

God's, grace, power and mercy will flow to that lowest place in your life, enter the dead sea into the garden of Eden. And many of you know this, I think of some of our senior citizens, so many of whom have been going deeper and deeper with Jesus for decades. And you know this and so you can say to the rest of us, "Come a little deeper. The water is great." And there's lots of things that we can do to go a little bit deeper. I mean, I could make a long list of how we go deeper, like practically, what does that look like. Long list, but there are three that come from this text.

Okay. The first to go deeper with Jesus is to worship. This river that brings new life comes from the temple, a place of worship. That is our hope doesn't come from a government building, doesn't come from a school, doesn't come from a bank. We are remade in the presence of God, which is what worship is about. Being in the presence of God. And notice here, Ezekiel, isn't observing the river. He's not critiquing the river. I don't like the way this river is flowing. He's in the river. He's having an experience of the river. God is here in this room and worship is about experiencing his presence.

The problem is in America, we have turned worship into entertainment. We pastors have done this because we want to make you come to church and keep you coming to church. And quite frankly, you have done this by pressuring us to give you the music and the sermons and all the things you want, just the way you want them. Together we have sinned and turned worship into entertainment which is about watching something and then evaluating it. And we all do this, right? Yeah. I didn't like the music today. Yeah, the sermon was kind of off today. And I do this too sometimes. I mean, I'll sometimes say that sermon was so boring.

I was so bored when I preached it. Right? I mean, by my own sermons. A friend of mine told me that he grew up in a family where every Sunday lunch always included a big slice of roast preacher, because they would just critique the service at lunch, right? Now we all do that. We all have our preferences and preferences are fine. But if we have to have our preferences about music or anything else to worship, that's not worship.

That is spoiled, entitled consumer Christianity. And I am sometimes that person. Not always, but sometimes. But here's the thing, the Bible says that in heaven, there will be a great

multitude from every nation tribe, people and language standing before the throne. Every culture is going to be in heaven. They're not all going to be singing the songs you like. So if you can't get used to singing songs you don't like here in church, heaven's going to be really uncomfortable for you. So the next time something happens here that you don't like, just remember, we're getting you ready for heaven.

Okay? We are serving you. A mature Christian can worship in anywhere, anytime to anything because worship is when we give our full attention to God and not on a bunch of stuff that's not in the Bible. I remember one time that this really became real to me was when I was doing college ministry and I was having a busy day one day and I had to go to a prayer meeting with students. And I got there all flustered and my mind racing. And I said, "Okay, let's pray." Probably in a tone that said, "Let's get this over with. I got stuff to do." And so we went to prayer, but nobody prayed. Nobody. So I decided, well, I'll start. So I prayed to kind of drop the hint that at a prayer meeting you're going to pray. Right? So I prayed. And when I finished nothing silence for awkward time, awkward amount of time. Just nobody prayed. And finally, a student kind of heard her take a breath. And she said, "Oh Jesus." I thought, yay. We're going to address him before he comes again. You know? And she said, "Right now, I know that right now, all around you, the angels are singing holy holy, holy. And all I can think about is my midterm. So Jesus, I give you the outcome of this midterm.

You take it so that I can join my voice to the angels and worship you." And as she prayed, I realized that while I was racing from one meeting to the next that day, at the same time in heaven, throngs of people were bowing down before Jesus. And all I needed to do was join my voice to theirs. And my stress in that moment was gone. I felt Jesus presence, felt joy and peace and hope. It gave me life. That's worship. And you can do that anywhere. And the deeper we go into it, it brings life just like that river that flows into the dead sea.

So when you're here, focus on the words of the song, the feelings that you're having. If something annoys you in worship, it happens to all of us. It happens to me. If the music or whatever you don't like, whatever, just turn that into and say, "Jesus, man, my heart is not right. Meet me here and help me worship you." Focus on Jesus here and then all week long in prayer. And yeah, yeah, my mind wanders when I pray. If your mind wanders, you're in good company. My mind wanders when I pray, I just figure that's part of it. And every once in a while, when I realize that my mind has been wondering, I say to Jesus, "Jesus, are you getting all this?"

And is there something you're trying to teach me in these places that my mind has wandered to?" Worship. Second way to go deeper with Jesus is to tithe. Oh, you did not see that coming, did you? You're, "Oh man, we were having such a nice sermon and then he brings up the tithing thing." Right? Well, the chapter right before this one, the chapter right before this one about the river is all about giving. And tithe means a 10, to give 10% of the money God gives to you. It's his money to the worshiping community you're a part of, to be used to for God's purposes here and around the world.

Old Testament commands 10%, the new Testament ups the ante, and says that giving should be sacrificial. Which means for people like me and my wife at our income level, we give more, 10% to this church and then over and above to other Christian organizations. We're also called to tithe our time. It's kind of both. The average American Christian gives only one or 2% of their income. And all the data shows that the richer you are, the richer you are, the less you give as a percentage.

In fact, poor people tend to be much more generous. And this is not just about getting the resources the church need needs to meet the practical, spiritual, tangible needs of people here and around the world. That's part of it. And a lot of you do tithe and thank you. And if everyone tithes, oh my gosh, we could make a serious dent in the homeless problem here on the East side and help all kinds of people in poverty around the world, in the name of Jesus and all kinds of stuff.

So that's part of it. But the other reason to tithe is it is one of the best ways to go deeper with Jesus and know that he is real. Because we see him provide for our needs, gives the money we need and or teaches us we can be happy on less than we thought we needed. Which helps us know that he's real because he's there. We see him providing. I got an email from a woman in our church who I'll call Lori, who said, as a kid, she was taught to tithe. And for her, it was really fun to give that money because even little kids have money. I mean, if you're in high school, you have money and time that you can give. And Lori said it was fun for her. But she ended up marrying someone who wasn't a Christian and so it made it hard to give because he wasn't really, he didn't really want to do it. Well, 20 years later that marriage ended and Lori got nothing financially. And she was struggling. And at church one day she heard a woman talk about how her and her husband had struggled financially at one point.

And so they asked her dad for help. And the dad said, "Are you tithing?" And this woman said, "No, there's no money left at the end of the month give." And he said, "Well, then give the tithe at the first of the month and watch God provide the rest." And so that's what they did. And that's what God did. And they have been tithing ever since. Well, Lori, that inspired Lori to give. So she started to give not 10% at first, but started to give. She said it didn't take long to see God providing everything she needed. So then she started giving 10% and God continued to meet her needs.

She says, "It gives me great joy." This is a quote. "It gives me great joy." She likes this. "It gives me great joy to know I'm part of helping people through this church in the name of Jesus." About two years ago, she went to halftime at her work, which meant her salary was now half but God nudged her to just keep giving the same amount. So now she's giving 20%. I could tell stories like that all day long, how God meets our needs. People who face unexpected expenses only to get an unexpected refund from something that meets the expense and on and on.

It is one of the best ways to go deeper with Jesus. Because we see him provide and that helps us know that he is real. Worship, tithe. And finally, to go deeper with Jesus, go with the flow of the holy spirit. The image in this passage is a river. Don't fight the current. That's how people drown. Don't resist where the holy spirit is trying to take you. Yes, we need to check what we hear with scripture to make sure it's God and all of that we need to discern, but don't be paralyzed by that. Don't fight the current of where the holy spirit nudges you to go.

One time I was visiting my parents in Richland and I was standing on a dock at the Columbia river and it was June and really hot. The river was really high that day and flowing very quickly. It changes from day to day. This guy came along and looked like he was going to jump in. And I said, "I grew up here. I wouldn't do that if I were you. The river is high and flowing pretty fast today." Do you think he listened? Nope. He just jumped on in and within seconds he's down the river and he looks at me with these big eyes. And I'm, "Dude, I told you not to do it. Don't look at me."

So then he starts trying to swim upstream to get back to the dock. And I said, "No, no, no. You'll just exhaust yourself. Don't do that. I said down the river always is a park that sticks out in the river. The current slows down there. Just let the current take you and you can get



out at the park." So he flipped over on his back and started floating down. And he said, "This is fun once it's not scary." So often we are afraid to let current of the holy spirit take us. We're afraid if we do what Jesus says to do in the Bible that how's it going to turn out. Like if I tithe, will I have enough money?

If I talk to someone about Jesus or serve in some way, is it going to be okay? So we resist what the spirit is doing, but if God is nudging you to it, yes may be hard. Yes, it may be scary at first, but it will bring life just like the river does in this text. It's fun once it's not scary. So where are you in the river? Maybe you're on the banks. You kind of come to church, but don't really think about Jesus the rest of the week. Or maybe you're ankle deep, the safe place, kind of not really taking risks for Jesus or maybe you're waist deep.

You have weighted into the life that Jesus offers, but still not fully immersed kind of half in, half out. This is where I hang out a lot of times. Not always, but sometimes. But the place I want to be and the place where the life is, is in the all in place where I am letting the spirit take me where he will. So wherever you are in the river, take the next step. Worship, not as entertainment, but as encountering the presence of God. Tithe, follow a nudge to do something Jesus wants you to do.

I know a successful businessman who was, it's kind of restless, bored, wondering isn't there more to life than just the next promotion and more money. And Jesus began to nudge him to free him from that bondage. And so he waded in ankle deep and sponsored a child in Kenya through a Christian organization that helps kids in poverty. And part of sponsoring a child isn't just the money you give, but it's also writing letters because Jesus works through relationship. Well, he didn't do that part at first, but Jesus kept nudging him to wade in a little bit deeper and have a relationship with this kid.

So he wrote to his sponsored child and this little girl just captured his heart. She had a tumor on her face, which caused her parents to say that she was a burden and a curse from the devil. And so he paid for surgery to remove the tumor. Few years later, he waded in even deeper and went to Kenya. And one of the things he did was to take her to an amusement park in Nairobi. And she got to do all kinds of things like rollercoaster ride and eat cotton candy and horseback ride. Things she didn't even know existed. And at the end of the day, he asked her, "What was your favorite part of today?"

And she said, "Oh, my favorite part was when you took my hand were walking toward one of the rides. It was like having a dad." This girl who had been shamed by her own father, never been treated as a daughter, had a moment of dignity and love. And it wasn't the rides and the toys that this man thought that's what was going to bless her. No, no, no. It was the relationship. It was Jesus working through him to remake this little girl. But also to remake him. Because when she said "Holding your hand was the best part," he got all choked up and felt the holy spirit closer than he ever had saying, "This is what you were born to do." So he went home and told his wife, "I want to sponsor a dozen kids and I want to visit them all, all the time." And she said, "Sounds good to me." And they've been doing that ever since. And relationship with these kids gives him more joy than any promotion or big deal he landed or anything. In fact, sometimes when he introduces himself, he says, "My name is Mark and I help Jesus set kids free." He waded into the river, focused on God, gave, followed a series of nudges that took him deeper and deeper and deeper into life with Jesus.

And he, and this little girl were remade. So wherever you are in the river, wherever you are in the river, Jesus says to you, and to me, "Come a little deeper. Let me take you to places of life and abundance that you can't even imagine. They may be hard. They may scare you at first, but they will remake you and they will make you new. Come a little deeper. The water is great." So Jesus, thank you for the call. And you are the river of life and we ask that you would lead us deeper and deeper progressively into a relationship with you. Jesus help us to do that so that we can be remade and so that we can help you remake this world in your name. Amen.

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**Discussion Questions:** Ezekiel 47: 1-9, 12

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*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Opening Questions:**

- Icebreaker: Who was the last person you wrote a letter to (and mailed it with a stamp)?
- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

**Scripture Reflection Questions:**

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

**Sermon Reflection Questions** - *Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:*

- What keeps you from pursuing a deeper relationship with Jesus?
- What steps can you take to go deeper with Jesus?

**Closing Question and Application:**

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?
- Who might you share this with?

**Closing Group Prayer:**

- Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.
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