



# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## **Where the River Flows, Everything Will Live**

SERMON BY REV. STEVE CLARK ■ OCTOBER 29, 2023

In one of the greatest cinematic masterpieces of all time, Disney's *The Emperor's New Groove*, my favorite Disney villain ever, Kronk, frequently wrestles with his better and worse nature. He has a "Kronk Angel" on one shoulder and a "Kronk Devil" on the other shoulder. "Do I do the worst thing or the better thing? The thing that my boss wants me to do or the right thing to do?" Most of the time I wouldn't rely on *The Emperor's New Groove* to inform my spirituality, but I think Kronk's onto something here! Most of us can testify that on our best days, we can help the world around us become a slightly better place when we choose patience over pride or forgiveness over revenge or gentleness toward our spouse and kids over a temper. On our worst days, we can make the world around us a less better place for those around us by snapping when we're irritated, by refusing to give grace, or by being a little stingy with our generosity. This is displayed in our lives every day.

On one end of the spectrum, I think of a pastor of mine, Tim. Pastors need pastors, too. I meet online via Zoom with Tim every month for something called "spiritual direction." Tim has me sit in silence for a minute or two, prays for me, then leans back in his chair and asks me what I want to talk about. I feel renewed after an hour of Tim's listening, talking, and praying with me. I have new insights about my life. I'm at great peace with whatever I was struggling with. Don't you want a Tim? I'm sorry, but you can't have my Tim: I wouldn't trade him for the world!

Let me contrast that picture with something much different. This week you probably heard about Lewiston, Maine, where there was

another mass shooting. Dozens died and scores were wounded by a senseless act of violence. You might feel grief for the families; anger at the perpetrator; maybe a sense of hopelessness or despair at the seemingly never-ending news cycle of brokenness, anxiety, and destruction in our world. How could someone do this?

These are two extreme cases that paint a picture of reality for us. With every day of our lives and every interaction in our day, in small ways, we either make our world a better place or a worse place. We listen deeply to a loved one, choose patience with a spouse, give resources to the needy, and we help renew the world. Or we choose unkind and angry words with a friend, selfishness with our resources, or revenge rather than forgiveness and our little corner of the world becomes a little more anxious and broken. How do we choose the first, rather than the second? How can we bring renewal to our own broken lives, marriages, and family relationships, and renewal to the people around us instead of bringing destruction? To answer that question, let me read for you our passage today, from Ezekiel 47:1-12 (ESV).

**T**hen he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. <sup>2</sup>Then he brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and behold, the water was trickling out on the south side.

<sup>3</sup>Going on eastward with a measuring line in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits, and then led me through the water, and it was ankle-deep. <sup>4</sup>Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was knee-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was waist-deep. <sup>5</sup>Again he measured a thousand, and it was a river that I could not pass through, for the water had risen. It was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through. <sup>6</sup>And he said to

me, “Son of man, have you seen this?”

Then he led me back to the bank of the river. <sup>7</sup>As I went back, I saw on the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other. <sup>8</sup>And he said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, and enters the sea; when the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh. <sup>9</sup>And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes. <sup>10</sup>Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From Engedi to Eneglaim it will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. <sup>11</sup>But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. <sup>12</sup>And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.”

You might be thinking, “Wait a minute. That story is about a temple. You were going to tell me how to become the kind of person who can change the world! This is a bait and switch. This is like when I go online looking for a recipe for fettuccine alfredo, but then I find a food blogger’s website and I get twelve paragraphs of her life backstory before the recipe. What’s a story about a temple got to do with becoming the type of person who can change the world?”

Stick with me! I think it will make sense in a little while. At first glance, this story of a river flowing from the temple is a confusing passage, and it’s hard to see what it has to do with our lives. This passage has a lot to do with water so understanding the water imagery is key to understanding the passage. We’ll talk about the water in two parts: the water’s *source*, where it comes from; and the water’s *force*, or its effect. This explanation was used by commentator Brian Bell, and I find it a helpful way to explore the passage. First, let’s start with the water’s source.

In Ezekiel 47:1, *“water is issuing from below the threshold of the temple.”* That water eventually turned into the great river Ezekiel couldn’t even swim through. What’s going on? To most of us, water coming out of a building is a very bad thing. If you drive home after church today and there is a large river running from your garage you will not be as pleased as Ezekiel seems to be. To understand what this means we need to know why the temple was so important.

The temple is a big part of the story in the Book of Ezekiel, a prophet in the Old Testament. Prophets were typically called by God at special times with special messages for His people. Ezekiel drew the short straw: he lived at a difficult time when the Israelites had abandoned God and were mistreating one another; their news cycle might have felt like ours today. Ezekiel’s message was this: if God’s people continued to disobey Him, judgment would come. In chapters eight through eleven, Ezekiel has a vision or dream of God’s judgment on Jerusalem: The city is destroyed and God’s presence leaves the temple. In chapter 11:23, *“the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.”* Sure enough, that vision came true just five years later during Ezekiel’s lifetime when Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple razed.

But by the time we get to the end of the book, the tone has changed. No longer is there a promise of judgment but a promise of restoration. In chapter 40, Ezekiel has another vision about the temple: *“in the fourteenth year after the city was struck down”* (Ezek 40:1). In this vision, a heavenly guide takes Ezekiel back to Jerusalem, and the last eight chapters of the book describe a new, rebuilt temple including all its measurements, all its rooms and decorations, and the river we heard about in chapter 47. In chapter 43, Ezekiel has a triumphant vision of *“the glory of God coming from the east”* (43:2), and *“the glory of the LORD filled the temple”* (43:5). What does it mean that God’s glory filled the temple, and why is that such a high point?

When my wife and I moved to Florida in early September of last year, we moved into a very quiet neighborhood. We had the

community pool to ourselves some days; there was never a wait for the restaurant; we rarely ran into people when we walked our dog. Then January happened. Suddenly we couldn't find a seat at the pool; our dog had just assumed she owned the entire condominium complex but was now very confused with all the people moving into her condo building. It was my first Southwest Florida season!

In Florida, you've probably noticed there are a lot of seasonal homes. Many people own homes but don't necessarily live in the homes as they spend most of the year in Wisconsin or Massachusetts. You'd rightly call it their "house," since they own it; but in the summer there is a difference between someone who lives in a home year-round and someone who owns the house but doesn't reside in it. After living here through this past hot summer I can understand why! But this difference is a helpful picture for us.

When the temple was in Jerusalem, God was like a year-round resident. He didn't just "own" the temple and visit it on holidays; He lived in the temple! 1 Kings 8 describes God's glory entering the temple after it was built as if He were moving in. The holiest room of the temple was like God's living room; even the holiest priests could only enter once each year. Today we might call the church "God's house," but we're not afraid of being struck dead for accidentally walking into the sanctuary on a Tuesday, and we don't expect to see the mysterious cloud of God's presence behind the receptionist's desk in the office. The temple was very different. It wasn't just God's house, but God's home. The temple meant, "God is present here." That's why Ezekiel 43 is such a big deal: When God restores the temple He says, *"I will dwell in their midst forever"* (Ezek 43:9).

Armed with that knowledge, look again at our text for today. When Ezekiel described this powerful river coming out from the temple, the whole point was not that it was coming out of a building. The point was that the river was coming out from the presence of God. And as this powerful river of God's presence flowed, it got deeper and deeper and wider and more powerful such that, by 47:5, *"It was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through."*

Once again, to most of us, this image is confusing. In the 21st century, a river flowing through a city is not a good thing. It reminds us of storm surge photos after a hurricane. In the 6th century B.C., it meant something very different. Before indoor plumbing and bottled water, people settled near rivers. A river was a sign of life and abundance. In ancient Egypt when the Nile burst its banks and flooded the land it was viewed as a divine blessing from the god Osiris. It meant the soil would be rich and bring a bountiful harvest. Water—and rivers—meant life itself. The presence of water determined whether you ate or starved. Abundant life flowed from the presence of God; God's presence is the source of the waters. What a beautiful image but what does it have to do with us today?

I am going to take a bit of a left turn in my interpretation of this confusing passage, so follow closely behind me. People interpret this story about the temple in all sorts of ways because Ezekiel can be a very confusing book. There are flying wheels, animals with weird faces, valleys of dry bones coming to life—name the weird prophetic motif, and Ezekiel's ready to one-up. In fact, my ESV Study Bible has a footnote saying that "almost all interpreters agree that Ezekiel 40-48 is one of the most difficult passages in the entire Bible." A very comforting sentiment when one is preparing a sermon on it!

Some think Ezekiel 47 is completely literal: that one day there will again be a literal temple in Israel. Some people think it's completely apocalyptic: that this passage refers to heaven and this depiction of God's presence and the river have to do with our future in heaven. Many disagree with my interpretation, but I believe the temple is a symbol for believers in Jesus. I believe it has to do with us, the church, right now, today. And here's why.

In 1 Corinthians 6, the Apostle Paul writes, *"Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God"* (1 Cor 6:19). Jesus speaks in similar language in the Gospel of John when He says, *"If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him"* (John 14:23). In the Revelation vision of heaven there is no temple. We are the temple

of God's presence. God doesn't live in a house anymore. He doesn't live in the church. If you believe in Jesus Christ, God's presence lives in you. Let's take that concept and apply it to our earlier idea: God's presence is the source of abundant life that renews the world. If you believe in Jesus, God's presence lives in you. The combination of these ideas is God's presence in you is the source of abundant life.

Now is this passage making a bit more sense? You can do something with the statement: Abundant life flows from the presence of God. God's presence in my life is the source of abundant life. You might be thinking, "Wait a minute. I know people who aren't believers in God, and they've renewed my life! They've made the world a better place!" It's true, some of my non-Christian friends are people who have made my life so much more joyful. Many non-Christians have done amazing renewing work in the world. If God's presence is the source of abundant life, how do we make sense of that?

To answer that question, we need to talk about the force of the water. Look at Ezekiel 47:7: *"I saw on the bank very many trees on the side of the river."* Again from the water, we have an image of abundant life. But then things get wild. In verse 8 we're told, *"This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, and it enters the sea; when the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh."*

On its own, that verse might not produce any great spiritual epiphanies. Let me give you some more context. The Arabah is the name for the desert to the southeast of Jerusalem. There is only one body of water, one sea, in that desert. It's known as the Dead Sea. It's the Dead Sea to which Ezekiel is referring when he says that this river will flow into the sea and make it fresh. It's the Dead Sea to which he's referring in verse 9 when he talks about many fish beginning to teem in its waters.

If you have been to the Dead Sea, you know exactly how ludicrous this image is. The Dead Sea is a hot tub in a desert. It is the lowest point on planet Earth. The concentration of saltwater in the Dead Sea is so high—34% compared to 4% in the ocean—that you can't sink. You can bob around like a cork, sit on the water, and

stand upright in the water like a pencil. The saltiness of the Dead Sea is also why it's called the Dead Sea; nothing can live in it except some very hardy forms of bacteria. You are discouraged from staying in the Dead Sea for longer than 20 minutes because you can become dehydrated from the saltiness. The Dead Sea is the singular most barren body of water on Earth.

Ezekiel casually tells us how the river that flows from the temple will make the Dead Sea fresh. It will make fish live in the Dead Sea. This is an astonishingly impossible image. You may as well say the Everglades will dry up or that mountains will spring up in Naples or Bonita Beach Road will never have traffic again. What causes this impossible turnaround? Verse 9 tells us *"Everything will live where the river goes."* The picture of the water's force is clear. It doesn't just bring abundant life; it brings renewal to barren places. This powerful river has the power to renew the world no matter how dry and broken it might seem. It is a river of living water: a river that brings to life whatever it touches.

In John 4, when Jesus speaks with the Samaritan woman at the well He tells her, *"Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him...the water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life"* (John 4:14). You might remember how Jesus described this water earlier in the passage: *"Living water"* (John 4:11). Jesus is saying when we believe in Him and are worshipping God the way we were created, a river of living water springs up inside us. Now from where could Jesus possibly be drawing that imagery?

From what we've learned we might say the main idea from Ezekiel 47 is the presence of God has the power to renew the world. But if we add what we learn from Jesus about living water, and what we learn from Paul about our bodies being a temple for God's Spirit, then Ezekiel 47 might really be: The presence of God dwells in believers of Jesus. That means you have the power to renew the world. The river Ezekiel saw flowing out of the temple with the power to renew the Dead Sea isn't flowing out of the physical church building. It's not flowing out of really qualified spiritual leaders or special



people. It's flowing out of the temple. And you, Christian, are the temple of the Holy Spirit. The river that can make the world alive flows out of you! You have the power to renew the world!

That sounds audacious. But what if it's true? What do we mean by renewing the world? It is any time you bring the experience of God's kingdom to the world. When you forgive someone who doesn't deserve forgiveness, that's renewal. When you are patient with your kids and loving to them when you don't want to be, that's renewal. When you put your spouse's interests genuinely above your own, that's renewal.

The creators of Alcoholics Anonymous knew that only belief in a higher power, which we know to be Jesus, could give people the power to be set free from addiction. That's renewal. Family members of the victims of the Charleston church shooting in South Carolina stood before their family's killer, one by one, and forgave him in the name of Jesus. That's renewal.

Life where there's death; fish where there's desert. Think of John Newton, the captain of slave ships and seller of human beings whose conversion to Christ made him an abolitionist and the writer of "Amazing Grace!" Think of Chuck Colson, Nixon's hatchet man and Watergate scandal accomplice whose newfound faith in Jesus led to a dynamic prison ministry. Think of the Apostle Paul who turned from a murderous scoundrel to someone willing to die for his faith, Matthew the tax collector, Simon the Zealot, Zacchaeus, Nicodemus, the list goes on.

The river of life that comes through belief in Jesus Christ can make even the most barren desert come to life. These are things we cannot do on our own. This is what abundance means. All of us, even those who might not be believers in Jesus, receive some measure of God's "common grace"—we have the ability to be nice to people when we don't want to be or to be kind and generous. But to forgive someone who wrecked your world? To go from slave captain to slave redeemer? That is an abundant kind of renewal beyond normal human ability. And the outrageous testimony of Ezekiel 47 is that

you, as a believer in Jesus, have that world-changing power residing within you.

If that's all true, why isn't it working? Why is the world so broken? Why is our nation so broken? Why are our families so broken? Why do some churches feel more like war zones than hospitals? Instead of a powerful, raging river why does it feel like our spiritual lives are rarely more than a trickle?

In the 1978 war movie, *Force 10 from Navarone*, some soldiers complete a daring rescue mission to recover an explosives specialist. They want this explosives specialist to destroy a crucial bridge that will ruin their enemies' chances of winning the war. As soon as he sees the bridge, the specialist, Miller, says he'll need eight hours to detonate the bridge. He needs tons of explosive power. The troops don't have eight hours. They begin to panic that there's no hope after all. Then one of the men thoughtfully asks, "Miller...what would happen to that bridge if that central arch was suddenly hit by millions of tons of water?" Mallory remembers a dam just a half mile up the river. Miller lights up. "A dam? Why didn't you say so before? I can do a tremendous job with a dam!" Miller gets some explosives to detonate the dam and when the water is unleashed the powerful force of the raging river demolishes the bridge.

Our job as followers of Jesus is to wreck our own dams. If we believe in Jesus Christ's death on the cross and Resurrection from the grave, His Spirit lives in us. If we believe in Jesus, we have an unfathomable power of God's Holy Spirit living inside us. But we have our own dams of sin, darkness, and idolatry in the way. Like dams containing a river, our sinful tendencies and our own deep flaws slow our spiritual waterfall into a trickle. We have the power to renew someone's marriage – but our own is crumbling. We have the power to renew the world – but so often, our own world is falling apart. To "destroy the dam" is to get the slavery of sinful habits, tendencies to judge one another, or reluctance to trust God out of the way of His life-giving Spirit. It's not up to us to fix the world. It's up to us to get ourselves out of the way and let Jesus do the work.

In John 15, shortly after telling His disciples that His Spirit would make His home in them, Jesus said, *“Abide in me, and I in you...apart from me, you can do nothing”* (John 15:4, 5) On the one hand, Jesus said you will have the power to renew the world living in you. On the other hand, if you don’t nurture your relationship with Jesus – spend time with him, spend time in worship, walk in community, read His Word, and obey Him – that power will remain like water trapped in a dam. The power will remain untapped, without a relationship there is no renewal. But if you can burst the dam and set the water free there’s no telling what renewal it can bring.

You have the power to renew the world living inside you. What does that mean and how do we do it? Let me give you two ideas.

1. **Feed the river.** God’s Spirit lives in you but so does a sinful nature. As you feed your spiritual nature the source of the river intensifies. How do you feed your spiritual nature? Through simply being with Jesus; abiding in His Word; engaging in His community; and spending time in silent prayer. What is one thing you could do this week to feed the river?
2. **Destroy the dams.** Jesus, through His Spirit, renews the world. Not us. How can we get the “dams and clouds” out of the way to let His powerful Spirit’s river flow through us? A dam might be a sinful habit you’ve been clinging to. It might be a sense of despair that God will never use you. How do you destroy the dams? Well, sometimes you might need explosives. You might need to ask a friend to hold you accountable for your temper and check in every week with you on how you’re doing. Sometimes, just feeding the river can make it powerful enough to destroy the dam. Again, the river of Jesus brings life, not our own hard work.

There’s one more image of living water I neglected to tell you about in Revelation 22:1.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life,  
flowing from the throne of God and from the Lamb,

through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding different kinds each month. The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

You see the parallels, don't you? The river of life flowing from God through the city, trees on either side—it is Ezekiel's river. Right now, you and I are called, as best as we can with our broken dams, to bring healing to the nations through Jesus Christ. But one day the mission will be complete. One day every ill will be healed, every wrong will be righted, and every longing will be fulfilled. And every time you, through the power of Jesus, get the privilege of bringing a tiny bit of renewal into someone's life, you are seeing just a foretaste of what we will have one day in His city—where the river goes, everything will live! ■