

Strong at the Broken Places

6. A River of Blessing

August 29, 2021

Welcome to the final week of our series on the book of Ezekiel. I rarely have what could be called a vision, but around 20 years ago an image came to my mind with some unusual clarity and I wondered if it was from the Holy Spirit. At that time, Crossroads consisted only of our original campus on the hill in North Fayette Township.

I had a mental picture of a water cascading from our church, starting down our hillside, and flowing out into the surrounding county. The phrase “A River of Blessing” came to my mind. I understood that image to describe God’s intent for Crossroads Church. At the time I didn’t recognize that that image was very similar to the one the prophet Ezekiel received in a vision over 2,500 years ago.

The book of Ezekiel records a series of visions God showed the prophet Ezekiel. The visions reveal the glory of God, the root causes of Israel’s captivity in Babylon, and the Lord’s good purposes for Israel. God revealed that he would restore Israel back to its homeland and defeat the forces against it.

Ezekiel’s final vision is found in chapters 40-48. It describes what the restored temple would look like from a spiritual perspective. In the vision, an angel acts as a tour guide to show Ezekiel around. There’s a new altar, new priests, and a new system of worship. God’s presence comes back and enters the temple. God once again lives with his people. It is Powerful!

In chapter 47, the angel shows Ezekiel water flowing out of the temple: ***Ezekiel 47:1-2*** *In my vision, the man brought me back to the entrance of the Temple. There I saw a stream flowing east from beneath the door of the Temple and passing to the right of the altar on its south side. ² The man brought me outside the wall through the north gateway and led me around to the eastern entrance. There I could see the water flowing out through the south side of the east gateway.* This stream is only in Ezekiel’s vision; there has never been an actual stream flowing out of the temple; this was symbolic – to communicate a point.

Let’s notice two things about the river in Ezekiel’s vision. First, **the stream grows deeper and wider.** ***Ezekiel 47:3-5*** *- Measuring as he [the angel] went, he took me along the stream for 1,750 feet and then led me across. The water was up to my ankles. ⁴ He measured off another 1,750 feet and led me across again. This time the water was up to my knees. After another 1,750 feet, it was up to my waist. ⁵ Then he measured another 1,750 feet, and the river was too deep to walk across. It was deep enough to swim in, but too deep to walk through.*

So, the river gets deeper. That's not unusual; most rivers do. The Mississippi starts out 20 feet wide and 3 feet deep, and it grows to be a mile wide and 200 feet deep by the time it enters the Gulf of Mexico. But here's what's unusual about the river Ezekiel sees: **it gets deeper with no tributaries**. There are no feeder streams or rivers that make it grow, it gets deeper on its own. It comes from the presence of God in the temple as a stream, and the stream grows to become a deep river without any visible contributors. The angel wants to make sure Ezekiel is taking it all in: **Ezekiel 47:6** *[The angel] asked me, "Have you been watching, son of man?"*

The second thing to notice about this river is that **the river gives life**. *Then he led me back along the riverbank. ⁷ When I returned, I was surprised by the sight of many trees growing on both sides of the river. ⁸ Then he said to me, "This river flows east through the desert into the valley of the Dead Sea.*

Ezekiel was surprised to see trees because the area around the Dead Sea is a desert. Water is scarce; it might get 2 inches of rain per year. When I was in Israel a few years ago, I took a picture from a plateau that overlooks the Dead Sea Valley, which is the lowest elevation on earth. In the picture, the Dead Sea is in the distance. Hardly anything grows around the Dead Sea, and nothing grows within it. The water of the Dead Sea is ten times saltier than the ocean, so no fish or plants can grow in it. That's why it's called the Dead Sea. People die if they drink its water.

But when this deep river from God reaches the Dead Sea, it transforms everything: **Ezekiel 47:8-9,12** *The waters of this stream will make the salty waters of the Dead Sea fresh and pure. ⁹ There will be swarms of living things wherever the water of this river flows. Fish will abound in the Dead Sea, for its waters will become fresh. Life will flourish wherever this water flows...¹² Fruit trees of all kinds will grow along both sides of the river. The leaves of these trees will never turn brown and fall, and there will always be fruit on their branches. There will be a new crop every month, for they are watered by the river flowing from the Temple. The fruit will be for food and the leaves for healing."* The river transforms everything it touches. The New International Version puts **Ezekiel 47:9 (NIV)** like this: *where the river flows everything will live*. If we open ourselves up to God he will give us life, because *Life will flourish wherever this water flows*.

When we look around today, we see a lot that is not flourishing. Marriages and families are breaking apart. There are bitter divisions in the nation along with natural disasters, injustice, anxiety and depression, and emptiness. But amidst it all, there is a river flowing from the presence of God, and life will flourish wherever this water flows.

Here's what we need to hear today: **the river flows through us**. When I had the mental picture of a river flowing from our hillside to the world, it was you and me moving out from the hillside into a thirsty, broken world with the life of Jesus, motivated by the love of God and love for others.

In **John 7:38** Jesus said, *Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.* Jesus is the Living Water, and he said that living water flows *from* within us who believe into our thirsty and dying world. And wherever the river flows, life will flourish.

Notice that Jesus said the water will *flow*. That means we are a river, not a lake. A river and a lake are both made up of water, but they are significantly different. A lake collects water in one place, and anyone who wants to drink from it needs to go where the lake is. A church that is a lake says to unreached people, “Come worship with us.”

The water in a river is always moving outward and irrigating the land it touches. A church that is a river takes the living water of Jesus out to the thirsty community. That’s who we want to be at Crossroads.

For the last 30 years, the river of life has been flowing through the people of Crossroads. Today I’d like to share with you part of the vision of what our church can look like five years from now, on our 35th anniversary. Our staff and many leaders have given their input and helped refine this.

Our mission remains the same: to make disciples who make disciples. To do that we will multiply disciples, groups, and churches everywhere. We are motivated by love: love for God and love for others. **As the River flows through Crossroads, the River will be deep and wide.**

In **Matthew 28:19-20** Jesus said, *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*

When it comes to making disciples, our goal is quality AND quantity. Our aim is to make more AND better disciples who love God and love others. The world has changed over the last 30 years, so we have adjusted our strategy for reaching it. We have shifted from a “Come and see” strategy to a “Go and show.”

We want to equip and send people with power and love to make disciples and we have shifted from seeing the weekend service as the basic expression of the church to seeing the Life Group as the basic unit. In groups, we can worship, grow in community, and join in mission. We are equipping our Life Groups to reach people in their neighborhoods and workplaces.

If we’re going to send everyone as an everyday missionary, we need to equip them. Our Equipping Track is a series of classes which, combined with Life Group experience, helps develop people. Starting next month, there is a new addition to our equipping track called Movement Makers. This is a one-year long, in-depth, experience that will refine character and activate calling. It is going to powerfully change people’s lives. You are part of a church that is a rich environment for equipping you to love and

obey Jesus. When people think of Crossroads, they will think of people who are being changed by Jesus and who make disciples.

We are called to make disciples beyond our own area. Jesus said to **go make disciples of all nations**. So, **the river flows to the world**. God so loved the world, so we do, too.

A few years ago, we started a non-profit called A1.8 Movement to be the church planting arm of Crossroads Church. We just renamed it “The River Network”, after Ezekiel 47:9 “where the river flows everything will live.” *The River Network’s purpose is to start and strengthen churches*. Plans are underway to catalyze 100 new churches and other churches are looking to us for help in how to build a discipleship culture. The River Network will equip existing churches in relational disciple-making, both in the US and overseas.

Looking ahead, we’ll see that **the river will help every race and language to flourish**. The most recent Census data revealed that the US more multi-ethnic than ever. 20 years from now, there will be more people of color than white people in America. That means that if we are going to reach our nation and our region, we *must* reach people who don’t look like me.

What does it look like to love our neighbors who are of a different ethnicity? Those who are white loving people of color, and people of color loving those who are white. As we love on another, Crossroads Church will look as diverse as heaven.

We also need to reach people of other languages. On Pentecost, the Spirit miraculously empowered the first disciples to speak about him in multiple languages of those who were in Jerusalem. As a result, thousands of people heard the Gospel in their own language and received eternal life. So, from the first moment of its history, the church was a multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-language body.

Several months ago, Pastor Christy felt prompted to brush up on her high school Spanish. She was praying for us to be able to reach people of other languages and thought Spanish might be useful.

Not long after that she was in her office at the back of the West campus building talking with another pastor when there was a tap on the window. A woman was standing outside the window. Christy motioned her to the back door so they could talk. The woman was from Venezuela and spoke Spanish. She explained to Christy “The Lord told me to come here”, so she did. The woman didn’t come in the front door, she knocked on Christy’s window at the back of the building. I think that was an encouragement to Christy that she was on the right track.

I believe the Lord is knocking on our window as a church asking, “Will you love people who speak different languages in the name of Jesus?”

Not long after Pastor Christy had her experience, a small Spanish-speaking congregation asked us if they could meet at our North building for worship. Then, when they heard about our ministry philosophy, they said they'd like to be involved with Crossroads.

Recently, a couple who speak Portuguese started attending our services. There are now 16 Portuguese-speakers who say they want to learn English at Crossroads.

And, before the pandemic, 50 young people of Indian descent met every Saturday morning in our building at West to learn Tamil, the ancient language of India. It's like the Lord is saying, "I've brought them into your building. Are you willing to show them the love of Jesus and offer them life?"

Maybe I'm passionate about reaching those who speak other languages because I know what it is like to live in another country and not speak the language. I went to high school in Brussels, Belgium and while I was there, someone shared the Gospel with me in English, and my life was forever changed. Believers went out of their way to reach me, and I am grateful.

The world might be segmented, but not the Kingdom of God: **Revelation 7:9**
After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

The river flows to all people. **The river will help every generation to flourish.** Families are made up of multiple generations: kids, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, great-grandparents. They may not all live in the same house, but they are one family that loves one another.

The family of God is made up of all generations, too. Generations can learn from one another and help each other grow spiritually. For example, Titus 2 urges older women to mentor younger women. For years, adults have discipled young people in our student ministry. Life Groups may choose to be age-specific, while our worship and joint ministry teams will be multi-generational.

The river will help the poor to flourish. When reading the Bible, it is hard to miss God's care for the poor. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament speak about how God loves and cares for the poor. After Saul met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, he became known as Paul. He started to preach the Gospel to non-Jewish people, which caught the attention to the original apostles. They called Paul in to check out this new preacher and see if he was legit. After interviewing him, they gave him the thumbs up. Paul reported in **Galatians 2:10** *All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.*

The early church was concerned with the poor, and through the ages, when the church remembered the poor, it stayed vital.

About three years ago, I was in the worship area for a few hours serving as a prayer partner during our Journey to the Cross Good Friday experience. I was in the back of the room contemplating the life-size tomb upfront when I had the distinct sense inwardly that we were needed to reach out in ministry with the poor. Shortly after that we started to partner with a ministry in McKees Rocks that one of our members began. That was great, but I get the sense that it not all we are to do. It's time we build on that. Perhaps your Life Group may be led to do outreaches with and to the poor.

The river will be naturally supernatural. In **John 14:12**, Jesus said, *whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.* And the early church saw miraculous things through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As a church, we want to help everyday missionaries to be “naturally supernatural.” We want to equip all who are interested to use their spiritual gifts where they live, work, play, and learn. In particular, we have been equipping on healing and prophecy, because they are needed both in the church and in the work of evangelism.

There is so much more that I could share, but I don't have time. The future will be exciting as we see the River of Blessing flowing.

Remember, you and I are the church. So these things become reality as we step up to answer the Lord's call. I invite you to pray, “Lord, how do you want me to let your Living Water flow?” Perhaps your action step will be to get into a Life Group (we'll be starting more next month in our Fall spiritual growth campaign). Or, maybe it's time for you to take the next equipping track class. If you haven't been through Following Jesus, I encourage you to start there. If you have, jump into MD 1 (Making disciples 1).

Let's let the River flow!