

# Ezekiel 47:1-12 - Contagious Grace

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Good morning. Greetings from Colorado. I fear that September 19, 2015 will not be a day that many Alabama, Auburn fans remember, with fondness. But there was another date in reference to Ezekiel and the passage this morning. The date was August 14, 586 B.C. August 14, 586 B.C. You see, 10 years earlier, about 10,000 Jews from Judah, and Ezekiel was one of them, were taken to Babylon in exile. And for 10 years, false prophets had told those 10,000 people that it was going to be a short exile. There's no way God will allow Jerusalem to fall. There's no way. Jerusalem is his city, and we just need to wait, and God will restore us. The prophet Ezekiel, he was like a lone witness.

If you've ever read that book, you know that the dude was crazy. I mean, he would cut his hair off, he would shave it, he'd put it in piles, he would burn it, he would cook his food over manure. He built little models of a village. He was crazy, and he was the only one that gave the message of the word of the Lord.

He was the one that said, the exile is not going to be short. It's going to take a long time. He was the one that said, don't put your faith or your trust in how you were born or your lineage, or don't put your faith in Jerusalem. It will fall. And it happened on August 14th. And you can imagine those exiles as they faced friends, relatives, their people coming into Babylon and realizing, that crazy guy, I think he was telling the truth. Now, I chose Ezekiel 47 because a couple of years ago, it seemed to me as a pastor that there were many in our church that were really frustrated with the direction of our nation. There were many that dreamt of going back to yesterday, maybe a nation in the 50s. There were many who worried, what's going to happen to our nation? Can we even call it a

Christian nation? Is that a good thing for us? There were many that felt a real sense of despair. And their tendency was to draw into themselves in a sense of protection, digging in.

[ 3 : 1 3 ] Words of despair. And you've probably heard it. You've probably heard people comparing the United States and saying, are we going to become like Europe? Are we going to have these beautiful buildings like this that eventually are turned into office space or restaurants? That's what's going to happen to the United States. And I thought of the prophet Ezekiel. Here he is speaking to a people that claimed promises, promises from the Word of God, promises that dealt with who they were and what they believed and how they were born and where they were raised. And yet in great despair, as they would have seen their friends, their people. And you've probably watched it on TV, the Syrian refugees. They're facing even worse. They were being carried away as slaves.

And yet what's beautiful about this prophet and what we read from Isaiah is the prophet always brings the Word of the Lord for the conviction of the people of God. And he always holds out the grace of God.

It's not just something in the New Testament. The prophet Ezekiel, especially starting in chapter 47, but even as far back as 37, you know, you know, the valley of the bones, the dry bones. And God is saying, if Ezekiel, from these dry bones, I can create a nation, surely if my people return to me, I will restore them. But he gives this beautiful picture in Ezekiel 47. It is the picture of a river. And if you've ever flown west, if you've flown over New Mexico or Arizona, Colorado, and you look down at daylight, you see, oftentimes you'll see those green circles, right? The green circles. And it's the irrigation that's on that big wheel that comes around. And you see where water has been. Or you'll see those fingers of a river. And it's all green in this barren land. And the river has been God's illustration from Genesis 2 of life. We've sung about it. The water that brings life. And so Ezekiel picks up that image. And we'll read about it. The word of the Lord from Ezekiel chapter 47. If you've wanted to hear God speak to you, he does so in his word. And I would ask if you are able this morning to stand for the reading of the word.

And then 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. Then he brought me out by the 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. 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. 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. And 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. And he said to me, son of man, have you seen this? And then he led me back to the bank of the river. As I went back, I saw on the bank of the river, very many trees on the one side and on the other. 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.

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. Everything will live where the river goes. Fishermen will stand beside the sea from En Gedi to Ingilaim, and 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.

[ 7 : 53 ] But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh. They're to be left for salt. 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. This is important. He says, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. The fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing. You may be seated.

The remainder of the book of Ezekiel, the Lord gives him a vision of a city and lands and temple. But this morning, we'll look at this river, this river of life.

Psalms 46, we're told there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. In Isaiah 33, Zion is described as a place of broad rivers and streams. In Joel 3, we're told that stream beds flow in the fountain from the house of the Lord. In Zechariah, he prophesies on the day, living water shall flow out from Jerusalem. The river brings life.

This morning, I want to encourage you to think of yourself as a church and your place in the changing of the world. Do you realize that what happens right here is essential for God's plan to change the world? What happens in this sanctuary, what happens when God's people gather together to worship him is designed not just to make you feel good or to teach you something new, but to change the world.

Now, the Lord gave Ezekiel all sorts of visions. And in chapter 8, he is told to make a hole in the wall of the temple. And he looks inside the temple. And the text tells us that in there, he sees all sorts of detestable things, grotesque images. Some of you have been overseas to Nepal or India, and you see some of those idols, the pictures of the god Kali who is holding human skulls. And I can only imagine that that's exactly what he saw as he looked in the holy place in the temple of the Lord. In chapter 10, he has this terrible vision. It is the spirit of the Lord, the cloud that every Israelite knew represented this presence of the God who is with us, the God who took us out of slavery, the God who will lead us to the promised land. The cloud leaves the temple. He departs.

[ 10 : 57 ] And Ezekiel tells the people he departs. And that's precisely why he departs. What was going on in the temple was horrible in his sight. This morning, I want you to think about the origin and the flow and the purpose of this river. The world needs a river just like this. Huntsville needs it.

Alabama, the Bible Belt, desperately needs it. And so first, I want to look at the origin of the river. Verses 1 and 2 and the end of verse 12. The origin of the river. Where does it start? Where does it come from? And I can tell you a few things. I can tell you where it doesn't come from. It doesn't come from the palace. It doesn't come from Nebuchadnezzar's great and glorious reign and his rule and his magnificent city. It doesn't come from the Senate. It doesn't come from the university. It doesn't come from a great sports arena. It doesn't come from a mall. It doesn't come from the great outdoors or a hospital or a wonderful community center or the Justice Department. It doesn't come from a brothel.

It doesn't come from a restaurant. It doesn't come from someone's nice dream home. It doesn't come from the perfect spouse, friend, or lover. It comes from the altar. From what was going on in the temple.

From the altar in the center of the city. Daniel Block writes about this. He says, the structure at the very center of the temple symbolizes God's desire to receive sinful humans and his delight in their worship. I love what you say here about experiencing and expressing grace.

The Lord, when he set a temple, said, in the center of that temple will be a place where I will meet with my people and blood will be sprinkled and sins will be atoned for. People will come in in great need and great filth and great want and great hunger and unsatisfied. They will come in and they will receive grace and mercy.

[ 13 : 38 ] From the altar. The other thing we notice about this is that it can't be stopped. I mean, you've all had an overflowing sink. Hopefully not an overflowing toilet.

It's hard to stop water, isn't it? It can't be stopped. When what goes on amongst the people of God is right. When his mercy and grace are not just preached, but received and acted upon.

Then the expression has to flow. It cannot be stopped. The influence is unstoppable.

Now, it causes us to ask a few questions. As the Lord would say that we are now, those who put their faith and trust in Christ, are now living temples. It's not a tabernacle building.

It's not a sanctuary. But the living God inhabits the people of God. And he lives in their temple. It demands the question, doesn't it, of what's on the altar in your heart?

[ 15 : 00 ] What have you brought in? In the meditation this morning, it would appear that our enemy, he is just as happy to mix Christianity with any other religion.

To add something to it. And little by little, that's exactly what the people of God did. They had the temple, and you read, they worship God, but they also worship the other idols of the nations around them.

I think the way to find out what's in there is you ask yourself, is the God that I serve, is it giving me life?

Or is it demanding and taking life? I mean, I had a whole list that I just went over of places that the water doesn't come from. Some of them are absolutely fine.

Some of them are right and good institutions. But if anything, other than the grace and the mercy of our Savior inhabits the altar of your heart, you're in great danger.

[ 16 : 06 ] The worship of the living God giving or taking life. Secondly, we see this flow of the river.

You see, what had happened at the altar in the temple was the opposite of what was supposed to happen. Instead of the living water flowing out, the people of God had brought in what was wrong and detestable, but they had brought it in in order to worship it.

Now, in Missouri, we had a really nice house. In the basement, as those of you who have basements, there was a drain in the middle of it. Nice, big, I think it's about a six-inch drain in the middle of it.

And concrete around it. And you know what it's for. It's the clean-out. You know, it's where everything that is gross and dirty in the house goes out to the street.

Except when it backs up. Now, I always tell my wife that she is very much like a potted plant or a potpourri. She brings beauty and good smells into the house of men and stench.

[ 17 : 19 ] And yet, something wasn't right. I walked into the house and you could smell it and maybe you've experienced it. The flow going backward.

You see, it's vitally important that the mercy and grace that you receive is shared.

It is not just for us. It has never been just for us. It is to flow outward. So what had happened there is the accumulation of other gods that turned the whole flow backwards.

But the flow is to be out. And what's amazing about this passage is that as it goes out, it grows. You know, I mean, it's not like you receive a certain dose of grace and it's just enough for you.

And if you share that with someone else by taking upon you something that doesn't belong to you, by not being offended when you should be offended, by giving when maybe they don't deserve it, it's not as if you lose it.

[ 18 : 42 ] It's as if it grows. And grace shared grows. That's absolutely the picture that he is showing us here. As it flows out and the further it goes, it feeds everything.

And as it feeds everything, it gets greater and greater and greater. Lastly, we see this function here of the river.

Verses 6 to 12 tells us that this river gives trees and plants for food. It makes salt water fresh, provides fish to eat, employment for fishermen, it leaves salt that is necessary, it grows the trees that are just like the tree of life that you read about in Revelation.

The fruit to eat and every month bears its fruit and leaves for healing. It spreads and brings life to everything.

So quite simply, Southwood, what's the function and what goes on here matters. What's your job as the people of God?

[ 19 : 59 ] Well, it's absolutely to invite the unclean into the presence of God. To invite the unclean and the outcast to bring them as you yourself have come in desperation and need.

That's your job. It's to worship the living God. Worship is not just something that is done for our own edification.

Worship is formational. And there are many in our reformed circles that have not grasped that. We tend to believe that the human being is, we could kind of boil down a human being to a brain on a stick and if we teach them what's right, if people know what's right, they will do it.

Just, just have a kid if you believe that. As a youth pastor, often parents would say, have you taught on children obey your parents?

And I would look at them and I'd say, yes, I've taught. And quite honestly, if I did everything that I taught, I would be perfect. It's not just the knowing. And it's a frustrating thing for us, isn't it?

[ 21 : 15 ] When the heart wants what the heart wants and we know something is not right and we know something will not fulfill and we still long for it and worship is formational in our affections.

Do you not see that on a Saturday? I guarantee you, if you're an alien from another planet and you came and landed on a Saturday in SEC country, you would say, these humans, they worship this leather pigskin thing.

They gather. Sometimes they're so excited they're there hours beforehand. And they sing these same songs and some of them are absolutely ridiculous.

You should see what they wear. And what goes on in there has this amazing power to bind people together.

Oh, my wife and I were there when John Elway had one of his great drives. I mean, it was amazing. And what happened?

[ 22 : 22 ] All these people, black and white, people we didn't even know, what are we doing? We're hugging each other. I'm letting some other man, I don't know, hug my wife. Why?

Because Elway threw a touchdown. Worship is formational.

I think our advertisers have figured that out. Some of you have probably seen the Nike commercial that shows a football stadium and it just says the word, worship, with a Nike swoosh.

Our advertisers know that. It used to be, when I was a kid, it would be nine out of ten dentists recommend it. Now, the right toothpaste gives you friends. The right tablet puts you in a whole community of people that love you.

Worship is formational. And it must be right. It must be Christ-centered. It must celebrate this work that God has done, this call to a people to be His own possession.

[ 23 : 30 ] We invite the unclean to be clean. We worship God and then we leave those rivers of grace. I mean, you can almost envision that in Huntsville, can't you?

As you will go back to your places of work. What does it mean that you're filled by grace? It means at the office you don't have to always defend yourself.

You don't always have to be right. it means that you can be a neighbor that even though your other neighbor is so offensive. I had one that every Saturday night I swear he would do something to his dog so it would cry all night to keep me from sleeping so I couldn't preach on Sunday.

I had visions of shaving that dog doing other things to that dog. An instrument of grace means we're able to treat others simply the way Christ has treated us.

And so when we come to the New Testament and we see Jesus entering in his triumphal entry what does he do? He goes to the temple and gentle Jesus meek and mild look upon the little child what does he do?

[ 24 : 42 ] He fashions a whip and he says get out of my father's house. You have turned it in to a den of robbers get out of my father's house.

There wasn't living water going on in that temple either. Jesus promises that those who receive him by faith become in themselves dispensers of grace.

John 4 as he talks to the woman at the well and many of you know her story. She had drunk from every possible well. longing to be loved accepted cared for significant.

He tells her everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

the woman said to him sir give me this water so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water. In John 7 Jesus says whoever believes in me as the scriptures said out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.

[ 26 : 08 ] Well I've got six things for you to take away. I only have one week so I'm going to try to squeeze six things. First you've got to understand that the final existence of human beings it's not in some disembodied spiritual collective but the final existence of human beings as he has pointed out here as you see in Revelation 22 is a physical spiritual life with God and with other human beings.

Secondly before anything or anyone is used of God they must first be cleansed. And probably you here know that and you're saying duh we know that but you know that most of the world outside the doors of the church maybe this church they don't think that.

I mean I'm a pastor so when people meet me that's what they talk about. They ask questions about God and the Da Vinci Code. and they think that in order to be accepted by God you clean yourself up.

And that's what they tell me. Well I'll get to church and I'd love to join a church but there's just some things I've got to fix first. And I look at them and I say you know what that's like saying I've got to cure my cancer before I go see the doctor.

Before anyone is used of God they must be cleansed. Third the stewardship and the renewal of all things is God's work.

[ 27 : 48 ] The renewal of the environment, the renewal of industry, the renewal of the university. It's God's work. It's the flow of grace from the people of God that should affect every area of human flourishing.

Fifthly, God's concern. for his holiness and his purity is matched by his desire to bless human beings.

I mean, you see that in the cross. God's absolute purity matched to his desire to be merciful to human beings.

Lastly, it's the new temple of God. The church is his change agent. for the world. So I know that there are probably many here that have felt really discouraged the last few years.

Maybe it's politically, maybe it's the laws that we've passed, maybe it's the polls that come out and you feel like we're losing. Let me just tell you too, exiles, defeated and carried away into slavery, God gives this picture.

[ 29 : 00 ] God says, this is what I'm going to do. And you come to me. Come to me and receive mercy and grace and leave as rivers of grace.

Experience my grace, express my grace. let's pray. Father, we thank you for your word, that it is always true.

That your word comes as a fresh river of life to a people. A people that should have known better that all of their culture pointed to a wonderful God who out of his own love and grace saved a people from slavery and brought them to a promised land.

A God who gave them a prophet that spoke his direct word to them. Even in the midst of their rebellion, in the midst, Father, of their idolatry and fornicating with false gods that you promise them, as always, you will receive the humble, the broken you receive, and the proud you turn away.

We pray for your blessing upon your people, upon your church, upon this city, that this place would be known as this fountain of life.

[ 30 : 28 ] That those who enter would experience the cleansing work of Jesus Christ, oh, not just the first time, but Father, every week be renewed and filled and sent as agents of your grace and mercy.

We ask this in the matchless name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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