

EZEKIEL'S VISION OF THE WATERS

Ezekiel 47:1-12

Information concerning the Major Prophets in general should be reviewed before anything is done with the chapter from Ezekiel.

Doctrinal Points

All truth comes from the Lord.

The Word contains deeper and deeper meanings—its three senses. If truth is to produce good, it must come from the Lord through the Word.

Good works must have in them recognition of the Lord.

Notes for Parents

This lesson is also on the “Major Prophets,” with a particular passage in Ezekiel as a center of our thought. There are, we recall, four Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. They are called *Major* only because their books are much longer than those of the twelve Minor Prophets, which follow them in our Bible. Isaiah lived in Judah in the time of king Hezekiah. Jeremiah also lived in Judah and began to prophesy not long before Judah was captured by Babylon. He witnessed the fall of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, but was not himself carried to Babylon, and he continued to prophesy to the people who were left. Ezekiel and Daniel were both among those carried away to Babylon, and began to prophesy in captivity.

The story we are reading in Ezekiel 47:1-12 is part of a long vision Ezekiel had in the twenty-fifth year of the captivity—his last vision. In the vision he was taken back to the Holy Land and was led all through the temple by an angel who measured everything as they went. Then he was given a vision of a river coming out of the temple. The account of this river is very striking and it has a beautiful meaning for us. For the river is divine truth as it comes down

to us from the Lord in His Word. If we are to understand the Bible at all, we must first see that the Lord speaks to us through it. Then we can study it and learn more and more of its meaning, and at last we shall come to realize that it can never be exhausted. There will always be more there for us to find. So in Ezekiel's vision the waters became deeper and deeper as he went on. And everywhere the river came it brought life and healing except to the "miry places" and marshes. The only things in our lives which the Lord cannot make pure and whole by means of the Word are those evils and weaknesses which we cling to and do not want to recognize or correct. When we study the Word and let it show us our faults so that we can fight against and overcome them, the Word brings us life and happiness and peace.

The river that Ezekiel saw is the same river that watered the Garden of Eden and the same river that John saw in Revelation, "a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb." And you remember what the Psalmist writes: "There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High."

Primary

Even with the youngest children this lesson may be taught as a parable about the Bible. As a parable it is simple and clear, and young children's perceptions are sometimes very keen. Follow the outline suggested, trying to impress upon the minds of the children the details of Ezekiel's vision.

After Josiah died, the kingdom of Judah was conquered by Babylon, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, and all the people were carried away into captivity in Babylon except some of the poor people who were left to take care of the fields and vineyards.

While they were in captivity, two great prophets were raised up among them. One of these was Ezekiel, a priest. He was given many strange visions which showed him the Lord's power and how

important it is to worship the Lord and to study what He teaches us in His Word.

The other Major Prophets were Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel.

Isaiah lived in Judah in the time of Hezekiah.

Do you remember what finally happened to Judah?

Jeremiah lived through the time of Judah's fall.

He was not carried away to Babylon but later was taken to Egypt and died there.

Ezekiel and Daniel were both among those who were carried away to Babylon.

Their prophecies were given to them there.

Ezekiel had many strange visions.

In one of Ezekiel's visions he was taken back to Jerusalem and shown the temple just as it had been before it was destroyed. Then he was shown something else.

Outside of the temple he saw something new.

What did he see coming out from under the eastern entrance.

What did the angel with him have in his hand?

How deep were the waters after the first thousand cubits?

How deep were they after the second?

How deep were they after the third?

Then how deep did they become?

What were growing on either side of the river?

What were found in the waters?

What happened to everything to which the waters came?

What happened to the places to which the waters could not bring life?

The wonderful river which Ezekiel saw in his vision was not the kind of river which we can see with our eyes in this world. It was a picture of how the Lord teaches us in His Word. At first we have only a very little understanding of what the Lord is saying to us as we read the Word. This is like the shallow water at the beginning. But if we go on studying it and trying to live as the Lord wants us to live, we get more and more understanding, and finally we become wise enough to know that we can go on studying the Word forever and always learn more and more. So the waters of the river became deep enough to swim in.

Then Ezekiel was allowed to see how everything came to life where the river flowed, just as our lives become happy and useful

when we live as the Lord teaches us in His Word.

Junior

This lesson, like the one on Psalm 91, is a good one in which to introduce the Juniors to the thought of the presence of the spiritual sense in every detail of the letter of the Word.

Who finally conquered Judah?
What happened to the people?

The second of the Major Prophets, Jeremiah, lived through the period of the fall of Judah. He had warned the people of what would happen to them if they continued in their evil ways, and he had advised them to submit and pay tribute to Babylon so that they might be allowed to stay in their own land. For this reason, when the people were carried away, the king of Babylon allowed Jeremiah to remain in his own home along with the “poor” who were to take care of the fields and vineyards. Jeremiah continued to prophesy, and he urged the remaining people to stay quietly at home and wait for the Lord to deliver them. But the people were afraid, and a group of them decided to flee into Egypt. They took Jeremiah with them against his will and he is thought to have died in Egypt. The last part of the book of Jeremiah and the book of Lamentations were written in Egypt.

Ezekiel and Daniel were among those carried away captive into Babylon. Our next lesson will be about Daniel. From the first few verses of the book of Ezekiel we learn that Ezekiel was a priest and that he began to prophesy in the fifth year of the captivity. He was given many wonderful visions and was shown the fate of other nations beside his own. And he was allowed to tell the captives that the faithful among them would someday be permitted to return to their own land. He himself apparently did not live to see the return, but this is not surprising, as he was grown up when he was taken to Babylon and the captivity lasted seventy years.

Our lesson today is a part of Ezekiel's last vision, which was given him in the twenty-fifth year of the captivity. He was taken

in the spirit to Jerusalem. Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed, but Ezekiel was allowed to see a vision of the temple still standing just as he must have remembered it. An angel was sent to show him through the temple. Read about him in Ezekiel 40:3. As they went, the angel measured everything. We find that Ezekiel's vision fits exactly with the description of the temple when Solomon built it, and adds many important details. After everything was measured, the angel brought him to the door of the temple, which was toward the east. The tabernacle, too, had always been set up with the entrance toward the east.

What did Ezekiel see coming out from under the threshold?

From which side of the altar did the waters come?

How deep were the waters after the first thousand cubits?

How deep were they after the second thousand?

How deep were they after the third thousand?

How deep did they finally become?

What grew on the banks of the river?

What happened to everything to which the river came?

Who stood on the banks of the river?

How long would the fruit and leaves of the trees last?

What was the fruit said to be for?

What were the leaves for?

What happened to the places to which the river could not come?

When you are older, you will understand some of the wonderful lessons which this vision of Ezekiel teaches us, but you are old enough now to know that the river is a picture of the Word. The Word comes to us from the Lord, just as the river seemed to flow from the altar in the temple. At first we understand only the outside meaning of the Word—pictured by the water up to the ankles. But as we grow older and keep studying it, its meaning is seen to go deeper and deeper, until finally we realize that no one can ever exhaust it. We can study it forever and always learn more and more. The fishermen on the banks are like us when we are drawing truths to live by out of the Word. The trees are like the great principles we learn from it which lead us to do good; the fruit is the good we do. And their leaves are the thoughts which come from

these principles, which show us our faults and how to correct them. They can make our souls healthy, just as medicine can cure our bodies. The only part of our souls which the Word cannot make alive and well is the part we are not willing to change. The selfish feelings and thoughts which we love so much that we cling to them even when we know they are wrong are the swamps and salt marshes.

If you can read this story in the Word and see this deeper meaning in it, perhaps you have reached the point where the waters are to the knees.

Intermediate

The details of this vision of the waters are for the most part correspondences with which the Intermediates are already familiar. The teacher would do well, therefore, to see how far the class itself can go with the interpretation before beginning his own instruction. This lesson is a striking story in the letter and a powerful one in its spiritual sense.

Of the four Major Prophets, the first two lived in the kingdom of Judah. Isaiah, as you may remember, was the prophet through whom the Lord spoke to king Hezekiah. Jeremiah lived in the last days of Judah, prophesied its end, and saw his prophecies fulfilled. He was among those allowed by the king of Babylon to remain in their homes, and he continued to prophesy, but later was taken to Egypt against his will by some of the people who were afraid to stay in their own land. His last prophecies and perhaps the five poems which make up the book of Lamentations were given him in Egypt. Ezekiel and Daniel were both carried away with the captives to Babylon and prophesied in captivity. The ancient Hebrews, believing that prophetic inspiration could be given only in the Holy Land, never included either Lamentations or Daniel in their Scripture canon, but they did accept the book of Ezekiel, perhaps because Ezekiel was already a priest when he was taken captive and because he was carried in the spirit to Jerusalem.

One of Ezekiel's visions of Jerusalem is the subject of our lesson

for today. Ezekiel began to prophesy five years after the beginning of the captivity. Our lesson is part of his last vision, given him in the twenty-fifth year of the captivity. In it he was carried into the land of Israel and set upon a very high mountain by or upon which “was as the frame of a city on the south.” There a man came to him “whose appearance was like the appearance of brass, with a line of flax in his hand, and a measuring reed.” This man took him through the temple, measuring every part of it. The description of it is given in chapters 40-46, and this description has been found to fit well with the more general description of Solomon’s temple found in II Kings. Then follows the vision of the waters in chapter 47.

Many parts of the books of the Prophets are hard for us to understand without a great deal of careful study, but this vision is both beautiful in its letter and very clear in its meaning, since it contains so many correspondences already familiar to us. Water, we know, is the symbol of truth, and the waters flowing from beside the altar in the temple are truth from the Lord, or the Word. See how every little detail in the letter of the Word is important: the waters flowed from the right side of the altar and the right side always pictures the side of love or affection—the Word is given us by the Lord in love for us; the right side is also said to be the south side, the temple facing east, because the south corresponds to spiritual intelligence, and the Word is given us to bring us a knowledge of God and spiritual things. But then Ezekiel was brought outside of the temple and brought about northward—the north is spiritual obscurity—until he came to the “utter” gate by the way “that looketh eastward.” Isn’t this just what happens to all of us? When we are little children, we are told and we at once believe that the Bible is the Lord’s Word and that the Lord loves us and wants us to learn about Him. Then we go to school and become absorbed in learning about the world and in our work and play, and often our first belief becomes dim and we are not so interested in Sunday school. But if we keep going, we come back after a while to a point where we begin again to want knowledge of the Lord—the “utter gate by the way that looketh eastward,” for the east

always represents where the Lord is—and there are the waters flowing out again on the right side.

Then when we really begin to study the Word—to follow the waters—they become deeper and deeper. In the Word we often find the numbers ten, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, and even ten thousand times ten thousand. They all picture “fullness of state.” That means the time when we have passed through a certain stage—like our “teens,” for example—and are all ready for the next. So each thousand cubits brings us to a new and deeper understanding of the Word. At first we see what the literal sense teaches us about what we should and should not do in this world; that is like the waters to the ankles. Later we find that it has a spiritual sense which teaches us about our souls and how we should think and feel; this is the waters to the knees. Then we begin to see a little of the celestial sense, which tells us how the Lord thought and felt when He was in the world, and as we see His great love for us, we begin to feel true love for Him and the desire to serve Him in all things; this is the water to the loins. Finally we realize that there is no end to what we can learn from the Word. We can go on studying it forever: “waters to swim in, a river that could not be passed over.”

It is easy to see, too, why the banks of the river were lined with fruit trees “whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit be consumed.” We may remember from the Creation story that fruit trees picture true principles by means of which we can do genuinely good works, deeds which are spiritually living because the Lord’s unselfish love is in them. As the river of truth must come from the Lord, so all good works must come from Him because He alone is good and truth. Also, fish in a good sense represent affections for natural knowledges for the sake of use. So when we love to study the letter of the Word for the sake of knowing better how to serve the Lord, we are like the fishermen standing on the banks of the river casting their nets and drawing in fish, “exceeding many.”

It is because the Word comes from the Lord and has within it His love and wisdom that it is said that “everything that liveth,

which moveth, whithersoever the rivers shall come, shall live." Our life does not come from ourselves but from the Lord, and any part of us which we try to hold back from the Lord's guidance is like the "miry places" and marshes "given to salt" because in those things we have no desire to do as truth teaches.

Finally, here is something for you to think out for yourself: Remembering that a tree pictures a principle and its leaves thoughts coming from that principle, why is the leaf of the trees by the river said to be "for healing"?

Basic Correspondences

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| measuring reed | = ability to measure state of church |
| line of flax | = truth pure and genuine |
| south | = spiritual intelligence |
| north | = spiritual obscurity |
| fish nets | = means of instruction |
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Senior

This is an opportunity to impress upon the young people the fact that it is only as we see the world as the Lord's creation and the Bible as the Lord's Word to men that we can come to any true understanding of life or use our talents and knowledges as they are meant to be used in the service of the Lord and the neighbor.

We call Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel the Major Prophets not because they are relatively more important than the twelve Minor Prophets, but simply because the books are much longer. Isaiah prophesied in Judah in the days of Hezekiah and the three kings who preceded him. Jeremiah lived to witness the captivity but was not carried to Babylon. Ezekiel and Daniel prophesied in captivity.

Ezekiel's prophecies, by his own testimony, were given over a period of twenty years, from the fifth to the twenty-fifth year of the captivity. The last one, from which our lesson is taken, is recorded in chapters 40 to 48. In this vision he was taken back to the Holy Land and conducted through the temple by an angel who

carried a line of flax and a measuring reed and measured everything as they went. The measurements tally with those given in the less detailed description of Solomon's temple in II Kings. Through chapter 46 we might think that Ezekiel was having a dream of something which had been very familiar to him, for he was one of the priests (Ezekiel 1:3).

But in chapter 47 something enters the picture which Ezekiel had never seen in the days before the captivity. The waters proceeding from under the threshold of the house eastward, which were seen to come from the right side of the house at the south side of the altar, picture divine truth given us by the Lord in love. We receive this truth through the Word; so we think of the river of Ezekiel's vision as the Word. It is this truth in the Word by means of which we have spiritual life.

Our reception of truth in the Word, however, depends first on our acknowledgment that the Word is from the Lord and secondly upon the preparation we make for understanding it through our study and through the use we make of it in our lives. You notice that there were some places—the “miry places” and marshes—to which the river did not bring life, but which were to be “given to salt.” Salt in a good sense represents the element which unites truth to goodness, the desire to live as truth teaches; in a bad sense it represents the lack of this desire. That was why Lot’s wife, when she looked back toward the wicked city of Sodom, was turned into a pillar of salt. In our lives there are always some selfish feelings and thoughts which we are unwilling to give up even though we know they are wrong. These are our “salt marshes,” to which the river cannot bring life. We can receive only as much truth as we are willing to use.

The river of truth in the Word deepens as we progress in regeneration, and enables us to do more and more good. The trees by the river bank brought forth fruit which never failed and leaves which did not fade. The leaves are the thoughts which grow out of the principles we establish in our lives as we progress in spiritual intelligence. And the leaves were for healing. It is by means of these

thoughts that we can see and correct the faults and weaknesses which are the diseases of the soul.

One thing more the river does for us. It makes all the natural knowledges in our minds living and useful. We have only to stand on the banks and fish them out. The man who sees clearly that all good and truth come from the Lord and nothing from himself, and who studies the Word to see what the Lord is saying to him in it so that he may direct his life rightly is never misled by appearances or frustrated by disappointments, but lives a full, happy, useful life whatever his outward circumstances may be.

Adult

Perhaps the best lesson for the Adults is a discussion of our personal responsibility for our progress in spiritual intelligence. The Lord gave the Word and in His Second Coming opened its inner meaning, but His truth can do us no good unless we are willing to study and use it.

In a Sunday school course it is not possible to do much with the Prophets. The greater part of these books requires advanced study. And yet we all receive a powerful impression from hearing the Prophets read. In the Psalms and Prophets more than in the historical books—probably because there is often no story to hold our attention in the natural sense—we seem to feel the Lord speaking, even though we may not always understand the message. One cannot help pitying the person who has allowed himself to be misled into the belief that the Bible is the product of men and who studies the Prophets only to discover what Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel meant by the words he wrote. Certainly the prophets themselves had no thought that their words were their own. Nowhere else in the Word do we so constantly read “Thus saith the Lord,” “The Lord said unto me,” “The Lord showed me,” and “The word of the Lord came unto me, saying.”

We should have no doubt that it is the Lord who is speaking to us as we read the Prophets. Here and there the message comes through clearly even in the letter, as for example in Micah 6:8, but

for the most part we must study the spiritual sense if we are to be instructed as well as emotionally affected.

Swedenborg explained verse by verse only the books of Genesis, Exodus, and Revelation. But in the incomplete manuscript *Prophets and Psalms*, published posthumously, he gives us a summary explanation of each of the Psalms and of each chapter in the Prophets. Beside this the writings are full of quotations from the Prophets, often with quite detailed explanation. So if one is willing to make the effort, it is possible to get at the spiritual meaning of the Prophets without guesswork or the use of one's own imagination. In the past, without the knowledge given us by the Lord in His Second Coming, men sometimes went very far astray in trying to interpret passages in the Prophets according to their imaginations. In this course we are able only to give the children some general idea of the Prophets and to give the adults one or two examples of what we can learn when we "dig in" to the study of any particular chapter or passage.

The passage chosen as our example today is a striking and beautiful picture in the letter. It is part of Ezekiel's last vision, given him in the twenty-fifth year of the captivity. For Ezekiel the priest was one of those carried away captive to Babylon with king Jehoiachin in the first great deportation from Judah. In this last vision Ezekiel was taken back to the Holy Land, where upon a high mountain he saw "as the frame of a city on the south." Here he was met by a man "whose appearance was like the appearance of brass" with a line of flax and a measuring reed in his hand, who conducted him through the temple, measuring each part as he went. This (chapters 40-46) is the description of the temple to which we referred in an earlier lesson, the description which the Rev. T. O. Paine found to be the complement of the description of Solomon's temple in II Kings.

Knowing as we do that the temple represents the dwelling place of the Lord in each of us, or a true spiritual character centered around worship of the Lord and obedience to the commandments, and that water is the symbol of truth, we recognize immediately

that the waters issuing from the temple on the right side or the south side of the altar are a picture of divine truth given us by the Lord in love to bring us into a state of spiritual intelligence. We know, too, that divine truth can be given us only as we read the letter of the Word with the acknowledgment that it is from the Lord and with a desire to obey its teachings. That is, truth comes from the Lord alone and flows by influx into the knowledges of the Word in the mind of a good person.

Swedenborg's summary of the meaning of these twelve verses in *Prophets and Psalms* reads as follows: "Influx of Divine good and Divine truth from the Lord; from this influx the angels of the three heavens, and men, have spiritual life, and from the Divine good and Divine truth they have intelligence and charity."

Our "river" of divine truth is the Word. As we progress in regeneration we are enabled by the Lord to find deeper and deeper truths in it. In AE 629 we are told that the ankles signify what is sensual and natural, the knees what is spiritual and natural, and the loins the marriage of truth and good. It is the same progression seen in the interpretation of Saul, David, and Solomon, culminating in the peaceful and wise state of loving the truth for the sake of use. When we reach that state, depths of truth in the Word can be revealed to us which we were not prepared to see before. See below for a description of the final state.

The trees along the banks stand for true principles understood by means of the Word. Their fruit represents good works done from unselfish love and therefore genuine and lasting. Their leaves picture spiritually rational ideas, which are able to show us our evils and weaknesses and so lead to the healing of the soul. The fish in the river are all our natural knowledges which are given vitality and made serviceable when they are seen in relation to the divine plan and purpose.

So through Ezekiel we are given a concrete view of our spiritual possibilities. If we see that the Word comes from the Lord and continue to study it with the help of the means given us by the Lord in His Second Coming, it will bring life and blessing to every

part of our experience. The only limitations to our spiritual development are of our own making. The swamps and marshes will continue to be without life and will be “given to salt.” The selfish feelings and thoughts to which we cling, knowing them to be wrong yet unwilling to apply to them the healing “medicine” of truth, cannot be reclaimed.

The Psalmist writes, “There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved.” This is the same river of Ezekiel’s vision, the same river which flowed out of Eden, and the same “pure river of water of life, clear as crystal” which John saw “proceeding out of the throne of god and of the Lamb.” And the Lord through John says to each one of us: “Let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 3424: “The ‘river’ is the Word; the ‘waters which cause everything to live’ are the Divine truths contained in it; the ‘fish’ are memory-knowledges.”

Apocalypse Explained, n. 629⁸: “How intelligence increases by the reception of Divine truth proceeding from the Lord is described by the ‘waters’ which the prophet passed through . . . ‘the waters to the ankles’ signify such intelligence as the sensual and natural man has, for ‘ankles’ signify what is sensual and natural; ‘the waters to the knees’ signify such intelligence as the spiritual-natural man has, for ‘knees’ signify what is spiritual-natural; ‘the waters to the loins’ signify such intelligence as the spiritual man has, for the ‘loins’ signify the marriage of truth and good, which is spiritual; ‘the waters that could not be passed through’ signify celestial intelligence, which is called wisdom, such as the celestial man or an angel of the third heaven has.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. Where did Ezekiel and Daniel prophesy? *in Babylon*
- P. Where was Ezekiel taken in his final vision? *Jerusalem*
- J. What did his angel guide first measure? *the temple*

- P. What did he then see which was not in the temple as he had known it?
water
- J. How far did the angel measure the river each time? *a thousand cubits*
- J. What were the three depths at which Ezekiel was allowed to cross it?
ankle, knee, loins
- P. How deep did it finally become? *over his head*
- P. What grew beside the river? *trees*
- P. Who stood upon its banks? *fishermen*
- J. What happened to everything the river touched? *became healthy*
- J. Was there any place to which it did not bring life? *marshes*
- J. What was done with such places? *left to salt*
- P. What were the leaves of the trees for? *healing*
- P. What does the river picture? *the Word*
- I. What are pictured by (1) leaves, and (2) fruit? *(1) good thoughts, (2) good deeds*
- S. How must we think of the Word and use it if we wish to understand it more and more deeply all the time? *the inexhaustible Word of God to us*