



Week 8: Restoration: Better Than Ever

Week 8, Day 1: Read Ezekiel 38:1-9, 39:1-8

Understanding the Passage

Chapters 38 and 39 describe the events to happen after Israel has been restored. In these two chapters, there are seven sayings of Ezekiel, each of which begins with “Thus says the Lord God.” Here is what Ezekiel prophesies: “Gog of Magog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal” is going to attack with his armies from the north, charging upon Israel who is now living peacefully in their restored land. Israel has not yet rebuilt its army, or restored the walls of Jerusalem, or rebuilt any of their defenses. This time, though, rather than allowing the armies to conquer Israel as was the case before (because of Israel’s unfaithfulness and pride), God will intervene and Gog of Magog will be defeated by multiple disasters, including earthquake (38:19-20) and diseases and fire from heaven (38:22). The people of Israel will use the weapons of the attacking army as their firewood for seven years. This time, the whole world will know of the holiness and power of God not because of the destruction of Israel, but by its protection.

Boy, folks wish they knew who Gog of Magog is supposed to be! Some say it is Babylon again. The most prevalent interpretation is Alexander the Great, but the chapters mention an alliance with Persia (Alexander’s bitter enemy). Additionally, Alexander was neither defeated nor resisted as he came through Israel, so the narrative does not quite fit. Some say Magog is Rome and Gog the Roman emperor. Others have viewed it as a more modern allegory, with Russia being Magog. Still others view it as a description of something that is to happen as the end times approach. The fact that nobody is sure who Magog is has made this a wonderful passage and story to always give encouragement to peaceful, faithful people under attack by any opportunistic forces. Gog and Magog could be anyone or anything; we are to count on God for defense!

Two things that are important to remember for us as we read these chapters.

- First, they remind us that there will always be challenges. We keep hoping for the day we get through the problems that come our way. When there are no longer personal challenges or spiritual enemies that push us back. That day won’t happen, even when restoration has come and the bad times are past. One of the things that makes life meaningful is solving problems and coping with challenges.
- Second, when our own defenses fail us, we find ourselves counting on God in new and powerful ways. This is always God’s purpose – we will know that we can count on God. Over and over we read the words of God coming from Ezekiel’s mouth: “Then they will know that I am God.”

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in the passage speak to you the most and why?
2. What do you think it means for us to “know that God is God?”
3. Do you ever long for a life with no challenges or problems? What approach to life do you think that longing produces?
4. When have your usual defenses been useless, leading you to count on God in a more significant way?

Week 8, Day 2: Read Ezekiel 43:1-9

Understanding the Passage

- 1) As we have learned, the prophecy of Ezekiel is built around four major visions.
- 2) The original vision of the temple, and the glory of the Lord departing from it in chapters 1-3.
- 3) The defiling and destruction of the temple in chapters 8-11, as Ezekiel is taken through a hole to see the unfaithful goings on inside.
- 4) The valley of dry bones brought back to life in chapter 37.
- 5) The final vision from God that we see in chapters 40-48, describing a heavenly city, the center of which is a rebuilt temple of God.

Just as the book of Exodus describes God giving Moses a picture of the Tabernacle in a vision, complete with every detail, so God gives to Ezekiel every detail for the rebuilt temple. In addition, God gives details of new ways to worship, and new roles and responsibilities for priests and others in the community.

In 537 BC, King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and released the Israeli people after fifty years of captivity and exile to come back to Israel and rebuild the temple and city. There is some debate about whether this “second temple,” which is described in the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, followed the vision of Ezekiel. It was expanded greatly by King Herod in the years just before Jesus’ birth, so the original footprint is somewhat unknown. We do know that Herod’s temple followed the same basic structure as Ezekiel, with some differences. Some, who view this part of Ezekiel as a prophecy of what is coming in the end times, see Ezekiel’s temple as “the third temple,” still to be built in the 1000 year reign of Christ that is part of the apocalyptic narrative.

Chapter 43:1-9 describes the glory of the Lord returning to this rebuilt temple. There are two words used for “glory” in the Old Testament. The one we hear most often discussed is the word “shekinah,” and it means “pride.” More often, however, the Hebrew word “kabod” is used, and it is the word used here twice in verse 2, and in verses 4, and 5. It means glory, but it can also be translated as weight, or heaviness. It connotes power, strength, and authority. The glory of the Lord is not simply about looking good. It is about power! Note that here, the promise is that the power and strength and authority of God is back with the people of Israel, and God says “I will reside among them forever.” (verse 9)

Do you ever feel like you have “lost your mojo?” Do you feel like God isn’t pulling for you anymore, that your decisions and unfaithfulness have left you without the strength and power of God? I confess that I have asked myself if the Christian community, those of us in the church, have lost our mojo when we adopt the gods of our culture and are indistinguishable from those whose hearts we are trying to transform. But this chapter is a reminder that we’ve got our mojo back! The kabod of God has promised to reside with us forever. We just need to learn to depend on it, and step into the flow and current of what God is doing around us.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in the passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Why do you think God, through Ezekiel, would be so specific about the way the temple was to be built, and how worship was to be accomplished? Do you think it matters to God today what size the altar is? What has changed?
3. How would you describe the “mojo” of God at work? How do we know if we, as a church, have our mojo back?

Week 8, Day 3 – Read Ezekiel 45:1-12

Understanding the Passage

Chapters 45-48 detail the layout of the city of Jerusalem and the new united nation of Israel, to be established when the Israelites return from captivity. This is God, the urban and national planner, spoken through the mouth of Ezekiel. A few important things to note about the land in Israel’s vision:

- 1) Ezekiel’s picture is that Israel is “temple-centric.” The temple stands at the center of the city, and the city stands at the center of the nation.
- 2) There is a place set aside for the priests and the Levites right next to the temple. This meant that they would not have to travel long distances throughout the country when it was their time to minister in the temple.
- 3) There is to be common land near the temple, which shall belong to “all of the people of Israel,” rather than one single tribe of Israel.
- 4) The plan recognizes secular government as well, giving the “princes of Israel” the land on either side of the city, stretching out all the way to the Mediterranean to the west and the Jordan River/Dead Sea to the east.
- 5) Later, in chapters 47:13 – 48:29, Ezekiel describes the rest of the boundaries of the nation, and notes that the land is to be divided between the tribes equally.

The plan for land distribution has important ramifications. Because of this God-designed and equitable plan, there are a few specific outcomes and commands. The princes will have their land, and will no longer oppress the people and the tribes or take the spoils of their land. There will be honest weights and measures, and currency shall be tied to those honest weights and measures. The princes will pay their offerings too, because their authority is derived from God, and they will pay a higher share than others, because they are there to serve the people, rather than the other way around.

It always gets back to land and money. A community that honors God is a community that seeks to be fair, equitable, and practical when it comes to the assets. It recognizes the need for government, but commands the government to not oppress or land-grab. When we seek to live a faithful spiritual life, as a faithful community of Christ followers, we have to look at money and possessions as well. We often like to pass over the section of scripture that describes the early church, as Luke says “they had all things in common, and sold their possessions and distributed to any as had need.” (Acts 2:45) The notion that our possessions are material rather than spiritual, and therefore not important, is among the first heresies condemned by the church, and is not biblical. And a community that believes money is not important misses both the biblical witness and the practical truth we all experience. Want to know what matters to a community? Follow the money.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in the passage speak to you the most and why?
2. How does money play into your spiritual life? Do you try to keep your financial and spiritual lives separate? Does money stand in the way of your full commitment to Jesus?
3. Do you think the church should have anything to say about the distribution of resources in our community, about government oppression and/or corruption? Does living in a secular nation make a difference?

Week 8, Day 4 – Read Ezekiel 45:13-25

Understanding the Passage

From 537 BC to 334 BC, after Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonians, the Persians were the ruling empire over Israel. Unlike the Babylonians, the Persians respected the customs and religions of the people they conquered, appointing governors who would oversee them. Their approach became the model of empires moving forward, with a centralized government and appointed governors to work with the locals, often embracing the traditions of the people. This was the very model the Romans used, with Herod as “the Jewish king,” appointed by Rome and accountable to the Emperor. So, as we learned yesterday, “the prince” would be allotted an amount of land, but could take no more than that. And as a way to maintain appropriate authority, “the prince” had certain religious obligations on behalf of the people, along with the priests and Levites.

Today’s reading details the role of the prince to provide and make a sacrifice to atone for the sin of the people. Verse 17 reminds us that at the Passover festival, “he shall provide the sin offerings, grain offerings, the burnt offerings, and the offerings of well-being, to make atonement for the house of Israel.” All the people were to join in these offerings, but it was up to the prince to provide them. The priest was to participate as well, marking the doorposts of the temple and the altar with the blood of a young bull. The prince, then, was to make his offering on the Sabbath day of the Passover feast – “six lambs without blemish and a ram without blemish; and the grain offering with the ram shall be an ephah, and the grain offering with the lambs shall be as much as he wishes to give, together with a hin of oil to each ephah.” (46:5-6)

Worship is an offering of one’s self. Much of worship in Israel was designed to atone for sin. Somehow, they felt that if they did as Ezekiel said and “remembered their past sins and all the detestable things they had done,” and made a significant and appropriate offering, their sins would be forgiven. God would receive their offerings, forgive their sin, and act on their behalf. As Christians, on the other hand, our worship is not a prerequisite of forgiveness, because we know the real Prince of Israel has already made a final offering to atone for sin. Too often, we believe that our forgiveness is predicated on our being willing to give God enough of ourselves. Our worship, instead, is to be a response to that forgiveness, and our offerings are out of love rather than guilt. We “give ourselves away,” not so that we might garner God’s favor, but because of God’s commitment that in the new covenant, by the blood of the prince of Israel, our sins are already forever forgiven.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Which verse(s) in the passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Why do you come to worship? Obligation? Guilt if you miss? Do you come primarily to give or receive?
3. What do you think is the difference between confessing our sin and receiving forgiveness and making a sin offering?

Week 8, Day 5 – Read Ezekiel 47:1-12, 48:35

Understanding the Passage

After a long interlude describing the temple itself, and the instructions for worship and sacrifice, the narrative resumes. Ezekiel has been taken in a vision to the new temple, and the glory of the Lord has returned to the temple itself. What is the result of this glory? There is a river that flows from the south side of the temple and then turns eastward. And as it flows, it gets bigger and deeper and wider, until it cannot be crossed. And it flows all the way to the Dead Sea, and it refreshes the sea so that it is now full of life. The land between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea is the wilderness of Judea, and the river will fertilize that land so it is alive. And everywhere the river goes there will be life! And the leaves will be the leaves of healing!

The image of life-giving water is central to the narrative of faith.

- 1) Remember in Ezekiel 36, God said that the nations would say that “the land that was laid waste has become like Eden.”
- 2) Genesis describes Eden as follows: “A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches...” (Genesis 2:10)
- 3) Psalm 46:4 says, “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.”
- 4) The prophet Joel says “all the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water; a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord and water the valley...” (Joel 3:18)
- 5) Zechariah prophesied, “On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half of it east to the Dead Sea and half of it west to the Mediterranean Sea, in summer and in winter. The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name.” (Zechariah 14:8-9)
- 6) In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” (John 7:37-38)

Perhaps the most significant words are found in Revelation, a parallel passage to Ezekiel 47, where John of Patmos writes of the transformed world ahead: “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” (Rev 22:1-2)

So what does this mean for us? First, God’s intention and purpose is to bring about a restored city of God, so that “then they (all the nations) will know that I am God.” It is as if he has come to understand that punishment and destruction will not do the trick alone, but must be paired with restoration and healing. We look forward to that day, and want to be a part of bringing it to pass. Second, it means that the amazing “kabod,” the glory of the Lord that returned to the temple is not reserved for the temple itself. Instead, it flows out of the temple, and brings life to dead and parched land and hearts and homes, and brings healing not just to Israel, but to all the nations. The church of Jesus Christ exists not for those of us inside it, but for those outside who need the life Jesus provides.

When I was a youth pastor, we used to sing a silly song “I’ve got a river of life flowing out of me. Makes the lame to walk and the blind to see. Opens prison doors, sets the captive free. I’ve got a river of life flowing out

of me. Spring up oh well, (swish swish swish swish) within my soul. Spring up oh well, and make me whole. Spring up oh well, and give to me, that life abundantly.”

Do you have a river of life flowing out of you? Remember, St. Paul reminds us “you are God’s temple...” When the mojo comes back, we can’t keep it in, but have to pour it out on the whole world, “for the healing of all the nations.”

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Which verse(s) in the passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Do you have an experience in which you have found water to be particularly life giving?
3. If Jesus is the source of life-giving water for you, what has been the conduit for that water? From whom did that life-giving water flow?
4. How might you open up the gates and let the water flow out of you more?

Week 8: Questions for Weekly Discussion (based on video lesson, daily readings and reflections, and weekly sermon):

1. Of the daily Bible readings and reflections from this week, which one hit home for you, or provoked the most thoughts and questions?
2. What is your most significant takeaway from the whole study of Ezekiel?
3. How would you describe the change that is to take place in the people and nation of Israel? Who brings this change about?
4. In various places in scriptures, it says “God relents.” Do you think God changes?
5. God moves from judgment to restoration, and both of them are designed that the world will “know that I am God.” What is most likely to convince you that God is God?
6. Where have you experienced God as “a river of life” with leaves for healing?
7. If that “river of life,” and the glory of God is to flow out of the temple, what do we do to keep it in the church instead of let it flow out? What do we do to magnify it for the world?
8. Do you believe that one day we will have this restored Utopian world, or is it just a dream that we are to reach for?