

# What is Our Future? (Ezekiel 47:1-12)

**Big Idea:** The story of Scripture – our story – ends with God’s presence on earth, bringing life, renewal, and healing to everything.

We began a series on the storyline of the Bible way back on March 1, which was in a different era. Since we started this series, everything has changed, and it’s hard to believe. But in God’s grace, the ending to this series couldn’t be more suitable for the time that we face.

Why do I say this? We began by asking the question, “Why is the world glorious but broken?” And we’re living in the middle of that right now. It’s glorious: we have Netflix and Zoom and Uber Eats and friends. But it’s broken. We have coronavirus and job losses and financial pressures, and we’re all going stir crazy. We’re all feeling it. We love life, and yet we hate parts of it too. That’s where the story begins, and it’s where we live.

We’ve been following the twists and turns of this story with two major threads:

- **Brokenness** – We’ve seen the brokenness continue: we’ve seen sin and exile and longing.
- **Hope** – And we’ve also seen hope: God’s relentless plan through one man, and then one nation, and then one man again – Jesus - to rescue us from our sins and the world from its curse.

Okay, that's where we've been so far. Two threads, brokenness and hope, and we're living in the middle of that, and it's sometimes hard to tell which one is winning out.

How will this story end? Which one wins out?

## A Confession

I have a confession to make as we begin. I have had a really bad history in answering this question.

When I was still a seminary student, a teacher-friend invited me to teach her class about heaven. I figured, "How hard can it be?" I started to panic the night before when I realized that most of what I'd learned about heaven came from popular culture and wasn't very good news. I tried to cram that evening but was still really poorly prepared. I couldn't even answer the questions of little children about what our future would be like.

I'm not alone. You're probably aware that the Bible teaches a lot about what our future will be. But a lot of us are probably fuzzy on the details. For a lot of us, the after-life sounds like eternal boredom. Listen to what one person said:

*If there is no disease, sickness, aging, or death in heaven, if there are no obstacles to overcome and nothing to work for, what is there to do? Forever is a long time to be blissfully bored. (Michael Shermer)*

The atheist Christopher Hitchens even called heaven a "celestial North Korea" from which "you would never be able to escape," a "place of endless praise and adoration, limitless (self-denial) and (depreciation) of self." Doesn't sound like much fun! But that's not what our future is.

What I want to do today is to give you one of many pictures the Bible gives us about the future, then spend two or three minutes filling out this picture, and then to give you a simple application. Sound good? One picture. Then we'll zoom out a little. And then we'll apply what we've learned.

## One Picture

So here's the picture. It's not the one that some of you are expecting from Revelation 21:21 of a gate made from pearls and a street made from gold. It's actually a less well known but more significant picture from the Bible that shows up twice.

Here's the first time this picture shows up. We just read it. It's from Ezekiel 47. In chapters 40 to 48, Ezekiel describes how God's presence will one day return to his people and his temple. Ezekiel has a vision of what this new temple and new city would look like. A tour guide even shows him around. What he sees is even more amazing than Solomon's temple. There's a new altar, new priests, and a new system of worship. And the best part: God's throne comes back and enters the temple. God once again lives with his people, and it's better than ever.

All of that is a setup for what we're about to read. In chapter 47, Ezekiel describes a stream that pours out of the temple threshold. It starts as a trickle, then it gets ankle deep, then knee deep, and then waist deep. Pretty soon this stream becomes a river that's so big that you can't pass through it. It becomes a raging river as it flows from the temple, through the city, and into the desert in one of the most desolate places on earth, the Dead Sea Valley.

The Dead Sea Valley is one of the most desolate places on earth. It's the lowest place on earth, 1400 feet below sea level. The Dead Sea is ten times saltier than the ocean. There's hardly any rain. Fish and plants can't live in it. It's a brutal place.

But as this raging river reaches the Dead Sea, it's transformed. Read what Ezekiel says:

*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. 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. But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are 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, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.” (Ezekiel 47:9-12)*

What a picture! Let's summarize:

- God has returned
- Things are better than ever, even better than they were at their peak
- And streams of water flow outward to the most desolate and broken places, bringing healing and life and restoration to places that were dead before

That's what Ezekiel says our future will be like. There are no harps or clouds involved in this picture! We don't even leave earth. It's more like a return to the Garden with the four waters that watered Eden (Genesis 2:10-14). God present. Things even better

than they were at their best. Dead places made alive. Life, healing, and fruitfulness everywhere. Renewal to all of creation.

Okay. I love that picture. But this is not the only place this picture appears! It also appears in Psalm 46:4 and Zechariah 14:8 and other places. But it really takes center stage again when you go to the very last chapter of the Bible. Listen to this:

*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of 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 its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. (Revelation 22:1-3)*

The setting is similar to Ezekiel. In chapter 21, a new Jerusalem comes to earth. God now lives on earth, and he's already banished death and mourning and crying and pain.

This time there's no temple, though, because the temple is God. God's presence used to be restricted to one geographical place. Now it permeates every square inch of this new world.

And what do we discover? A river flowing from the throne of God. Surprise twist this time: the tree of life is there – the same tree of life that was in the middle of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2, the tree that we could no longer access because of sin. The leaves of the tree bring healing to the nations. No more war. It's a new and better Garden of Eden. Nothing that as under God's curse will be there. God will bring healing and restoration to this world.

# Zooming Out

Let's zoom out for a moment and try to get a clearer picture of our future.

Our future is not really about us leaving the earth. It's about heaven reuniting with earth and God living here, healing and restoring everything that's broken, and bringing life and healing to the world.

Let me say that again: it's not about us leaving earth. It's about heaven reuniting with earth. It's about God living here, his presence permeating every square inch, and God bringing healing and restoration to everything that's broken. It's like the Garden of Eden, only better.

To [quote](#) Randy Alcorn, who's written some excellent books on heaven, "The Bible says that in the ultimate Heaven God will come down from his place to live with us in our place, the New Earth."

He continues:

*Carefully read Revelation 21-22 and many other passages, and you'll discover that we'll eat, drink, work, worship, learn, travel, and experience many of the things we do now. References to "nations" on the New Earth suggest that civilizations will be resurrected, including human cultures with distinctive ethnic traits (Revelation 21:24, 26). In the middle of the city will be the tree of life, just as physical as it was in Eden, and we will eat a wide variety of fruits (Revelation 22:1-2). A great river will flow through the city. Both nature and human culture will be part of the New Earth.*

*... What will be gone is not Earth and our bodies, but sin and death and the Curse!*

*... No one will go hungry, and all will be satisfied. No one will weep, everyone will laugh. That is the promise of Jesus. Count on it.*

That's how our story ends. But before that ending comes what the Bible calls the Day of the Lord. It sounds like it should be a good day, but that's not how the Bible puts it. The good news is that evil will be judged. That is very good news because there is so much evil that needs to be judged justly and rightly, and it wouldn't be right for God not to judge what's wrong.

But it's also bad news because we are all guilty. But it's also bad news because we've done some of that evil. Those who respond to Jesus and his good news will enjoy this new earth. Those who reject God's revelation of himself through nature and the gospel, who refuse to bow the knee to Jesus, will be quarantined "like the last traces of smallpox being locked in a secured laboratory so that it can never escape" (Michael Bird).

The Apostle Paul put it well:

*The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31)*

## **So What**

So that's the story. We're in the in-between waiting. And that's where I want to end today.

We live in a world that's glorious and yet broken. The two themes run through the whole Bible, just as they run through our lives today.

- Brokenness everywhere, heartbreaking brokenness. Sin, sickness, injustice, hardships. Life is short and hard.
- Hope everywhere: love, beauty, and God's relentless plan to rescue us and the world

Two themes run together, but one theme will end. One day the brokenness will be a thing of the past, and there will just be glory everywhere: the presence of God himself; things better than they were at their best; healing and life and restoration everywhere.

**The story of Scripture – our story – ends with God's presence on earth, bringing life, renewal, and healing to everything.**

And we should live for that day. We should long for that more than we long for the end of the pandemic, more than Superfan longs for the return of the Raptors, more than anyone longs for anything.

Cyprian of Carthage said this way back in the 200s:

*Casting away the dread of death, let's think about the immortality that follows afterwards ... We who see that terrible things have come, and know that even more terrible things are coming, should count it the greatest blessing to leave as soon as possible. If in your house the walls were tottering with age, the roof shuddering, and the whole edifice, worn out and weak, likely to come crashing down in instant ruin, wouldn't you get out quickly?*

Our current crisis should make us look forward to that day even more. Living for that day will help us get through life in this glorious but broken world.



Thank you, Father, for the ending of this story. Thank you that “everything sad will come untrue” (J.R.R. Tolkien) that eternal life, “once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory” (C.S. Lewis). May that day give us hope in our current hardship. And may we all trust in Jesus so we may experience that day. Amen.