

## **Life to be Longed for. Ezekiel 40-48**

How do you describe the life worth hoping for to those who know the grief of loss, the bitterness of failure and defeat, and the shame of knowing you have brought that loss and failure upon yourself?

How do you describe the life worth staying loyal to the LORD for, life on the other side of the LORD's promised but not yet experienced victory, as you and your people are surrounded by the pride and the power of your conquerors, experience every day the seeming victory of their gods, the triumph of their understanding of the world, the triumph of their truth, the triumph of those who despise the LORD?

That is the challenge facing Ezekiel

In chapters 34-38 he has revealed God's promises of salvation to the exiles of Judah in Babylon – of His gathering His people like a shepherd gathers His flock, of new life, of life from the dead, of victory over all who would oppress and plunder them

Promises the LORD has committed Himself to for the sake of His holy Name, that all would know He is the God He has revealed Himself to be

But the lived experience of Ezekiel's audience, his countrymen and women, is exile and loss

Being reminded every day – that they were captives in a foreign land, that their city was destroyed, and that their conquerors, the Babylonians, were stronger, smarter, wealthier, their gods more powerful

Was the fulfilment of God's promises worth hanging on for?

When it happened, what would it be like?

Would it only be more of the same, a cycle of sin, judgment and dispossession?

What, in the end, could they, should they, hope for?

They are questions for us as well.

As followers of Jesus we are not a conquered people in BC Babylon

But in this life we also know the grief of loss, and sometimes the bitterness of failure

We too know what it is like to live in a world where those who do not honour God are portrayed as the winners, where an understanding of the world where the LORD is irrelevant is promoted as the real life, where the truth of the godless is the ruling truth

Whether that, for example, is seen in the denial of a Creator when we study God's good world, or in the promotion of an understanding of gender and sexuality at odds with God creation of humanity as male and female

Is being loyal to the Lord, waiting for the fulfillment of His promises worth hanging on for?

What will the outcome be like?

What in the end are we hoping for?

What is the vision of life that is worth longing for, and persevering for?

Neither Ezekiel, nor we, can answer those questions from our own experience

Ezekiel too is an exile living amongst exiles. His seen, his experienced reality, is one of defeat – even if he knows that defeat to be the LORD's judgment on Israel's sin

But the LORD provides the answer for Ezekiel and for the exiles in the vision preserved for us in Ezekiel 40-48, the vision of a life worth longing for.

*Ezekiel 40: In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning of the year, on the tenth day of the month, in the fourteenth year after the city was struck down, on that very day, the hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me to the city. <sup>2</sup> In visions of God he brought me to the land of Israel, and set me down on a very high mountain, on which was a structure like a city to the south.*

This is the third set of 'visions of God'

The first Ezekiel experienced at the beginning of his ministry [Ezk. 1:1]

The second – chapters 8-11 – described the departure of the LORD from the temple and Jerusalem, and prophesied its destruction [Ezk. 8:3]

And in this third the LORD reveals to Ezekiel what only the LORD knows, life on the other side of the LORD's victory, on the other side of the great saving work promised in Ezekiel 34-39.

That life is pictured in these chapters in terms and pictures familiar to Ezekiel and his hearers, but it expresses ideas that are abiding.

And the dominating idea, the pictured reality, is that life, the life worth longing for, persevering in being loyal to the LORD for, is found in the presence of the living God, that the fulfillment of our longing is in God Himself.

I am going to summarise how Ezekiel presents that vision of life

Then see how the NT picks up on what Ezekiel describes in its own vision of the life worth longing for in Revelation 21-22

And then ask how Jesus brings and secures that life for us.

Christmas – time for rich food, and this is rich – so if you have questions as you are digesting it, just ask

Chapters 40-48 of Ezekiel are all about the presence of the LORD amongst His people

The tour of the temple that takes place in chapters 40-42 climaxes with the LORD's return to the temple, to live amongst His people

*Ezekiel 43: Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. <sup>2</sup> And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory. <sup>3</sup> And the vision I saw was just like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and just like the vision that I had seen by the Chebar canal. And I fell on my face. <sup>4</sup> As the glory of the LORD entered the temple by the gate facing east, <sup>5</sup> the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple.*

The last word of this section and the book gives the name of the city as

*Ezekiel 48: <sup>35</sup> The circumference of the city shall be 18,000 cubits. And the name of the city from that time on shall be, The LORD Is There.*

The LORD being with His people is the big idea of chapters 40-48.

They start, chapters 40-42, with describing the provision the LORD has made for His presence amongst His people as Ezekiel is taken by a guide on a tour of a new temple.

When the LORD returns to that temple He says

*Ezekiel 43: <sup>7</sup> and he said to me, "Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place of the soles of my feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the people of Israel forever. And the house of Israel shall no more defile my holy name, neither they, nor their kings, by their whoring and by the dead bodies of their kings at their high places,*

If you have tried reading Ezekiel 40-42 I suspect you were underwhelmed – unless you are an architect I suspect it did not excite you, and even an architect would probably find it challenging.

There are lots of measurements as Ezekiel is told to describe something that already exists, that the LORD has already created. The description is not a blueprint that the exiles or their descendants are told to build [very unlike the description of the tabernacle given to Moses Ex. 25:8 ff]. They are being shown a gift to a repentant people [43:10-11].

This promised gift may not excite us, but think of yourself as an exile

When speaking of the temple being destroyed Ezekiel had described it as

*Ezekiel 24: <sup>21</sup> 'Say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will profane my sanctuary, the pride of your power, the delight of your eyes, and the yearning of your soul, and your sons and your daughters whom you left behind shall fall by the sword.*

The temple mattered to them, and they had a picture of the temple in their minds

They knew and loved its grandeur

They had felt its pavement beneath their feet

Had gone with crowds to its great celebrations

It meant everything to them

And here Ezekiel gives a description, both beautiful and practical, of a temple the LORD had provided, a temple His glory would again inhabit in all His holiness

In Ezekiel the longed for future is one where the LORD would be present amongst His people.

And this would be a permanent presence, a secure presence, for in chapters 43:12-46:24 the LORD provides through His commands the means for dealing with their sin, for their being able to stay in His holy presence.

*Ezekiel 43:<sup>13</sup> "These are the measurements of the altar by cubits (the cubit being a cubit and a handbreadth): its base shall be one cubit high and one cubit broad, with a rim of one span around its edge. And this shall be the height of the altar:*

These chapters start with a detailed description of the only piece of temple furniture mentioned. It is the altar [43:13]. No other furniture is described, throwing the altar and its function – to atone for sin, into prominence. And the description of the altar is followed with descriptions of sacrifices to be made, who can make them, and who will provide them – as well as a description of the location of the temple, a geographic location that will preserve its holiness at the centre of Israel.

There is a lot of detail – but it is very focused.

The LORD is providing the means that will make sure they are never thrown out of the land again, that they can always dwell with Him. The life to be longed for is not more of the same, not more sin and judgment and dispossession.

By His grace their security in his holy presence will be all the LORD's work, a work to which they are to respond with repentance and faith,

This section tells them they enjoy this future, are in His presence, only on His terms, trusting and using what HE has provided

Ezekiel makes it very clear as he reminds the people and the Levites of their past failure [44:10-11] that this is the LORD's grace to sinful people, but it is effective grace.

They will be able to dwell with Him forever.

The future to be longed for comes by the LORD's gracious initiative as

The LORD provides for His presence and

He secures His holy presence amongst sinners by making provision to deal with their sin

And then thirdly we are told in Ezekiel 47 that the presence of the LORD is life giving

*Ezekiel 47: 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. <sup>2</sup> Then he brought me out by 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.*

There is a river, at first just a trickle, flowing from the threshold of the temple, from the presence of the LORD

It is no natural river, growing quickly larger without tributaries from a small beginning

And its effect is not natural v. 8. *when the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh.* Brackish water mixed with fresh normally taints the whole lot, but this water transforms dead water, the saline water of the Dead sea, into life giving water. This is life to the dead.

*Ezekiel 47: <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.*

And it is Abundant life – everything will live where the river goes v. 9

And Rich life v. 12 – there is no want here.

*Ezekiel 47: <sup>12</sup> 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."*

Just as there was a river in Eden to water the garden full of trees for food so where this water goes the land becomes like Eden

And this vision of the life giving presence of God is a picture of life at the centre of a renewed Israel, for the book ends with a description of the equal

distribution of the promised land amongst the twelve tribes of Israel in the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham, with the holy portion with the temple from whence the river flows, right in the middle of the land

And it is the twelve tribes – even though ten had been lost and absorbed into the Assyrian empire for around 200 years. This is the Israel of promise who will live in God's presence.

Life in the presence of the LORD is life from the dead, life for a rescued, healed and restored people

A people whose sin is so effectively dealt with that the city to which every Israelite can come, not just the temple, is called 'The LORD is there.'

*Ezekiel 48:<sup>35</sup> The circumference of the city shall be 18,000 cubits. And the name of the city from that time on shall be, The LORD Is There."*

The vision of life worth longing for is life in the presence of the life-giving God, where the holy God admits sinners into His beautiful and glorious presence forever – on His terms,

where He has provided a way of dealing with their sins - forever,

where HE heals their wounds, and brings back what was lost

And having given life to a dead people His presence renews a barren and dead creation

Transforms a despoiled Israel into Eden

Like a 7 day coach tour of the capitals of Europe, we have left a lot uncovered in Ezekiel 40-48. Read it and test what I say. But we need to move on to think about how the New Testament picks up many of the features of Ezekiel's vision of the life worth longing for, a life worth persevering in faithfulness to the LORD for – in its own picture of that life in Revelation 21-22, the vision of life that like Ezekiel's vision follows the great victory of the LORD and the ending of rebellion to the LORD's rule in the judgment of all sin in Revelation 19 and 20.

There too, for example, as in Ezekiel we meet a heavenly being with a measuring rod [Rev. 21:15], a square city with twelve gates on which are the names of the twelve tribes [21:12-13, Ezk. 48:30-34]

And this vision of the life worth longing for, persevering for, is also dominated by the presence of the LORD

*Revelation 21: Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."*

The dwelling of God is with man, and He will dwell with them.

It is the LORD's presence that makes this the life to be longed for, His healing, comforting - He dries every tear, life giving presence.

And it is not tears dried to cry again, not a life which will be more of the same, life characterised by sin, and loss and death

His people are secure in His presence by the LORD's work

Sin is dealt with. This is life on the other side of judgment, a judgment His people have been spared because their names are in the Lamb's book of life

*Revelation 21: <sup>27</sup> But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.*

Sin is removed

It will never trouble God's people again, consigned to the lake of fire

*Revelation 21: <sup>8</sup> But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."*

And again the LORD's presence is a life giving presence.

Ezekiel's image of the lifegiving river flowing from the throne of God, [the temple being declared as the LORD's throne 43:7], is taken up and expanded

*Revelation 22: 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 <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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.*

The river flows through the city, and its leaves are now for the healing of the nations

And there is now nothing cursed – just as that river brought life to the dead sea, now all judgement on creation is reversed, the curses of Genesis 3 finished

But there is one big difference between Ezekiel's vision and Revelation's vision

Ezekiel's presentation of the life of God's redeemed, forgiven people was dominated by the new temple he described

But look at Rev. 21:22

*Revelation 21:<sup>22</sup> And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.*

No more temple!

Is that a failure of fulfilment?

Or a suggestion that Ezekiel is still to be fulfilled by building a temple in the millennium, as some suggest

No.

Ezekiel was presenting the life to be longed for, life in the presence of the living God, at peace with Him

Through pictures that his hearers and readers could grasp, things like temple and sacrifice that they were familiar with.

But he was looking for more than a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem on the return from exile. The text tells us that.

There was never a command to build the temple described

Never a suggestion that the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem should operate by Ezekiel's rules

The river was always looking for a transformation of creation by the LORD, a time Zechariah 14:8, referencing Ezekiel, places at the end, when the LORD is king over all the earth

Ezekiel's division of the land has no regard for its geography – conveying an idea, not giving instruction on how to divide it

The role of the prince – as the chief worshipper, unlike any actual earthly king, including the kings of Israel

Ezekiel's vision was a way of picturing life, conveying in images the key features of life at the end, the life God would bring by bringing His people into His presence

Ezekiel's temple itself was an image of a sign, for the temple and tabernacle before it were a sign of God dwelling amongst His people, the God whom heaven and earth could not contain. In fact they were signs that conveyed the idea of distance as well with their graded levels of holiness, where only the high priest could enter the most holy place.

In Revelation what that sign pointed to is replaced by the reality

*Revelation 21:<sup>22</sup> And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.*

The reality – one day we will be in the presence of the living God Himself, not just the high priest but every believer

Believers will be so transformed that His servants, sealed as His own 'will see His face' 22:3-4

*Revelation 22:<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.*

We can use the words

Know a little of what those words mean

That we will Always enjoy His favour, never have to hide from the holy God again

Have intimacy, not distance, with the living, almighty, just, righteous, God of steadfast love and faithfulness

But there is so much more, so much more that we can only begin to sense

For this is an experience no one on this earth has had

No one can see my face and live [Exodus 33:20] – the LORD had said to Moses

John 1:18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made Him known."

We can use the words and know we do not know

And yet know it will be glorious – for we have started to see God's glory in Christ, full of grace and truth –

Think of seeing Jesus, of being able to see him – not as a baby, not hanging on a cross

But glorious

Meeting Him as the one who loved you, called you, kept you, raised you

And know that is only the beginning

And we are helped in our longing for what none has experienced by knowing that there will not be then what all have experienced

No death, or crying .... This is life as we know it in this world

No guilt or shame

No corruption of truth

No fear of life running out, running away from us

The life pictured in Ezekiel and Revelation, Life in the presence of God, is worth longing for the God who has life in Himself and who is for life is worth longing for

But how do we come to that life in Revelation?

That question has two senses

1. How do we move in the Bible from the picture of that life with the temple, to the picture of that life without the temple? A picture of that life focused on the twelve tribes of Israel and the land of Israel, to the picture of a new heaven and earth with people of every nation and race
2. How do you and I come to share in it, to have confidence that one day God will wipe every tear from our eye?

The answer to both questions is the life-giving presence of God come amongst us that we remember at Christmas. Jesus brings and secures that life for us.

Jesus is God present with us. Remember what the angel said to Joseph about his pregnant fiancé Mary

*Matthew 1: She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins*

And Matthew goes on to add

*Matthew 1:<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:*

*<sup>23</sup> "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel"*

*(which means, God with us).*

Jesus is God with us. Wherever He is, the LORD is there.

Jesus Himself used the image of the temple to reveal His reality when challenged about His behaviour in cleansing the temple.

*John 2:<sup>18</sup> So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?"<sup>19</sup> Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."<sup>20</sup> The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?"<sup>21</sup> But he was speaking about the temple of his body.*

What the temple was a sign of, He was in reality – God come amongst His people, present amongst His people.

And the LORD Jesus continues to be God present with His people always. As He is about to ascend He says

*Matthew 28:<sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

I am with you always. What Ezekiel's vision of the temple was speaking of, Jesus is now for His people – the LORD amongst His people always

How can that be? It is because He has dealt with our sin forever, and so made us a fit place for the Holy Spirit of God

The New Testament proclaims this over and over – it is the gospel, Christ died for our sins, and the author of Hebrews presents that reality in terms drawn from temple and sacrifice

Jesus is the priest and sacrifice that has made sinners holy, fit to be in the presence of the holy God.

[John 1:36, 1 John 4:9-10, Romans 3:24-26]

*Heb. 9:<sup>24</sup> For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.<sup>25</sup> Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own,<sup>26</sup> for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.<sup>27</sup> And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,<sup>28</sup> so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.*

And by that sacrifice

*Hebrews 10:<sup>10</sup> And by that will we have been sanctified, [that is made holy], through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*

*<sup>11</sup> And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.<sup>12</sup> But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,<sup>13</sup> waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet.<sup>14</sup> For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*

In His Son the holy God has taken the initiative, come amongst us and made us fit to live in His presence forever, as He promised.

And His presence, the presence of God – is life giving.

He gives life now, eternal life now, that guarantees our sharing in the life of the new heaven and earth

*John 5:<sup>24</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.*

And drawing on Ezekiel's picture Jesus says

*John 7:<sup>37</sup> On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.<sup>38</sup> Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'"*

*<sup>39</sup> Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*

The Spirit Jesus gives is the river of life that transforms our dead hearts to living, fruitful hearts

The life of God in us that guarantees our sharing in the life of the new heaven and earth, the life the Spirit teaches us to long for [Romans 8:22-25]

It is because of Jesus, who He is and what HE has done, that we no longer need a temple that is a presence that communicates distance

So effective is His work in dealing with sin that even now we can be called the temple of God, as those in whom by grace God dwells by His Spirit

1 Cor. 3:16, 6:19

*Eph. 2:<sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,<sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,<sup>21</sup> in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.<sup>22</sup> In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*

Jesus, God with us, secures life for us now, and the life that awaits us in the new heaven and earth, life in transformed and resurrected bodies, life in the presence of God Himself.

This life He gives to everyone who will turn away from sin – from ignoring God, rebelling against God, being Lord of their own life – to confess Jesus as Lord and will trust Him to forgive their sins and raise them from the dead.

He will give it to you if you repent and believe the good news that Jesus is Lord, God with us.

There is a life to be longed for

A life to persevere for

We Sense that when we read of the river of life

When we read of that day when

*Revelation 21: <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."*

Christmas, remembering the birth of Jesus, God with us, teaches us to look forward to that day our Saviour by His coming and death has secured for us, to long for that life.

And being brought to think of that life through Ezekiel reminds us that it is the presence of God Himself that is that life, and it must be His work, and it can only be enjoyed on His terms as HE deals with our sin

And Ezekiel's oh so Concrete vision with measurements and detailed instructions reminds our hope is not thin, some disembodied being in heaven. IT is rich – a new heaven and earth, creation transforming

And knowing the LORD spoke of this life in Ezekiel and seeing the LORD's faithfulness in bringing it through His Son, you can let the fulfilment of prophecy we enjoy in the now assure of the fulfilment we wait for

When you sing and speak of Jesus as Immanuel – thrill at what that means, what God had already promised it would mean when He came to live amongst His people – life, life in His presence, life for ever, life for sinners.

Praise Him, and in this God denying, God defying culture – where we can be tempted to think that embracing its lie that God has somehow ceased to be Creator and Judge of all will make our life easier, resolve to live for Him.

For life, full rich life, is found only in God, and apart from Him is only death

