

Revitalizing the Dead Sea

The Dead Sea in Israel is the lowest point on earth, with its surface being 427 metres below sea level. There are several streams that feed the Dead Sea, the Jordan River being one of them, but because the elevation is so low, no water flows out of the Dead Sea. Rather, the sun evaporates any water that enters the sea, leaving behind any minerals that might be present in the water. Over the millennia, the salinity of the Dead Sea has increased so that it is 10 times saltier than the ocean so that if you would boil a liter of Dead Sea water dry, you would be left with 250 grams of salt. The high salinity of the Dead Sea enables even the poorest swimmer to stay afloat, making it virtually impossible to drown in that body of water. But, because of the high salt and mineral content, the Dead Sea has absolutely no life in it. Not a single fish or plant can tolerate the water of the dead sea.

While the surface of the Dead Sea is well below sea level, the city of Jerusalem is well above it, standing at an average elevation of more than 700 metres above sea level. (Nobleford is 985 m above sea level.) Jerusalem is only 35 km from the Dead Sea, and in that short distance, the road drops almost 1.5 kilometres. That being said, in spite of the elevation drop, no water flows from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea, for there are no rivers in Jerusalem, and the small streams that furnish the city with water flow in other directions.

So, we have two things that are true: the Dead Sea does not support life, and no water flows from the city of Jerusalem. In Ezekiel 47, however, we see something quite different. Ezekiel lived at a time when the city of Jerusalem was being destroyed by the armies of a nation which sought to make itself a world empire. God had removed his presence from the temple, Ezekiel tells us, leaving the temple and city of Jerusalem vulnerable to attack. In 586 BC, the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, the city was ransacked, and the people were hooked together in long lines and forced to walk 100s of kilometres to be resettled in other places. All this was because of the continued and constant sin of God's people. The first part of Ezekiel's prophecy focuses on destruction, but the second part focuses on the restoration that God promised.

Ezekiel 47 comes at the end of a fairly lengthy description of restoration: a design for a new temple is giving, there is a description of God returning to the temple, the priesthood is restored, the altar is restored, and the nation of Israel is restored as well. It is then that Ezekiel gives a description of a river flowing from the temple in a southeast direction, growing as it flows the 35 km to the Dead Sea. When it reaches the Dead Sea, it is so plentiful that the Dead Sea's salinity is so reduced that it becomes a freshwater lake, and it begins to support aquatic life; the sea, for the first time in recorded history, is seen to be teeming with fish. Ezekiel shows us two impossibilities: water flowing from Jerusalem and life flourishing in the waters of the Dead Sea.

The revitalization of the Dead Sea must be considered a kind of creation event. We recall from the Genesis 1 account that God filled the seas with all sorts of aquatic life. Fullness is the result of God's creative work. We also know from a careful reading of Scripture that human sin can reverse the God's

work of creation. The Bible (especially the prophetic books) gives multiple examples of fertile areas becoming deserts when the people fall into sin (reversal of the third day of creation). Similarly, the flood, a result of human sin, shows us the reversal of the second and third days of creation as the waters flood into areas where they do not belong. Conversely, when flood waters recede or when deserts become fertile, this is a sign of God's restorative work. Usually, this restorative work occurs at the same time that God is restoring his people as he forgives them of their sin and renews his covenant with them. Thus, when Ezekiel sees God creating a river which flows from the temple, God's dwelling place on this earth, and the water flows from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea, replenishing it so that it become fertile, we must understand that this is God overcoming the destructive power of sin so completely that even the Dead Sea, which never has had any life in it, now becomes an incredibly beautiful ecological system teeming with life.

Ezekiel's vision is picked up by John in the book of Revelation. There in Revelation 22 we see the New Jerusalem, and in that city is the throne of God. Flowing from beneath his throne is a river that flows down the street, and on each side of that river are fruit trees, yielding fruit every month, and its leaves, we are told, are for the healing of the nations. This is a nearly exact duplication of the picture we see in Ezekiel 47, for in that chapter the river also enables trees to grow, and they too produce fruit which God's people may enjoy, and the leaves of that tree are useful for healing. The main difference between Ezekiel and Revelation is that while in Ezekiel the river flows from the temple, in Revelation there is no temple, and the river flows from the throne of God. This is not a contradiction, for, as we well know, the temple of the Old Testament, contained the throne of God, and the walls of the temple kept God apart from the people because the people were sinful and God was holy. In the New Jerusalem, God will reign, but he will not need to protect his holiness from the sin of the people for there will be no more sin and thus no need for a temple. Still the throne of God remains.

We cannot read Revelation 22 without Ezekiel 47, and when we read both chapters, we will see God's restorative, recreative work, and we see that only God can bring this level of restoration/recreation to this world. Two impossible things are pictured: Jerusalem produces a river (no human engineering can make this happen) and the Dead Sea sustains abundant life (also an impossibility, humanly speaking). The Dead Sea can only be made alive by huge quantities of water diluting the salinity of the water, and only a river will suffice to make that happen. God does not use the existing rivers to bring the Dead Sea to life but, rather, he creates a new one, one that has never been seen before, and the source of that river is himself. Simply put, salvation comes from God, it is complete, and it is beyond restorative, for it brings fullness of life where there has never been life. Between Ezekiel's vision and John's vision in Revelation, stands Jesus Christ who made real God's work of restoration and recreation, something that no human being can do.

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