A Vision of Restored Worship

Text: Ezekiel 43:13-46:24

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**Scriptures:** Hebrews 10:1-25; Ezekiel 43:13-17; 46:1-24

Songs Chosen: [SttL] 359, 84, 312, 122, 216

Series: Ezekiel (sermon #14)

Theme: Having received a detailed vision from the Lord describing a new temple, Ezekiel receives a vision of restored worship in the new dwelling place of the Lord which is larger and has more restrictive access than the old with a new priesthood and a new kingdom.

Proposition: In Christ alone, true worship of God is restored.

**Introduction**

The old church building which stood at 63 Cornwall Street 48 years until 2011 was a place of memories for many in the congregation. It represented a community of belonging. It was the gathering place for worshipping God together every week. When the February 2011 earthquake damaged the church building with the result that the congregation could no longer gather there, a number of troubling questions arose: ‘Where can we worship the Lord together now?’, ‘What is the future of this church? can we continue?’, ‘What is the Lord’s will for us in all this?’ Similar questions arose for the exiled Israelites in Babylon who had learned of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and who faced a tremendous loss of hope.

For members of the Reformed Church of Christchurch the answers to the questions which came after the 2011 earthquake had relatively straightforward answers, as we now see: In God’s good providence, for a number of years the congregation was able to gather for worship at the Seventh Day Adventist premises on Grant’s Road until a new building was completed. By God’s grace, the congregation is being rebuilt and strengthened by the Lord – the future looks much brighter than it did in 2011. It seems that at least part of the Lord’s will was for the congregation to learn to trust Him through the difficulties of the past and to faithfully endure in His strength.

For God’s people Israel after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem the answers came in the form of visions revealed to the prophet Ezekiel. The words of Scripture in the last eight chapters of the book of Ezekiel are strange to our ears. We can understand what these visions were, our difficulty is knowing what they mean. We can interpret the significance of this middle section of the new temple visions by focusing our attention on three related aspects of God’s revelation in our text: a new altar, a new priesthood and a new kingdom.

1. **A new altar (43:13-27; 46:1-24)**

You can’t make an empty house a home, you need to have beds, tables chairs, and other furniture to reasonably live there. When Jenny and I moved to Australia for me to take up full-time studies at the Reformed Theological College, we took with us 7 children and 43 pieces of baggage on the plane. On our arrival, we needed to rent a house to live in and we had no beds, tables, chairs, or any other household items. In God’s amazing providence we went to an auction and bought almost everything we needed to fill the empty house we had leased. That was a lot of furniture!

In the detailed visions of the new temple which Ezekiel received from the Lord 25 years into the period of the exile in Babylon, the structure is empty apart from a single item of furniture – a wooden altar (40:47; 41:22). In the vision, the altar had precise measurements and was the place where sacrifices were to be made. Blood from a bull was to be put on the four horns of the altar as a sin offering to purity the altar and to make atonement for it (43:20). A male goat without blemish was to be presented as a sin offering. There were to be seven days of offerings made to consecrate the altar. Then on the eighth day and following, priests were to offer burnt offerings and peace offerings. Blood from the sin offerings was to be put on the doorposts of the temple, the four corners of the ledge of the altar, and the posts of the gate of the inner court (45:19). In chapter 46 further specifications are given of daily grain offerings and bulls, lamb and goats without blemish (46:7-8) together with a description of the kitchen area where the sacrifices of the people were to be boiled (46:24).

As we’ve already heard, it is not difficult to understand what is being described in elaborate detail in theses visions, the huge challenge is finding out what it all means! Perhaps as you have read chapters 40-48, including our text today, you have been left wondering what significance, if any, this has for us today. Apparently there was a Jewish Rabbi named Hananiah ben Hezekiah who burned three hundred barrels of oil to fuel the lamp in his attic (that would translate to a very large power bill today!) The point is that he spent vast numbers of study hours before he was able to reconcile this vision of Ezekiel with the worship-related laws in Exodus, Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Perhaps sadly, Hananiah ben Hezekiah’s monumental work was subsequently lost. After that many rabbis just gave up on trying to explain the meaning of the temple visions. Instead they advised their pupils to wait until the prophet Elijah returned. At that time, these rabbis taught that he would then be able to explain the meaning of these enigmatic Scriptures.

Some, in more recent times, have tried to interpret these visions literally in terms of a future physical temple on this earth where sacrifices would be made. Most Christians see that this is contrary to the plain teaching of the New Testament Scriptures that the death of Christ is the full and final sacrifice for sin (Heb 10). Some suggest that the sacrifices in Ezekiel 43-46 are merely of a memorial nature with no atoning aspect – but this goes against the text which specifically states that the offerings in the new temple will make atonement (Eze 45:15,17, 20).

So, is there any hope for us in trying to make sense of these visions? Yes. There are several keys to rightly understanding this challenging portion of Scripture:

**Firstly**, keep firmly in mind that these are visions from God (Eze 40:2), and NOT detailed descriptions with literal future fulfilment.

**Secondly**, remember that these visions are conveyed in a way which would have resonated with the patterns, objects and understanding of worship with which Old Testament Israel was familiar. Their situation is not our situation, so we need to carefully translate the meaning of the visions from their context before the first coming of Christ to ours in light of our Lord’s completed work at Calvary.

**Thirdly**, recognize the purpose of these visions at the time they were revealed to the Lord’s prophet so that He could convey them to the exiles in Babylon. That purpose was to encourage God’s people to continued repentance for sin, ongoing faithful endurance and hope for a future which would be so much better than the past.

Let’s go back now to the single item of furniture in the temple – the new altar. The purpose of the altar and the sacrifices made there was to restore relationshipwith the Living God whose glory filled the temple (44:4). You can see this from the declaration made by the Lord God at the end of chapter 43 after the altar and sacrifices have been detailed: “*I will accept you*” (43:27b).

The wooden altar and atoning offerings here do not point to some future physical temple where an elaborate Old Testament style system of sacrifices will be re-established, but to a wooden cross and to the shedding of the blood of Christ unto death so that those for whom He was offered up would be acceptable to God. Just as these visions are full of detail, likewise the pages of Scripture carefully show how so many of the details surrounding the death of Christ fulfil many previous prophesies e.g.

* The 30 silver coins paid to Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus (Matt 26:14-16 in fulfilment of Zech 11:12).
* The division of Christ’s garments by lot (John 19:33 in fulfilment of Psalm 22:17-18).
* The cry of utter abandonment by Jesus as He received the full penalty for the sins of God’s people “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* (Matt 27:46 in fulfilment of Psalm 22:1-2).

Jesus is the “*Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*” (John 1:29). “*For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified*” (Heb 10:14).

The elaborate vision of a new altar revealed to Ezekiel conveyed a message of certain hope for those who would listen. God was going to **re-establish relationship** with His people who would live in the presence of their God...which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **A new priesthood**

I once took a bus from Stockholm, Sweden to go skiing up North. I hadn’t realized that I would be dropped off in a small village at 4a.m. in the morning and would need to wait until breakfast time before meeting with my friends who would arrive from another city. It was many degrees below freezing and snow covered the ground. However, by God’s grace I found an old church building, the heavy wooden doors looked imposing, but were unlocked. I gained entry and was able to sleep for a few hours on a pew before the sun came up. It is sadly necessary today that many church buildings, like this one, are locked when there is nobody around. Respect for church property is not what it used to be.

We see from these visions of God given to Ezekiel how carefully controlled entry to the new temple would be. There are many gates to restrict access and procedures for entering and leaving (e.g. 46:8-10). To what present reality does this limited access in the temple vision point? We know from the New Testament that the new temple is Christ Himself. When He predicted His own death and resurrection, Jesus said: “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*." (John 2:19) John explains “*He was speaking about the temple of his body*” (John 2:210. Jesus is the One who dwells in the midst of God’s people now because they are His body, the church (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19; Rev 21:22). He is also the entrance way through whom all those people within new temple have gained access. Christ said “*I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved*”. (John 10:9a) As the writer to the Hebrews says “*we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by* ***the new and living way*** *that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh*” (Heb 10:19-20)

All the gates of the visionary new temple point to Christ. Members of all ethnic groups, free or slave, male or female, who enter into the presence of God, come through Him alone. There is a fundamental equality of all those who have been born again by the Spirit and who belong to Christ (e.g. Gal 3:28). In the parable of the vineyard workers (Matt 20:1-16), all receive the same reward whether they have laboured long and hard or came in at the eleventh hour. There is no distinction in salvation.

Yet in this vision of the new temple we see that different people are only allowed to come so far into the building. The Levites who had fallen into idolatry(Eze 8) are demoted to a lower position of service “*to keep charge of the temple, to do all its service and all that is to be done in it*” because “*they became a stumbling block of iniquity to the house of Israel*” (44:12). However, a small group within the Levites had greater access in the temple. They were the descendants of Zadok, the high priest, descended from Aaron, who served in the reigns of both David and Solomon. The Lord says, “*they shall come near to me to minister to me*” (44:15), “*they shall enter my sanctuary*” (44:16).

There would be very strict standards of holiness for these priests:

* They would wear clean linen garments and turbans representing ceremonial holiness (44:17- 19).
* They would keep their hair trimmed but not shaved off (44:20).
* They would not consume wine in the inner sanctuary (44:21).
* They would be restricted in whom they could marry (44:22).
* They would teach the meaning of purity to the people (44:23).
* They would have no land of their own, the Lord would be their possession (28).

There is another person in this temple called ‘the prince’. At first we might think he represents the coming Messiah, but this cannot be so for a number of reasons. He and other princes are warned against sin (45:9; 46:18); He has children (46:16); He needs to make a sin offering on his own behalf (45:22) as well as ‘on behalf of the house of Israel’. The prince is also a priest, he is a leader, but he is not Christ.

We’ve already seen that there is no future literal fulfilment of these detailed regulations for this future priesthood. So, who do these priestly people with different positions of service and privilege within the new temple represent? They are people like you and me, who are part of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are “*a holy priesthood*” who “*offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*” (2 Pet 2:5).

Brothers and sisters, we are those whom the Lord is pleased to use to build His church (2 Pet 2:5). However, we build in different ways, some more fruitful than others. The Apostle Paul describes this in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15. Some build on the foundation of Christ with strong precious materials like gold, silver and precious stones, others with perishable materials like hay and straw which will not last. Paul writes “*If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire*”.

There are different degrees of reward for all who are equally saved in the kingdom of God, depending upon how they have served the Lord. This truth is foreshadowed in Ezekiel’s vision of the new temple. The Zadokite priests in the vision were able to be closer to God’s presence but also had to live with many restrictions (e.g. on their clothing, food, and what they could touch). Likewise, those who experience the blessing of God’s presence in their lives can be those whose lifestyle is restricted (from the unbelieving world’s perspective). Brothers and sisters, many think that we are an odd bunch because we do not delight to do the ungodly things many in the world do (1 Peter 4:4). This is not a call to pietism of an ascetic lifestyle, but to greater godliness.

The presence of God is a greater motivator towards purity. As John writes: “*And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure*” (1 John 3:3). John Newton wrote: “*What words can express the privilege and honour of believers, who, whenever they please, have audience with the King of kings, whose compassion mercy and power are, like his majesty, infinite. The world wonders at their indifference to the vain pursuits and amusements by which others are engrossed, that they are so patient in trouble, so inflexible in their conduct, so well satisfied with that state of poverty and obscurity which the Lord, for the most part, allots them*”.

Brothers and sisters, we are the new priesthood. Holy in Christ, by the righteous declaration of God. We are called to live holy lives as we willingly present ourselves as living sacrifices to the Lord. We are a holy people in the Kingdom of our Lord, which brings us to our final point.

1. **A new kingdom**

Many towns are carefully planned around key features with the streets aligning with these. For example there are three squares in Christchurch named after martyrs in the English Reformation (‘Latimer’, ‘Cranmer’ and what was once to be called ‘Ridley’. It is now ‘Cathedral’ square).

In chapter 45 the land within this vision is divided according to a special plan. A central portion is to be set apart as a ‘holy district’ 25,000 cubits long and 20,000 cubits broad (45:1). Another section of 25,000 cubits long and 10,000 cubits broad was to be set aside for the Levities who minister at the temple. On this land they were to build their homes. Alongside the portion set apart as the holy district there would be an area 5,000 cubits broad and 25,000 cubits long to belong to the ‘whole house of Israel’. The prince would also have a portion of land for himself and for his descendants.

The different degrees of access granted within the temple are reflected in the allotment of land around the place of God’s presence. Holiness in the temple is extended to holiness in the land. The leaders in the land are to ‘*put away violence and oppression, and to execute justice and righteousness’* (45:9). Accurate weights and measures are to be used in gathering up the offerings and gifts provided by the people (45:10-12).

Unlike so many of Israel’s kings of the past who used their position of power for their own personal gain, the prince in the vision is limited in his rule and the people are protected by the Lord: “*The prince shall not take any of the inheritance of the people, thrusting them out of their property. He shall give his sons their inheritance out of his own property, so that none of my people shall be scattered from his property*." (46:18)

**This is a vision of a kingdom which is centred around the presence of the Lord who is at the centre of every aspect of life**. For the Israelites to whom Ezekiel conveyed these visions, this God-centred kingdom is represented by:

* The layout of the new temple.
* The division of the land.
* The human leader’s limited authority under the Lord.

This is a vision of a renewed kingdom which reflects the glorious nation which Old Testament Israel was called to be, but failed to embody.

Where is this kingdom now? It is here in our midst. The kingdom has come in the lives of all for whom Christ is the centre of their lives. This is the kingdom of which Jesus spoke so much in his earthly ministry. This is the holy kingdom which has come and is coming.

The visions of the temple, complete with an altar, sacrifices, priests and set in a holy place surrounded by the land of promise in which justice and righteousness is executed reveal a glorious restoration of worship. Worship, not only in the gathering together of the Lord’s people for worship as we do every Lord’s Day, but worship in every moment of our lives as we live holy lives in this world, the land of our ‘exile’ (1 Pet 1:17).

Even though the exiles were far from home and the old temple had been destroyed as a result of their disobedience, yet the Lord would build another temple, more extensive and more holy than the last one. This was not the small temple rebuild which the returning exiles would construct under the leadership of Nehemiah, nor would it be the larger structure built under Herod and then destroyed in AD70. This was to be the holy temple of the Lord Jesus Christ, the church in which a holy priesthoodoffers spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. This was to be a worship which was not restricted to a building, but spilled out into all of life, the Lord being at the centre of every activity in this ‘promised land’.

Today, brothers and sisters, we live in the Kingdom of the Son which has come, but is yet to come in fullness. Ultimately, these visions point forward to the New Heavens and New Earth where the ‘*dwelling place of God will be with man*’ (Rev 21:2), where ‘*the temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb*’ (Rev 21:22) and where ‘*nothing unclean will ever enter in*’ (Rev 21:27).

For us today the call is the same as it was to the exiles in Babylon: A call to repentance and holiness in our lives; A call to continue to trust the Lord with enduring faithfulness; A call to hope in the future which God has promised.

Therefore, “*let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*”. (Heb 10:22-25)

AMEN