

## **Module 3**

### **A Kingdom, A People And A River**







## Module 3: A Kingdom, A People & A River

### ***A New Paradigm For The Post Modern House Church Movement***

*“And He showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. And on either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:1-2).*

#### **Phenomenologists And Keepers of Swimming Pools**

For the past 150 years Western & American Christians have increasingly become “phenomenologists.” O.K., that needs some explaining. As we noted in the previous Module on Post Modernism, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant introduced subjectivism into human knowledge by limiting all human knowledge to the observable “phenomena” which can be apprehended by the 5 senses and interpreted by the 7 categories of the mind. This left what he called the “noumena” or ultimate reality (including God, truth, values, meaning) unknowable in any absolute terms. As a result we are limited in our knowledge of reality to the outward appearance of things, the “phenomena.” Ultimate reality (if it exists at all) is beyond our ability to know. In other words, what we see is what we get. That’s it.

The impact of this widely accepted view of reality has been nothing short of disastrous. Students of Dr. Francis Schaeffer will remember his explanation of the “upper” and “lower” stories of knowledge separated by a “line of despair.” Our Post Modern culture represents the end result of a corporate intellectual life lived by men who, for all practical purposes, are “phenomenologists” trapped beneath a line of despair that separates them from any genuine knowledge or experience of God, truth and meaning.

The Church has not escaped this disaster. We, too, have become “phenomenologists” of a different sort. Valuing only what we can see, we have become earth-bound analysts, absorbed and distracted by the endless analysis of “things.” Even our apologetic proofs for God’s existence rely, for the most part, upon collections of “phenomena” which our culture has already concluded can never rise above the invisible “line of despair” which holds all men captive. On a practical level this means that church growth is reduced to things we can see, such as analyzing cultural trends, understanding the ratio between the size of our nurseries and the size of our sanctuaries, or focus group studies on whether the espresso bar (complete with a life-sized cardboard-photo cut-out of the pastor serving a latte) should be located in the main lobby or somewhere else. We have concluded that statistics (counting the phenomena) constitutes “knowing the truth.” To apply the harsh words of Leslie Newbigin to the Church, we have analyzed ourselves into practical imbecility. Never in our history have we known more . . . and accomplished less.

Now, because we value only what we can see we have become builders and keepers of institutional swimming pools. According to historians the Roman Emperor Constantine’s mother, Helena embarked upon a tour of Palestine in search of biblically significant locations. Wherever she found a place where Jesus had visited she built a church (as did the Crusaders of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century). While we groan and laugh at this behavior, we are no different, just more creative. The Holy Spirit manifests himself in great power and blessing in an event that can only be described as a “revival.” So, what do we do? We respond by building a religious swimming pool. We start a magazine to promote and institutionalize a move of God’s Spirit that has already passed. Like Moses with the veil over his face we hope that no one will notice how the glory has already faded. The elusive “noumena” of God, truth and spiritual reality is something we can neither see nor control. So we settle for something we can see and control. We start a “school of revival ministry” to teach a method for achieving something we were never responsible for producing in the first place.

But in times of revival it is the River of God’s Spirit which has begun to flow, not the methodologies of men which have begun to work. The invisible tide of heaven has suddenly begun to beat upon the visible shores of earth. Old channels through which the River may have flowed in times past, but which have since become dammed up by unbelief, control and religion are by-passed as the River seeks new channels where it can flow freely. God is looking for channels for His River. Men tend to want to build swimming pools where they can siphon off and capture a portion of the River, appoint lifeguards to watch over the swimmers who come, offer swimming classes, hold “Holy Spirit pool parties,” create committees to decide whether or not a bigger swimming pool should be built and how exactly should they rule and control what actually belongs to God.

The God of all creation has always been about three things in this world. First, He has always been about establishing a Kingdom of righteousness and peace. Second, He has always been about calling out a people who would love, worship and obey Him. In return He would love, bless and rule over them as both Shepherd and King. Third, God has always been about empowering His called out people to serve Him by pouring out a spiritual River of His power, presence and blessing.

#### **The River**

On the sanctuary wall of a local Presbyterian church hangs a set of beautiful banners created by several women in that church, including this author’s wife. The banners depict a flowing river of the Spirit of God with a quote from Revelation 22:1,

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*“And he showed me a river of the water of life.”* The image of a river as a metaphor of the Holy Spirit, like this passage in Revelation 22, is not new, either with the Apostle John or with the Church. Two hundred years before Joel prophesied it, five hundred years before Ezekiel saw it, and nine hundred years before the early Church experienced it, the Psalmist Korah wrote (and sang!) about this River, *“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy dwelling places of the Most High”*(Psalm 46:4).

Today, we sing songs about the River flowing, asking the Holy Spirit to come and flow over us and through us in power, without ever examining the scriptural teaching regarding the River of the Water of Life and asking ourselves what it means to the mission of the Church today. I believe that a proper understanding of this River will result in a new and powerful paradigm of God’s dealings His Church and the world today, and will give us in a renewed vision and the promise of renewed power in our lives as we move into God’s new paradigm of house churches. So lets look at The River.

The image of the River in Revelation 22:1 is taken directly from the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, chapter 47, verses 1-12 This passage occurs within the context of Ezekiel’s vision of a future (future to Ezekiel’s day) restoration of Israel, the Temple, the People, the Priesthood and the Land. In Ezekiel 47:1-12 the prophet is given a vision of the Temple. The emphasis of the vision is upon water that begins to flow *“from under the threshold of the house toward the east, for the house faced east.”* We are told that this water was flowing *“down from under, from the right side of the house, from south of the altar.”* This will become important later.

When Ezekiel is taken by his angelic guide to the east gate of the Temple he sees that the water is *trickling* from the south side of the Temple and is traveling eastward. At this point Ezekiel’s angelic guide travels east from the Temple with a measuring line (obviously taking Ezekiel with him as he goes). At a distance of a thousand cubits from the Temple the trickle of water has become a flow that covers the prophet’s ankles. Ezekiel and his guide then move another thousand cubits from the Temple where the flow has become deeper, reaching the knees. After another thousand cubits distance the flow of water has increased to where it now reaches the loins (about waist deep). Finally, Ezekiel and the guide move another thousand cubits and discover that what began as a trickle of water beneath the threshold of the Temple has now become *“a river that I could not ford, for the water had risen, water to swim in, a river that could not be forded”*(Ezekiel 47:5).

### Describing The River

At this point the angelic guide asks Ezekiel, *“Son of man, have you seen this?”* The guide wants to know if Ezekiel understands what he has seen. Ezekiel is brought back to the bank of the river, a river bank lined with trees. He is told that the waters of the river will travel east toward the Dead Sea (the only Sea east of Jerusalem). Even the dead salt waters of the Dead Sea will become fresh and will teem with life, such is the cleansing power of the River. Every living creature that the river touches will live. The river also produces a great harvest, a wide variety of fish (a reference to John 21:6). And, finally, the River causes trees to grow along its bank (borrowing the imagery of Psalm 1), producing fruit and leaves which are for the healing of the nations. What does this all mean? In order to understand the meaning of this unique and wonderful river we need to look at each of its characteristics.




***It flows from the Temple.*** This river flows from the Temple in Jerusalem. But every student of Jerusalem and the Temple is keenly aware that Jerusalem (and particularly the Temple Mount) has no river or spring of water. Indeed, when the Assyrians threatened to invade Palestine in the early 700s B.C. King Hezekiah ordered workmen to dig a tunnel 1,777 feet through solid rock from the Pool of Siloam to the Spring of Gihon outside of Jerusalem’s walls in order to provide fresh water to the city during a siege.

If we want the Temple imagery itself to explain the source of this water then we need to ask ourselves a question: Where in the Temple was there a large source of water? The answer is: in the Great Bronze Sea. This was a large bowl or “laver” for water, cast in bronze, which stood in the court of Solomon’s Temple. The Great Bronze Sea measured ten cubits (fifteen feet) in diameter and stood five cubits (7.5 feet) high (see 1 Kings 7:23-26). The Sea was located on the *southeast* side of the Temple (1 Kings 7:39), beside the altar (the water of Ezekiel 47 flows from the *south* side of the Temple, toward the east). The purpose of the Sea was to provide water for the Priests to perform ceremonial washings. Now, The water contained in the Great Bronze Sea, which the Priests used to cleanse themselves after every sacrifice, is symbolic of the Holy Spirit, just as in the New Testament the Holy Spirit cleanses the believer through the “washing of regeneration” (Titus 3:5).


So, what is this all about? In the Temple imagery of Ezekiel 47 the Great Bronze Sea has been tipped over, pouring out its water which flows out under the threshold from the south side of the Temple. The message is clear. At some point in time, future to Ezekiel, a day would come when the Holy Spirit would be poured out from the Temple of God. So, another question presents itself: Has there ever been such a time, subsequent to Ezekiel’s day, when the Holy Spirit has been poured out? The answer is, Yes! The Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost. On the day of Pentecost the Great Bronze Sea of the temple was tipped over and the waters of the Holy Spirit were poured out!


In order to have a more complete understanding of the imagery used here we need to understand the New Testament concept of the Heavenly Temple found in the book of Hebrews, Chapter 9. According to the writer of Hebrews, the Heavenly Temple is the true and perfect temple, of which the earthly temple was but a shadow and a type. In this Heavenly Temple Jesus, following His crucifixion, entered the holy of holies and presented Himself as the perfect and final sacrifice and His blood as the final perfect atonement for sin. With the shedding and presentation of Jesus' blood in the Heavenly Temple there was no longer any need for either *sacrifices* or *ritual washings*. When did these events occur in heaven? They occurred between the death of Jesus (after which He appeared in heaven to present His blood in the Heavenly Temple) and Pentecost (when the Great Bronze Sea of the Heavenly Temple was overturned).


Now the Great Bronze Sea in the Heavenly Temple has been overturned and the water of life, the River of the Holy Spirit, that cleanses and gives life, has been poured out upon the Church and the world in a River that grows as it flows. On the day of Pentecost the Great Bronze Sea of the Heavenly Temple, where Jesus now mediates for us as our heavenly high priest, was overturned and the River of the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the Church. That event was "once-for-all" in that it will never be repeated. But that River of the Water of Life continues to "grow as it flows." This is the fountain-head of revival in the Church, and the hope of the Church for revival in our day. It is a River of God's presence, power and blessing that is ever increasing, rising to new levels and empowering God's Church in fresh seasons of God's dealings. Indeed, what we call seasons of "revival" or "awakening" are simply seasons when the River of God's Spirit, the River of Ezekiel 47 rises and flows in fresh depth and power.


 **It grows as it flows.** Imagine placing a bowl of water on your kitchen table and then tipping the bowl over so that the water spilled out. How far would the water flow? Would it flow out the door and down the street, becoming a river in the process? Of course not. But that is exactly what happens to the water in Great Bronze Sea in Ezekiel's Temple. The Great Bronze Sea is tipped over and the water begins to flow. At first it is only a trickle of water under the threshold, but a thousand cubits (roughly 1500 feet) from the Temple the trickle has grown to a stream that covers Ezekiel's feet up to his ankles. The trickle of water grows in power and depth the further it flows, eventually becoming a river that cannot be forded.

This point is crucial to understand. Most believers today have a view of the world which says that the power of God is waning, not increasing. In other words, in their understanding the River of the Spirit of God is slowly "drying up." This is not the teaching of Ezekiel 47. According to Ezekiel 47 God's power and blessing *grow as they flow!* Do you believe that! This passage teaches us that we should expect the River of God's Spirit, God's power in our world, to grow and increase as time goes on. We should expect every revival, renewal and awakening to be more powerful than the one which preceded it. But do we believe that? Do we genuinely expect God to do greater things in our day than He did 100 or 200 years ago? If this interpretation is correct, then Ezekiel 47 suggests that *Pentecost was only the beginning "trickle" of a mighty river that grows as it flows!*

 **It purifies and cleanses everything it touches.** The God of Scripture is a God of redemption. The great redemption that was purposed by God the Father and was achieved through the death of the Son is now applied by the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul describes it this way, "*He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit. . .*" (Titus 3:5). The river of the Holy Spirit purifies and cleanses by the washing of regeneration. This should be a source of hope and encouragement for the church. We live in a world that is becoming increasingly polluted and is in need of cleansing, and cleansing is the promise of the River!

 **It brings life to every creature it touches.** This is living water. It is the water of life. It is alive with power to bring life to every creature it touches. This is the ministry and power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised this living water to the Samaritan woman at the well in John Chapter 4. He promised this living water to all who were thirsty on the last and great day of the feast in John Chapter 7. This river, which gives life to everyone it touches, is available today. It is the River of the Spirit of God!

 **It yields a great harvest of fish.** Ezekiel was told that fishermen would stand before the river and would spread their nets from Engedi to Enghaim, places along the Dead Sea which were not known for fishing. Ezekiel was told that the fish would be "*according to their kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea, very many.*" This description seems to be a precursor of John 21:6-11 where the disciples caught a "*great number of fish.*" It is the power of the River of the Spirit that turns ordinary men into fishers of men. The River of the Spirit of God is the power in our evangelism, and the promise of the River is that we will have a great harvest of fish!

 **It nourishes trees which produce food, and leaves for the healing of the nations.** The word picture here in Ezekiel 47:12 is taken from Psalm 1 where the righteous are described as trees planted by streams of water. The river of the Spirit of God causes the trees (the righteous) to grow so that their leaves do not wither and their fruit do not fail. But there is more. The fruit which the righteous produce is to provide food, while their leaves are for healing. This promise is repeated in Revelation 22:1-2, where we are told, "*the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.*" This is an incredible promise to all believers. God wants to heal the hurting nations of the world. God desires to heal Russia,

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China, Serbia, Kosovo, and many others. And He is sending the River of the Holy Spirit in increasing power to produce in the lives of believers the fruit (and the leaves) necessary to bring about that healing. God desires to heal nations and to sweep them into the Kingdom of God.

### Fasting & The River

When the Holy Spirit fell upon the early church at Pentecost, Peter declared that this outpouring of the Spirit was “*what was spoken of through the prophet Joel*” (Acts 2:16). The promise of the Spirit’s outpouring in Joel was preceded by a three-fold call to fast. This strongly suggests that *the waiting church in the upper room was devoting themselves to **fasting and prayer** during those ten days between the ascension of Jesus and Pentecost*. I believe that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit described in Ezekiel 47 occurred on the day of Pentecost, and has been “flowing & growing” ever since.

God answered the prayers and fastings of the early Church, and at Pentecost, not only was the prophecy of Joel fulfilled, but the imagery of Ezekiel 47 was also fulfilled. The Great Bronze Sea was overturned and the River of the Spirit of God began to flow. Here we see the relationship between fasting and the River of Ezekiel 47. Like the early Church, our calling today is to fast and pray and implore God to cause the River of Ezekiel 47, the River of the Spirit of God, to flow deeper and wider in our day, to be a River of blessing that “grows as it flows.” Our calling is to fast and pray, asking God to send His River to cleanse our polluted land, by convicting its inhabitants of sin, righteousness and judgment. Our calling is to fast and pray, asking God to send the River of His Spirit into our lives and our Churches to make us fishers of men, to empower our evangelism, and to reap a great harvest of fish. Our calling is to fast and pray, asking God to send His River to empower the Church, releasing all His many gifts and blessings and producing fruit with which to feed the nations and leaves with which to heal them.

### The Coming “River Houses”

It has always been, and continues to be, the heart of God to build His Kingdom, to call out a People, and to pour out His River. I believe God is once again raising up “old-but-new” paradigms to accomplish His three great purposes. Can you hear what He is saying? One of the mature prophetic people in our house church network recently had a conversation with a Christian couple who are not involved in house church (yet!), but who are gifted prophetic intercessors. “*What are these ‘river houses’ I keep hearing from the Holy Spirit?*” she asked my prophetic friend. When he shared this with me I couldn’t help but laugh. For some time now the Lord had been telling me that the coming move of His Spirit would be an outpouring of the River of Ezekiel 47 in great power which would flow through house churches: “*river houses*” if you will. Two “old-but-new” paradigms coming together to achieve God’s three great purposes in this world. What she was hearing was confirmation of what I had been hearing and teaching, and am now sharing with you. The River of God’s Spirit is about to flow in great power and blessing, and house churches are the new-but-old channels through which He plans to flow.

In Ephesians 3:20 the Apostle Paul tells us that we worship and serve a God “*who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us.*” God’s ability to do, exceeds both our ability to ask, and even our ability to think. Yet most Christians today act as though God’s power in the world is like an hour glass whose sand is about to run out. **How wrong we are!** I believe Paul understood the River of Ezekiel 47. God’s power, to renew the Church, to awaken the world, to heal the nations and more, is a River of His Spirit that grows as it flows. All that is needed today, is believers who are willing to seek Him in prayer and fasting, asking our God, Who delights to bless, to send the River of His Spirit into our lives, our homes, our neighborhoods and our community.

### Prayer of Application

*Heavenly Father, I fast and pray before your Throne of Grace this day and ask You to send the River of Ezekiel 47, the River of the Spirit of God, to flow deeper and wider today. Come, Holy Spirit, in greater power than we or our generation have ever known. Come, Holy Spirit, and flow through our land. It is polluted and unclean and we need your convicting, cleansing power. Come, Holy Spirit, and flow through the Church. Our evangelism is weak. We lose more fish than we catch. We need your power to become fishers of men. Come, Holy Spirit, and flow through the Church to empower us to produce fruit to feed the hungry nations, and leaves with which to heal them. Come, O mighty, Holy River, and flow through us in greater power; deeper and wider than anything we have ever asked or imagined. Come, River of God, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord I pray. Amen.*



Let the River flow!