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# The Lord is There

Ezekiel 48 v 30-35, Revelation 21 v 1-14, 22-27

## Introduction

This week I saw a news article about a girl who had lost her sister a few years ago to cancer. In her final months the sister had enjoyed playing a game. After she passed, the surviving sister found the game she had been playing. In the game world she had created a village, built a house and cultivated a garden. Her favourite colour had been yellow, and so the house had a yellow roof, there was a yellow bench outside it and yellow flowers filled the garden. There was something of that girl's character written into the game, and so her sister kept on playing, tending the village as a reminder of the sister she loved, feeling something of her presence in the game.

Presence is important to us, especially the presence of the people we love. What do we treasure about those we care for? It's not their talent, their wealth, their influence. What we really care about is spending time with them, being in their company. That's why separation is hard. When we move away and have to leave friends or family it hurts us. We miss their presence. That's why as Christians we still mourn when we lose a loved one. If we know they are a believer we can be sure they have gone to be with the Lord. They are in a better place. But we still feel that separation. They're no longer with us. This is why lockdown hit many of us hard: we couldn't be with one another.

## Jehovah Shammah

And so when Ezekiel has this vision of a mighty city, beautiful and bounteous, he names it after what he sees is the most important thing about it: Jehovah Shammah - the Lord is There.

## Visions of Heaven

What would your vision of heaven be like? Green fields? Endless sunsets? Perhaps it's somewhere you are free to do what you want. Maybe it's a place of rest, free from pain or worry. There could be beauty all around, or there might be food and drink in plentiful supply. All these things are good, but for Ezekiel there was one overriding quality about the glorious city he saw in his vision - God is there. His presence filled the place.

## God's Presence Through the Bible

We can see all the way through the Bible that God is a God who wants us to know him. He is omnipresent - everywhere all the time, and yet we don't see him or feel him. But if we study our Bibles we find that he breaks through into our experience of reality time and time again.

- In Exodus 3 Moses encounters God as he spies a bush burning with flames but not being consumed. He moves closer but the voice of the Lord warns him that the place he walks is holy ground. There's nothing special about the soil - but God is there, and that makes it holy.

- Further on in Exodus we find Moses leading the Israelites across the wilderness. He sets up a tent, calling it the tent of meeting, and those who wish to consult with the God who has rescued them from Egypt can go to the tent. Moses would go in and enter the presence of God by entering the tent.

- This is only a for a short time though, as the people build a tabernacle, an elaborate structure with a tent for the priests to bring offerings, and in a small portion of that tent the Most Holy Place, where the presence of God resides.

- Later on the Israelites build the temple, in the pattern of the tabernacle, and again there is a Most Holy Place, which the high priest enters once a year to make atonement for the people.

- Even when the Jews are in exile, God shows his presence. At the very start of Ezekiel he is by one of the rivers of Babylon, far away from Jerusalem and the temple, and yet God appears to him in an amazing vision.

- And then of course in the New Testament we have the ultimate expression of God's presence with us, as God the Son is born. John says "*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*".

- Jesus had to leave, but he didn't leave us bereft of his presence. He promised that he would send the Spirit: "*he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth*"

- He isn't just present in individuals through the person of the Holy Spirit. He also promised to be there for groups of believers, assembled in his name: "*where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.*"

- And in fact his presence is felt by and through the whole body of the church, with Christ as its head.

For individual Christians, for assembled local churches, and for the universal church, we are promised God's presence.

## The Two Cities

So let's have a look at these two visions of the holy city, the New Jerusalem, that were witnessed by Ezekiel and John.

Ezekiel has a vision that he recounts through chapters 40-48 of his book. It is very detailed and involves a lot of measurements. In the first 5 chapters he gives a detailed description of the restored temple in Jerusalem. Further chapters reveal the land being returned to Israel, a resumption of the feasts and the city at the centre of it all. It is clear that Ezekiel is prophesying of when his people will return from exile and rebuild the temple, but it is also evident that there is a further future place. The "prince" is mentioned several times. It's clearly a reference to the Messiah who will redeem the people and reside in the city.

John's vision of New Jerusalem is of a huge place, over a thousand miles long, wide and high. He watches from a mountain as it is lowered from heaven. There are many similarities with Ezekiel's vision:

- Both are viewed from a high mountain
- Both talk about the glory of the Lord shining from it. Ezekiel says "*the land was radiant with his glory*" while John says "*having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel*"
- Both talk of a river flowing from the centre of the city, with trees on either side, bearing fruit each month for the good of the people
- Ezekiel talks of the 12 gates, one for each tribe of Israel. John also mentions the gates but also adds that the walls have foundations inscribed with the names of the 12 apostles.

There are differences though. Ezekiel's city had a temple, while John says there is no temple in the new Jerusalem. There is no need for one because the Lord is there. John says "*He will dwell with them, and they will be his people*".

## A Real City?

In Ezekiel's time, the Jews were far away from home, far away from the Jerusalem that they loved. The idea of the city being restored and them being restored to the city must have seemed amazing, perhaps even impossible. But they did return and the city was rebuilt. The promises of God are true and reliable.

But it was obvious there was another dimension to Ezekiel's vision. There was a future, heavenly aspect to it. And John's vision confirms it. When John first mentions the new Jerusalem he compares it to "*a bride adorned for her husband*" (see v2). Then in verse 9 an angel invites him: "*Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb*". This is very specific language,

and we already know who the Bride is. It is the church. In fact just 2 chapters earlier John told us about the marriage supper of the Lamb, and the church is the bride.

And so when John refers to the city as the Bride, he is saying it is the church. We think back to when Jesus referred to the kingdom of God, and meant not a place but a people: those who have Christ as their king. We think of how he talked of restoring the temple in 3 days, and talked not of the building but of himself. And now the city of God is not stone, but people: his people. And notice the dimensions. Over a thousand miles in breadth, length and height. This would be a strange city if made of stone, but when it is made up of souls we appreciate the great extent of God's grace.

There is a great deal of precise instruction in the building of the tabernacle in Exodus. There is similar detail in the measurements of the temple in Ezekiel's vision. However, among all the articles and rooms, there is only one place that is a cube, which has the same breadth, length and height. It is the Holy of Holies, where the presence of God was. No wonder Ezekiel looked upon that city and called it Jehovah Shammah - the Lord is There.

(For some extra study, go and find out what objects were in the Holy of Holies, and think about how these apply to the believer.)

## **Conclusion**

How does this picture affect us as Christians today?

The presence of God is a promise to all who belong to him. As believers we can be sure that God is with us. Sometimes we don't feel like it's true, but we can rely on the truth of it no matter what our feelings are, because God has promised it. And it doesn't depend on our effort or obedience. There are times when our lives are uprooted. We can find ourselves taken away from all that we know, dropped into a strange place with a different culture and people we don't understand. But we can rest on this promise: God is There. There to comfort and console; there to restore and encourage; there to bless and empower. As Zephaniah says:

*“The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing”*

And we have a hope, a destination that is sure. That place that is without mourning, crying or pain, where beauty is all around. The place where the Lord is. Who will come to be there? John tells us in the final verse:

*“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.”*

How do we get our names written in the Lamb's book of life? When we repent from our sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, that reservation is made. And it can't be rubbed out.