



ezekiel river

AN ALLEGORY BASED ON EZEKIEL 47

BY RICK CARLSON

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For my wife Pat,
my forever companion

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the power of story

One of the great questions in life is “How do I get from here to there?” The longer version is “How do I find a path to face the challenges that surround me? Overcome roadblocks? To live—and hopefully finish my life—with meaning?”

My answer to you begins with a story. My reason is simple: going way back in time, stories have been a way to pass along wisdom and challenge the human spirit.

So I invite you to take a journey that was inspired by an ancient author, and the curious visions he was given for his people. His name was Ezekiel. The time was 591 B.C. And the Jewish people whom he loved were in a world of hurt and paralyzed with fear about their future.

But the story ahead of you—and its power—isn't about history. It is about this time in which we live and our own uncertainties about the future. My hope is that as you read, you will see parallels to your own spiritual journey and determine in your heart to follow the River home.

- Rick Carlson

EZEKIEL 47:1-12

The man brought me back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. He then brought me out through the north gate and led me around the outside to the outer gate facing east, and the water was flowing from the south side.

As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist. He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross. He asked me, “Son of man, do you see this?”

Then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river.

He said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Sea. When it empties into the Sea, the water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there it makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live. Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds—like the fish of the Great Sea. But the swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they will be left for salt. Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.”

ezeziel river

chapter 1

It was the best sermon he had ever slept through. William Dunham had spent most of his life running from anything remotely resembling religion. Needless to say, he felt very uncomfortable sitting in church.

As a kid, Will's mom brought his sister, Molly, and him to Sunday School every week. He liked going because his teacher, Mr. Dave, gave everyone chocolate donuts and told cool Bible stories with lots of blood and guts. It wasn't more than a few weeks after his tenth birthday that Will and Molly's parents split up and eventually divorced. His mom had to get a weekend job which meant Will and Molly's days in Sunday School were over. Will never told any of his friends about going to church as a kid. He didn't have to because it was easy to blow off his "God experience" as some sort of juvenile brain washing.

The closest he got to religion in high school was humiliating students who prayed around the flag pole and wore Jesus jewelry. He hit two or three parties a weekend with his friends, made lots of money working at the dealership and changed girlfriends every couple of months. Even through his twenties and after buying out his boss to own the dealership, Will continued to live on the edge and became rich, self-centered and very lonely. He didn't want to have anything to do with God and was confident that God wanted nothing to do with him.

So when Molly asked him to come and listen to his niece sing in the Little Cherubs Choir at church his first instinct was to reach into his bag of lame excuses. But when he looked into little Stephanie's big brown eyes the bag was empty. "I wouldn't miss it," he lied with a smile.

“Oh, goody,” Stephanie said jumping up and down. “You have to sit in the front row so you can see me sing my solo on, *Shall We Gather at the River!*”

With his fake grin intact he took a long deep sigh as the five-year-old chased her puppy into the family room. “Thanks, Will,” Molly said grabbing his arm. “This really means a lot to her.” Her gentle smile and soft words disguised the fact that inside she was praying shouts of thanksgiving and praise. “Could it be that you are using a kids’ choir song to speak to my prodigal brother? O God, soften Will’s heart; don’t let him find another excuse.”

Had he known that The Little Cherubs weren’t singing until after the preacher’s speech he would have tried to get in eighteen holes at the country club. As it was, he endured the readings, singing, standing up and sitting down and even forced himself to drop a dollar in the offering plate. It was actually a relief when the minister began his talk. “Molly owes me big time,” he thought shifting to a more comfortable position. Before long, Will’s eyes became glazed and heavy.

“Grab a pencil, my friend,” a voice called through the fog.

Will flinched. Waking up in strange places and not knowing how he got there was nothing new. After a couple liters of brew, and who knows how many chasers, he often ended up in some pretty weird places but this had to be the weirdest—church!

“Grab a pencil,” the stranger said. Will struggled to remember how he got there and why this guy was bothering him. He combed all ten fingers forcefully through his hair hoping to get some blood flowing to the brain.

“You’ll need something to write on too,” the stranger repeated.

“Huh?” Will questioned as he rifled through the pew rack finding a well-worn golf pencil and some dog-eared registration cards.

“Okay, let’s start up on the platform area.” The stranger pulled a tape measure from his belt and handed the hooked end to Will. “I’ll call out the numbers, you write.” Will scraped at the pencil tip with his thumbnail to peel away a little more lead and then wrote as fast as the numbers came. “Nine feet, seven inches tall; the cross beam is six feet, two inches; both the post and cross beam are six and three-quarter inches wide and four inches deep. Got it?”

“Got it,” Will said scribbling the last dimensions.

“Do you know what this is?” the stranger asked.

Will shrugged his shoulders, “A cross?” he said tentatively thinking it had to be a trick question.

“Of course it’s a cross,” the stranger chuckled as he guided the tape measure back into its housing. “But do you know why we’ve got to start at the cross?”

“Because it’s the tallest?” Will figured that a guess was better than no answer at all.

“Tall has nothing to do with it,” the stranger corrected with a warm smile. “You’re thinking way too concretely, my friend. Things and events that you see and experience here have meanings that are hidden by the obvious. That’s why you’ve got to write everything down that you don’t understand on this journey. Somewhere along the way those things and events will make sense.”

Will had no idea what the stranger was talking about. What journey? Meanings hidden. .write everything down? This was really confusing. He underlined the last series of numbers not knowing what to write.

Will’s attention was suddenly diverted. He made quick light steps past the front of the cross and then kneeled down and felt that the carpet was wet. “Hey, you’ve got a problem here. There’s water leaking from somewhere.”

Looking up he couldn’t see any noticeable sign of water damage in the ceiling. At closer inspection, he noticed that the sides of the cross were covered with water beads like rain on a windshield. Wiping his hand along the glossy wood finish, a splash of condensation drenched his hand.

“Well, this doesn’t make any sense,” he said standing up. He looked down the steps of the platform and could see that a dark water stain had saturated the carpet all the way up the center aisle. “Hey, if you don’t deal with this water problem now you’re not only gonna lose the carpet but the sub-floor as well. Believe me, that’s gonna get expensive—I know.”

Will was proud of his frugal advice. Maybe saving the church a few bucks would send a little luck his way, who knows?

“Do you want to see where the water goes?” the stranger asked.

“Ya, we probably should see if there is any other damage,” Will said scribbling something on his church registration card. They walked carefully up the edges of the center aisle trying to avoid the squishing sound of shoes on saturated carpet and pad. Entering the

lobby, Will was taken aback by a very disturbing sight. The water had drained out of the carpet and made a wide pool on the tiled lobby floor.

“Do you want to see where the water goes?” the question came again.

“Probably should. This is getting weird.” There was no way to get to the main entrance except to splash through the shallow pool. Will led the way walking carefully trying to avoid getting his \$600 Ferragamo’s wet. As they approached the large double doors he pushed hard on the crash bar sending a small waterfall over the threshold and bringing in a flood of warm sunlight.

“Nice day,” the stranger remarked, taking in a deep lungful of mountain air.

“You seem rather nonchalant about this. Aren’t you concerned that you may have significant flood damage in your church?” Will looked carefully at the stranger to see if he showed any sign of concern but there was none.

“Don’t forget to write down everything you see and highlight what you don’t understand,” the stranger said pulling the tape measure out of his pocket. Will stood and watched the small stream for awhile, thinking logically it would stop but the water kept coming. He poked his head back in to see if the pool of water in the lobby was receding. No change.

“Do you want to see where the water goes?” the stranger asked with his eyes smiling. Turning toward the morning sun, Will and the stranger looked out over a vast mountainous landscape.

“It’s beautiful,” Will said without blinking. The smell of pine needles and the splash of color provided by the varieties of yellow, purple and pink wild flowers contrasting against rich red soil and the vibrant blue sky encouraged Will to take his own deep breath. “You know, I’d love to build a cabin right over there,” he said pointing to a high plateau overlooking a deep ravine. “This is the place dreams are made of.”

“Before you start homesteading, don’t you want to see where the water goes?” the stranger smiled handing Will the hooked end of the tape measure.

“Uh, ya,” Will acknowledged. The stranger stretched the long yellow tape along the small stream of water until it was fully extended. He took a small stick out of his pocket about the size of a popsicle stick and stuck it into the ground marking the spot.

“That’s fifty yards; nine more measurements to go,” he said turning down the hill with Will in tow. Measurement after measurement, ten popsicle sticks were planted into the ground. “We’ll stop here,” the stranger called and motioned for Will to join him.

Will turned back to look at their 500-yard pilgrimage; he realized that the stream was now significantly larger. He had been so busy holding the tape measure and trying to protect his shoes on the rocky terrain he hadn’t even noticed that the volume of water had increased many times. Without being told, Will began to write: *The stream of water appears to be ~~multiplying~~ increasing growing the further it flows from the cross!*

The gentle murmur of the babbling brook reminded him that he was thirsty— really thirsty.

“This would be a good place to get a drink,” the stranger said walking into the middle of the stream, shoes and all. He hooked the tape measure on his belt and knelt down. Cupping both hands, he dipped them in the water and took a long savory drink. Being more cautious, Will scouted a series of rocks, which he used as stepping stones, to make his way to the middle of the stream.

“Protecting your shoes is a waste of time, my friend,” the stranger said leaning down for another cupful. “You will never know the joy of this water unless you get in.”

“I’m just thirsty, thank you. I don’t need a bath.” Will laughed at his own attempt at levity as he carefully hopped from one rock to the next. He tried to balance on one foot, lean down and cup some water but he couldn’t get low enough. After a variety of failed attempts in every possible combination of positions Will decided that thirst required compromise.

Keeping his right foot on the rock, Will carefully lowered the left foot into the icy stream. The sensation of water filling his

expensive shoe was overshadowed by the desire to quench his thirst. Will bent low directing a constant flow of water into his mouth with his hands. He drank gulp after gulp coming up only for an occasional gasp of air.

The stranger was right. One foot in the stream was not enough. The water called to him again. This time he submerged his right foot down to the pebbly stream bed. The water surface tickled his ankles as it moved. The wet sensation crawled up his socks and the bottom of his pant legs. Overcome by fresh, delicious water, Will followed the example of the stranger and knelt down in the stream.

He drank as though he had never swallowed water before and so deeply that he would never have to drink again. At last, he leaned back on his heels with his eyes closed facing the sky. It was just a drink of water but he was changed forever. Amazing. The little stream sang its continuous song while Will and the man remained speechless.

The moment was interrupted by a deep sigh. "It's time to move on, my friend." Will did not open his eyes or change position. "I was afraid you were going to say that. I've never felt this way before." His eyes opened and he looked up at the stranger who was already standing and holding out his hand to help Will to his feet. Grabbing each other's forearms provided the connection as the man dug in his right foot applying the leverage needed to help Will up.

"This is only the beginning. Believe me, you'll thank me." Will did not like being rushed but stood anyway. "Why don't you write about it?" the stranger smiled.

"What?"

"Write on your card about what just happened to you when you drank from the River," he said pointing to the pocket where the cards and pencil were hidden. Will was surprised by the suggestion, as if the pencil and paper had magically appeared.

What do I call you? What's your name?" Will asked.

The stranger pulled the tape measure off of his belt and handed the hooked end to Will. "You can call me Companion, if you like."

"Companion? Sure. You can call me, Will. Oh, ya, write it down." His mind was still spinning with the newness of the refreshing drink of water. After a brief pause, he wrote two words: *Thirst quenched.*

It was all he needed to remember.

“I have to warn you,” Companion said, handing Will the end of the tape measure. “You’re not going to like the next leg of our journey.”

“Why is that? Is it dangerous? Are there wild animals? I can defend myself, you know.” Will had good reason to feel confidence in his athletic abilities. He assessed that he was in much better shape than Companion and could handle almost any challenge the guy could throw at him. “What is it? Listen I run twenty miles a week and lift regularly. I can handle it, I’m sure.”

Companion smiled. “I know, I’m just warning you. You’re not going to like the next part.” Planting a popsicle stick, he moved ahead over a series of large rocks and then disappeared into some thick brush.

“Isn’t there another way?” Will shouted.

“You don’t need to shout.” Companion replied. “Let me just tell you, when you get in here, just keep moving. Don’t stop. There’s no other way.”

As soon as Will entered the dense brush, he understood. He did not like it. The flat rock was covered with a thick gelatin-like moss that offered very little hope for traction. Each step had to be taken carefully. The rock was at a slight angle, which made it all the more treacherous. Will soon realized that every step was going to be slippery, very slippery. To make matters worse there was nothing to hold on to. The bushes that canopied the slurry-covered rock were armed with very long, sharp thorns. Will did not realize how hazardous each step was until he began to slip. By instinct he reached up and grabbed a thick branch to regain his balance. His punishment was a palm full of thorns that pierced his right hand. Recoiling in pain Will went down flat on his back.

Companion heard Will go down but resisted the temptation to turn around and see what had happened for fear of losing his own footing. The picture in his mind pretty well matched Will's pratfall. Getting up was more difficult than Will expected. In fact, it was impossible. After his third attempt to get to his feet, he conceded and crawled on all fours the rest of the way. Companion watched safely from a dry rock as Will dragged himself out of the muck. He was a mess. His hand was bleeding from the thorns. His clothes were covered with green slime. He felt the goo all over his arms and legs, in his hair. His left ear was plugged and his eye was stinging. He even tasted the rancid stew on his lips. He had never felt so utterly filthy.

"Companion, get me outta here! Ugh, this is so gross. I hate it. Hate it!" Will became more and more agitated with each movement. Repulsion of the slime made him want to vomit. The inability to stand up on his own was humiliating. But at last, the strong hand of a friend helped him to his feet.

"Follow me," Companion insisted. Will held his arms out away from his body to limit the points of contact with his soiled clothes.

"I hate this," he shouted.

"I know," Companion said offering his hand again to help Will step up on a large rock. "You're almost there. I warned you that you were not going to like it."

"You got that right. Why did you take me through there, anyway?" Will could have practically answered his own question as he looked for other possible paths.

"Let me put it this way, I know you didn't like going that way but you would have liked the other ways even less. Come on and wash off."

Without hesitation, Will sloshed into the stream which was now up to his knees. He did not care about the expense of his shoes, pants, shirt or even that he was wearing his wallet. All he could

think about was getting clean. When he reached the middle once again he dropped to his knees and began to wash. The current scrubbed the slime off of his body and carried it away. His new friend cupped water in both hands and poured it on Will's head. The grime washed away with each splash. Will slowed his frantic scrubbing as more and more of the creepy sludge floated away.

"Do we have to go through there again?"

"Do you want to?"

"No! No, I hated it. I have never felt so disgusting in my whole life."

"You'd be surprised how often people go back and forth through there. Some get so used to the feeling of being covered with that stuff that they don't bother getting cleaned up."

"Seriously, I hated it."

"I know, you've said that a lot."

"I mean it. I hated the feeling of being so dirty. I almost felt badly for defiling the River with my filth."

Companion smiled again. He had never thought about it that way before. "It's actually the other way around, Will. The River is not defiled by the junk we wash off, instead we are made clean by its constant flow."

Will felt gentle hands on his shoulder and head. "You are clean. If you walk carefully, you will only have to wash your feet when you go through that place."

"Would you like to see where the water goes from here?" Companion asked. Will nodded, stood up and they both sloshed their way to the edge of the stream.

Pulling the pencil and a card from his pocket Will wrote:
Walk carefully. Clean regularly. Stay in the stream!

Companion handed the hooked end of the tape measure to Will and began another series of measurements along the stream. When the tape stretched 50 yards, Companion took a popsicle stick out of his pocket and planted it in the pebbly soil. The slope became steeper and so each fifty-yard measurement went slower and slower as they negotiated through the labyrinth of boulders and shrubs. By the time Companion stabbed the tenth popsicle stick in the ground they were both ready for a cool dip in the water.

To Will's surprise the stream had swollen hundreds of times its size in only 500 yards. He pulled out the worn registration card and golf pencil and wrote: *Another 500 yards. Stream is now a small mountain river.* Without hesitation Companion walked into the middle of the stream. The water moved swiftly enough so that even though it came to his waist the splashes drenched halfway up his collarless white shirt.

Will tucked the card and pencil back into his back pocket and, without giving a second thought to his shoes, walked briskly across the force of the current toward Companion.

He was enthralled by the clarity of the stream and began to laugh when he looked down. Companion's feet were magnified many times by the water so that they looked rather clownish.

"Follow me," Companion said as he lead Will to the opposite bank where the sounds of laughter and chatter could be heard in the distance.

"Who is that?" Will asked as they walked up on the beach. "I thought we were..." He cut off his own question when he noticed a man-made trench about three feet across, which led east toward the voices. There was evidence that it had recently been used as a spillway. The River had, for some reason, changed course and would no longer feed into the trench. "What's this all about?" Will asked.

“You’ll see.” Companion led Will through some heavy underbrush and down into a shallow valley where they came upon a large group of people enjoying a small man-made lake. They had built docks, changing houses, boat ramps and were stocked with all sorts of expensive water sports equipment. They had obviously built a community around the little lake and were planning to stay there for a long time. There were small cabins down near the lake but some larger houses and shops under construction all over the surrounding hills.

It had always been Will’s dream to have a little place on a lake in the mountains. Everywhere he looked he saw happy people doing what happy people do—having fun. The kids were all playing in the lake while the adults sat around reading, sun bathing or just talking with a cup of coffee and pastry in hand.

Will laughed as they walked past a sign. “*Welcome to Oasis*. Are they serious?”

“You’d be surprised how arrogant these communities can be,” Companion said.

“Welcome to Oasis,” a friendly voice interrupted. “I saw you standing up here and thought maybe I’d come and say hi. My name is Contentment,” she said with her hand outstretched. “I guess you could call me the official greeter.”

“You can call me, Companion.” Companion and Contentment shook hands briefly and then she turned back to Will.

Will was taken aback by the woman’s gentle beauty.

Contentment’s smile sent another flush across Will’s face. “Would you like to see our community?” she asked.

“I’d love to,” Will responded and walked beside Contentment along a grassy path while Companion followed behind.

“Oasis, as you’ll see, is a pretty special place. It is more than just a beautiful location. It’s a family of people who live and work

beside each other and really care for and love one another.” she said walking briskly.

“When you say family, do you mean that this is all one family?” Will questioned.

“Oh my, no,” she laughed. “We have very similar interests, goals and values but we’re not related. Sorry, I didn’t mean to confuse you,” she laughed again. Will loved the way she laughed.

“Tell me about the lake,” Will asked.

“The lake is the reason we’re here. As you have experienced the joy of the River we also enjoy the lake. A while back the founders of Oasis dug a huge trench from the River to this valley to fill the lake. It was their hope that their sacrifice would one day give birth to a place where people could rest from their trek along the River in the safety of a loving community.”

“I noticed that the River has changed course or something because the trench is dry,” Will remarked.

“It was just as well because the higher the lake rose the less prime building area we had for future expansion. Come over here, I want you to see this.” Contentment lead them past one of the most charming log cabins Will had ever seen. It had obviously been built within recent months because the barkless logs were still moist with a fresh tan color. A large group of people was clearing brush and rocks to install a large grassy area down by the lake-shore. It was easy to point out the couple who were the new owners because they kept hugging each other and saying how nice it already looked.

“My dream has always been to have a place like that,” Will sighed.

“Why don’t you join us?” she asked looking into Will’s eyes.

Will took a sweeping gaze over the landscape. “You probably wouldn’t have to twist my arm very hard. I really like what I see,” he said.

“Why don’t we climb up to Look Out Ridge,” she said pointing up to a small but prominent hill on the other side of the lake. “You will be able to get a much better view of the whole community from there.”

Will and Contentment began to walk forward as Companion spoke up, “If it’s all right with you, I’m going to stay around here and mingle with the locals.”

“That’s fine,” Will said thankfully, “we won’t be long.” Contentment and Will took the twenty minute hike up to Look Out Ridge and sat down for a few minutes to take in the view. A few minutes turned into an hour; one hour into two and two into three. The time flew by for Will as they talked about everything from their experience on the River to their hopes and dreams for the future. The more they talked the more he realized how similar they were and that he could imagine settling down here with Contentment for the rest of his life. He was falling in love.

Halfway back down from the ridge Companion met the giddy couple. The look on his face told Will that something was wrong. “We have to talk,” Companion said.

“Sure,” Will replied.

“I’ll get you some of the brochures and the free coffee mug I told you about,” Contentment said walking ahead toward the large log structure marked Oasis Community Center. Companion waited until she was far enough away to not overhear.

“This is not a good place to be. We’ve got to go back to the River. You will die here,” Companion said abruptly.

“Die here? What, are you nuts? This is a great place. I want to live here! Look at the fun these people are having. Look at the kind of community they are building and they’re doing it with class. Go back if you want to, I’m staying,” Will said with determination and locked his gaze on Companion’s eyes.

“Will, the longer you stay the more doubtful it will be for you to ever return to the River,” Companion said allowing a long uncomfortable silence to follow.

Will could see that Companion was serious and his heart sank in the anticipation of what he might be giving up. Companion broke the long, painful silence. “Will, do you trust me?”

“Will looked down as his countenance fell, “Ya, I trust you.”

Companion put both his hands on Will’s shoulders. “If you trust me, then listen to me now. We cannot stay here.”

“You’d better have a great reason because I’ve got a thousand reasons why I want to stay.”

“You’re going to need to write this down because you’re not going to like it,” Companion said. “There is no other fresh water tributary feeding the lake besides the dry trench. The water is stagnant. Can you imagine over time what this place will be like?” Companion stared at Will intensely waiting for an answer.

Will cleared his throat, thinking it through, “The water will probably go bad after a while.”

“Will, while you were up there getting the big picture I did some looking around. The community leaders are already secretly treating the water to give the illusion of purity.”

“They are?” Will said with interest.

“If you stay here, you’ll soon be deceiving yourself into thinking that this really is some kind of oasis along with the rest of these people.” Companion let the long period of silence scream truth into Will’s heart. “Will, we’ve got to leave this place right now or else you may never return to the River.”

Will couldn’t decide if he was going to cry or blow up in one of his famous anger outbursts. He didn’t—he couldn’t say anything. His heart sank so low you could almost hear it hit the ground. “Okay, I trust you,” he finally whispered.

Contentment returned carrying an armload of brochures and logo-covered giveaway items. “I hope you’ve got something to carry all this.” Her smile fell when she looked at Will. She read his face like a neon sign, “You’re not staying, are you?”

“No, I can’t,” Will said with the words piercing his heart. “I have to go back to the River.”

“But we’re near the River,” she pleaded. “At night you can even hear it from here.”

“It’s not enough. I have to stay by the River. It’s where I need to be.” Will gathered all the boldness he could find. “Why don’t you come with us?”

After a thoughtful moment, Contentment lit one of her warm smiles. “I’d love to—someday, but not now. There’s still so much for me here and I’m not sure I’m ready for more adventure on the River yet.” She forced a laugh hoping to break the awkwardness of the moment.

Will’s heart was broken. Without saying anything he stepped forward, kissed her on the cheek, turned and walked away. He knew that if he looked back he would change his mind. Companion put a hand on Will’s shoulder as they made their way back.

“I know you’re really hurting but you can’t imagine the great things that are ahead,” he said trying to give some comfort.

Will was not consoled and picked up the pace. The feeling of loss over leaving Contentment and what might have been a storybook future with her filled his mind. In a sudden impulse he stopped and angrily blurted out to Companion, “I want you to know one thing. I’m writing this on my card. I don’t like it and will probably always regret this.” He pulled the pencil and card from his pocket, scribbled madly, and then replaced them into his pocket again. They walked in silence the rest of the way to the River.

“You know the routine,” Companion said handing the hooked end of the tape measure again to Will. Without a word he took it and waited for Companion to make his way down to the first fifty yard mark. It took exceptionally long because the brush was thick and the grade was much steeper than before. Will was easily irritated as his face and arms were getting scratched up from forcing their way through the thick brush on the shore.

The last fifty yard stretch was the most treacherous yet. Will had only been rock climbing once, but he quickly remembered the importance of planning ahead to get solid toe and hand holds. In the back of his mind he wished he were sipping lemonade with Contentment back at the lake.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” Companion yelled feeding the final few feet into the tape measure. The River was no longer babbling. It roared. The towering walls of stone along both banks made Will feel very small. He knew that Companion would again lead him into the water. Instead of anticipation, for the first time he knew fear. The water was now turbulent white from crashing into huge rocks which lay in the River bed.

It was a relief when out of the corner of his eye, Will saw movement off in the brush. A short overweight man emerged into the clearing from what was likely a seldom used trail. He didn’t look much like a hiker and was rather preoccupied with brushing off his clothes and presenting a good appearance.

“Are you hungry?” the jolly man shouted. There was no way to carry a conversation here because of the thunderous noise from the River. He walked a little closer to be better understood, “Are you hungry?” he yelled.

Will raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders at Companion as if to say “why not?” The last leg of the hike was quite

challenging so getting a little something in his stomach might be good. The man motioned for the travelers to follow and headed back the same way he came.

They entered a dark cave obviously excavated by hand. After hiking down two long tunnels they took two sharp turns. With the second turn the darkness was interrupted by a faint light. The tunnel became narrower the further they went. As they came to what was apparently the exit, the tunnel was so narrow that the chubby man got stuck and needed to be pushed—hard. Companion and Will didn't have much trouble getting through the keyhole-shaped opening but when they exited Will jotted some notes on his well-worn card: *Don't gain weight!*

The landscape was claustrophobic with high walls of rock on every side along a narrow valley. Though it was daytime, Will guessed that the people here lived mostly in shadows because of the thin horizons. Upon entering the valley there was one factor that the senses could not ignore—the smell. It was overpowering, combining the pungent odor of decay coupled with the mask of cheap bathroom deodorizer. Will was certain that eating would be impossible given what his nose was telling his stomach.

“Nice of you to join me,” the man said. “Welcome to the community we humbly call Indulgence. My name is Glutton. I kind of run things around here.” He made a broad sweep with his hand to frame his domain. “This is your lucky day because we have just begun one of our favorite yearly festivals called the Feast of Zealots.”

Much like a marketplace people had set up stands of food with every kind of delicacy imaginable. All of them were eating while trying to convince everyone who passed by them to sample their wares. “Eat what you want,” Glutton recommended. “Everything is free.”

Will noticed an old lady with a platter of things that looked like little sandwiches. “These look good, what are they?” he asked.

“You mean you don’t know?” she countered. “These are political appetizers. Politics is one of the basic food groups here, you know. You must be new!” Her insincere smile gave Will the “willies.”

“Yes, we’re just visiting,” he said backing away from the tray. “Thank you anyway.”

A teenager dressed like a banker sat a few steps away wearing a large red bib with stains all over the front. To his left was a large platter piled with slabs of ribs. To his right was a ten-gallon bucket three-quarters full of rib bones. His face was covered with barbecue sauce and he did not even look up when he talked.

“Take what you want but stay out of my way,” he said with his mouth full. “These are Ambition Ribs. The more you eat the more you want.” Will reached across the table to tear off a sample when he heard a hissing sound from an aerosol can. A white fog drifted down over the table bringing a strong artificial sweet smell like one of those cardboard tree air fresheners that Grandpa dangled from his rear view mirror.

“Outta the way,” a man in coveralls growled as he pushed past Will. He had a large metal canister strapped to his back connected to a nozzle and hose from which he randomly sprayed the pungent perfume into the air.

“What’s he doing?” Will asked, putting down the unappetizing rib.

“He’s the Refresh-Air Man. I don’t know if you noticed but we have a slight air quality problem here. There were so many complaints that we instituted the Refresh-Air Initiative which took care of the problem.”

Will almost laughed out loud but caught himself when he saw that Glutton was completely serious.

“What was the cause of the original air quality problem?” Companion asked.

“A long time ago our ancestors without regard for the environment created a large man-made lake from the River.” Glutton over-exaggerated his gestures to tell the story. “Do you see the fog down there? That’s where the lake was, or still is, I guess. Since they did not recognize the need for a freshwater feed, the lake eventually went stagnant. The sulfurous smell won’t go away unless we drain the lake and start over but, of course, that would cost too much.”

Will couldn’t help but smile as he realized that the community back at Oasis would eventually end up like this. “Why don’t all of you just leave this place and go back to the River?” he asked.

“There have been a few who left but for most of us, this is our home. We’ve learned to adjust to the...inconveniences and, as you can see, everyone has found something important to distract them from their surroundings,” Glutton said proudly.

It was true that these—distractions, as Glutton put it—not only kept the people from the putrid air and polluted water, they also kept the people from life on the River. They had become prisoners of their own self-indulgent interests. They were consumed by what they thought was an enlightened agenda but they remained in the dark. They prepared good dishes like ‘Save the Dolphin Tuna Casserole’ and ‘Just Say No Brownies’ but they ate way too much. They did nothing in moderation and their excesses had made them all morbidly obese. Most of them could not get through the keyhole exit to the River if they tried.

Will couldn’t take it any longer when he watched two preschoolers chow down on TV dinner after TV dinner. He ran to what looked like a boxing ring in the center of the courtyard, climbed between the ropes, jumped up and grabbed a microphone dangling in the center. He didn’t even notice the two ladies in business suits wrestling in the corner over a ‘Devil’s Food Abortion Cake.’

“Hey! Listen everybody, stop it—stop it!” Will yelled. “Don’t you see what you’re doing? You don’t have to live like this anymore! Come with us back to the River. It’s not far and you’ll find everything you need there and...” He realized that no one was listening to him. Their vices not only blinded them but made them deaf to the truth as well. Letting go of the mic he climbed back out of the ring, shook his head and walked slowly toward Companion and Glutton.

“Do you want to come back with us?” Will asked. “You need to get out of here—it’s only going to get worse. You will die here.”

Glutton laughed, “People die here everyday, son. Besides I’d never be able to get through that skinny entrance again anyway.”

They shook hands and watched as Glutton made his way over to the “Twelve-Step Food Circus.” They decided not to stay any longer than necessary and retraced their steps to the mouth of the keyhole cave. Will made a big sigh as he turned back one last time to see the covered man spray another white cloud.

“Why do those people want to stay there?” Will asked as they scooted along the sandwiching walls. “These are smart people who have obviously experienced the River and followed it a long way. How can they delude themselves into thinking that being imprisoned is better than being on the River?”

Companion was thoughtful with his answer. “I don’t think that they necessarily want to stay. For many, they are too ashamed to come out of the shadows. Others think that they can only return to the River after they have somehow found the inner strength to fix themselves rather than to escape first to the River and be healed.” His voice got louder and louder as they got closer to the roar of the River rapids. Finally, he was shouting. “Still others are so blinded by self-absorbed passions that they have forgotten that the River even exists.”

The thunder of the River drowned out attempts at further conversation. “Come on,” Companion yelled waving his hand. They inched their way to the middle where the water level approached their arm pits. The current was strong and constant and kept inching them downstream because of their buoyancy. Will leaned into it to compensate but the more he leaned the less sure his footing became. Unlike his previous encounters which were thirst quenching, cleansing, and refreshing, The River was now exhilarating.

Adrenaline wildly pumped through Will’s body as he teetered on the edge of balance but the power of the current pulled his feet out from under him. “Companion!” was all he could yell before he was submerged into the white rapid torrent. Will was in for the worst ride of his life.

Companion had ridden rapids before but never without a kayak. Survival training had taught him that people react in two ways when they are facing river rapids without a kayak or raft. The first is to fight the River. But swimming against a strong current only leaves the person exhausted and in grave danger. The second is to ride the rapids and allow the water to take them where it wants. This vulnerability does not mean that danger is averted. It does, however, help the person stay alert to what is coming so that he can know when to react and hold his breath.

Companion dove in hoping to find a fast current to catch up with Will. Surfacing fifty yards downstream, he quickly looked ahead and behind but saw no sign of him. The River was a torrent now. Huge swells, falls and swirling pools each presented mortal danger. Companion struggled to keep his head above the water futilely yelling against the deafening pounding of water on rock.

At last, in a brief, swift calm he saw Will one hundred yards ahead fighting the River with all of his might trying to get a lungful of air. He disappeared again as he descended into a violent series of rapids. Companion's screams of instruction could not be heard. He kicked hard off a boulder hoping to catch up.

Will panicked. All he could think about was getting out of the River. His exhaustion was now impairing his judgment. He saw a forked branch of a dead tree hanging over the River and blindly reached his left arm up to grab it. With all his strength he held on to the lowest of the branches which kept him from continuing down the River. He didn't have enough strength to pull himself to safety because of the current's drag on his body.

By the time he realized that the tree was moving it was too late. It rolled so that the top branch of the fork crashed onto his forearm. Already in shock, Will did not even feel the impact when

both bones in his arm snapped like twigs. All he knew was that once again he was flying perilously down the white water.

Companion negotiated as best he could through the watery roller coaster. He kept his legs in front of him and used his hands like paddles to adjust his body for what was ahead. Most importantly, he kept his head above the water. At last he saw Will floating just past a large dead tree branch. Companion used his hands as a rudder to avoid a dangerous encounter with the dead tree.

Will realized that his left arm was broken when he reached up to protect himself as he headed toward another large rock. His limp hand and wrist dangled at a 90° angle at the break. Without the protection of his left arm, Will's head took the brunt of the blow cutting it deeply. The faint dizzy feeling was explained when he realized that he was bleeding badly.

Another set of rapids, bigger than the last came quickly. He had no strength to fight anymore. He could not swim out of danger or defend himself. If the River was going to kill him, then it might as well finish him off.

The first few jogs and jumps were gentle. But when he relaxed enough to take a deep breath, the River dipped hard and flipped him over. With only the use of his right arm he could not adjust to get his head above the water. The powerful current pulled him deeper and deeper then smashed him face first into a wall of rock. The water pinned him under the surface with hundreds of pounds of pressure against his back. Will lost consciousness. He was dying.

Strong hands held on tightly while powerful legs thrust against the rock wall to dislodge the body. Companion would not get a second chance. The effort, though small compared to the heavy force of the River, was enough to push Will back into the current. Companion pulled him to the surface and held on. There was no way to get to the shore or even time to resuscitate his friend. The River was in charge. Together they flew over the edge of an eight-story waterfall and tumbled into a deep clear pool.

Companion spent his last measure of strength bringing Will to the surface. The effort was not in vain because he was not alone. Four friends released Will from Companion's grasp and pulled them both out of the water. They worked quickly and efficiently while Companion took a much deserved rest.

A strong west wind blew across the River and reached the rescue party as they lifted Will's limp body over their heads. The wind's intensity grew until it was difficult for the four to stand. In a sudden lurch, Will stiffened and drew a life-saving breath. Will vomited a lungful of water and gasped again and again until the lung spasms calmed to a normal breathing pattern.

The rescue team leaned him against a large tree and went to work. The first friend pulled down a branch from the tree and stripped off a large handful of leaves. The second pounded and mashed them in a small bowl so that the leaves became a green fibrous paste. They gently applied the paste to Will's arm and head. The third friend inserted a small shaft into the trunk of the tree and watched as a white milky sap ran into a waiting cup. Though Will was still unconscious the sap was dripped carefully into his mouth. The fourth friend gathered two large leaves from a nearby flowering plant and wrapped them around Will's arm and head.

Companion and the four friends surrounded Will and began to sing. The simple song softly rose gently into the evening air. Before

long other people emerged from the rich, flourishing garden-like landscape. People of all ages and nationalities gathered around Will, Companion and the friends. More and more people came—a dozen, then fifty, soon a hundred. More people than Will could count. The longer they sang the more people came.

Will's injuries had put his mind into a silent state of chaos until he heard the music. He opened his eyes and sat up. The chaos became order and the panic became peace. The gash in his head had already stopped bleeding and was healing hundreds of times faster than normal. He pulled off the large leaf that wrapped his left arm. He remembered the dead tree limb that smashed down and broke it. But now there was not any pain and with each flex of the hand his arm got stronger and stronger. Curious.

A big crowd gathered at the shore of the River. They were singing a song that he did not know but it was beautiful. Panning the crowd Will saw Companion and gave a look as if to say "how'd we get here?" Companion smiled back. Will's smile turned to surprise when he recognized his old Sunday School teacher, Mr. Dave. Will reached out his hand. Dave squeezed it hard, pulled him up and transformed the handshake into a bear hug. The hug was punctuated by masculine pats on the back.

"How did you get here?" Will asked backing away. Dave was about to answer but smiled in recognition as his focus shifted to someone who was approaching from behind Will.

"Will, it's good to see you," a familiar voice said from behind. His sister Molly wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Molly, how...?" he whispered hugging her back.

"I've been waiting for you to come down the River since we were kids." Molly broke down in deep sobs and buried her face in Will's shoulder. A long precious minute went by before Will said anything. "I wish Mom was here."

Molly looked up with tear-soaked cheeks, "She never stopped praying. Never." Wonderful memories filled both of their minds

of their mother. Even in her brokenness and sacrifice, she had faith that her prayers would be enough for her children. She lived in that hope but died without knowing. Will and Molly kept holding each other.

Looking up, Will gasped. A familiar lump caught in his throat. “Contentment” was all he could say. She stood a few feet away with one of her light-up-the-world smiles. Will walked over, gently put his arms around her and began to weep. He had resigned himself to thinking that he would never see her again.

“Am I in heaven?” he asked in all seriousness.

A wave of laughter rolled through the crowd. Companion moved closer to Will and placed his hand on his shoulder. “My friend, you are now part of the River Community. Everyone here has followed down God’s River like you.”

Mr. Dave stepped forward. “Believe me, all of us have been seduced by places like Oasis where promises are empty compared to life following the River.” Will nodded as things started to make sense.

Tears streamed down Molly’s face as she took his hand. “Some of us were so afraid of what was ahead on the River that it was easy to get caught in deception in a place like Indulgence and the Feast of Zealots.”

Will looked back to Contentment. “How did you get here? I thought I would never see you again.”

“I’ve been following you since you left Oasis,” Contentment said. “But I couldn’t let you know until now because you might have stopped following the River.”

“You’re probably right,” Will agreed.

“There’s something you need to know, Will,” Companion said. “The River takes a different course for everyone. For some, the

River winds slowly and demands patience and perseverance. For others, like you, the River takes them through dangerous, white water rapids of life and terrifying valleys of death.”

“I’m still not sure how I got here,” Will confessed.

Companion brought Will to the River bank, stood behind him and pointed west toward the mountain from which they came.

Will was awestruck. “Look at how far you’ve come,” Companion said. “See the church where we started. Remember the water dripping from the cross and how it soaked the carpet up to the lobby? Remember the trickle splashing over the threshold and beginning its journey down the mountain? See there.” Will looked down the sights of the pointed finger. “That’s the place where the stream was ankle deep and you took that long drink of water.”

Will relived his journey, “I see it! Look, that’s got to be Oasis and over there somewhere in that valley has got to be where we followed Glutton to the Feast of Zealots.” Will followed the River with his eyes and then walked forward out of Companion’s grasp. “Look at those rapids...”

“Remarkable, huh?” Companion said with a deep sigh.

“A waterfall? I never went over a waterfall!” Will looked back at Companion in disbelief.

“’Fraid you did, but you were pretty out of it by then,” Companion said.

“Wow. It all looks so different from here,” Will confessed shaking his head. “Where do we go now?” Will asked.

Companion again came behind Will, put his hands on his shoulders and pointed him to look down River. “It’s good to look back once in awhile to see how far you’ve come, but it’s far more important to look ahead to where you’re going.”

The mighty River dominated the landscape. The pure clear water was now far too wide and with currents too powerful to swim

across. It cut through a vast arid desert, sun-baked and cracked, dotted with occasional gnarled bushes. The contrast of lifeless tans and grays against living greens and browns on the banks of the River took Will's breath away.

"Wherever the River flows, there is life," he said taking in the full panorama.

"It's time to eat," Mr. Dave said directing Will's attention toward a magnificent spread of food like he had never seen before. There were huge baskets of peaches, apples, kumquats, strawberries, blueberries and every kind of fruit and vegetable imaginable. They had just been picked and were so perfect in shape and color that he couldn't believe they were not plastic. A team of cooks and bakers had prepared fresh fish and warm bread. Will realized that everything they needed was all available on the bank of the River. His mouth watered and stomach growled. He was very hungry.

"Before we eat," Companion interrupted, "there's one other thing that we need to do." He turned to Will and sighed deeply. "My friend, there is a responsibility that comes with following the River. None of us would be here if it were not for companions who would go on the journey with us. People who had been there before, who could measure the unexplained, and point us in the right direction. People, who through their example, led us into the stream to drink and to wash. People who knew when to wait and when to go. When to speak and when to be quiet. When to let go and when to rescue. None of us would be here if it were not for people to guide us on the River."

Will watched as Companion deliberately reached down and pulled the tape measure off of his belt. "This is for you, Will." Companion squeezed it into Will's open hands. "You, my friend, must go up to the mountain church and take the journey with others. It is our sacred trust and privilege. Remember Will, always stay by the River and the River will lead you home."

A solo voice began to sing. It was the same song, the same simple melody that the people were singing when he first woke up. Will closed his eyes as he listened to the sound of the child's sweet voice. It was so pure, so clear, so true.

*Shall we gather at the River,
the beautiful, the beautiful, River,
Gather with the saints at the River
that flows from the throne of God.*

ezeziel river *chapter 10*

When the song finished Will opened his eyes. For a moment again he was confused about where he was. On the platform was his niece Stephanie waving at him from the Little Cherub's Choir as they walked off. Within a few moments the congregation was singing a song with lots of Amens and then began to exit the sanctuary.

"Will, I'd like you to meet someone," Molly said touching his arm. "This is a friend of mine who...."

"Companion!" Will said in shock.

The man got a big smile on his face. "No, most of my friends call me, Nick."

"I'm sorry," Will said trying to hide his embarrassment. "You look like someone I know. Nice to meet you." They shook hands and began to talk. Molly said very little as the two bantered back and forth. She could tell that Will and Nick had the potential to be friends, perhaps good friends.

But her jaw dropped and her heart leapt when Will changed the subject as he walked toward the platform. "I'm not very religious, you know, but I'm curious. So...what does all this mean?" This was a first. Molly knew it. Nick knew it, and Will knew it.

"Good question," Nick said as he started up the stairs of the platform. "I think you'll find this is the place to begin."

Will followed. And it was there at the cross Will began the journey of a lifetime.

what comes next

The journey Will and Companion took down the river is meant to inspire a very important question in you, “Is God trying to get my attention?”

You may have found yourself going along living your life like normal and then something gets in the way...

*a probing question
an inescapable impression
a deep longing
or an overwhelming crisis*

and you wonder if something—or someone—somewhere is trying to get your attention.

Throughout human history God has initiated personal contact with people. Just as every person is different—from different cultures and times—so are God’s ways and means for making connections. It does not matter if you are a religious person or not. When God taps you on the shoulder it is always best to give him your undivided attention.

So ask yourself, “Is God trying to get my attention?”

If he is, then it is crucial for you to do something about it. If you want to learn more about what you are thinking and feeling and want to explore what this means for you and what to do next, please join us at www.EzekielRiver.org.

Get ready to respond and step into the river of God for the greatest adventure of your life.

ezeiel river

AN ALLEGORY BASED ON EZEKIEL 47

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