

pm - Ezekiel 1

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[0 : 00] Psalm 137. By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs.

Our tormentors demanded songs of joy. They said, sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth. If I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

And he had this vision. So we start reading Ezekiel chapter 1 beginning at verse 1. In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

On the fifth of the month, it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin, the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians.

[1 : 20] There, the hand of the Lord was upon him. I looked and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north, an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light.

The centre of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance, their form was that of a man, but each of them had four faces and four wings.

Their legs were straight, their feet were like those of a calf, and gleamed like burnished bronze.

Under their wings, on their four sides, they had the hands of a man.

All four of them had faces and wings, and their wings touched one another. Each one went straight ahead. They did not turn as they moved. Their faces looked like this.

Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side, each had the face of a lion, and on the left, the face of an ox. Each also had the face of an eagle.

[2 : 26] Such were their faces. Their wings were spread up outwards, spread out upwards. Each had two wings, one touching the wings of another creature on either side, the two wings covering its body.

Each one went straight ahead. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, without turning as they went. The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire, or like torches.

Fire moved back and forth among the creatures. It was bright, and lightning flashed out of it. The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning. As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four faces.

This was the appearance and structure of the wheels. They sparkled like chrysolite, and all four looked alike. Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel.

As they moved, they would go in any one of the four directions the creatures faced. The wheels did not turn about as the creatures went. Their rims were high and awesome, and all four rims were full of eyes all around.

[3 : 39] When the living creatures moved, the wheels beside them moved, and when the living creatures rose from the ground, the wheels also rose. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, and the wheels would rise along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

When the creatures moved, they also moved. When the creatures stood still, they also stood still.

And when the creatures rose from the ground, the wheels rose along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked like an expanse, sparkling like ice and awesome. Under the expanse, their wings were stretched out one towards the other, and each had two wings covering its body.

When the creatures moved, I heard the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty, like the tumult of an army.

When they stood still, they lowered their wings. Then there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads as they stood with lowered wings.

[4 : 53] Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire, and brilliant light surrounded him.

Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

When I saw it, I fell face down, and I heard the voice of one speaking. Let's pray, shall we?

Our Father and our God in heaven, we do pray that as we come to this passage that is difficult, it's challenging to understand, we pray that, Lord, you will help us to understand it, and that we will be able to see what you are saying to us.

Help us to get a sense of your glory, and your majesty. In Jesus' name, I ask. Amen. There are many benefits to being at home.

[6 : 20] That if you're an Olympic athlete, for instance, you've got your home crowd there. So, the British team this year did amazingly well.

And no wonder, they were being cheered on by tens of thousands of British spectators. Or, even more recent than that, if you look at, Samsung and Apple have been fighting it out in the courts all over the world.

In various countries, Apple have been saying, Samsung have copied them. And in most of the countries, it's been kind of touch and go one way or the other. Until you get to the court in California, which said, Samsung have got to pay billions and billions of dollars to Apple.

And I'm sure, the fact that California is exactly where Apple is, has got nothing to do with that ruling. Or maybe it has. There's benefits to being at home. Life away from home can be hard.

It's harder to relax. Though I've been found very, I've been felt very welcome here, I must say. And, thank you very much for putting up with me.

[7 : 36] But, life in exile, if you're away from home, if you're forced to be away from your home, life in exile is life as an underdog.

So, what does it mean for the exiles, God's people in Babylon, what does it mean for them when God himself comes to join them in exile?

Initially, we might think, well, that's great news. But as we read the book of Ezekiel, we start to see that it's not as good as they might have thought. You see, the background to this is that Ezekiel is here with the exiles in Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar's army had come along and he had conquered Jerusalem. And, he'd taken huge numbers of the most important people away, people like Ezekiel, he was a priest, and other leaders, people like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that we read about elsewhere. All the leading class, if you like, were taken away. The people that were left were allowed to live still in Jerusalem for a while.

[8 : 57] And a puppet king was put in their place. King Jehoiachin, or Jehoiachin, who's mentioned in verse 2, he was taken into exile, but a guy called Zedekiah was put in his place. And he was the kind of puppet king.

Now, what was going to happen ten years after that initial exile was that Zedekiah, having rebelled against Babylon, would then draw the wrath of the Babylonian army.

Nebuchadnezzar would come back with his army in full force, and that would be the end of the story, apparently, for Jerusalem. The walls would be destroyed, the temple would be destroyed, Babylon, Jerusalem, would be just totally flattened.

Now, that's where Ezekiel fits. He's in between those two crucial events. He's been taken into exile, he's there with the first wave of exiles, but Jerusalem still stands.

Jerusalem hasn't been destroyed. Ezekiel's job is to warn that, well, initially, is to warn that the punishment of Jerusalem's coming.

[10 : 08] The story actually continues in Ezekiel after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, but that's later on. Initially, his job was to warn of this coming event.

And so, these exiles, they were there, exiles, aware of Babylon's power, wondering, well, is our God truly powerful? The Babylonian gods seem to be much more powerful than Yahweh.

Does our God really love us? He's allowed us to be taken away, treated like slaves. And so, the message that Ezekiel is going to bring them is a tough message, but if he's going to do it, what he needs to start with is a vision of God.

And so, that's where this book begins. If he's going to bring this really unpalatable message to his fellow Jew, then he's got to know who he represents.

He's got to understand God in all his greatness and his majesty and his power and his authority. That's why he needed this vision.

[11 : 23] Before we can understand what God is doing amongst us, we must understand God. Just like Ezekiel, we need a vision of God.

Otherwise, we'll be left confused and wondering, what is he doing? It just doesn't seem right. It's Ezekiel, he alone, who sees this vision and is called to speak.

The vision didn't go to the Babylonians. Ezekiel would have been useful if they could have seen who it was they were opposing. If they could have seen God in all his might and his power, maybe they'd stop being so cruel to the Jews.

And this vision didn't go to the other Jews. It would have been useful for them to see who they were, essentially turning their backs on, forgetting about. No, the vision went to Ezekiel alone and his job was then to talk to the exiles.

Now how can we relate to this? Well, we are exiles. We're exiles. We're not here as people who are at home in the world. We are citizens of heaven.

[12 : 44] We're not at home. One of the commentators on Ezekiel says this, he says, the image of the Christian life as exile is not a common one in our day.

The primary paradigm we have adopted is that of the victorious Christian life. How then do we live with the reality of life in a very different world where victories are frequently hard to come by and right living does not always lead to success?

The Christian life is hard because this is not our home. And so we need a vision of the Lord if we are to live as his people in exile.

We need a vision of the Lord if we are to teach others about him. So Ezekiel is a difficult book.

This chapter is a difficult chapter but it is a very relevant one to us exiles here on earth. chapter.

And this chapter I going to draw out three things from it.

[13 : 53] Three big things that tells us about God coming in power and it tells us about God coming in judgment and God coming in mercy.

So firstly God comes in power. Have a look again at verse 4. I looked and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north.

An immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. And then it describes further on wheels.

It's 15 and downwards. As I looked at the living creatures I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four faces. This was the appearance and structure of the wheels.

They sparkled like chrysolite and all four looked alike. Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel. As they moved they would go in any one of the four directions the creatures faced.

[14 : 53] The wheels did not turn about as the creatures went. So this is a God who is on the move. The wheels can go forward to the sides back. They can go any direction.

This God Ezekiel is seeing is not limited to Jerusalem. He's not trapped in the temple. He's on this chariot that is able to go anywhere.

And what's more he sees everything. Verse 18 says their rims were high and awesome and all four rims were full of eyes all around.

Now we probably have less difficulty with this concept than the Jews did. They were much more temple bound in their thinking.

We do tend to understand I guess that God is not focused on the temple in Jerusalem anymore. But it's still something that we need to remember that God is not limited.

[16 : 01] We can so easily fall into the trap of limiting God in some way of thinking well God will only work within certain ways, within certain structures. We are tiny things.

We have limited understanding. God is not limited. He can do things that surprise us. He can work in ways that surprise us.

And then you've got these living creatures. What's all that about? Verse 5 says, And in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man.

But each of them had four faces and four wings. Their legs were straight, their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. And then further on down it tells us the faces were, on the front there was the face of a man, then on the right side the face of a lion, on the left the face of an ox, and each had the face of an eagle as well.

So this very strange representation of a creature that's like all of nature, including the human being. [17:14] And so there's this image of authority over nature, but it's not just that, actually. That's initially what you can see, but then when you look at what these creatures are like, if you were to Google, if you were to go into the internet and look up Babylonian gods, you'd see a picture of something, perhaps Marduk, you'd see.

And what you'd see is a creature that's like a body of an ox, and it's got wings, and it's got the face of a man. And when you read that, this passage here, you start to see a resemblance to the gods that the Babylonians worshipped.

So here was Ezekiel having this grand vision, and he's seeing something that looks unusually like the statues, the idols, that his captors would worship.

What was their role? Well, ultimately, their role was to go about with a throne on top of them. They were carrying God.

our God has got authority over the Babylonian gods. That's the message. You think they're the powerful ones? They're not.

[18:39] They're just statues. They're made of bronze. The living God, he sits over them, in authority over them. At best, they are his servants.

Now, the gods of our age are powerful. The media, they tell us what to think. The politicians tell us what we can't do. And they're starting to tell us more and more what we can't think either.

And the big multinational businesses tell us where to spend our money and what our financial priorities should be. They hold all the cards.

But do they realise that they are under God's authority? No. No, they don't. But then we wouldn't expect the false gods to acknowledge the living God.

The sad thing is, though, when God's own people believe that these things are more powerful, and God's own people allow the media to determine how they should think, when God's own people assume that those in political power have got the power have got the power governed by these priorities to do with money, and they think that it can only happen if we've got the finances to support it.

[20:10] Surely God is more powerful than these things. Do we believe that? God's vision of God's power?

Do we believe that God's vision of God coming to his people in power if we're to truly believe that God is God?

God. So God comes in power, and secondly God comes in judgment. Have a look at verse 4 again. He says, I looked and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north. So God is coming with a storm, and it's surrounded by fire and lightning, it tells us.

He's this warrior on a chariot. Now we've seen what a storm can do to New Jersey, haven't we? It can be devastating.

[21:18] Homes destroyed, disappeared. And so this warrior coming on a chariot, who has he come to fight? Well the Babylonians, we hope.

they're the enemy. But the message of Ezekiel, and other prophets like him, like Jeremiah, they tell us that Babylon, when they invaded, when they destroyed Jerusalem, they were actually doing God's bidding.

They didn't know they were serving God, but they were serving him. they were bringing about God's justice on his own people, who had turned their backs on him.

He was fighting his own people. The warrior on a chariot is coming with a storm and the fire and the lightning, and who's he coming to fight? He's coming to fight his own people.

Suddenly God's omnipresence feels a lot more ambiguous than we might think it is. Asking God to be with us has a definite downside.

[22 : 26] When we ask for him to be with us, we think of it as a comforting, encouraging thing, but we forget he sees everything.

He sees what we do and what we think. His presence is an uncomfortable thing all of a sudden. He is the holy creator to invite him into our lives, to be amongst us, leaves us incredibly vulnerable. The judgment is always worse for those who are closest to God. Jesus said that about Jerusalem. They hadn't done anything as bad, apparently, as Sodom. And yet the judgment would be worse for Jerusalem than it would for Sodom because Jesus had been amongst them and they turned their backs on him.

Well, Jesus has come amongst us by his spirit. And though that's a great thing, it does mean that we face the possibility of being judged by an incredibly high standard, much higher than those who would never ever come near a church.

[23 : 55] If we're to live holy lives, we need a fresh vision of God coming to his people in power. Coming to his people in judgment.

judgment. He comes in power and God comes in judgment. And thirdly, he comes with mercy. Let's jump down to verse 28 where it says, like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him.

A rainbow. What's a rainbow but a reminder of God's promises. after he flooded the world, that most terrible act of judgment, how many people would have died when the water came down and drowned them.

An awful act of judgment on God's part. His righteousness expressed in its full anger. But afterwards, he made that promise, I will never ever flood the earth again.

And he gave that promise and put the rainbow in the sky to remind his people, I will hold off on judgment. I am a God who is patient, a God who wants to have mercy.

[25 : 23] And so as he comes to his people, a terrifying vision of the awesome God on a chariot, a storm, coming with thunder and lightning. he comes with a rainbow.

He's going to hold his hand back. You see, the Babylonian exile was not the end for the Jews. It lasted for a lifetime, 70 years. And then the children of the original exiles were able to return to their homeland, most of whom would never have been there before, but they were able to go back and settle.

And in fact, being in exile was to be protected from the judgment that was to come on Jerusalem. When Nebuchadnezzar came and destroyed the walls and the temple and mercilessly killed people, the exiles were better off, because they were already outside of the picture.

God's presence with his people is terrifying, but ultimately it's a good thing because of his mercy. We need this fresh vision of God in his power, in his judgment, and in his mercy.

But there's this big question here, is who exactly did Ezekiel see? Kind of skipped over it a bit, but if you look at verse 26, above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man.

[27 : 13] The one on the throne looks like a man. God's glory. The final verse at the end of verse 28 says, this was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

When we go to Hebrews chapter 1, it tells us in chapter 1 verse 3, the Son, Jesus, is the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. Jesus came as one of us. Jesus went into exile from heaven to be with and to identify with his exiled people.

And Jesus was, as a result, he was both transcendent and imminent. That means those two big words. Transcendent means beyond our understanding or our ability to reach.

He was, Jesus is greater than anything we can, Jesus is this one that we see here, this vision that we can barely understand. God in all his greatness, transcendent, can't touch him.

[28 : 34] And yet, imminent, which means we can understand him, we can reach out, we can touch him. If you'd have been around at the right time, you could have touched him. And it doesn't make sense that he can be both.

Either God is too far away, too great, too mighty, too above us, or God is one of us. He can't be both, can he?

Well, he can. He is. paradoxically. And it's possible because of Jesus, the man who is God, the human being, who is the creator of the universe, the judge of all the world, who died so that we can be forgiven.

This is the God we come to. And more importantly, he comes to us. Whether we want it or not, he comes to us.

And one day, he will come again, in all his glory, and his majesty, and his power. And the storm will come to us, and we won't be able to avoid it.

[29 : 50] And so the question for each one of us is, am I ready? Am I ready? Let's pray.

Father God, in heaven we do thank you for sending your son to us. Our great hope, the hope that we have is in him, and him alone, and you have saved us by your son and his death on the cross. Lord God, may we know confidently that we are right with him. help us not to miss out on his calling, and on his greatness, on his great forgiveness.

May we not have to face the storm alone, and be destroyed by it. Lord God, we thank you for the gospel that gives us hope.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, let's sing. We're going to be coming around the laws table in a moment.

[31 : 06] Barry will be leading us there. But before we do that, let's sing, O church arise and put your armour on, hear the call of Christ. Battle.