

Seeing Him Who Is Invisible

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Date: 31 January 2021

Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 0 0] But we are going to turn to our Bibles right now. We're going to be reading together in the Old Testament and in the first chapter of the prophet Ezekiel.

Ezekiel, one of the great long chapters, long prophets of the Old Testament, after Jeremiah and Lamentations and before Daniel.

And we're going to read together in chapter one. We're going to be looking at chapter one this week and I think chapter two next week with Bob. So Ezekiel one then at verse one.

In the 30th year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chabar Canal, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

On the fifth day of the month, it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin. Word of the Lord came to Ezekiel, the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans, by the Chabar Canal.

[1 : 0 6] And the hand of the Lord was upon him there. As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north and a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually.

And in the midst of the fire, as it were, gleaming metal. From the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance.

They had a human likeness. But each had four faces. And each of them had four wings. The legs were straight and the soles of their feet were like the soles of a calf's foot.

And they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings, on their four sides, they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus.

The wings touched one another. Each one of them was straight forward without turning as they went. As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side.

[2 : 1 0] The four had the face of an ox on the left side. And the four had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. And the wings were spread out above. Each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of one another while two covered their bodies.

And they went straight forward. Wherever the spirit would go, they went without turning as they went. As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire.

Like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. And the fire was bright. And out of the fire went forth lightning. And the living creatures darted to and fro like the appearance of a flash of lightning.

Now as I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures. One for each of the four of them. As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction, their appearance was like the gleaming of beryl.

And the four had the same likeness. Their appearance and construction being, as it were, a wheel within a wheel. And they went. They went in any of their four directions without turning as they went.

[3 : 27] And their rims were tall and awesome. And the rims of all four were full of eyes all around. And when the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them.

And when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose. Wherever the spirit wanted to go, they went. And the wheels rose along with them. For the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

When those went, these went. And when those stood, these stood. When those rose from the earth, the wheels rose along with them. For the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

Over the heads of the living creatures, there was the likeness of an expanse. Shining like awe-inspiring crystal spread out above their heads.

And under the expanse, their wings were stretched out straight one toward another. And each creature had two wings covering its body. And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings.

[4 : 28] Like the sound of many waters. Like the sound of the Almighty. A sound of tumult. Like the sound of an army. When they stood still, they let down their wings.

And there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads. When they stood still, they let down their wings.

And above the expanse over their heads, there was a likeness of a throne. In appearance like sapphire. And seated above the likeness of the throne was a likeness with a human appearance.

And upward, from what had the appearance of his waist, I saw, as it were, a gleaming metal. Like the appearance of fire enclosed all around.

And downward, from what had the appearance of his waist, I saw, as it were, the appearance of fire. And there was brightness around him. Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain.

[5 : 31] And so was the appearance of the brightness all around. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

And when I saw it, I fell on my face. I heard the voice of one speaking. Amen.

And may God bless to us his word. Amen. Well, I'm delighted to be back with you.

Whatever with is for all of you at the moment. And look forward to being here this week and next week. And before we look together at Ezekiel 1, let's pray.

God, our Father, I pray that you will take my human words, in all their weakness and inadequacy, that you will use them faithfully to proclaim the written word.

[6 : 33] And so lead us to the living word, the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray. Amen. Amen. Every year, the Oxford English Dictionary compiles a list of new words, words which have either been invented during the previous 12 months, or words which have come into prominence, or perhaps with a new meaning.

Sometimes these are genuinely new words, words like from scientific medical research, and so on. But very often, they are words familiar in a different context.

I'm sure we are all zoomed out, for example. But there is one word. No one will regret its passing. No one will regret looking at its memory rather than the present reality.

And that surely is the word lockdown, which expresses so much of our experience at the moment. The prophet Ezekiel was in a situation of lockdown, far more serious, far more dreadful, far more long-lasting than any of us today.

He's in a situation where exile is unfolding. The people of God are going to be taken away to Babylon. The city destroyed, and Israel seemingly going down the dustbin of history.

- [8 : 06] The whole exile had not yet happened, and it's going to happen later on in the book, in chapter 33. A man comes to Ezekiel and says, the city has fallen.
- But this is the beginning of the exile. In 2 Kings 24 and in Daniel 1, the many leading citizens are deported to Babylon, including, of course, Ezekiel and Daniel.
- I often wish there was a kind of authoritative supplement to the Bible that would tell us the answers to some questions. Did Ezekiel and Daniel know each other? Were they even aware of each other's existence?
- The point, of course, is the Bible was not written to satisfy our curiosity, but to lead us to salvation. So we don't know the answer to that.
- But Ezekiel in lockdown, if you like, in a land surrounded by evidences of worldly power, and in that situation, another reality breaks in.
- [9 : 09] Another, a bigger reality than the one, than the reality of lockdown then or now. The Bible never speaks about the natural world and the supernatural world.
- What it speaks about is the seen and the unseen world. Now, none of us are in any danger or whatever of ignoring the seen, tangible world.
- But what we're in real danger often, particularly at a time like this, is ignoring the unseen world. And the title for this evening are the words spoken of Moses in Hebrew 11.
- Moses endured, seeing him who is invisible. He persevered. So did Ezekiel. So do all people of faith, seeing him who is invisible.
- There are three questions I want to ask. The first one is, when does the vision come? That's verses 1 to 3. You know, there's a great deal of detail here. Ezekiel isn't saying, as I was sitting among the Jew one sunny morning, I had these wonderful pictures come into my mind.
- [10 : 14] No, this is specific. Among the exiles by the Chibar Canal, with a sense of frustration, a sense of lockdown, he contemplates what might have been.
- Rather like John on Patmos at the beginning of Revelation, I was on the island called Patmos, or the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. It's specific in the 30th year, on the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was by the exiles.
- Now, the 30th year is very significant. It's almost certainly Ezekiel's age. He had just turned 30, or about to turn 30.
- That was the day when he had begun his official duties as a priest in the Jerusalem temple. That wasn't going to happen now. His whole future seemed blighted.
- And just at that moment, when Ezekiel is despairing, in his 30th year, God opens up for him a new ministry. He's not to be a priest in Jerusalem.
- [11 : 20] He is to be a prophet in Babylon. And that, of course, is so characteristic of God. At dark times, we need to remember that he is going to finish the good work he began.
- He's never going to abandon us. Someone who it was said, Never forget in the darkness what God taught you in the light. Because he is the same God.
- And so often, he doesn't reinstate the past. He doesn't magically whisk Ezekiel back to Jerusalem to start what would in any way be a very brief and abortive time as priest.
- He gives him a vision for his new calling. He throws aside the curtain. The hand of God was upon him there.
- The word of the Lord and the hand of God. The hand of God, God's complete involvement. God's complete personal involvement, both in creation, in history, and in his people's lives.

- [12 : 28] The hand of God, sometimes the arm of God, sometimes even the finger of God. God is totally involved. He's not remote across leagues of super space.
- He opens the heavens and shows Ezekiel what is to be, not only in his own life, but what is to come in days to come. So when the vision happens, the vision happens, the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiakim.
- He was taken off to Babylon during this first stage of the exile. At the end of Kings and the end of Jeremiah, we read how this king was actually raised to a prominent position in Babylon.
- It doesn't mean that the Davidic line has been totally restored, but it does mean God hasn't finished with the line of David. So secondly, what's the vision about?
- Now, this is the long section from 4 to the first part of 28. As I looked, behold, a stormy wind. Now, words are strained to breaking point here, as they so often are in Ezekiel.
- [13 : 32] Powerful symbolism, powerful visionary experience. It probably begins, what Ezekiel thinks is a natural phenomenon.
- The sky grows dark. A black storm cloud races across the heavens with the brightness of the sun. And at its edges, great cloud, verse 4, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually.
- And in the midst of the fire, as it were, gleaming lightning. From the north he comes. Now, that's hugely significant. He's not coming from the south.
- He's not coming from Jerusalem. And then, of course, is teaching Ezekiel a hugely important lesson. He is not simply the God of Jerusalem. He's not confined locally.
- He is coming from the north. And there's another shade of meaning there. The Hebrew word north, or Zephon, was a hill in the far north, where the pagans believed their gods lived.
- [14 : 37] God, the God of heaven, Yahweh, the God of Israel, is coming from the very midst of paganism. He's alive and well. Get this in Psalm 48. Zion on the sides of the north.
- Literally on the heights of Zion. And he is coming. And he is showing Ezekiel, as he was also to show to Daniel and his friends, that he is alive and well in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon.
- He is not dead. He has not been defeated. In ancient world, it was believed that when a nation was conquered, its gods were conquered as well.
- And that, of course, is the great problem for the people of the exile. After all, their faith began with the exodus. And I've often said, if you want to understand Old Testament history, look at these two twin poles of exodus and exile.
- What happened at the exodus? Yahweh defeated the gods of Egypt. He defeated Osiris. He defeated Amun-Ra. And all the multitude of gods. And if you read the plague stories, that becomes very plain, because these plagues are all attacks on Egyptian gods.
- [15 : 49] I will pass through Egypt, he said, and against all the gods of Egypt, I will execute judgment. I am Yahweh. Does this mean now that he is weaker than Marduk and Nebel, the gods of Babylon?
- That was the question they had to face. Now, we saw the time of the vision. Time of the vision, Ezekiel's 30th year, when he was about to become a priest, and the fifth year of the exile of the king of Judah.
- So, we started what the vision is about, and I said it seemed like a natural phenomenon, a storm cloud racing across the heavens. One thing about Ezekiel is, although many passages are obscure, he sets out his material very clearly.

I really appreciate that, having struggled with Jeremiah for years, and trying to make sense of that tangled forest. It's great having a book like this, where the ideas are set out so clearly.

So, what actually does Ezekiel see? What is the vision about? Now, we're told at the end of the chapter, I saw the glory of the Lord, and the glory of the Lord is particularly associated with the Ark of the Covenant.

[17 : 08] And what Ezekiel, in effect, sees by the river Chebar is a kind of portable Ark of the Covenant, the glory of God in the heavens.

This is the God of the Exodus. He's alive and well, and his glory is in Babylon as well as everywhere else. Now, indeed, in 1 Chronicles 28, the Ark of the Covenant is called God's throne.

And this throne is now hovering above Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon. He is the creator. He is the Lord of the whole earth. And it comes, fire flashing continually, and in the midst of the fire, gleaming metal.

That's really the first few verses. And then in verses 5 to 14, we have four living creatures. Verse 5, from the midst of it came four living creatures.

These are almost certainly the cherubim. The cherubim first mentioned in Genesis 3, the cherubim guarding the gates of Eden, guarding the way back to the tree of life, and the flaming sword.

[18 : 26] And fire is always associated with God, the Garden of Eden. Moses confronts God in the burning bush. And then in Daniel chapter 7, the throne of God is surrounded by a river of fire.

And of course, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit comes in tongues of fire. So, these four living creatures are in the, this was the likeness of four living creatures.

That's the word used of humanity in Genesis 1, 26. Humanity made in likeness and image of God. Now, the number four is significant. I'm not meaning there's a kind of magic esoteric code in the Bible, but certain numbers have very powerful symbolism.

And four is the number of God's control over the whole earth, coming from the four rivers that went out of Eden to water the garden. And in Daniel chapter 7, the four beasts that rise out of the sea represent human power throughout the whole of history, and not just in the centuries immediately following Daniel.

They are human, they're also animal, the lion with the representing power, the ox representing strength, and the eagle, of course, representing unfettered flight through the heavens.

[19 : 51] The whole created order is under God's control. That is the point. There is no part of the creation that God does not rule in.

And in Revelation chapter 4, we have a similar picture of these four creatures who praise God day and night. You can think of this impact on Ezekiel.

He's surrounded by the dreary drudgery of exile, thereby probably an irrigation canal for which flowed from the Euphrates. And then suddenly the veil is thrown aside, and he sees this more powerful reality.

You'll notice how in the Bible sometimes the veil is very thick. Sometimes, like in the book of Esther, it's so thick you have to listen very carefully. Whereas in some books, particularly apocalyptic books, like Daniel and Revelation, we are shown what is happening in the unseen world.

We have the chariot throne, the ark of the covenant. We have the four living creatures. And then in verses 15 to 21, we have the four wheels.

[21 : 01] I doubt if people who use the phrase wheels within wheels are thinking of the book of Ezekiel because it's really nothing to do with that. The point is, God is mobile.

It's interesting. If you look at the images used of God in the Bible, some images suggest solidity and strength, particularly the rock.

Other images suggest mobility, dynamism like the river or the wind. There is motion in every direction. I'm obviously not going to try and expound every phrase in this.

But surely the point is that this is showing that God's agents, God's angels, God's mighty ones are in the whole earth, even when we can't see them.

Motion in every direction. They had eyes. And this recalls Proverbs 15, verse 3. The eyes of the Lord are in every place.

[22 : 03] And each went straight forward. Wherever the spirit would go, that's verse 12, they went without turning as they went, and so on. Now, this in many ways is a poetic way of the kind of reality that David talks about in Psalm 139.

Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I hide from your presence? If I go up to heaven, you are there. If I go down to Sheol, you are there.

So there is this tremendous sense of security. Wherever we are, wherever we are in the world, we are in God's world.

Old American spiritual says, this is my Father's world. Something we need to remember. It's difficult to remember because it's so often we can't see the reality.

So, the chariot throne of God. The living creatures, the wheels representing motion. And then, verse 22 to 25, over the heads of the living creatures, there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal spread above their heads.

[23 : 18] This is the word used in Genesis 1. The old translation was firmament, the spacious firmament on high. And now here, this is reminding us of God the Creator.

The Ark of the Covenant reminds us of the God of the Exodus. These other images remind us of the God of creation. And here the vision has a soundtrack as well.

Verse 24, And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings, like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult, like the sound of an army.

And this is a phrase that Ezekiel is going to use later on in his vision of the eternal temple in chapter 43, where God's glory returns and it's like the sound of many waters.

And it's also used of the worship of heaven in Revelation chapter 19. It sounded like the noise of many waters. And indeed, the Son of Man, as he appears to John, has a voice that sounds like many waters.

[24 : 30] But there is silence as the living creatures let down their wings. So there is this tremendous sound of praise followed by this awe-inspiring silence.

But, in a sense, all this detail is simply an introduction to the throne and its occupant. Verses 26 to the first part of 28, And above the expanse, over their heads, was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire.

And seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with human appearance. Notice that Ezekiel is very careful with his language.

He's not pretending he can give us a kind of pictorial description of Yahweh, Lord of heaven and earth, seated on his throne. But surely, the fact that he has a likeness with human appearance is pointing forward to that time when the Ark of the Covenant is going to take flesh and live among us.

Remember what John says in chapter 1, The Word, the glory of God, became flesh and lived among us. And we saw his glory.

[25 : 49] That's the final fulfillment of Ezekiel's vision here. One day, the Word is fully to be revealed.

In a human being. Eternal glory in a human face. And upwards of what? Gleaming metal like the appearance of fire.

And downwards had been the appearance of his waist. I saw as it were the appearance of fire. Ezekiel knew his scriptures well. Undoubtedly, he'd be thinking of the Sinai experience when God came down in awe and majesty and fire and revealed himself to Moses.

And I think that's so important. The whole picture hanging together. The whole story developing as more and more is revealed. And there's a further detail added at the beginning of 2028.

Like the appearance of the bull that is in the cloud on the day of rain. This takes us back, of course, to the covenant with Noah and creation after the flood.

[26 : 58] And this is the sign that God, as it were, laid aside his battle bowl and is now speaking in grace. And this is described in the last words, the glory of the Lord.

Now this word glory is easy to use like so many words in a kind of vague way. It has really two, it has really two particular shades of meaning. One is it comes from a verb meaning heavy, reality.

God is the absolute reality. Exactly the opposite of the word hevel, which is the Ecclesiastes word sometimes used of idols. They are a puff of wind.

God is reality. Now, surrounded by pagan gods with many of the vessels of the Jerusalem temple taken and placed in the temple of Marduk.

This was a reality that Ezekiel needed to see. The glory of God. But also, of course, the other shade of meaning is light. The light by which we see everything else.

[28 : 06] C.S. Lewis said, I know that the sun has risen, not because I see it, but because by it I see everything else. As the psalmist says, in your light we see light.

Now, of course, Ezekiel is going to develop this in the rest of the book. But in a sense, this first chapter is giving us a picture of the great reality that Ezekiel saw when the heavens were opened.

When children sing, my God is a great big God. That is putting in simple language what we have in this chapter and what we have so often throughout Scripture.

My God is a great big God. He's not just slightly bigger or slightly different from us. He is unique and His glory fills the heavens and His glory fills the earth.

So, when did He see it? He saw it when His hopes were dashed and suddenly a new ministry and a new future opens up. What is the vision, the glory of God, the chariot, the chariot, the ark of the covenant, the cherubim who guard the throne of God and indeed later on in the book Ezekiel is to talk about the guardian cherub who guarded the throne of God but who because of his sinfulness was cast down and became Satan, the devil.

[29 : 40] And finally, and very briefly because it's only half a verse, the end of the chapter, such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

And when I saw it, I fell on my face and I heard the voice of one speaking. Ezekiel falls on his face just as when Isaiah sees Yahweh in the temple, he feels small and sinful and guilty.

And when John sees him on Patmos, he falls at his feet as one dead. And of course, John, the other disciples had already seen glimpses of that glory on the mountain of transfiguration.

Too much to take in. I mean, we need to, we really need books like this to teach us something of the majesty and holiness of God.

so often that's something that's missing in our gatherings, isn't it? This sense of holiness, this sense of awe. But, the last part of the verse is so important as well.

[30 : 50] I heard the voice of one speaking. Ezekiel is not left to work out what the vision means. He's, God is going to tell him what it means.

And in a sense, this is the rest of the book. Don't worry, I'm not going to try to expound the rest of the book of Ezekiel next week, but simply the immediate words. Because God realizes that we can get visions wrong.

We can misunderstand them. A great example in the book of Daniel, when Nebuchadnezzar has the dream of the great image and the stone falling on the image and breaking in pieces.

If Nebuchadnezzar has been left to work that out for himself, undoubtedly, I thought, oh, I am the stone that's fallen on these other powers and crushed them.

But Daniel shows him that's not true. And similarly, Ezekiel hears the voice of one speaking, and that will be our subject next week.

[31 : 56] We are not Ezekiel, but we have Ezekiel's God and we have the open heavens. Amen. Let's pray.

Father, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses who have run the race before us and who now rejoice in the unveiled presence of your glory, help us in these difficult days and in the days to come to see you who are invisible, to see your face and to hear your voice so that we may indeed persevere.

And as we see you and listen to you speaking, we ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.