

“Ezekiel, a Beginning ”
 Sermon for 1 July 2018
 Text: Ezekiel 1:1-28; Psalm 137

July is a terrific month to begin a series on Ezekiel because it was on July 31st 593 BC when a thirty year old religious professional trained for the priesthood, named Ezekiel had **visions of God** on the banks of the **River Chebar, or canal**. This location is near Tel-Abib (as some propose). This divine encounter transpired while he was in exile during “The Captivity” in Babylon. Ezekiel was deported from Judah in 589 in what was known as the first deportation of the cultural elite, a strategy designed to ruin the nation of Israel. Ezekiel was a contemporary of Daniel, the Seer, who was, along with his friends (deported earlier in 605) and contemporary with two other notable prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, the latter’s writings preceded Ezekiel’s (by seven years) and continued after the twenty-two years of Ezekiel’s activity *another fifteen years*. The date of Ezekiel’s last recorded prophecy.

So this year is the 2,611th anniversary of the **vision and call** of Ezekiel and which occurred in the 5th year of his exile. *Now that was a long, long time ago and the Babylonian Empire, which was so powerful at time, is mostly forgotten, lying in the dust and ruin of antiquity.* Therefore this astounding vision came to a frustrated Levitical priest a mere four years after the destruction of the temple in 589 BC (on Mount Zion) and the fall of Judah! Ezekiel was then barely half-way through his first 13 year term, in the ranks of those Levitical priests who served the temple. But the glory of God had departed the temple (in disgust, as it were, and in rejection for unrepentant national wickedness). The Glory lifted and passed through the East Gate (the same gate through which it was/is anticipated that the glory will eventually return) and hovered over the Mount of Olives! The sacrificial system of Judaism was put on hold, in remission, for over a hundred years (seventy of which would be spend in exile) as God punished Israel for her apostasy and corporate sin—particularly the sins of her leadership, the princes, nobles and rulers along with the priesthood, misled as they were by many false prophets. The nation was **disciplined** out of the love and mercy of God, for the sake of purifying their hearts and hopefully, by repentance turning the hearts of his people back to himself to the praise and honor of his Great Name. That turning was slow in coming. I say mercy, because God for his glory and for the peoples’ good supplied them with the prophet Ezekiel. (Ezek, 1:1-3) We learn that none are innocent and that all suffer the consequences of sin together—my sin leads to our consequences..

These are deeply sobering thoughts because God is unchanged. That God would be so incensed at the dishonor his people had brought to his name that he would remove his protection, allow them to be defeated militarily and even carried away into captivity as strangers and aliens. *And yet here is the astounding thing: **God does not abandon his people even though they have abandoned him!*** That is the main idea behind this first section of Ezekiel. **God sustains his people despite their sin and rebellion in the midst of their chastisement.** This is as much to say that God punishes sin, and even when his children deserve punishment, his discipline is **a means of grace** aimed at correction and return, not suffering and destruction. *For it is possible to go into exile without even leaving your own country—when godlessness reigns and the country you once knew simply disappears.* Such treatment is neither arbitrary, nor cruel but fitting, apt and just. His displeasure is always earned but it can be turned. Such is the character of God which he reveals to us in Ezekiel.

There are five various ways in which God manifests himself to mankind.

His eternal (1.) godhead is manifest in the works and workings of Creation. As the Apostle Paul writes, obviously and apparent to all **so that we are without excuse—** everyone who looks objectively at the world around us knows that God is. However, (2.) the knowledge of God which can be abstracted from nature and nature's law is powerless to restrain the vain imaginations, and idolatrous conceptions of god that lie in men's hearts! Such inner perversion helps to account for the emergence of many world religions! Such knowledge is neither a saving knowledge, nor a sanctifying knowledge. God's eternal godhead is also manifest in his works of providence (see Job 9:10-11):

**10 who does great things beyond searching out,
and marvelous things beyond number.**

**11 Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not;
he moves on, but I do not perceive him.**

I don't exactly see how this quality makes God's godhead manifest because his providences are apparently beyond rational comprehension—too vast, too deep, too intricate. (3.) Then there is enormously clear self-disclosure of God as his righteous and holy law is revealed on Mt. Sinai—*which some Jewish scholars take to mean, manifested to the whole world*, but because the sons of Ishmael and Esau, preferred gods of murder and violence to Yahweh, the God of grace and mercy, they rebuff the Law(!). To draw this out briefly, through three ethnic examples, I would point out that the Edomites, the nation or progeny of Esau were sensual, earthy and materialistic people—easily satisfied by the things of this world which is why, when Jacob offered Esau more stuff (at their intense and scary reunion), Esau was able to say, “No thanks. I have enough.” Because his fleshly heart sought after *everything but God*, he was content with wealth and possessions that do not last. The judgments prophesied against Edom are found in Obadiah 1:18-19; Jeremiah 49:28-33; and Ezekiel 25:12-14 and 35:1-15.

And, second people group, the Ishmaelites, were the offspring of Abraham and Sarah's sin. They are embittered by being Ishmael, the first born, being (with Hagar, his Egyptian mother) sent away. They carried forward an injured, racist sense of entitlement against their Jewish cousins/ brothers (including Isaac's progeny). They believe what is theirs (Israel's land) is wrongly theirs and that Palestine rightfully belongs to them. With envious hatred, they push for the total annihilation of the Jews: “push them into the sea!” with hateful indignation. In the last mid-century, when they fled Israel, exposing their neighbors to an all out assault by the league of hostile Arab nations, they now wonder why they are not trusted by those they hated enough to see slain. Jeremiah prophesied their end in chapter 49:28-23.

Thirdly, there are the Moabites, conceived out of incest (by Lot's daughters), drunkenness and sin, who pursued fertility, lewdness and licentiousness up until their inglorious destruction. All three of these groups were declared enemies of Israel's God, all embraced their own perverted life styles and all clung to godless values (despite repeated calls to repent!) and, consequently, they all hated both God and reject his law with a passion. Both Jeremiah (Ch. 48) and Isaiah (Ch. 15:1-9, and v.16) predict their judgment. It may be difficult for us to accept that such ethnic distinctions truly exist, and that they actually do describe and explain people's behavior and matter to God. But to

pretend that every tribe and nation is essentially the same, simply won't survive the scriptural test. History matters, choices matter, family traditions matter.

Now the fourth way that God manifests himself is (4.) in himself; but he being spirit and invisible makes such direct observation problematic. That doesn't mean God cannot reveal himself. However, the effects of his presence—or the mere appearance of light, his radiance, is not fertile ground for transferrable descriptive imagery.

In recognition of all the limitations noted so far (in Creation, in innate knowledge, in past theophanies, and self-manifestation), it is a relief to arrive at the fifth mode of manifestation (5.) ***The clearest, sweetest and most comfortable manifestation of God is made only in the Lord Jesus Christ.*** I mean expressly “the incarnation,” the Lord with us in the flesh, even God Immanuel. This means of revelation takes its place beside the word itself as one of the two *highest, best* even irrefutable manifestations of God available to us human beings. The word does contain descriptions of visitations of the glory of God—manifesting itself in our world—and the vision of Ezekiel is certainly pre-eminent among them.

So what are the specific ingredients of Ezekiel's visitation¹? There is ***at God's initiative*** glory—*fire, light, awesome power and presence and a voice from heaven*: then manifest discipline (ever a means of grace!), displays of sovereignty, judgment, mercy, promise and faithfulness. restoration . . . supply lots to look into. Surprise, as in radical interception. It is immensely terrifying scene, with jolting reversals: you were my priest, now you're my prophet—you were a Pharisee, Saul, now you are my apostle, Paul (once a persecutor, now my ambassador—a people hurter, now a people helper²). Like Isaiah and Paul, Ezekiel became ***a radically re-ordered personality*** (what he expected from life is not what he got!) in a tremendous and terrifying, divinely appointed encounter—a theophany. ***I saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple*** (Isaiah 6:1). . . ***And as they went, I heard the sound of their wings, like the sound of the Almighty*** (he had never heard it before BUT he knew exactly what he heard . . . and saw!) ***a sound of tumult like an army*** (Perhaps the armies of Neco on his advance to Carchemish and to defeat at the hands of the young prince Nebuchanezza?) Compare Ezekiel 1:24 with Isaiah 13:4, ***a tumult on the mountain—*** such as all Israel witnessed of God at Sinai (in the original giving of the covenant law—darkness, flashing light and terror) which phenomenon, the army, presumably he had observed in real time—as World War II vets witnessed bombardments by sea and air, and Panzer LV's and field artillery. There you have it, the unheard of likened to the

¹ The exposition of the fundamentals related to the existence and nature of a Supreme God and of his created angels, was known by rabbis as “the Matter of the Chariot” (compare with 1 Chron. 28:1'8) in reference to the form of Ezekiel's vision of the Almighty. It must be compared to other manifestations: Exod. 3; Exod.24:10; Isaiah 6:1; Daniel 7:9 and Revelation 4:2) Some the symbols appearing here also occur in those passages. We have Gold, sapphire and burnished brass, the “terrible crystal” are images of majestic glory—“thunder, lightnings and the rushing Storm” of awful power. The Cherubim are that backdrop to the four living creatures. Then we have “the likeness of the glory of God” and “the light and fire, lightning and cloud are marks in the inanimate creation of the **presence of God** (Ps. 18:6-14)—the four creatures stand for the animate orders—lion, ox, eagle and man—ruling, suffering, imagination and man for the spiritual dimensions. We have “the manifestation of the glory of the living God, repeated elsewhere in the book. See Barnes' Notes on the Bible.

²**Who are you, Lord? I am the Jesus, Whom thou persecuteth!** (Acts 9:5 cf Acts 26:15)

heard of!—the unknown framed in feebler terms of the familiar—an extension of knowledge and experience. A voice, a sound.

God ensconced in the midst of four **living creatures** who reappear in the vision of John (Rev. 4:6-8) a familiar neighborhood:

6 and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: 7 the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. 8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!”

There is a consecrating awe in the majesty of God—it carries the impact of a real encounter, with cries of dismay, an atmosphere of endangerment for while he is not safe, he is good! There is real peril involved because of the glory of the One with whom we have to do! When we meet with him, casualness dissipates because with his glory there is such might!

28 Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, 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, and I heard the voice of one speaking. ESV

Replete with bright light, burning coals, lightning’s and flashings. They are attending spirits and guardians of his holiness—not merely guardians of the universe only! But of his person! Gen. 3:24 **He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.** Exodus 25:18-20: **18 And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. 19 Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. 20 The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be.** There were cherubim worked into the ten curtains of the tabernacle (Exodus 26:1 and again Exodus 36:8—I counted at least 65 references to cherubim in the Old Testament! I had no idea they were so ubiquitous! Many strictly ornamental, other like those in Ezekiel quite functional.)

And there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads (v. 25 from heaven as it were). When they stood still, they let down *their wings*. And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was “a likeness” with a human appearance! (A vision of God! Ezekiel 1:24-26). Suddenly, the new man, the freshly called prophet, realizes that *although the glory had departed from the temple, **the glory was present among his people in exile, right where they were!** O friends when you are used to meeting with God in church, familiarly, meeting him in the streets, the countryside, in a parking lot or library it is magnificently unsettling!* Then

you sense he is God and you are not! Then you admit God is in charge and can do supernaturally exactly as he pleases all the time, any time. *These encounters are not merely impressive, but similarly astonishingly overwhelming!—as is Niagara Falls to rapids in the upper Kennebec, or the Androscoggin Rivers.* But this is not merely “Show and Tell,” friends, for the **voice** signifies a message—for God’s people under discipline in a foreign land (Ezekiel 2:4, 7, 8-10): **And when I looked behold, a scroll of a book was in the hand. And it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe.** A MESSAGE³. (Forty-nine times, the phrase **and the word of the Lord** occurs in Ezekiel—meaning many messages!) It distressed Ezekiel for seven days! Overwhelmed. **But I have made you a watchman over Israel!** (3:16) Warn them from me. **They are a rebellious house.** (2:5) You will perform signs of judgment on Jerusalem and Judah.

*It is as if God shows up **grandly**, with enormous, unannounced fanfare, undeniably **present and real**, and greets you, “Good morning, son of man (Ezekiel is mentioned by name only twice in the book (1:3 and 24:24), I have a new job for you . . . a new title, a new occupation . . . a new calling! Here are the tools and uniform, skills and aptitudes you will need. **Suit up. Let’s move out.** I’ll let you know more, what you need to know when you need to know it. Trust me—together we can get ‘er done.”* And so it went for twenty-two years. There is a profound sense of personal inadequacy when one encounters and is commissioned by our all-sufficient God. **In Himself, he lacks nothing . . . needs nothing!**

I am uniquely sovereign, wondrously great, totally infinite and expansive (v.22)! *I am high and holy, righteous altogether, in all my judgments. I ride the wind,* and nothing you can do *buffets me!* I will see that all sin is punished, or dealt with *just as I am doing.* Look and see, I buffet you! I am mighty in fire⁴, in forest, or volcanoes. (vv. 4-28)

We learn from this that God cannot be confined, he is unlimited and never distracted and never disinterested in His people—it is as if he is re-introducing himself with this vision in a foreign land. Saying, I am here . . . so hear me now! *And here is the truly wonderful things about seeing God so clearly—where he is viewed clearly everything else is viewed rightly!* This applies to re-ordering our fallenness, or resolving our chaos! He calls us to delight in Him and that means delighting in obeying him!

But why now? Why me? Ezekiel might ask. Excellent questions. I want to reiterate what I mentioned before: that even in the worst of **consequences** for our sins, deported and in exile (denied, defeated and discouraged!), God is merciful and kind—present, *intervenes*, full of grace and poised to forgive and to restore his people—in due time. What am I to do? **The hand of the Lord** was upon him there. Isaiah responded to **Who shall I send? And who will go for us? Here am I, send me.** They are both sent to difficult assignments: Go and say, keep on hearing but do not understand—seeing but do not perceive . . . **lest they see and hear and turned and be healed**—ahead of time? Before the chastisement has done its full work. And in the call of the Apostle

³ Interestingly, Ezekiel is told to “eat and speak.” Feed your stomach. He discovers that the bitter words actually taste sweet in his mouth! It is as if he fed on scriptural granola bars—only they were spiritually nutritious.

⁴ See Ezek. 1:13 “burning coals of fire;” Exodus 19:18 “in fire;” Heb. 12:18, “a blazing fire; Rev. 1:14-15, “a flame of fire,” “refining as a furnace.”

Paul, Paul realized that God had appointed him to know his will, and to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth. Yes, to be a witness: **for he is a chosen vessel of mine before the Gentiles, and kings and my people.** And Paul began to proclaim Jesus.

Probably that 31st of July rolled out as an *ordinary* day—the captives including Ezekiel were grieving, still saddened by recent events: the destruction of the temple and the fall of Judah—***Israel? what Israel?*** Their country was demolished beyond recognition! Thank God we aren't that far gone in America! And the exiles weren't the least bit inclined to sing **the songs of Zion**, traditional songs of national pride, and sweet reflections of more propitious times, as they were taunted to sing by their captors. *Where was God? Why was this happening to them? **So Ezekiel was raised up to tell them, remind them and to comfort them: God is even in this⁵! You deserve nothing, I do freely give it. I am glorious in mercy, and merciful even in my wrath!***

They may have been reflecting, ruefully that day, on the God-directed (instrumental) role of Nebuchadnezzar⁶, as the divine rod of discipline (2 Kings 24:9), acknowledging that none of them were innocent and that the rod had only fallen after repeated warnings and threats! After all they had killed many of the prophets God sent their way! They may have owned their rebellion and sincerely lamented all the evil that they and their leaders had done in the sight of the Lord. We may even pick up on some resonances of this predicament in our country today. Widespread corruption, bribery, treachery, lying, immorality, abuse of power, abortion, drug trafficking, murders and thievery even entrapment . . . arresting people and then looking for crimes. None of which is good. But take heart, God will never abandon us. He will opt for discipline over casting us off—he will not disown his own, rather he will move to repossess us!

And because God is holy. And because he reigns for his glory and for our good, we may be looking at discipline, at going into exile in our own land, 2, 611 years later—forget deportation and relocation! They got seventy years *which for us might be a light sentence!* Our condition could be similar to that of God's people as portrayed in Psalm 137. First there is humiliation for their fall—and torment added to regret as their conquerors mock and deride them publicly. Of course they didn't feel like singing! Jeremiah 24:6-7 sets forth the gracious purposes of God behind the discipline:

6 I will set my eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. 7 I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

⁵ The temple in Jerusalem, even the city itself cannot contain me; they do not even constrain me. You can blow up my buildings and level my cities; but you cannot demolish my presence, or my influence one iota—wherever I wish to be I am there. I am not small enough to be left behind like a set of car keys. I am neither anemic, nor weak, limited not lifeless. I am not to be found in the dust bin, or the “lost and found” like an abandoned umbrella, or raincoat on the rack! I know everything, everywhere—I am as global as the world's weather. I proceed where I wish without, I proceed without pivoting or turning, arrive before leaving. Everywhere all at once.

⁶ The divine use of Nebuchadnezzar did not extend to approval of the king's methods of warcraft—the exceptionally cruel and abusive treatment of other nations in conquest came back to haunt the Babylonians—the invective detailed in Psalm 137, closing verses, appears just and warranted. When they, in judgment were razed and slaughtered, the just would not protest!

The we will be found in the midst of refinement, or purification—growing in holiness, in the fierce glowing of divine purity! We are heaven's display case on earth—open to public review like a splendid collection of minerals, or butterflies. A wonder and a marvel! It takes some time for the seasoning to set, perhaps to thoroughly permeate the dish. Remembering our stomachs! That's the **seventy years!** God desires to take his people through regret and remorse to glad repentance, to thorough restoration *and not mere relief from current distress!* He limits the ordeal.

God's mercy is also shown in the persistent provision of his prophets. Those analyzers and prognosticators who can make sense of where things are and point to the road ahead. God came to Ezekiel. God made his priest into his prophet. A similar initiative to that which lies behind the incarnation, the sending of his Son to save us. No temple? No priestly service? No problem. How about a **word from the Lord in due season?** Thank God Ezekiel was wide open to the call of God. Are we? God will show us a vision where we are that we would never have seen if we had not been relocated and afflicted. ***It is whatever, wherever, whenever and however, Lord!*** In the meantime, let us pray for the peace of the city where we are settled, knowing that our exiled is not permanent and we have both a hope and a home with Him. Secondly the hand we are in are competent hands—kind in intent and skillful in handling. Finally, we know that what God has begun, he is able to complete.

For Ezekiel it was something to see. For God's people it was something to hear: a message! And something that we get to overhear, consider, engage, study and re-read. The hand of the Lord was upon him to do just that! And what we observe is that this ministry was a sign of God's presence even through their darkest hour, even in their deepest distress. Well, that is a great place to begin our journey. **Amen**