

## **INTRODUCTION:**

We’re beginning a new series of sermons today, on the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel. Though there are some memorable passages in this book, such as the Valley of Dry Bones, overall it is one of the least popular of the prophetic books. I think one of the reasons for this is the way the book begins and the way it ends. It concludes with a vision that covers nine chapters, about a fifth of the book. This vision contains detailed descriptions of a restored Jerusalem and temple, descriptions that seem largely irrelevant to us. The book begins with a vision that many find even more difficult to understand. John Calvin said about the vision of this chapter, “If someone asks whether the vision is clear, I confess it is very obscure and I do not profess to understand it.” If someone of his intellectual and theological stature couldn’t understand it, what chance do we have?

As we launch into chapter one today, it is important that we understand the significance of prophetic visions. Ezekiel saw something that changed his entire life, and he wants us to see it as well. The word **“behold”** in verse 4 is a command to look at what he saw. In a few minutes, we’re going to look at it in detail, but for now I want to point out that his vision was essentially of the throne of God in heaven. That’s what changed him forever, and it will do the same for us. Ezekiel would not agree with the statement we sometimes hear about a person being too heavenly minded to be any earthly good. He would say just the opposite, that you don’t really comprehend reality until you see earth in light of heaven. It’s like putting on glasses for the first time and finding everything coming into focus. I remember several years ago thinking that all of my reading lamps were getting too dark, because I was having trouble seeing clearly the small print. Then I put on some reading glasses and was amazed at the clarity that came. Let me give another illustration. An airplane pilot is caught in bad weather when all of his instruments go out. Though he can still see out the window of the cockpit, he is seriously limited. Visibility is poor, and without his instruments, he doesn’t know such crucial factors as his altitude, airspeed, location, heading or where the airfield can be found. Though he may be able to see 200 feet in all directions, in light of the fact that a plane flying at 150 mph covers that 200 feet in less than a second, he really can’t “see” adequately without his instruments. Until we see what Ezekiel saw here, we are just as limited. Without the “instruments” of seeing heaven, we are not seeing what we need to see in order to make it through life. So I would like for us to look at this vision and note its context, contents and consequences.

### **I. The Context of the Vision**

It is important that we begin our study of Ezekiel by understanding its historical context. Thanks to the careful way that Ezekiel informs us of the timing of these events, it is not hard to locate them in their biblical context. The “thirtieth year” of verse one is probably when Ezekiel turned thirty, so that doesn’t help us very much. But his note in verse 2 that this occurred in **“the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin”** is immensely helpful. Let’s look first at the larger historical context and then at the detailed context with Ezekiel himself. We’ll take a view from 30,000 feet, and then from just a few hundred feet.

These events occurred during the early years of Judah’s exile to Babylon. Let’s take just a few minutes to review the basic story line of the Old Testament, locating the exile within that story. Israel’s life began with the call of Abraham. During the life of his grandson, Jacob, the entire nation moved to Egypt under the leadership of Joseph, one of Jacob’s sons. They remained there for more than 400 years, during which they grew and prospered. But then they were mistreated by Pharaoh, and God raised up Moses to deliver his people from Egypt to a land he had promised to give them. After wandering in the wilderness for forty years because of their unbelief, God led them into this Promised Land. During the first 300 years of the nation’s life in this land, there was no king. They were ruled by a series of judges such as Samson and Gideon. But then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul around the year 1050 B.C. There was a united monarchy for only 120 years of Israel’s long history, with Saul, David and Solomon each ruling for about forty years. Then the nation endured a split between the ten northern tribes and Judah. The northern kingdom was called Israel, and they were ruled by a series of evil kings. Not a single one of them was faithful to the Lord, and God sent judgment in the form of the Assyrians, who conquered the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. Judah, the southern kingdom, had a series of good and bad kings, and they endured as a nation until the Babylonians defeated them over a series of years, concluding in the destruction of the temple in 586 B.C., and took them into exile back to Babylon. The events of this entire book take place during the early years of this exile to Babylon.

We can be even more detailed about the context because of Ezekiel’s careful note that this happened in the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin. A little background is necessary here. Judah was caught between the two superpowers of the late 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Babylon and Egypt. King Jehoiakim had allied himself with Egypt. But it became evident that he had picked the wrong superpower when Egypt was defeated by the Babylonians at Carchemish in 604. So Jehoiakim quickly shifted his allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon’s king. But then he had second thoughts about that and shifted once again back to Egypt. Before Nebuchadnezzar could take his revenge, Jehoiakim died and left his son Jehoiachin to face the fury of a Babylonian reprisal. That happened in the year 597, when Jehoiachin was dethroned and taken into captivity with the royal household and the leading citizens of Judah, including Ezekiel himself. They have now been in exile for five years, which makes the year of this vision 592 B.C.

There are a couple of other details Ezekiel mentions in these opening verses that are an important part of the context. He tells us that they are located by the Chebar canal. This canal was part of an irrigation system that brought water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers into the city. To modern American readers, it sounds idyllic. They were given waterfront property. It is almost certain, however, that exiles would be located in land no one else wanted. Probably, they were located by this canal because they formed part of the slave labor that would be forced to dig the great ditches that would form these canals. They had been engaged in this hard labor for five years, even enduring the mocking of their captors. Psalm 137 records this mockery, as their Babylonian captors said to them, **“Sing us one of the songs of Zion”** (v. 3).

Ezekiel was in a situation of even greater turmoil, as indicated by the fact that he tells us he was thirty years old and a priest. Being a priest was something into which one was born, and Ezekiel was born into it and had been training throughout his life to assume the priestly duties. According to Numbers 4, priests began their service when they turned thirty. But Ezekiel would not be able to begin what he was born to and what he had been training for his entire life, simply because he was cut off from the temple. A priest without a temple is like a piano player without a piano. So the scene is one of great sadness for Ezekiel. Perhaps it is even his birthday, and he has gone off by himself to grieve his great loss. Something was about to happen, though, that would change his world forever. He was about to see God in his glory through a visionary experience.

## **II. The Content of the Vision**

We are commanded to look at the vision Ezekiel saw, so let's proceed to do so. It can get very confusing, so let me begin by summarizing the three main parts to the vision. There were four angelic creatures supporting a giant platform with a throne upon it, and these unusual wheels that were beside the creatures. So the three elements are the creatures, the wheels and the platform.

Let's begin with the creatures, which we learn later (ch. 10) were cherubim. In our western tradition, cherubs are nothing more than cute, fat babies with wings. Ezekiel's four creatures are very different. Let's start with their heads, each of which has four. There is a human head, a lion's head, an ox's head and an eagle's head. The human head is facing outward, with the result that no matter the angle from which they were viewed, all four heads were visible. They also have hands, suggesting their ability to accomplish whatever they wanted. They have two sets of wings, one which holds up the platform with the throne on it, with the other being used to cover their nakedness. These creatures were the attendants of deity. Every powerful person, even on the earth, has attendants. You would not be able to approach directly the president of the United States because of all the attendants and security surrounding him. God also has attendants, supporting his majesty and defending his empire. One commentator summarizes it like this. “Carrying the divine throne, the four-headed cherubim declare that Yahweh has

the strength and majesty of the lion, the swiftness and mobility of the eagle, the procreative power of the bull, and the wisdom and reason of humankind” (Wright, p. 48). And the repeated use of the number four (heads, wings, creatures) suggests the four corners of the earth. God is sovereign over all the earth.

The second and easiest to understand element is the platform that contains the throne of God. God is sitting on the throne (v. 26), which is similar to the way he is portrayed throughout the book of Revelation. It pictures the security and certainty of God’s rule. He is never agitated, but fully confident in his reigning power. Not once in the book of Revelation do we read that God stands. When he gives his orders from the throne, there is not even a movement of his hand, only the power of his voice commanding and making it so.

The wheels are the final component of the vision, which Ezekiel describes at length. Each set of wheels is intersecting, which is intended to convey the idea of quick movement in any direction. The wheels are covered with eyeballs around their entire perimeter.

Though it would be easy to get lost in the details of this vision, its overall meaning is not difficult to discern. What we have portrayed here is a giant, mobile throne. God is not stationary in his rule, but able quickly to move throughout the earth. He is not confined to a temple back in Jerusalem, but is ruling over every detail in Babylon as well. There is an indication of this that is easy to miss in our English translations. It’s the word “there” in verse 3. In the original language of the Bible, this word is in a position of emphasis. We would do that in English by writing it in bold typeface, or by increasing the volume if we read the sentence out loud. The sense is that God’s rule was present in this place where Ezekiel and all his friends would least expect to find him. And he’s not present as a defeated God, but one of majesty and victory. His people may have been defeated by the Babylonians, but God was not defeated, nor could he ever be. Perhaps you’re in some trying circumstance in your life right now, and you are beginning to wonder what has happened to God and his promises. Our need is for our eyes to be opened to see our God of splendor and sovereign control.

### **III. The Consequences of the Vision**

Let me point out three consequences of Ezekiel’s vision. They are the same three things that will happen to us as we see God in his greatness. First, Ezekiel worshipped God. **“And when I saw it, I fell on my face”** (1:28). How do you know if you are seeing things the way they really are? How can you know that you are not like I was before putting on those reading glasses for the first time? I thought the problem was with low lighting and not my vision. It is so easy to move through life thinking that you can see, when in fact you are not at all seeing things as they really are. Ezekiel shows us how we can know if we see in this response of worship. If your vision is clear, you will worship. It works in the other direction as well. The best way to clear up your vision is to begin worshipping.

The second consequence of this vision in Ezekiel's life is that he submitted himself to God, even though he found it very difficult to do so. God spoke to Ezekiel and asked him to do some things that were not easy. He was to speak a message to a people who were stubborn. **"Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me"** (2:3). Bringing God's message to them would be like living in a house of thorns and sitting on scorpions (2:6). And God would make of Ezekiel a living illustration, which brought him into some great hardships. For example, he had to lie on his left side for 390 days, in plain view of his fellow Jews, as a sign of God's judgment of the northern kingdom of Israel for 390 years. And then he had to lie on his left side for 40 days, as a sign of God's judgment upon Judah. And during this entire time, he had to eat a limited diet and take in a limited amount of water as a symbol of living under God's judgment and the deprivations resulting from that. But probably the most difficult thing he was asked to do is recorded in 24:16. **"Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke; yet you shall not mourn or weep, nor shall your tears run down."** The next day, his wife died. There is only one thing I know that is sufficient to cause a person to be willing to endure such difficulties. Ezekiel had seen the glory of God. Submission to God is not first of all a matter of the will, but a matter of one's eyesight. When we see God as he is, we submit to him willingly.

The third consequence of this vision in Ezekiel's life is that he found God's word to be sweet, even when it was filled with judgment. Chapter 3 speaks of the scroll upon which was written the words of **"lamentation and mourning and woe"** (2:10). Ezekiel is told to eat this scroll. **"Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey"** (3:3). This is a paradox that lies at the heart of the Christian life. The way to find God sweet is to receive all his word, even the parts that speak of judgment. The book of Ezekiel is divided into two clear parts. Chapters 1-32 are all about judgment, while chapters 33-48 have some of the sweetest promises of grace found in all the Bible. There is only one path to the sweet words of grace and that is through the warnings of judgment.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Even in the midst of these warnings of God's judgment in the first part of the book, there is a picture of God's grace. It's in 1:28 where we read that the fire that was present around God on the throne (fire is a common image for God's judgment) was **"like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain."** It's talking about the rainbow, an image of God's mercy that was introduced with the flood in the days of Noah. It is God's promise never to destroy the earth again so universally. Some have pointed out that the rainbow is like a drawn bow with the arrow aimed heavenward. The only way for God to keep his promise of mercy is for an arrow to strike his own heart. That's what happened at the cross. We submit to God in all things, because at the end of the day, he brings a message of mercy through Jesus.