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### The Forging of a Servant of God

*Coram Deo* is Latin for “in the presence of God” and speaks of living one’s entire life in the presence of God, under the authority of God, to the glory of God! Talk about an important concept! Dr. R. C. Sproul recently wrote about this topic:

Recently a friend asked me in all earnestness... “What’s the big idea of the Christian life?” He was interested in the overarching, ultimate goal of the Christian life. To answer his question, I fell back on the theologian’s prerogative and gave him a Latin term. I said, “The big idea of the Christian life is *coram Deo*. *Coram Deo* captures the essence of the Christian life.” (Sproul, 2015)

He's right! When it comes to the essence of living out the Christian life, we must all live it out "before the face of God!" And yet, living coram Deo is a meaningless concept unless we have an understanding of the God before whom we are called to live! And that is where Ezekiel comes in.

In the first four chapters of Ezekiel we see the forging of a servant of God! Now not surprisingly at the outset of Ezekiel's call, God deigned to lift the veil that separates this world from the next by which He gave Ezekiel (and so us) a glimpse at the God who calls/commissions an individual into the service of His Kingdom! Who or what is the God before whom we:

- Must live?
- Work out our salvation?
- Minister and serve?

God answered that decisively as He commissioned Ezekiel to the prophetic ministry (just like He did when He commissioned Isaiah, Isaiah 6)!

As we examine this opening chapter, we must do so with a couple of caveats. First off, the vision before is limited by association. As a mortal man standing before an immortal Being, Ezekiel is at the end of himself. How can he describe an infinite, eternal, and unchangeable Being when all he has at his disposal is a finite, temporal, and mutable language? A. W. Tozer gives us some insight:

When we try to imagine what God is like, we must of necessity use that-which-is-not-God as the raw material for our minds to work on; hence whatever we visualize God to be, He is not, for we have constructed our image out of that which He has made and what He has made is not God. (Tozer, 2009, p. 16)

And so Ezekiel is at a loss in his description of the Eternal. He must resort to the language of simile! A. W. Tozer observed:

When the prophet Ezekiel saw heaven opened and beheld visions of God, he found himself looking at that which he had no language to describe. What he was seeing was wholly different from anything he had ever known before, so he fell back upon the language of resemblance. "As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire." (Tozer, 2009, p. 15)

And so no matter how intelligent, educated, or wise may be the Bible commentator, we begin at the outset recognizing that what we have before us quite frankly is beyond us! Such is the God who calls and commissions to ministry!

The vision before us is limited by distance. While what much of what Ezekiel wrote here would have had meaning to those living in his day, 2500 years removed we are at a loss to

understand some of the elements of this vision which would have been intelligible to Ezekiel's audience. And yet having said that, we must NOT err in the opposite direction and plead ignorance in the name of piety. For notice lastly, the vision before us is NOT Unintelligible. Many of the concepts used in this chapter have Biblical and cultural significance in the day in which Ezekiel lived. For example:

- Archaeology has unearthed many instances of multi-faced beings found in temples, murals, and the like. In Ezekiel's day, such a description would NOT have seemed grotesque or odd, but instead would have had a specific connotation (which we'll talk about).
- Furthermore, many of the concepts found in this chapter themselves have Biblical parallels. Again, while this chapter is filled with imagery, if we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture we can discover much of what is being proclaimed here.

And so we must NOT write this entire chapter off in the name of piety or false-humility, *"The entire chapter is beyond human thought, so skip it!"* Don't forget... as with the book of Revelation (Revelation 1:3), this chapter was given to be read, understood, and so applied in the lives of ones living in the doom and gloom of judgment and exile- much less in the life of Ezekiel as he worked out his prophetic calling!<sup>1</sup>

With that, we pick up our study at Ezekiel 1:4, where we find the setting of Ezekiel's vision is a setting judgment.

Ezekiel 1:4 "And as I looked, behold [*~you are never going to believe this*], a storm wind was coming from the north..."

Commentators are quick to point out that "north" would have particular significance to the Jews living at this time (whether they realized it or not) ... for it was from the north that the Babylonians had come in judgment in 605 and 597 BC, and it would be from the north that they would soon come again with total devastation in 586 BC. L. E. Cooper wrote,

"The storm came from the north, the direction from which the Babylonians invaded Judah. The great storm from the north represented the coming invasion and destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonian army (cf. Jeremiah 1:14). (Cooper, 1994, p. 64)

Accordingly, the book of Ezekiel begins on this glorious yet ominous note of judgment. It is not that the Babylonian pantheon was more powerful than the God of Israel; RATHER, it was the Lord Himself who was coming in judgment to wipe out the disobedient and recalcitrant nation! This was the same theme as Habakkuk: The Chaldeans were NOT the ones doing the judgment; they were pawns in the hand of the Lord, raised up to do the Lord's bidding! This is also in part why God had Daniel taken in the exile of 605 BC. By the time the judgment of Ezekiel transpired (586 BC), the people of God entering into exile would be greeted by the glorious proclamation of Nebuchadnezzar:

Daniel 3:29, “Therefore, I make a decree that any people, nation or tongue that speaks anything offensive against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses reduced to a rubbish heap, inasmuch as there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way.”

So what was this “storm wind” that came upon Ezekiel from the north?

Ezekiel 1:4, “And as I looked, behold, a storm wind was coming from the north, a great cloud with fire flashing forth continually and a bright light around it, and in its midst something like glowing metal in the midst of the fire.”

This was no ordinary storm! Perhaps you’ve seen thunder storms where dark clouds are illumined by a non-stop display of lightening. At first that is what Ezekiel saw. But then as the vision grew closer and so bigger, Ezekiel discerned that there was something- or more accurately- Someone inhabiting the storm. The appearance of this Being was that of “glowing metal in the midst of the fire.” Who might that be? The Lord God Almighty... the King of kings and Lord of lords! Speaking of Christ Ezekiel exclaims:

Ezekiel 1:27, “Then I noticed from the appearance of His loins and upward something like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of His loins and downward I saw something like fire; and *there was* a radiance around Him.”

With this, Ezekiel who was about to be called and commissioned to the work of a prophet would have understood, if he hadn’t before, that where he was and what he was doing therefore was NOT by chance or the will of a man. RATHER, he was where he was on account of the sovereign, glorious, ruler of the nations! This storm was of God. And not only would it wreak havoc and devastation for the people of God, but as we’ll see, it would alter the course of Ezekiel’s life forever!

Family of God, we must live in light of this truth! From the random flight of an arrow in battle (1 Kings 22:17, 34) to the decisions of a world conqueror, (Proverbs 21:1), everything that happens to us in this life is determined by the Sovereign will of a Loving Lord who rules over all of life! God is ever and always on the throne! If there were any question in this regard, consider the first element to Ezekiel’s vision; the four and living creatures.

### The Four Living Creatures, Ezekiel 1:5-14.

Ezekiel 1:5-7, “And within it there were figures resembling four living beings. And this was their appearance: they had human form. Each of them had four faces and four wings. And their legs were straight and their feet were like a calf’s hoof, and they gleamed like burnished bronze.”

First off note these are angels, specifically Cherubim (cf. Ezekiel 10:5, 20, which is incredibly significant! Cherubim were the highest ranking angelic class. Among their number are Gabriel and Michael (who is the archangel- which means the chief angel). However, this title was most likely given only after the first chief Cherub fell, Satan. Their primary function is to protect the holiness of God; in this regard, it is interesting that this was the very thing Satan did NOT do as a Cherub! As protectors of God's holiness, they always are pictured as surrounding God's presence:

- When Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden, it was the Cherubim who were stationed with the flaming sword to guard the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:24).
- God's design for the Ark of the Covenant involved the erecting of two cherubim between which God's throne/mercy seat would be protected (Exodus 25:18).
- Throughout Scripture, the Lord is described as "enthroned above the Cherubim" (e.g., Psalms 80:1; 99:1). Our text now explains this in great detail!

And so, as the vision before Ezekiel unfolded, this soon-to-be prophet is taken back by four awesome figures who have been created to serve as protectors of God's holiness!

What did they look like? They were largely in human form (which means they stood upright with straight legs). They each had four faces and four wings- which we'll talk about in a moment.

Ezekiel 1:8-9, "Under their wings on their four sides *were* human hands. As for the faces and wings of the four of them, their wings touched one another; their *faces* did not turn when they moved, each went straight forward."

So, they also had "human hands" with which they used to serve the Lord (cf. Ezekiel 10:7). Their "wings"- 1/2 of them- were outstretched (sort of like they were on the mercy seat), but they were not hunched over as with the mercy seat. Rather they stood upright with one set of wings touching the wings of their companions next to them. When they moved in different directions, their head did not turn. As they had "a face" on each side of their head, they simply went in the direction of that face.

The idea here is that these beings encompass all of life! Everywhere you go, you will find them! Find cherubim? No! You will find what they represent in this vision- as outlined in v. 10.

Ezekiel 1:10: "As for the form of their faces, *each* had the face of a man, all four had the face of a lion on the right and the face of a bull on the left, and all four had the face of an eagle."

As referenced, while this may sound grotesque to us, the image would NOT have been in Ezekiel's day. In many of the secular religious systems surrounding God's people, multi-faced images



were commonly utilized.<sup>2</sup> D. I. Block wrote and described them this way:

The selection of these animals may seem arbitrary to a modern reader, but they were perfectly natural for Ezekiel's world. Not only do they appear frequently on ancient iconographic and glyptic art; they also had symbolic significance for the Israelites." (Block, 1997, p. 96)

Now in the ancient world multi-faced beings were utilized to represent the different realms over which the supposed deity reigned. And so, it was here! Each of the faces of the cherub involved the chief or highest form of a particular category of creation. J. B. Taylor put it this way:

The four faces represented the highest forms of life to be found among the different realms of God's creation: man as supreme came first and faced forwards; the lion and the ox were the kings among wild beasts and domestic animals (what the writer of Genesis 1 calls 'cattle' and 'beasts of the earth'); and the eagle was the chief of the birds of the air. (Taylor, 1981, p. 58)

The implication behind all of this is that God in His glory sets in session on a throne served by every realm of creation. Or another way of putting it: The Lord rules over ALL of life! This is further stressed in that as the four faces point in the four directions of the compass, there is nowhere on this earth that God does NOT reign! D. I. Block further elaborated:

The entire apparition is dominated by the number four: four creatures, with four faces and four wings. While this feature is not interpreted, the numbers appear to represent the four winds, viz., the directions of the compass. (Block, 1997, p. 97)

The text continues:

Ezekiel 1:11-12, "Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above; each had two touching another *being*, and two covering their bodies. And each went straight forward; wherever the spirit was about to go, they would go, without turning as they went."

Two things are added to our understanding here. First, their other set of wings is used to cover their bodies- which was a sign of their humility and inferiority before the Lord. Though they are sinless, nevertheless they stand in awe at the transcendence of the Lord- just like the Seraphim in Isaiah's vision (Isaiah 6:2)!

A second thing that stands out here is that as glorious as the Cherubim are, nevertheless they do NOT determine what the Lord does and where He goes. This is determined by "the Spirit of God" who guides and leads them! Again, the emphasis here is on the Sovereignty and so the Glory of the Lord who rules over all of life!

Ezekiel 1:13-14, “In the midst of the living beings there was something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches darting back and forth among the living beings. The fire was bright, and lightning was flashing from the fire. And the living beings ran to and fro like bolts of lightning.”

Added to this already awesome description is “the lightening-like movement of the angels,” which once again speaks of an awesome setting, as well as the mass of “burning coals of fire” found in the middle of the beings.

Now unlike the “burning coals” of Isaiah 6 (רִצְפָּה [ritspah]) which were taken from the Altar of Incense and so used NOT for purification BUT for dedication, the coals used in this context (גַּחֲלֵת [gacheleth]) denoted judgment (cf. Psalms 18:8; 50:30)! The storm that came from the north in Ezekiel’s vision truly would bring with it the devastation of judgment!

Just as we saw that at the start of the Theocracy, God established the nation on a conditional basis (Leviticus 26:14-17), so here we read of the beginning of its demise! Throughout Scripture, “storms” are associated with judgment. As this storm came from the north, so also would God’s judgment soon come upon the people of God!

In this regard, it is important to stress, as the text itself does, that though God here is described as coming in judgment, nevertheless it is NOT because He lost His temper and so was in a rage. Man... God’s people... the Theocracy warranted this judgment on account of their national rebellion! L. E. Cooper put it this way:

The cherubim, as protectors of God’s holiness, were a reminder that humankind was sinful. People often want to blame the storms of life on God and forget that human sin brought chaos in the world. (Cooper, 1994, p. 72)

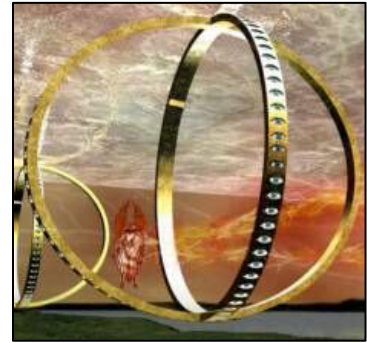
This is so important! Again, the Cherubim are there to protect God’s holiness, His otherness! As such, their presence is a reminder that it is NOT God who has messed up this world; it is man! In fact, God in His redeeming grace is in the process of fixing this world on account of man! That He doesn’t do it according to our schedule in our way may cause the sinner to cast dispersions. Yet behold the vision, it is man who has the problem, not God!

We need to hear this!

Years ago, King Alphonso of Portugal arrogantly declared, that if God had consulted him at the creation about the dispositions and motions of the planets, he would have contrived them better than they are. A little blasphemous, don’t you think?

John Newton responded to this:

We take it for granted that the Sun, the Moon, planets, and the stars are exactly where they should be and move just as they ought. But if we are content that the Lord should manage the heavenly bodies without our assistance, we are ready enough to advise Him how He should dispose of our insignificant selves! We think we could point at twenty things in our situation which might be mended; and that we would serve Him much better than we do if we were but at liberty to choose where and how we would be thus placed.



Thus, we rightly censure King Alphonso's folly without being aware that the thoughts that we sometimes indulge, are no less vain and arrogant than his! We might with as much reason, offer to assist God in the government of the universe as in the direction of our own paltry concerns! (Newton, 2014)

Such was the design behind the vision before us. It stresses the sovereignty, right, and wisdom of God as the downfall of the nation is here proclaimed! And yet it continues with the four wheels.

### The Four Wheels, Ezekiel 1:15-18.

Ezekiel 1:15-16, "Now as I looked at the living beings, behold, there was one wheel on the earth beside the living beings, for *each of* the four of them. The appearance of the wheels and their workmanship *was* like sparkling beryl, and all four of them had the same form, their appearance and workmanship *being* as if one wheel were within another."

Ezekiel next noticed "four wheels" that accompanied the angels. Along with everything else described, the wheels themselves were extraordinary! They, like the Cherubim, were a composite, they were "a wheel within a wheel" which spoke of their absolute ability to move everywhere in all directions.

Furthermore, the wheels were said to be made of "beryl" which is not the best translation. The Hebrew is תַּרְשִׁישׁ (*tarshish*) which speaks NOT of a greenish stone (like beryl or chrysolite), BUT of a yellow stone like topaz.

Ezekiel 1:17-18, "Whenever they moved, they moved in any of their four directions, without turning as they moved [so just like the Cherubim, the wheels did not turn when they moved... they rather could accommodate any direction by virtue of their design]. As for their rims they were lofty and awesome, and the rims of all four of them were full of eyes round about."



“The eyes” here are difficult to interpret. The word was translated as “glowing metal” (v. 4) or “sparkling beryl” (v. 16) which would denote here another picture of awesome splendor. However, the word most generally refers to the human eye which is the more favored translation. Taken in this regard, the wheels which are able to move in all directions (speaking of the extent of God’s sovereign rule) are filled with eyes which speak of the all-seeing, all-knowing majesty of God. Yes, God rules over all of life! Yet we must see that this regency is conducted by an all-knowing, all-seeing Being and therefore good! In the words of the Psalmist, speaking of God leading His people in the wilderness:

Psalms 107:7, “And he led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation.”

From this text, we conclude that God did NOT lead His people in the wilderness in the most direct way, the easiest way, or even the preferred way! Rather, He led them in the best way! And so it is as God reigns over this world! All that God does is good because He Himself is good! He knows all things and so brings about the best in every situation at all times!

Let’s spend a moment to consider the message which clearly is being proclaimed by this passage:

1. God Rules over Life! There is not a rogue atom to be found in creation! All that occurs is according to His all-powerful and kind will!
2. Yet with this, the text points us in a more definitive direction when it comes to God’s Sovereign Rule over life; the four wheels, the throne (which we have yet to address) and the cherubim with their outstretched wings, and the Lord whose place is above the Cherubim.

All of it points us in the direction of the ark, the Ark of the Covenant. If you thought of this already, you are in good company. Many a commentator has referenced this. See, in Old Testament and New Testament times, the ark was pictured on wheels. L. E. Cooper wrote:

The ark of the covenant in the holy of holies was considered the throne of Yahweh or the stool of his feet... Some representations of the ark have portrayed it as a box with wheels. (Cooper, 1994, pp. 68-69)

S. Loffreda wrote:

Excavations at Capernaum yielded an ark with wheels on it that was etched in one of the stones of the synagogue. (Loffreda, p. 36)

So many believe that what is being emphasized here is our Covenant-Making, Covenant-Keeping God. That is the emphasis!

If that is the case, then in this text notice how God deigned to relate to the world, NOT merely as the Sovereign Lord of creation with whom we all have to do, BUT as a Covenant God who will

only related to this world in the Christ.

From this we are reminded of a very important truth of Scripture. Man, ever and always relates to God as either covenant keeper or a covenant breaker! If you have sinned just once, then you are a covenant-breaker and so are subject to the righteous reign of an angry God who is coming again someday in judgment! But if you are in Christ, then you have been made to be a covenant-keeper who now can delight both in the Lord and in His righteous reign by which all things work together for good!

In this regard, understand that in Christ we are priests of the living God whose call is to present their bodies to God as a living and holy sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2)! This truly is what it means to live *Coram Deo*!

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## End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> Keep in mind the words of Graeme Goldsworthy on the purpose of the book of Revelation- it is the same as the chapter and the prophecy before us, "The problem of Christian existence is that we easily allow the tribulation which we experience within the suffering church to obscure the glory that is already ours by faith in Christ. This is the problem that the Book of Revelation sets out to rectify. If only that object and aim of the book were kept in mind we could be spared a lot of speculative interpretation. John's first concern is not to minister to arm-chair prophets in some far-off age, but to the battlers of his own age who struggle to reconcile the fact of their suffering with the fact of Christ's victory over sin, Satan, and death." (*The Gospel in Revelation*, p. 267)

<sup>2</sup> "...the composite, multifaced, winged figures can be understood only in the light of their ancient cultural environment. The principal features are well attested in Mesopotamian and Syrian iconography. Humanoid bodies with multiple faces, animal heads, and multiple wings, and composite winged mammalian creatures were common. The colossal composite figures that guarded the doorways to Ashurbanipal II's palace at Nimrud provide the most striking examples. One of these was a winged bull with a human head; the other had the body of a lion. Remarkably, outside Egypt only these three animals are represented on such composite figures. Although humanoid figures with heads of a lion, a bull, and an eagle, respectively, appear in a single context, and leonine forms with a human head in addition to the normal lion head are attested, no analogues to Ezekiel's figures, with four different heads on one body, have been discovered." (D. I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, NICOT, pp. 97–98)