

Ezekiel 1:4-28 “The Vision of God in Exile”
Psalm 29; Revelation 4

Children, what would you have seen in exile in Babylon?

 If you were taken captive on March 16, 597 BC

 You and your parents were taken into exile five years ago.

 You walked 1000 miles from Jerusalem to Babylon in the heat of the summer.

And wherever you walked you would see the idolatry of the Assyrians and Babylonians.

 You would see the statues of winged bulls or lions,

 some with human faces,

 guarding the palaces and temples.

 In the ancient world these sorts of creatures were viewed as the guardians of the gods.

 Every temple would have representations of some sort of fantastic animal-spirit

 either holding up the sky – or guarding the entrance to the temple.

 And as you looked, you would also think about how at the temple in Jerusalem

 the cherubim guarded the holy place.

And as you walked 1000 miles from Jerusalem to Babylon,

 from time to time you would hear the sound of chariots as royal emissaries sped past you,

 leaving you to choke in their dust.

And as you walked 1000 miles from Jerusalem to Babylon,

 you couldn't help but marvel at the glory, the speed and the technology of Babylon;

 everything about Babylon was so much grander than Jerusalem

This is why we need to hear the message of Ezekiel 1.

 Because we live in a day when “Babylon” appears much grander than “Jerusalem.”

Revelation 17-18 tells us that Babylon is the great political and economic power of the day.

 Whoever uses political and economic power

 to lure people away from the worship of God

 is Babylon.

 Wherever money and power seduces people away from the love of the Lord Jesus,

 there is the spirit of Babylon.

Children, let me put this to you plainly:

 we live in Babylon!

And quite frankly, the technology and power, the wealth and splendor of modern culture

 makes ancient Babylon look second-rate!

There are three things that we need to see in Ezekiel's vision:

 1) That God is sovereign

 2) That his judgment is coming

 3) And that we need to believe the gospel

Sing Psalm 29; Read Revelation 4

What Isaiah had seen in the temple in Jerusalem,
and what Ezekiel had seen by the Chebar Canal in Babylon,
John now sees in the heavens.
This is what all the others have been pointing to.
That is why John's vision blends all the other visions together.

Isaiah and Ezekiel (like Moses before them) saw earthly pictures of the heavenly reality –
because until the resurrection of Christ,
no man could enter the heavenly throne room.

So as we go through Ezekiel's vision,
I want you to remember that this is heading straight to Jesus.
Ezekiel's vision of the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD
is paralleled by John's vision in Revelation 1 of the exalted Jesus.

And as we live as Jerusalem in exile,
we need to keep the vision of the exalted Jesus ever before us,
because in John's vision there are three things we need to see:

- 1) God is sovereign
- 2) His judgment is coming
- 3) You need to believe the gospel

David Meredith, in his moderatorial address to the Free Church of Scotland
asked if we should wear crash helmets to church!

He used this quote from Annie Dillard:

'On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does any-one have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return. (Teaching a Stone to Talk, Harper & Row, 1982)'

Did you come to church today expecting to see Jesus?

Introduction (v4):

4 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.

I want you to see this clearly:

Imagine the four living creatures moving as a square
They come rushing down from the north at blinding speed,
with fire and lightning and a great wind.
This great looming cloud, tinged with fire and brightness –

the contrast between the gloomy darkness of the cloud,
and the fiery brightness at the very center of the cloud,
at the center of the fiery brightness is this “gleaming metal.”

This word, “hashmal” in verse 4 is only found in Ezekiel – three times.

The rabbis debated the meaning of this word –

and they “recorded the cautionary tale of a child
who picked up a copy of the book of Ezekiel at his teacher’s home
and apprehended the true meaning of the extremely obscure
and much-debated Hebrew word hashmal,
the substance of which the divine figure appears to be comprised (1:27).
Instantly, fire came out from the hashmal and incinerated him.” (Duguid, 17)

So the only person who ever knew for certain what this word meant –
died before he could reveal its meaning!

Actually, it appears to be a loan word, borrowed from the Akkadian “elmeshu”
which referred to a brilliant precious stone used in statues to enhance their shine.

But the point of the rabbi’s story is important:

the vision of God is dangerous – even deadly!
the glory of God is nothing to trifle with –
and mere intellectual apprehension will do you no good!

What I will be doing today is expounding Ezekiel’s vision,
so that you can understand *what he sees*.

But I warn you,
if you apprehend the true meaning of the “hashmal”
if you behold the glory of the LORD,
you will never be the same again!

Ezekiel’s Vision

Now, as we go through this vision,

I want you to watch for the connections:
we will see connections to the creation account,
we will see connections to Abraham,
we will see connections to Moses and the tabernacle,
as well as Solomon’s temple.

All of Israel’s history comes together in Ezekiel’s vision –
as it prepares us to behold the glory of Christ!

1. The Four Living Creatures (5-14)

5 And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, 6 but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. 7 Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf’s foot. And they sparkled like burnished bronze. 8 Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: 9 their wings touched one another.

Each one of them went straight forward, without turning as they went. 10 As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle.

The four living creatures remind us of creatures God made in Genesis 1-2.

Of all the living creatures,
these four are especially important.
The lion is the highest of all the wild beasts.
The eagle is the highest of all the birds.
The ox is the highest of all the domestic animals.
And man is the highest of all God's creatures.

But throughout the scriptures (and the ancient world) they had symbolic meanings as well.

The lion was renowned for its strength, ferocity and courage.
The eagle was the swiftest and most stately of birds.
The ox was a symbol of fertility and power.
And the human was invested with divine authority as the image of God.

What is more, God himself is compared with these animals elsewhere in scripture:

In Numbers 24, Balaam says that when Yahweh brought Israel out of Egypt,
he lay down like a lion, "who will rouse him up?"
Exodus 19:4 speaks of how God brought Israel "on eagles' wings" out of Egypt.
In Numbers 24, Balaam says that the LORD is for Israel "like the horns of the wild ox."

In other words, all of these images have their root in the Exodus from Egypt.

When God comes as lion, eagle, and ox – with the face of a man –
it should remind us how God brought Israel out of bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt.

So just in the faces of the living creatures and how that connects to Exodus, we see that

- 1) God is sovereign
- 2) His judgment is coming
- 3) You need to believe the gospel

11 Such were their faces. And their wings were spread out above. Each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. 12 And each went straight forward. Wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went. 13 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. 14 And the living creatures darted to and fro, like the appearance of a flash of lightning.

The appearance of these cherubim is described as "the appearance of torches."

You may recall that in Genesis 15:17
it was a torch and smoking fire pot that appeared to Abraham in his dream.
When the LORD God passed alone between the animals
when he established his covenant with Abraham,

the chariot of God appeared as a torch.
Likewise, when the LORD appeared at Sinai, in Exodus 20:18
there is also the same language used to describe the appearance of the LORD.
Every time the LORD appears, we see a little more of his glory.

When the LORD appears in glory,
the cherubim appear as the charioteers of Yahweh.

But these living creatures would also remind Ezekiel's hearers of Isaiah's seraphim.
Here in chapter 1 they are not named,
but in chapter 10 they are called cherubim.
The cherubim were first introduced in Genesis 3 –
placed outside the garden in Eden,
guarding the way – preventing man from desecrating the holiness of God
In Exodus 25 they appear again as the guardians of the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle,
and in 1 Kings 6 they are carved into the walls and woven into the weavings
of the temple.

And since Ezekiel was a priest,
Ezekiel would have known all about the cherubim.
He understands instantly what he is seeing:
these are the guardians of God's holiness.

The key image here is fire.
“their appearance was like burning coals of fire”
“like the appearance of torches moving to and fro”
“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.”

Fire is intimately connected with the theme of judgment.
God is coming to Babylon with judgment –
but judgment for whom?
As we'll hear in the following chapter,
judgment begins with the household of God!
God is not coming to *deliver* Israel,
God is coming in judgment *against* Israel!

Israel has ignored his holiness.
The leaders of Jerusalem have turned aside from the living and true God.
And so now Yahweh's charioteers come with blinding radiance and speed...

But how do they move?

2. And Their Wheels (15-21)

15 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. 16 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. 17 When they went, they went in any of their four directions without turning as they went. 18 And their rims were tall and awesome, and the rims of all four were full of eyes all around. 19 And when the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them; and when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose. 20 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. 21 When those went, these went; and when those stood, these stood; and when those rose from the earth, the wheels rose along with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

Whatever else these remarkable four-wheeled chariots are doing,
they should remind us of the “water chariots” in the temple (I Kings 7).
When Solomon built the temple, he had built ten four-wheeled bronze chariots
as stands to hold ten basins of water.

These ten water chariots were designed to show how the water from the temple
flowed outward towards the nations.

(At the end of Ezekiel, he will see a vision of a new temple,
in which streams of living water will flow to the nations!)

Ezekiel is now seeing the archetype – the pattern – of what Solomon had built.

But these wheels are not your ordinary sort of transportation!

There are wheels within wheels.

They can go in any of the four directions –
and yet, they do not turn as they go.

A literal picture of this would be of lightning fast movement
at right angles.

They are not powered by any earthly physics,
but by the spirit of the living creatures.

Verse 18 speaks of the majesty of the wheels:

they were “tall and awesome” (fearful) and full of eyes.

The word for “eyes” occurs several times in Ezekiel 1.

In 1:7 when it says that “they sparkled like burnished bronze”
the word for “sparkled” is the word for “eyes.”

Likewise, in verse 16, when it speaks of the “gleaming” of beryl –
that word “gleaming” is also the word “eyes.”

The “shining” of the firmament in 1:22 is also the word “eyes.”
And the “gleaming” bronze of 1:27 is also the word “eyes.”

When the word “eyes” (ayin) occurs in a context of precious stones
it usually refers to the shiny quality of the stones.

Since verse 18 is talking about how the wheels were majestic and fearful,

it makes more sense to take the word “eyes” to be used the same way here as in the rest of the chapter.

In the temple, the cherubim were in the holy place,
guarding the entrance to the presence of God.
The water chariots were in the courtyard,
leading away from the temple out towards the nations.

But here in Ezekiel’s vision
the chariots are what convey the living creatures to Babylon.

Again,
this communicates to those in exile,
that Yahweh’s earthly temple is only a representation of his heavenly temple.
Your God is not merely the God of Israel,
He is the God of all the earth!

- 1) God is sovereign
- 2) His judgment is coming
- 3) You need to believe the gospel

3. The Firmament (22-25)

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

The word for “expanse” is the Hebrew word “raqia.”

This is the same word we encountered in Genesis 1,
when God created an “expanse” or a “firmament”
to separate the waters above from the waters below.

The word “raqia” comes from a root meaning “to stamp or beat out” –
and is most commonly used with reference to beating out bronze plating.

So a “raqia” is generally speaking of a solid object.

In the ancient world, most folks thought of the sky as a solid dome over the earth,
and the scriptures speak in the ordinary language of the day.

So Ezekiel uses this language of a firmament
to describe the “awe-inspiring” crystalline structure
spread out above the cherubim.

It is like the firmament that God created on the second day –
that crystal blue dome above the earth.

But there is another source for Ezekiel’s way of describing this.

In Exodus 24, when God meets with Moses and Aaron and the 70 elders of Israel,
we are told that “they saw the God of Israel.

There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone,
like the very heaven for clearness.

And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel;

they beheld God, and ate and drank.” (Ex 24:10-11)

God had told Israel not to come up the mountain –
indeed not even to touch the mountain!

But now Moses and Aaron and the 70 elders of Israel come part way up the mountain
and they behold the glory of the LORD.

And when they do, they see the pavement of sapphire – “like the very heaven for clearness” –
in other words, beneath God’s feet is a pavement that reminds them of the raqia –
that big blue dome above us.

It is as though God has ridden a piece of the heavens to come and meet with them.

And when God gave Moses instruction for how to build the tabernacle,
he told him to put a blue cloth over the Holy Place –
so that when you looked up, you would see the blue of the heavens above you.

In the tabernacle and the temple, pictures of the cherubim were all around the holy place
reminding the priests of the holiness of God.

Greg Beale says well that

“the gleaming stones and metals composing the temple and the priest’s garments
functioned to remind one of the sparkling stars in the heavens,
which themselves pointed to God’s glorious presence
in his invisible heavenly temple-court.” (Beale 45)

23 And under the expanse their wings were stretched out straight, one toward another. And each creature had two wings covering its body. 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. When they stood still, they let down their wings. 25 And there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads. When they stood still, they let down their wings.

So far the entire vision has focused on what Ezekiel *saw*.

Only now does he introduce what he *heard*.

And what he heard is 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”

But when they stood still, they let down their wings.

And, as if to emphasize *why* they stood still,

he adds, “there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads.

When they stood still, they let down their wings.”

When the voice of the LORD speaks, the cherubim are silent.

4. And the One on the Throne (26-28a)

26 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.

27 And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were 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. 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.

Here is that word “hasmal” again – the “gleaming metal” – the fiery glow of the glory of the LORD.

Also note the rainbow.

This is the only place in the OT outside of Genesis 9 where the picture of the rainbow is invoked.

What is the significance of this?

God gave the rainbow as a sign that he would never again destroy the world with water.

As such, the rainbow *is* a sign of mercy and hope.

But in Ezekiel’s vision there is another side to the rainbow:

the reminder that this is the God who destroyed the world by water!

And now he comes with fire!

Please understand that the God you worship cannot be domesticated!

Oh, you can try to manipulate him.

You can try to get him to do what you want.

And then he will destroy you!

When you see the glorious vision of God,

you realize that you don’t get to negotiate with God.

You don’t set the terms of the relationship.

He does.

Ezekiel realizes that his words cannot communicate the full impact of his vision.

He keeps saying “the likeness of” or “the appearance of” or “as it were” – as if to say,

“I’m doing my best to tell you what this was like,

but all my words fall short of the majesty and glory – the fiery splendor – of the one who appeared to me.”

Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.

In other words, the true glory of the LORD is far beyond this meager vision!

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

What Do We Do with This Vision?

What is *your* response to this vision?

Ezekiel falls on his face.

When John sees Jesus in Revelation 1,

“The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow.

his eyes were like a flame of fire,

his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace,

and his voice was like the roar of many waters.

In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword
and his face was like the sun shining in full strength”

And what happened to John?

“I fell at his feet as though dead.”

How do you respond to the vision of the glory of the Lord?

David Wells has said that:

‘The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is that God rests too inconsequentially upon the church. His truth is too distant, his grace is too ordinary, his judgment is too benign, his gospel is too easy, and his Christ is too common.’ (God in the Wasteland, IVP, 1994)

Why?

How has this happened?

We have forgotten the glory of God.

We have forgotten Isaiah’s vision of the holiness of God in the temple.

We have forgotten Ezekiel’s vision of the fiery glory of God by the Chebar canal.

We have forgotten John’s vision of the exalted Christ.

What then shall we do?

- 1) Our first problem is that we have forgotten the sovereignty of God!

Note, I did *not* say that we have forgotten the *doctrine* of the sovereignty of God.

The reformed churches teach the *doctrine* of the sovereignty of God very well!

But like the little boy who apprehended the meaning of the *hashmal*,

we are in peril of being incinerated by the glory of God

because we claim to understand the sovereignty of God,

and yet we do not act like it!

We are like little children playing with a hand grenade!

If God is sovereign –
if Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords –
then why do we live as though his kingdom
is merely one part of our busy schedules?
As we will see throughout Ezekiel,
this is one of Ezekiel's most damning indictments of the elders of Jerusalem.
They all worshiped the LORD – they all paid lip service to the LORD their God,
but when it comes to how to negotiate the “real world”
it would be “foolish” to be entirely devoted to Yahweh!

Babylon is too powerful...

Do you think Babylon is too powerful?

What drives you in your relations with others?
Are you more concerned with what God thinks of you, or what they think of you?
Whose judgment matters to you?
Whose voice carries the most weight with you?

When you talk with your children about their misbehavior,
is the problem that they have made your life more difficult?
or that they have fallen short of the glory of God?

2) As a corollary we have forgotten the Coming Judgment

The predominant image in Ezekiel's vision is one of fire.

Judgment is coming.
God has not forgotten his exiled people.

And that is both good news and bad news!
It is bad news because Israel has rebelled,
and the elders of Jerusalem (now in exile) were the ringleaders!
We saw last time that Peter addresses his first epistle
to the “elect exiles of the dispersion” –
and throughout 1 Peter, he speaks of us as exiles, sojourners, and aliens.
In 1 Peter 4, Peter reminds us that “judgment begins with the household of God.”

We live in a day when most people view God's judgment
very much like the elders and prophets of Jerusalem:

“He will do nothing; no disaster will come upon us.” (Jeremiah 5:12)
How often have you heard people say that God is a god of love,
and so he does not bring calamity on people.
“Natural disasters” are said to be random “forces of nature.”

Now, I daresay that few of you *think* that you believe that.

But if you believe that judgment is coming,
then why do you not speak that way?
Why do you not warn your children of the coming judgment?
Why do you not warn your friends and neighbors to flee from the wrath to come?

3) This reveals that we have forgotten the Gospel!

We have forgotten the good news that Jesus has passed through death and judgment –
and he has been exalted to the right hand of the Father –
so that when God’s judgment comes upon us,
it comes upon us to purify and cleanse us –
it comes upon us to conform us to the likeness of Christ –
it comes upon us to make us partakers in the sufferings of Christ,
that we might also partake of his glory!

Perhaps we are tempted to envy Ezekiel.
Perhaps we wish that we could see such a vision.
But Paul says that we have something better than Ezekiel.
Ezekiel, like Moses, saw a vision of God’s glory –
but that vision was transient and faded away.

In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul says,
“We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord,
are being transformed into the same image
from one degree of glory to another.
For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

The same Spirit who directed the chariots of the LORD to Ezekiel
is the same Spirit who now directs us.

Paul’s point is that all those who are in Christ have a far more glorious vision than Ezekiel did.
Because we not only behold the glory of the LORD,
but we are being transformed into the same image.
We are being made *like* him.

No, even that is not a sufficient way of putting it.
We are being transformed into the same image.
The Lord who is the Spirit is building us together into one new man, a holy temple –
a dwelling place for the Lord.
The resurrection life of Jesus now dwells in us.

As we now behold the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ,
we are drawn into that glory,
in order that we might partake of that glory.