

Ezekiel 1-3:7 · Visions of the Glory of the Lord

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We are starting another new study tonight and it is in the book of Ezekiel. In our Old Testament study, the last couple of books that we finished were Jeremiah and Lamentations, and of course Jeremiah deals with that whole time where God is confronting the nation of Judah; the southern kingdom of Judah, with their sin and idolatry. And He tells them, He warns them that He's bringing the Babylonian army against them to punish them for their sins. And of course, the people don't listen to Jeremiah. He's right there living in Jerusalem and the people refuse to listen. Interestingly enough, during that same time, God had prophets elsewhere speaking the same message, one of them was Ezekiel. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were contemporaries, they lived during the same time.

I want to remind you of something, you know that the Babylonian army eventually came in and destroyed the city of Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and everything, but there were actually 3 invasions by the Babylonians before they finally came in the third time and destroyed the city.

And it was during that first invasion, when the Babylonians came, because of disobedience on the parts of the Jews and rebellion against the Babylonians, that they came and put down that rebellion, but they didn't destroy the city. They just took some of the people and took them off to Babylon. And there was a young man by the name of Ezekiel who was of the priestly line, who was probably in his 20s, and he was one of the people, along with Daniel, another contemporary who was hauled off to Babylon to live really the rest of their lives there, but they had kind of some different ministries. But Ezekiel, after he had been in Babylon for, oh, I don't know, maybe 3 years, started to receive visions from the Lord, messages, but his messages were going to be given to the Jews who were in Babylon, who had already been taken into exile.

Jeremiah's back home giving his message to the people who are still there in the area of Judah. In fact, Ezekiel was taken really about 10 years before the city of Jerusalem fell. And as I said, he was probably there around 3 or 4 years before the Lord began to give him A prophetic message to his people.

We're going to find that the first 24 chapters of Ezekiel were written in that period of time prior to the fall of Jerusalem and then the other chapters that come after that were spoken after the fall. And even though the majority of the people at this time, in these first 24 chapters were living back in the land of Israel, in the southern kingdom of Judah, they were all hoping for this thing to end soon.

And there were plenty of false prophets going around telling people exactly what they wanted to hear, "it's going to end soon, in a short time, everybody's coming home, the Babylonians are going to leave, it's going to be all good." There's only one problem with that, men like Ezekiel and Jeremiah had received a very different message from the Lord.

The Lord was telling them that it wasn't going to end soon. In fact, the Babylonians were going to come and they were going to destroy the place, and they were going to take everybody to Babylon and there they would stay for 70 years. Well, that's not what the people wanted to hear and so Ezekiel and Jeremiah were pretty unpopular with the people because they weren't having their ears tickled by those men, although they were getting the truth.

You're going to find that Ezekiel is a rather hard-hitting book from the standpoint of confronting the sin that was going on within the nation of Israel, particularly in the southern kingdom of Judah. But it's also a book that extends great hope in the grace, mercy and love of God.

I had somebody write me just today and said to me, "pastor Paul, what do you do when somebody keeps telling you that the Old Testament, in the Old Testament, God is cruel and vicious." I think that was the word that was used. She said, "what do you say to people who say that the God of the Old Testament is vicious?"

And I told her, I said, "I don't necessarily say anything." Because when people make statements, sometimes they make them purely because they want to believe what they say they believe so that they have an excuse not to really be open to what the Bible has to say. If they can make a statement, if they can make an accusation about God, "well, He's not a God of love because" and they have no desire to learn, I don't really respond to those questions, I'll be honest with you.

Because if somebody doesn't want to learn, it doesn't matter what I say. It doesn't matter how convincing my argument is, they're not going to change their mind. They've got what they consider to be a good excuse for not believing and

putting their faith in God and they're not going to let go of it just because I happen to give them some good reasons to.

So my response to this person was, "I don't necessarily say anything." If somebody asks a question and they're genuinely concerned and it's like, "I've been reading through the Old Testament and pastor Paul, I got to tell you, sometimes I feel like God seems a little cruel." Well, I'm going to take that person through a study of the Old Testament, a quick overview and I'm going to show them how many times we see in the Old Testament, in the Old Testament, God's mercy, incredible patience, long suffering, grace and tender love.

We tend to forget how many years God bore with the sin of His people, He was incredibly patient with His people before bringing judgment. We tend to just look at the judgment and we see it, and we, and our modern sensibilities get offended by the way God responds, but we ignore the mercy that is so prevalent.

So again, if somebody makes that statement to you about God being cruel or vicious or something like that, try to determine where they're at and if they're in a position in their life where they really want to learn and grow. And if they're not, I would just kind of let them say what they want to say, because they're going to believe it whether they, whether you say anything or not. So pray with me.

Father, open our hearts to your word tonight. Speak Lord, we desire to listen, we desire to hear your voice, we desire, Lord God, to know what you are saying to us in the scriptures this evening and we just really pray that you would enlarge our heart of understanding. For we ask it in Jesus name, amen.

Verse 1, chapter 1, "*In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. (ESV)* I want you to notice that Ezekiel claims to have seen "visions of God," not visions from God. They are certainly from God, but they are of God, and we'll see that.

And through these visions, we're going to be given some pretty incredible pictures; images of heaven itself, which of course we would not be able to know and understand without them. Verse 2, "*On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin),*" and by the way, we know that to be July 593 B.C., he's very good at dating, by the way. I like all of the ways he dates.

But he says in verse 3, “*the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the Chebar canal, and the hand of the Lord was upon him there.*” Now I want you to notice, starting off here, in verse 1, did you notice that he speaks in the first person and begins to talk about himself and then in verses 2 and 3, did you notice he switches to the third person? And then when we get to verse 4, he's going to switch back to the first person.

Welcome to ancient Jewish literature and incidentally, the reference to the Chebar Canal is kind of an interesting one geographically because it puts Ezekiel somewhere between modern day Baghdad and modern-day Basra, which would mean he was not at this time in the city of Babylon itself.

Verse 4 goes on and says, “*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.*” Now, I want you to stop there again for a moment because at the end of verse 4, I want you to notice that Ezekiel uses a reference for the very first time that we call “the language of similarity” and it's the words “as it were”. Did you catch that, did you see that in your Bible?

He says at the very end of it, he says, that “*in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal.*” And as we read on in this chapter, we're going to find that Ezekiel will rely heavily on the use of phrases like that and also words like “likeness” and phrases like, “like the appearance of.” And the reason I bring that out for you, is because the language of similarity means that Ezekiel is seeing things for which he has no specific reference.

In other words, he's seeing things where there's no exact match in his experience of life and living, and so therefore he must fall back on what he does know, and we call that the language of similarity. And he's basically doing his best to describe things using close equivalents rather than actually what he's seeing.

Because what he's seeing is so other, it's other. Remember how we've talked about the fact that God is not like us, God is other, and that's really what's behind the word Holy, apart, He's apart, He's other. God is other and so here is Ezekiel seeing things, God is showing him things that are other than what he has seen or experienced before and so he falls onto this language of similarity. And we're going to see that a lot.

Notice that he goes on to say in verse 5, “*And from the midst of it...*” So in the midst of this fiery thing that he's seeing that he has a difficult time describing, he says, “... *came the likeness of four living creatures.*” What's crazy is that these four living creatures actually are seen within this visible whirlwind that is God's presence, so they're seen within this, all right. Now, it isn't until chapter 10, that we're going to find out that these four living creatures are actually angelic beings, they're cherubim. We'll find that out when we get to chapter 10.

But we know that now by kind of looking ahead. And incidentally we don't know that much about cherubim to be completely honest with you, except to say that they are a certain class of angels that were very powerful, they attended the throne of God, and here's an interesting point, Satan was a guardian cherub.

That's what the Bible tells us, Satan himself was a guardian cherub before he was cast down. Now we're still in the middle of verse 5, he begins to describe them now and he says, “...*And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness,*” That's interesting, so they looked..., “likeness,” do you get that?

He didn't say, “and they were humans” or even “they looked exactly like humans.” He said, “*they had a human likeness*” and you'll see what he means by that when he goes on to say, verse 6, lest you think that they are just humans. “*but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings.*”

Now, I don't know if anybody you know that has four faces. We might say someone is two-faced, but that isn't even literal. And that simply means they usually talk out of both sides of their mouth or they have two kind of personalities that they'll show depending on the circumstances. But these cherubim are seen with these four faces, wouldn't that freak you out? And it says they had these four wings.

And then he goes on to give some further detail, “⁷ *Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot. (so they had hooves) And they sparkled like burnished (or if you will, highly polished) 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.*”

Of course, that's a very convenient thing when you have four faces. You can go any way you want and you never have to turn and you're always looking in that direction. It's weird, right? If I were Ezekiel, I would probably say, “and then I saw these really freaky things,” right?

And it says in verse 10, *“As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four (also he says) 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.”* Presumably in what you would consider to be the back, I suppose if the human face is the front. By the way, I have to tell you, in all honesty, we don't know what these four faces mean, we don't really understand the significance.

I've heard a lot of interesting conjecture, but that is really all it is. Verse 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.”* And how Ezekiel knew that these creatures were directed by the Spirit, we don't know, he just knew.

And it says, *“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.”* So you see what's, first of all, these are creatures that he's never seen before and he says, “in their midst was like burning torches moving.” So it wasn't just like a fire that was static or stationary, it was a fire that was moving around.

And he sees that it is extremely bright and he notices lightning emanating from these creatures as well. So, this must have been incredibly awesome to behold. Verse 14, *“And the living creatures darted to and fro, like the appearance of a flash of lightning.¹⁵ Now as I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, (very difficult to understand) 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, (he's talking about the wheels now) their appearance and construction being as it were a wheel within a wheel.”*

And of course that would make for movement in any direction very easy if it's a wheel within a wheel, right? You can kind of see that's all part of this thing. And, *“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.”*

And this is getting weirder all the time. These are wheels you guys, these are wheels, but they have eyes and it says, *“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.*” Are you lost? Because I'm kind of lost. We're talking about heavenly things here, we're seeing, we're peering into heaven and we are seeing things that are other and they're beyond our understanding. Ezekiel is describing what the ancient Jews referred to as the Divine Throne Chariot.

They believed these angels and the wheels that seemed to be somehow connected to them were actually a chariot on which the throne of God was held, and yet the chariot itself is alive, okay. You with me? Yeah, I know, hard to imagine, but he goes on. 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.*” He repeats that rather incredible statement.

Verse 22, *“Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness (again, it's not exactly, but there was the likeness) of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads.* ²³ *And under the expanse their wings were stretched out straight, one toward another. And each creature had two wings covering its body. (we're getting some repetition here)* ²⁴ *And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings (and he says, it was) like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army. ...*” Pick one, he says, it sounded like all those things, just pick one. ²⁴ *...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 obviously they're still now to hear the voice of the Lord. 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.*” So we don't have an actual throne with an actual human necessarily here at all, we have the likeness of a throne on which is the likeness of a human.

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. ...*” Isn't that interesting, think about that phrase, *“fire enclosed”*. We know what fire looks like when it's just burning, like in a campfire or something's on fire but when fire is enclosed, held in a particular area. So now you have literally the, if you will, this, for lack of a better word, this body of this human-like appearance on the throne, and there is fire as it is contained. He sees this burning inside, enclosed in this individual.

“²⁷ ...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, (isn't that interesting?) so was the appearance of the brightness all around.”

So if you will, something similar to that of a rainbow, literally all around him. And it says, *“²⁸ ...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.”*

And then Ezekiel chapter 2 is actually a continuation but is somewhat short, and it says, *“And he said to me, “Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you.” ² And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.”* Isn't it interesting that he says, “I was literally knocked down when I saw this, the glory of the Lord, but when He spoke to me, I felt the Spirit giving me the strength to stand and then to hear.”

Now what's interesting is that Daniel had a similar experience, although he had to ask the Lord to strengthen him because he couldn't get up. He says, “I can't even breathe.” The Lord begins to speak to him, and Daniel says, “I can't even breathe.” (Daniel 10:17) He's like on all fours on the ground, like gasping for breath simply because of the glory of the vision he's being shown.

And so, the Lord then strengthened him that he could stand up and start to even just listen. But isn't it interesting that there's just kind of a difference here in the way they are both enabled between Daniel and Ezekiel.

Verse 3, *“And he said to me, “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, ...”* I want you to notice that. I want you to remember people some something very important, and we've talked about this before. It was the southern kingdom of Judah that was taken into exile there in Babylon, the northern kingdom of Israel had been wiped out years and years and years before that by the Assyrian Empire, okay?

But I want you to notice, when God speaks to Ezekiel, He says, “I'm sending you to the people of Israel” and the reason that's important is because we know that there had been movement by the people of the northern kingdom of Israel before the downfall of that kingdom. There'd been many people who'd moved down into the southern kingdom, from Israel, so that all the tribes were represented there. There are no lost tribes of Israel, don't let anybody tell you there are lost tribes of Israel, God doesn't lose anything. He knows exactly where everything is and you'll notice that He refers to the people to whom is

Ezekiel is being sent as the people of Israel. “³ ...to nations (He says, middle of verse 3) of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. ⁴ The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’”

Now He doesn't, He is not given His message yet, but what He's telling Ezekiel, and this is important, He says that, “when you go to talk to them, here's the way you're going to start your message, ‘Thus says the Lord God,’ that's the way you're going to start your message.”

Why is that important for Ezekiel to know? Well, it's important because Ezekiel was told here that when he speaks to the people, he's going to be speaking for God. He is not going to be using his own voice, He's not going to be giving his opinion, he is going to be using the words, “Thus says the Lord God.”

And see, that's a powerful reminder that Ezekiel was not to speak his own words, he was not to give his own message. Ah, so many times I hear Christians talking online and elsewhere giving their own message, giving their own opinion, and that's what we hear most today.

I guess I understand that it's culturally huge right now, it seems like everything today has a comment section. I mean, everything, you get... If you're on any kind of social media, you know what I'm talking about. Everything has a comment section, even news stories, there's a comment section. In fact, just tonight I opened up my phone and I read, this news item popped up and it said, “Scarlet Johansen is pregnant and fans definitely have thoughts.”

And I thought, who cares? I certainly hope Scarlet Johansen doesn't care. “She's pregnant and fans have thoughts.” I thought, well, that's kind of, that's kind of where we live today, isn't it? Now can I make it clear that I believe people should be able to speak their opinion, that's called free speech, and I believe in the right of people to express their opinion.

But the one thing that our culture seems to have forgotten is that those are just opinions and they're not facts, and they're definitely not necessarily truth, they are just opinions. But what's interesting here in verse 4 is that God tells Ezekiel, “when you speak, you're going to say this, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’”

In other words, that's going to be Me talking, not you, and so it's not your opinion that makes a difference. I had a person write me just today, wanted to know my opinion on something and I wrote them back and I said, “my opinion

means less than nothing.” That was my response, that's what I say now when people ask for my opinion, “my opinion doesn't mean anything, go pray about it, see what the Lord says.”

His is the only opinion that matters. I've got opinions, I'm not telling them, I don't have opinions, I have opinions, but, they're not worth anything. They're well, they're worth as much as your opinions, right. So, yeah, that's it. Lord goes on, verse 5, “*And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.*”

And what God is saying to Ezekiel here is that, “listen, Ezekiel, they may not respond to your message.” In fact, He's going to tell them here in a little bit that they're not going to respond. But, He's kind of priming the pump to say, “they're probably not going to respond, but that's not your responsibility, your responsibility is to get the word out, it is their responsibility to hear the message and respond appropriately to it, but that is not your responsibility.”

And He says, “*they are a rebellious house*” but He says “one way or another, they're going to know you're a true prophet.” And that means that when the things that you say Ezekiel come to pass, they're going to know, they're going to know.

But then He goes on to address the possible emotional reaction of Ezekiel, look at verse 6, “*And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, (which means their threats and so forth) though briars and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions. (ouch) Be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house.*”

So here, Ezekiel is interestingly enough, warned not to be swayed or affected by the facial expressions, the body language or the verbal assault that he may get from the people of Israel in response to the message of the Lord that he's given them.

He says, the Lord actually says to him, “don't be dismayed.” And it is interesting in that in the original Hebrew, that means “don't be shattered.” Don't be shattered by their looks, don't let their looks... Because you know, facial expressions, when you've been doing what I've been doing for a long time, honestly, facial expressions don't bother me anymore, honestly, they really never did. But I know from talking to other people who do public speaking and teaching and that sort of thing, that some people are very sensitive to facial expressions. And if you've got somebody, kind of sitting out in the audience going, kind of giving you that you're an idiot kind of a look, with their arms

crossed, it can be kind of intimidating. And that's essentially what Ezekiel's being warned about here, not to let it bother him or not to let it get to him.

He says verse, because, why is God saying that? Because when you get intimidated, you start holding back, you stop telling the truth. Look what He says in verse 7, *“And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house.”* And once again, God is saying, as we've said before, “the hearing part is the responsibility of the people, the speaking part is Ezekiel's.”

And I really believe it's the same with us. If we get to start talking to somebody about the Lord and we share the truth of God's word, it is not your responsibility if they respond badly or if they say, “get out of my face,” or “why don't you just shut up” or whatever, however they might respond negatively to you. That's not your responsibility. You didn't fail, if someone responded to the word of God and said, “I reject what you've said.” That's not a failure on your part, that's a failure on their part.

I believe that Ezekiel will hear, maybe even already has heard, “well done good and faithful servant.” But guess what, people didn't listen to him, they didn't listen, they did not respond well at all, but he was faithful. And God is looking for faithfulness from you and me, He's looking for faithfulness. So, speak faithfully, whatever the Lord calls you to say.

Verse 8, *“But you, son of man, hear what I say to you. Be not rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you.”* In other words, “if I tell you to say something, you say it.” ⁹ *“And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it. ¹⁰ And he spread it before me. And it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe.*

¹ *And he said to me, “Son of man, eat whatever you find here. Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.”* ² *So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat.* ³ *And he said to me, “Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that that I give you and fill your stomach with it.” Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.”* This is basically what the psalmist talks about when he makes reference to the word of God.

Let me show you a passage from Psalm chapter 119, it says,

Psalm 119:103 (ESV)

How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Now, the psalmist isn't literally talking about the sweetness of honey, but Ezekiel is, even though this is a vision, this is a vision that he's having. But he says, "it tasted sweet when it was in my mouth." And that's because the word of God is true and it's always sweet, it might sour your stomach when you swallow it, if it's a rough message, but the word of God is always good.

And there's a picture here that I think we need to see that kind of conveys a spiritual truth for us concerning our need to consume and internalize the word of God before we can properly function as a messenger. And that's kind of what He's telling Ezekiel, because I think it's possible to hear a message and not really internalize it or embrace it. I mean, God could have said to Ezekiel, "all right here's the deal, I want you to tell him this, and this, and this, and this." And Ezekiel could have said, "okay, all right, I'll do that."

And he could have gone to the people and said, "all right, here's the message he got from God. He says, do this, and this, see ya." And never really internalize it, never really take it in on his own, never really embrace it for what it is.

How do I want to put this? If as a teacher myself, if I'm never convicted by the word of God that I share, then there's a serious disconnect going on. If I'm not affected by the word of God, that's a problem. And I really believe that one of the most important aspects of teaching God's word comes from the realization that I need what the word of God offers as much, if not more than the people to whom I'm teaching.

I have learned over the years that God raised me up as a teacher because I need to hear the word of God every single day, right? So do you, I need to hear the word of God every day. *"⁴ And he said to me, "Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them. ⁵ For you are not sent to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel— ⁶ not to many peoples of foreign speech and a hard language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely, if I sent you to such, they would listen to you."*

So God is saying, "if I'd sent you to the Gentiles, they probably would listen. But as it is, I'm sending you to the House of Israel." And that's why He says in verse 7, *"But the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are*

not willing to listen to me: because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart.”

Ah, we're going to stop there, I know we're kind of in the middle of a chapter. We're going to stop and we're going to pray and we'll pick it up there next time. But let's pray that we would not have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart, amen?

Father God, keep us from being stubborn, stiff-necked. Keep us Lord from resisting Your Word, but teach us Father God to be flexible and open and responsive. We look to you Lord God, in Jesus' name we pray, amen.