

“The Appearance of Glory”

Introduction: God’s people had lost all hope. Everything had changed and a sense of dislocation and anxiety prevailed. There would be no return, it seemed, to the good old days. Gone was the time when the believers in the LORD outnumbered their pagan neighbors. Through the pride and self-interest of their leaders, both spiritual and political, and the willingness of the people to follow unquestioningly where they were being led, God’s people had slowly but surely rejected his reign and asserted their own. Disobedience and wickedness had increased to the extent that now, it appeared, they were cut off from the very presence of God, forced to live as strangers in a strange land. Did God care? Had God been defeated by a mightier deity? Did God even exist? A fresh vision, a new word of hope was needed.

Am I describing the world in the 21st c. A.D., or that in the 6th c. B.C.?! It actually could be either, which is what makes this work of this ancient prophet so able to speak, some 27 centuries later, as we seek a fresh vision and new word of hope in these difficult days in which we’re living. To be sure, it will take a little work to mine its treasures. There are some truly bizarre, and hard to hear, chapters in the book, beginning with what we’ve just read! But after spending much of my summer walking with this fellow Ezekiel, I would say that it’s well worth it. So I hope to help his words and actions become accessible to you, and trust that we will grow to see the relevance of what God has to say to us through Ezekiel, who will actually lead us, quite nicely, I think, into our season of Advent. Ezekiel’s name, by the way, means “God strengthens.” May we be filled with such strength as we journey along.

I. Among the Exiles

A. So, where are we as we enter this work? Verse one tells us that we are “among the exiles by the Kebar River.” That is, we are among the people of God, the Israelites, whose king, Jehoiachin, has been conquered by a king named Nebuchadnezzar. This led to many of the Israelites being taken from their homes in Jerusalem and transported to Babylon, forced to live there as exiles, among a highly pagan people. This particular group of exiles had come to Babylon in 597 B.C. in what is known as the first deportation. We’ll talk more about this as we go along (because God will talk a lot about it), but the primary reason for the exile was the persistent disobedience of God’s people. It was a disobedience that ranged from the worship of other gods, to the total disregard of the poor and needy, to the practice of child sacrifice in an attempt to curry the favor of these deities. These abhorrent practices had gone on so long that God, in his wisdom, determined that discipline was needed. The discipline of God, and really the wrath of God, came in the form of the Babylonians.

B. As the book opens, we learn that it is now the fifth year of the exile, and also that Ezekiel was one of the ones who had been taken into exile. He was a priest, or at least had been in training for the priesthood because he was only 25 when deported and one couldn’t become a full-time priest until you hit 30. But now that he had turned 30, the priesthood didn’t look like it would ever happen. Separated from Jerusalem, and from its great temple and sacrificial system, how could one ever hope to serve as a priest? All that Ezekiel had been working toward seemed for naught.

C. Let’s just pause here and try to sense how incredibly difficult, and emotionally trying, this was for the people, as well as for Ezekiel. Deserved or not, losing your home, losing loved ones, losing your way of life, losing your sense of the future all had to have been utterly traumatic. These folks had

witnessed the brutality of war and had now been living like refugees for five years. On top of that was the apparent loss of God's presence. For, if the temple was where God was, if the disciplines of your spiritual life were linked to the temple, and if that temple was in Jerusalem, then living with God in this unclean land of Babylon, amidst an unclean people, did not seem possible. Psalm 137 gives us some sense as to the emotional state of these exiled folk:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. . . How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? (vv. 1, 4)

It is worth pairing this psalm with another, Psalm 27:

The LORD is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? . . . When the wicked advance against me to devour me, it is my enemies who will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident. (vv. 1-3)

The problem with these latter words is that it seemed as if they had not come true! The wicked had advanced, they had besieged, and they had attacked, and they had *not* stumbled or fallen but had emerged victorious! There was nothing to be confident about; the only thing left to do, in exile, was remember the good old days, and weep.

D. How would you define the "good ole days?" Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night wondering where the world is headed? Have you ever thought that your ability to sin was greater than God's ability to save? Have you ever said, "Well, I've really done it, God is going to leave me this time." I'll give it away now, though we've a lot of ground to cover before we get there – God is holy and righteous and rightly judges sin. But even in the worst of situations, even in the worst of consequences, God does not abandon us; he still offers a word of hope and restoration.

II. A Vision of Glory

A. The way God begins to communicate this to Ezekiel is through a magnificent, even overwhelming vision and display of his glory. Glory is a word that frames Ezekiel's ministry. He gets a plate-full of it right off the bat in chapter 1. Later (chs. 10-11) he'll see the glory of God, astonishingly, depart from the temple in Jerusalem. Later still (ch. 43) he'll see God's glory return in radiant splendor. The glory of God is his majestic perfection, his overwhelming power, the weight of his presence. The song we sang earlier on maybe helps us capture it best:

You are beautiful beyond description, too marvelous for words;
Too wonderful for comprehension, like nothing ever seen or heard.
Who can grasp Your infinite wisdom? Who can fathom the depth of Your love?
You are beautiful beyond description, majesty enthroned above.
And [so] I stand in awe, I stand in awe of You . . .

The only thing different from this song and Ezekiel's experience was that by the end, Ezekiel couldn't even stand! What had begun looking like a great storm ended up in the throne room of the Almighty God; Ezekiel could only fall flat on his face!

B. Trying to explain it almost removes its majesty. You really have to just keep reading and reading until it begins to take hold of you. But let me just make a few, hopefully helpful, comments.

1. First, the four living creatures in the opening scene, part human, part animal, with great wings, though bizarre sounding to us, were actually fairly similar to the massive statues of the guardian creatures that stood outside Mesopotamian temples, or were portrayed in paintings as holding up the sky, the perceived home of the gods. In this vision, then, the LORD uses what his people would have been seeing on the streets around them to depict those who are holding up his own throne room.
2. Second, to these figures are added wheels that touch the ground which in turn have other wheels inside them as well as rims that sparkled and were full of eyes, all of which spoke to an incredible freedom of movement of this being, as the spirit desired. There would be no holding this being back or restricting him in any way.
3. Third, above the figures was a vast expanse, awesome in light and in sound, like a massive multimedia presentation, in which God appears on the throne, riding his air-chariot in a figure like that of a man, surrounded with the radiance of a glorious rainbow. Does this anticipate the incarnation, when the glory of God becomes manifest in the person of Jesus? Does it anticipate the glory of the living God when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain top? Does it anticipate the vision of the heavenly throne room that John shares with us Revelation 4? At the very least, down by the Kebar River, in the empire of Babylon, Ezekiel realized this was no Babylonian deity; this was none other than the LORD himself, very much alive and well, and very much and very powerfully “there” (v. 3), outside of the temple and away from Jerusalem, in Babylon. How could that be?

C. Needless to say, this was a day that became etched in Ezekiel’s memory. Where were you when JFK was assassinated? Where were you on 9/11? Where were you when the Red Sox finally won it all? Where were you, Ezekiel, on the fifth day of the fourth month of the fifth year of exile? “I was by the Kebar River, in the land of the Babylonians. And the LORD was *there!*” And it was there that Ezekiel began to learn that God was not limited to the temple in Jerusalem, but was with his people, even in the traumatic and anxiety-ridden and disappointing space of exile. It was there that Ezekiel began to learn that this holy God existed beyond his categories and beyond his control. It was there that God revealed to Ezekiel the incredible treasure of his glory because, as Psalm 36:9 declares of God: “For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.” God knew that if there was to be any hope of renewal and restoration for his people, they would need to begin with an awe-filled vision of him.

Where do you go that leads you to a sense of the glory of God, to a sense of awe? What is that holy place where you find you need to remove your sandals, like Moses at the burning bush? What wakes you up to God’s presence, like Peter, James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration? What makes you fall flat on your face, or at least brings you to your knees, like Ezekiel by the River?

Is it a mountain top? A piece of music? A passage of scripture? Those, I think, are questions worth living with for a while.

When the world as he knew it seemed to have been crushed by calamity, when it seemed as if nothing familiar remained, God gave Ezekiel a vision of his glory to strengthen him. May such a vision, and the words that will follow, begin to strengthen us as well.