

God on the Move

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[0 : 0 0] Almighty God, speak to us now, we pray from your word, write it in our hearts that we may worship and serve you in our lives, for Jesus' sake and glory. Amen.

I think one of the most famous pictures that I know of the Second World War period is that famous photograph of St Paul's Cathedral in London, sort of silhouette by the smoke from the bombs during the Blitz on London.

It seemed to keep standing despite all the bombs around it. It seemed to be a symbol of hope, a symbol of the future and a symbol of victory in some ways for the Allies and I guess in particular for the residents of London.

Maybe even, I guess, a symbol of God being on our side, after all being a cathedral built to the glory of God. It's 592 BC, to be precise, September the 17th that year and we're in exile.

We're in Babylon, 1500 miles away west of Jerusalem, directly through a desert, usually by road over and above the Fertile Crescent as it's called, north of that desert.

[1 : 3 0] To Babylon, to Babylon in what is modern day Iraq. It's the year 592. We're in exile because a few years before that, five or six, Jerusalem had capitulated to the Babylonian forces led by Nebuchadnezzar, the emperor in effect of the Babylonian Empire.

Jerusalem capitulated, surrendered and it still stood. But into exile were taken the king, Jehoiachin, leaders, wealthy people, the sorts of people that could mount an uprising.

It was a standard policy of a conquered peoples. The Assyrians had done it more than a century before when they conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. The leadership, the intelligentsia, the political heavyweights, the religious leaders, they'd all be taken away.

So that what is left is a bit leaderless, demoralised, less likely to bring about an uprising against the conquering forces. But the temple still stood.

Jerusalem still stood in this period from 597, 798 BC for about a decade. And its temple was the largest ever building in the old ancient world to one God.

[2 : 5 5] A vast building and a beautiful building at that. We read, of course, about it and its dimensions and the gold and so on that's used in the first book of Kings when Solomon had built it in about the 950s BC.

So it had stood for the best part of 400 years. On a hill, not necessarily the highest point of Jerusalem, but certainly is a very dominant landmark.

Many of you will have seen modern Jerusalem or pictures of it and that gold dome, which is a mosque built in 691 AD. This temple stood on that site and was probably taller, maybe not quite as big in ground area, although its courts would have been quite a deal bigger.

So it's a very dominant building and it reached up in a sense to the sky. And it stood there as a symbol of security and hope, a sort of ancient St. Paul's Cathedral or an ancient Twin Towers, if you like, from New York.

Something that suggested permanent security, hope, stability, victory, safety for many of the Israelites. But of course, like the Twin Towers, it didn't stand for that much longer after Ezekiel's visions here.

[4 : 13] Because 10 years after Jerusalem capitulated, there was a stupid, politically stupid uprising against Babylon. And the Babylonian forces came back with a vengeance. And Jerusalem was destroyed totally.

And the temple was destroyed down to its foundations. Even after that first capitulation, the temple still standing, there was in a sense of great debate going on.

Where is our hope? What is God doing here? We've become in effect a sort of province of Babylon. The king's in exile, a puppet king's been put in his place, admittedly of Davidic descent, but meant to be really a puppet to Babylon.

What's really going on here? And for the people back in Jerusalem and Judea, around Jerusalem, by and large, they were still blithely optimistic. The temple, the temple, the temple. Jeremiah quotes them in Jeremiah 7.

It stands, we're safe, we're secure. It's those who've gone into exile that are being punished. The book of the prophet Ezekiel is going to flip all of that on its head. As indeed we'll see just in these chapters, 8 to 11, tonight.

[5 : 23] Ezekiel, the prophet, is in exile too. He's in Babylon. He's 30 years old. Well, now he's about 31. And he could have been a priest. He's a Levite.

We're told at the beginning of the book he's a priest. At the age of 30 he could have gone into priestly service in the temple. But presumably he was deported at about the age of 25 and therefore has never served in the Jerusalem temple.

And yet ironically in these chapters tonight, 8 to 11, we see a vision that is totally around and in the temple of Jerusalem.

This is 14 months after the book's opening. The book of Ezekiel is very ordered. Almost all its prophecies are chronological apart from a few that are to other nations in the middle of the book.

And then it resumes chronological prophecy thereafter in the last 15 chapters or so. So it's a very neat and tidy book. And by and large, it's a book about judgment at the beginning up to chapter 24.

[6 : 26] Then there's the interlude of prophecies against other nations that aren't chronological. And then from 33 to the end, basically oracles of hope. So it's very neat, very tidy.

There are little exceptions to that. But basically that's a helpful sort of structure to keep in your head. We're in the early part. We're in words of judgment. And we'll see later on in this series what changes judgment into hope.

So you'll have to wait. Suddenly, in exile, in the outskirts of Babylon somewhere, this Jewish refugee enclave, Ezekiel, who is dumb, unable to speak because God has made him dumb, other than to speak the words that God gives him, is transported in visions of God to Jerusalem.

So vivid are these visions and so realistic it seems that Ezekiel's almost there himself that some have speculated that he wasn't actually in exile and some have said that he actually travelled.

But that's certainly not what this text tells us. This is a vision of God. And so vivid and gripping is it that it's as though for Ezekiel, he's actually there in the temple and seeing all these things.

[7 : 42] We're told at chapter 8, verse 2, there was a figure that looked like a human being. Below what appeared to be its loins, it was fire. And above its loins, it was the appearance of brightness like gleaming amber.

That fits the description from the opening chapter, chapter 1, a vision I preached on two Sunday nights ago. And there, it's clearly God. This is a vision of God.

And out from this vision of God, in verse 3, stretched out the form of a hand, not literally a human hand, but something like a hand.

It's always elements of vagueness in the descriptions of God. And took me by a lock of my head. One could imagine that here's Ezekiel sitting, and it's all a vision, and yet he probably feels the pain of having his hair pulled up, as though he's being lifted up by his hair and taken into Jerusalem.

Very vivid, this vision. He took me by a lock of my head, and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem.

[8 : 49] So it's not really taken to Jerusalem, it's a vision. He's sitting there, we're told at the beginning of the book, with the elders of Judah around him. And at the end of chapter 11, at the end of this four-chapter-long vision, he's still sitting there with the elders.

Who knows how long all this took, and what they were thinking, as they looked at Ezekiel, probably sweating and tense, and screaming out at a different point, and so on. So, a bit like a nightmare, I guess.

So, Ezekiel's off in this vision, a vision of God to Jerusalem. And he's taken, firstly, the end of verse 3 tells us, to the north gate of the inner court.

The Jerusalem temple is, for want of being a bit simplistic, sort of concentric courts. And you sort of move in, and move in, and move in. Eventually, you get to the most holy place.

Now, it's not straightforwardly concentric circles or squares, but if you can imagine that, we're sort of, it's the inner court, but there's actually more inner bits to come. So, we're into the temple courts area.

[9 : 51] We're on the north side, not the main entrance. And that's where Ezekiel is placed, at the end of verse 3. He brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north.

And then comes a puzzling sort of juxtaposition. Firstly, to the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy. And then secondly, and the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I'd seen in the valley.

Now, it's a juxtaposition that's actually meant to trouble us. Because that's part of this chapter 8 part of the vision. What Ezekiel sees is, in verse 4, what he should see.

The glory of the Lord, in a sense, filling the temple. And in picture language, it's what he saw in chapter 1. Although in chapter 1, the vision is in exile, not in the temple.

It's a vision of what is a bit like a chariot, and above it is a throne, and above and on the throne is God, and it's fiery underneath, and it's bright and gleaming and shining.

[11 : 04] It's in effect God's mobile throne, we might say. And that's what he sees here. In verse 4, But also, the end of verse 3, this image of jealousy.

In verse 5, O mortal, lift up your eyes now in the direction of the north. So I lifted up my eyes toward the north, and there, north of the altar gate in the entrance, was this image of jealousy.

Now, we're not told exactly what it looks like. It's called an image of jealousy, because it makes God jealous. We sometimes think that jealousy is a sort of sin, but that's envy.

The jealousy that God displays, in both Testaments, mind you, it's there in the New as well as the Old, is the jealousy of, the best analogy is, of a spouse for their spouse.

That is, a husband or wife has the right to expect an allegiance from their wife or husband that no other can expect. And the Bible uses that marriage relationship frequently of God and His people, Israel in the old, the church in the new.

[12 : 16] And so jealousy is a fitting and right response when an exclusive allegiance is diverted to another. This is an idol, an object of worship, at the north gate of the inner court of the temple, mind you.

It's not a new temple somewhere else even. It's in the Jerusalem temple to Yahweh. It's an image of jealousy because it's provoking God to jealousy. They've, in a sense, been diverted from worship of Him to the worship of some idol.

Now, the description of this, with other descriptions in other parts of the Old Testament, suggests that this is probably a Canaanite idol, probably a wooden pole depicting fertility symbols, probably a female fertility symbol, lots of breasts on it probably.

Typical Canaanite, something that was there and warned against in Deuteronomy before they entered the land. King Manasseh, a very bad king, a few decades before the exile, had erected such an image in the temple.

It was destroyed by good King Josiah in the 620s BC, where now, 30 years after that, Josiah was dead and his rebellious sons have allowed lots of the Manasseh stuff to all come back in.

[13 : 34] That's probably what's going on here. It's fertility worship. And in the ancient world, you can understand it. You would worship the God who provides, you think, the rain, the sun, the crops, the animals and the children.

And it was a very perverse religion, Canaanite religion. Lots of sexual promiscuity is part of it. That is, you would engage sexual acts with temple prostitutes in order to encourage, entice the gods to produce children or animals or crops or rain.

That's probably what's going on here. It's an abomination. It's a disgrace. It's terrible. In chapters 5, 6 and 7, which we have skipped over in this series, there are frequent mentions of idolatry and abomination.

And this now is the picture of what's actually going on. And no less, it's in the temple precincts itself. Then in verse 6, do you think that's bad enough?

In verse 6, mortal, literally son of man, but as I mentioned the other night, it's really emphasising the humanity of Ezekiel.

[14 : 44] So whilst we lose that connection with Jesus calling himself son of man, nonetheless, it's the human sort of, you're a human being, you mortal one, being addressed here. Do you see what they're doing?

The great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here to drive me far from my sanctuary. Abomination's a very strong word, usually used for the incorporation of pagan worship into the worship of Yahweh.

Yet the end of verse 6 says, you will see greater abominations. You think this is bad? It is. But it's getting worse. There's three more to come.

But notice too, in the middle of verse 6, they're committing here to drive me from my sanctuary. That's the clue to what's going to happen in these chapters.

And indeed, the clue to understanding the opening vision of chapter 1 and why God is in exile in Babylon. That is, the abominations in the very temple of Jerusalem are actually driving God out.

[15 : 48] And we're going to see that visually at the end of this vision tonight. Well, then Ezekiel is taken in verse 7 to the entrance of the court. So it's a little bit closer that he's coming towards the centre.

And there's a hole in the wall in verse 7, which is not an automatic teller machine. And he's told there to dig through the wall. Now, we get these little instructions and it's a little bit like a David Attenborough documentary from the BBC.

You know, I can imagine this sort of whispering God because it's as though we're really in the temple and there really are people committing idolatry and walking around and worshipping.

We'll see that in a minute. And I can imagine this voice of God, a bit like David Attenborough, saying, now just quietly here, don't want to disturb them, but just dig through the wall so that we can peek inside and see what's going on.

That's the sort of thing, it's a bit like a documentary going on here. And what happens when he looks through, he digs through the wall and there was an entrance. He said to me, go in and see the vile abominations they're committing there.

[16 : 56] It's a bit like spying on an animal in its native habitat, a nocturnal animal. And so I went in and looked and there portrayed on the wall all around were all kinds of creeping things and loathsome animals.

Not any animal, lots of creeping ones, snakes, serpents, that sort of stuff. Loathsome may suggest being unclean at least for Jewish food laws, but also perhaps animals of other worship.

Most scholars reckon that what's being depicted here are Egyptian animal worship. The Egyptians worshipped animals like locusts and all that sort of stuff as we get a glimpse of that in the plagues in the book of Exodus.

And most likely that's what's going on here. All the idols of the house of Israel, before them stood 70 of the elders of the house of Israel with Jezaniah, son of Shaphan, standing among them.

Each had his censer in his hand for incense and the fragrant cloud of incense was ascending. It's as though in this room, a secret room that he's had to dig into in some way.

[17 : 58] It's as though perhaps all around the room there are these frescoes of animals for worship and maybe in front of different ones a place where incense would be placed to burn as an act of worship to those gods.

Most likely, as I say, Egyptian gods, certainly pagan. It's a secret room, it seems, for men and they think that they're unseen. So in verse 12, they're quoted there as saying, Yahweh does not see us.

Yahweh has forsaken the land. Now, of course, in the last five years the land has been defeated and so they've abandoned worship of Yahweh and they're worshipping these Egyptian animal gods.

But remember back in Deuteronomy, the end of all laws, there's a sequence of curses and blessings and the first in the curses of chapter 27 of Deuteronomy is cursed be the one who sets up an idol in secret and here it is happening in secret but what's even worse in the very temple buildings of Jerusalem.

Not in someone's home far away, not in another religious building built for another god, that's bad enough in Israel, but in the very temple of Jerusalem.

[19 : 20] Seventy men which may suggest a sort of eldership group so this is not just any old men but maybe something quite serious here in the leadership of the people. It recalls, of course, the seventy men who were appointed by Moses as leaders under him and later on the Sanhedrin probably had seventy men as well.

So here is pagan idolatry very close to the centre of the temple. The mention of a son of Shaphan in verse 11. Shaphan was a good man, a servant of Josiah but here thirty years later one of his sons is committing idolatry.

Now you think this is bad and it is but verse 13 warns us yet again like verse 6 you will see still greater abominations that they are committing.

Now he's taken to the north gate of the house so we've come inside the inner court to the very gate of the house somewhere we're now getting very close to the centre of the temple we're on the north side not the main entrance side probably and in verse 14 again we see a third picture of idolatry.

Here now we see women sitting there weeping for Tammuz. Tammuz was a Babylonian god a bit like the Greek god Adonis a young very handsome virile man here are women wailing mourning for him it may be a cult of the dead some suggest it's a bit like the sort of women's mills and boon fantasy TV type stuff how people you know weep for you know those sorts of soap opera type heroes who might die or even get married I suppose here's someone who's dead a mythological sort of figure meant to be extremely handsome but here are the women worshipping him again it's an act of idolatry a Babylonian god that they're worshipping and yet again in verse 15 have you seen this oh mortal well let me tell you there's worse to come you will see still greater abominations than these and then fourthly now to the inner court of the house of the lord now we're perhaps in the area that priests might only only priests might be allowed to go ironically of course for Ezekiel he was has never served in this temple he would have been too young when he was deported now he's hit the age he's now 31 and he's not there other than in this vision he's in the inner court of the house of the lord and there at the entrance of the temple maybe into the priest's area between the porch and the altar were about 25 men with their backs to the temple of the lord and their faces toward the east prostrating themselves to the sun toward the east it's another act of idolatry the fourth picture of idolatry we've had the worship of canaanite fertility gods egyptian animals a babylonian cult of the dead or some sort of adonis fantasy and now the worship of the sun they're facing east the main exit entrance out of the temple and they're bowing down prostrate presumably at the rising or the morning sun we should recognize therefore that in their whole posture they've got their back towards the holy of holies where in a sense god dwelt and basically by having their back and being prostrate or bowing down in some way they're actually in a sense shoving their backside towards god that is it's not just that they've turned their back on god but they're actually acting in a highly offensive way against god by doing this 25 men if they're in this court they may well be the priests the clergy of ancient israel again not just sort of mavericks of society but the actual leadership of society perversely worshipping idols it's a blatant insult to god in verse 17 god said to me have you seen this oh mortal is it not bad enough that the house of judah commits the abominations done here must they fill the land with violence and provoke my anger still further that is they've already provoked his anger and that's brought the babylonian army five years ago and they're still provoking his anger even further see they are putting the branch to their nose probably the modern equivalent would be to go like that now where you put your hand on your nose and you're sort of waving it as a sort of snub or a rude gesture that's in

[24 : 28] effect what these men are doing in worshipping the sun by in a sense showing their backsides or making a rude gesture to god in effect behind them in the holy of holies no wonder god says at the end of the chapter verse 18 therefore i will act in wrath my eye will not spare nor will i have pity and though they cry in my hearing with a loud voice i will not listen to them some of those words echo what god says he will do to the canaanites i will have no pity on them and nor should you he says in deuteronomy 7 in effect so here the sense is that israel has canaanite themselves if you can make a word like that that is by adopting pagan practices they've actually transferred themselves from being the people of god to being the enemies of god and now he will bring his righteous wrath against them well ezekiel a priest has had this little tour david attenborough type tour of the jerusalem temple all in a vision a very vivid vision four stages of idolatry i don't think it's that each is worse than the other so much as it gets worse because it's so central in the temple sexual fertility worship egyptian worship which some suggest is a probably a political device because there were people in this decade from 598 to 588 who were trying to switch allegiance from babylon to egypt because they thought they get a better deal so putting in egyptian gods may well be part of that political ploy for security there's this women's adonis cult and the worship of the sun it's no wonder that god's offended isn't it by all this it's no light matter and of course we might think we might be very tempted to think it's all very primitive people don't do this sort of idolatry anymore idolatry is an old testament issue of course it's not there are warnings against idolatry in the new and it may not be that people very frequently bow down to the sun but in our skin cancer riddled society there's a fair bit of sun worship of different sorts going on people still bow down to statues people still think there's some magic in holy water or relics or saints there are certainly lots of people who worship in effect a fantasy life a fantasy life on tv or in magazines or books fantasy life that does things for them by way of sexual pleasure as well and certainly of course we live in a society that is greedy for multi-faith worship a sort of downgrading of exclusive worship and sadly of course there are buildings built for the glory of the Lord Jesus

Christ that incorporate worship of all sorts of other gods and of course in our society there's still creation worship and there's a whole host of other very sophisticated idols we shouldn't think that idols are merely things made out of wood or stone or metal the threat of idolatry remains real and this warning to us is that even for the people of God we need to guard as the first letter of John ends from idolatry the shocking threat in this is that it is driving Yahweh God from his sanctuary from the temple the building he commanded to be built built by Solomon his glory filled it it would be a sign of his presence in the midst of his people and he's being driven out by such idolatry he's becoming like a refugee not quite deposed leaving semi voluntarily in a way often you've probably seen films or read books where some monarch or somebody is being in effect evicted from their palace or home the last

Mughal emperor of India left in the back of a cart I think thoroughly humiliating the only way I think he would spare his life if I remember the last king of Burma left in a humiliating sort of procession under British rule and was exiled in 1890 thereabouts to the west coast of India thoroughly humiliated they're just pale reflections in a sense God is being driven from his sanctuary from his palace his throne what does it mean well we go from cause verse chapter 8 to response chapters 9 10 and 11 in effect this is telling us why these events are happening now what's God going to do in response and let's look more briefly at these chapters in chapter 9 largely it's about the destruction of the idolaters the agents of destruction are six angels normally they'd be the defenders of the city but in chapter 9 verses 1 and 2 they are to become the agents of execution of the idolaters and there's a seventh person with them who's a recorder dressed in linen like a priest who's to make notes it seems but also has a slightly different function and as well as that we just get a hint now of what's going to happen more in chapters 10 and 11 in chapter 9 verse 3 the glory of the God of

Israel had gone up from the cherub on which it rested to the threshold of the house Ezekiel is being shown something inside the Holy of Holies somewhere he could never go even as a priest unless he was the high priest and only then on the day of atonement in the Holy of Holies was the box the Ark of the Covenant above that on it were two cherubim wings outstretched golden statues ferocious looking cherubim facing each other guarding the space above the Ark and that space between them and above was regarded as the throne of God in his place there was nothing that visually represented God of course that was highly prohibited but the Ark was like the footstool of his throne what Ezekiel sees is that the glory of the Lord has risen up from the cherubim it's getting ready to move and it's moved to the threshold it's just moved from above the

Ark and whatever it looks like it's moved this mobile chariot of chapter 1 just to the threshold perhaps where the curtain is that guards the entrance to the most holy place that's all we're told for now it's just a little snippet to keep us interested we're going to come back to that in the next chapter reminds us though in what follows that judgment begins with the household of God and the judgment is going to come from these six agents from the very center they're called in in effect to the center to receive the fire and the coals from the throne of God and to take it out by means of judgment beginning with the center of the temple but what about those who are innocent the rest of verse 3 and verse 4 says the Lord called to the man clothed in linen the seventh person who had the writing case at his side and said to him go through the city through Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it they're the ones who are going to be spared it's a little bit like the original Passover that somehow not a mark on the person but a mark on the doorpost here a mark on the person very like Revelation 7 as well of course in the New

[32 : 35] Testament but notice their description because this is really important it's not perfect people it's those who grieve and mourn over the abominations now think through the categories here there are the idolaters the ones who do the idolatry there are those who grieve and mourn are distressed about it all but in the middle there may well be a group of people who may not commit the flagrant idolatry but are a bit indifferent oh if they want to do it you know turn a blind eye the ones who are spared are those who grieve and mourn the ones who loathe in their hearts sin think then about how we respond to idolatry and immorality especially amongst in the church but not just that in society for many of us there's there's real grief and sadness but for some sometimes we're a bit indifferent might turn a blind eye or just think well it's nothing to do with me I'll just live my life God's calling us here I think by implication to be people who grieve or mourn over the abominations sins and idolatries committed in the midst of his people in particular that's the context it's not it's not quite about pagan worship in general out in society it's particularly within the people of God grieving and mourning and everyone else verses 5 to 7 will be slain in judgment pass through the city after him the six others were told and kill your eye shall not spare and you shall show no pity cut down old men young men young women little children and women but touch no one who has the mark and begin at my sanctuary for judgment begins in the household of

God as 1 Peter says in chapter 4 when Jerusalem did fall a few years later five or six years later we presume that the innocent were not necessarily preserved or protected from the Babylonian army it may be wrong in reading that but there's nothing to suggest that somehow they were miraculously spared does that mean this prophecy falls to the ground maybe you see there's actually deeper theology here maybe even deeper than Ezekiel expected himself that is that real life is not just life on earth preserved but life with God even perhaps after death Ezekiel gasps at all this at this killing in verse 8 while they were killing and I was left alone I fell prostrate on my face and cried out our Lord God will you destroy all who remain of

Israel as you pour out your wrath upon Jerusalem reminds you of Abraham doesn't it interceding for Lot in Sodom I think Ezekiel doesn't expect that anyone will be spared even though he knows that a mark will be put on people is there actually anybody who is worthy to receive a mark well we're not actually told that but Ezekiel is gasping is this the end of God's promise the answer in one sense doesn't come toward until the end of the vision I suspect that for Ezekiel as indeed for many in exile where he is they also think that the hope of the people of God lies back in Jerusalem not in Babylon they haven't understood God's purpose in this yet and God answers him in verse 9 the guilt of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great the land is full of bloodshed and the city full of perversity for they say the Lord has forsaken the land and the Lord does not see again quoting what we read earlier on of course of those men with the Egyptian drawings on the wall as for me my eye will not spare nor will I have pity but I will bring down their deeds upon their heads this is justice that is deserved it's severe because that is what is deserved there's no pleasure in this for

God or Ezekiel but it is what is right what Ezekiel sees in vision anticipates in effect the destruction of Jerusalem five or six years later in a sense you see this part of the vision is laying an explanation for an event that is yet to occur when Jerusalem is finally destroyed and the temple destroyed why why why because of the sins and idolatries of the people of God it's not because the Babylonian gods are more powerful than Israel's God it's not because they're better they have better army it's not because they have better chariots stronger horses more sophisticated military equipment it's rather because God is judging his people for their sin that's how to interpret the event the event itself is a bit ambiguous unless God explains its meaning and he's doing it here five or six years before the event actually occurs chapter 10 continues in effect the abandonment of Jerusalem but now we come back to this vision the vision that we saw in chapter 1 but now with a little bit more explanation and a bit more development above the dome or the firmament verse 1 says that was over the heads of the cherubim there appeared above them something like a sapphire or lapis lazuli perhaps in form resembling a throne we saw that in chapter 1 he said to the man clothed in linen go within the wheel work underneath the cherubim fill your hands with burning coals from among the cherubim and scatter them over the city we're being told here that what were called living creatures in chapter 1 are actually cherubim something that presumably in chapter 1 Ezekiel wasn't clear but now they're cherubim same creatures though and the fire the burning coals that were in the middle of it all there were four of them with their wings outstretched they formed like a square or a circle facing outwards each of them in the middle of it all were the burning coals of chapter 1 those coals now become the agent of judgment these men or angels that come and take the coals and scatter them as a sort of symbolism of the judgment that is coming upon the idolatrous people of God then in verse 3 it repeats what we saw about

God rising up above the cherubim and coming to the threshold that was anticipating the movement of God but then in the way the vision unfurls it sort of goes back into the background for a bit gives us a little foretaste now we get it again in chapter 10 verses 3 to 5 basically repeating what we saw there the glory of God this mobile chariot rising above the cherubim and moving to the threshold to the edge of the curtain ready to move and then chapter 10 verse 9 onwards verses 6 to 8 firstly the cherubim are taking the fire from within and heading off into judgment and then the rest of the chapter is largely elaborating on chapter 1 and the vision there verses 9 to 14 focus on the wheels the wheels go in any direction like supermarket trolleys except these will go in the direction that God wants them to unlike supermarket trolleys and the issue is mobility so we're not getting a full repetition of chapter 1 but the issue here is that the glory of God is not confined in the temple of

[40 : 19] Jerusalem but it's mobile that's the surprise it's on wheels and it's moving it's risen up the wings are flapping there's a noise of them moving and it's come right to the edge of the threshold about to leave the holy of holies and we've got description of the wheels in verses 9 to 14 because the issue is mobility of God and then in verses 15 to 17 we get more description of the rising up and the flapping of the wings and when they move they all move and when they stop they all stop it's all together now all of this is sort of slow motion it's a bit like a plane getting ready to take off you know how there's all these steps that have to happen it's all so slow it feels very slow you know you get on the plane you sit there for ages while they wait for somebody to get on with their luggage and then the door shuts and then eventually you sort of back away slowly from the the little you know thing that you walk down onto the plane and then eventually you turn in a different direction and you get out to a runway queue and eventually you're on the end of the runway and then the engines come that's sort of what's going on here it's sort of moving in stages getting ready for take off in a way and God is about to take off out of Jerusalem if I can use that sort of imagery here it's also creating suspense it's doing it in little stages as a narrative saying what's next what's next it's leading us on egging us on to keep reading and then we come to verse 18 then the glory of the

Lord went out from the threshold of the house out from the Holy of Holies that is and it stopped above the cherubim the cherubim lifted up their wings and rose up from the earth in my sight as they went out with the wheels beside them they stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the Lord and the glory of the God of Israel was above them they've come through probably the priest's court and they're now at that east gate the main gate heading out of the whole temple precinct so they've moved out from the Holy of Holies out through the priest's court they're now almost out into the court of men it seems now Ezekiel is taken to that spot he's watched this all move now he himself is taken to that east gate and what happens there at the beginning of chapter 11 the spirit lifted me up and brought me to the east gate of the house of the Lord which faces east and there at the entrance of the gateway were 25 men now this may be the same 25 men as before it's a slightly different location but again we've got 25 men including a man called Pelletire officials now these are men who are not in one sense now committing idolatry in some brazen act of worship but rather people who are boasting they're a bit like people who are reaping the benefits personally from a crisis the sort of looters in a city that's devastated by some natural disaster people who rather than go and help victims go and fill their own pockets these are the men verse 2 says who devise iniquity and who give wicked counsel in this city they say that time is not near to build houses this city is the pot and we are the meat that's an odd image and we might think well if I'm meat in a pot that's a bad image as though I'm about to be cooked but the idea is that being the meat is the best bit the choice portion and the pot is something that keeps you safe impregnable

Jerusalem or the temple is the pot and we're safe within her walls and the wicked advice that they seem to be giving about not building houses and so on seems to be that they're making economic advantage out of misleading other people somehow probably also it's a little bit different from Jeremiah's advice if you remember his letter in Jeremiah 29 he wrote to the exiles saying settle there build houses seek the welfare of Babylon because that's where you'll be for a while and that's where the hope of the future will come from and here is the opposite a false hope based in Jerusalem and a devious hope at that these men are probably people who are commandeering others houses the houses of the people who've gone into exile making profits from it and giving bad advice so that they actually make profits out of the people who are gullible for their bad advice and they're arrogant but what's quite humorous is here they are at the gate they're boasting about all their wicked devices and they're completely oblivious to the fact that the glory of the Lord is at the same gate now on its way out passing them by and they don't seem to see it they're blind to God their eyes are only open for their wickedness well of course as so often and as God promises human boasts come to nothing

God brings down the proud in their conceit so he says in verse 5 say or commands Ezekiel to say thus says the Lord this is what you think O house of Israel I know the things that come into your mind you have killed many in this city and have filled its streets with the slain therefore thus says the Lord God the slain whom you have placed within it are the meat and this city and this city the pot the opposite you have the meat but you the end of verse 7 says shall be taken out of it you have feared the sword and I'll bring the sword upon you says the Lord God I will take you out of it and give you over to the hands of foreigners and execute judgments upon you you shall fall by the sword I will judge you at the border of Israel that is not safely within the precincts of the temple but out at the very edges and the borders and you shall know that I am the

Lord this city shall not be your pot and you shall not be the meat inside it I will judge you at the border of Israel and then you shall know that I am the Lord whose statutes you've not followed and whose ordinances you've not kept but you've acted according to the ordinances of the nations that are around you notice twice in there you shall know that I am the Lord that's God's basic motivation in the Bible that you will know that I am the Lord basic motivation whether it's salvation or judgment or one for one lot and one for another in the same event for Pharaoh the Egyptians for Moses and the Israelites all the way through Exodus you will know or Pharaoh will know the Egyptians will know the Israelites will know that I am the Lord and that's what's going on here in judgment they will know that God is God the one they've turned their back on ignored and showed contempt to they will know in fact that he is God they ought to know it already but they don't and they'll be forced to know it brought to their knees in judgment before him and one of them dies he dies while

[47 : 29] Ezekiel is prophesying as though this underscores the certainty of this judgment some of this judgment of course may not happen for five or six years when Jerusalem is destroyed but there before Ezekiel's eyes one of them dies and I cried with a loud voice and fell down you wonder if the elders way in exile as Ezekiel is having this vision whether he literally cries out with a loud voice and the elders are wondering what on earth is he seeing our lord god will you make a full end of the remnant of Israel the same question in effect that he asked back in chapter eight similar question to elsewhere in the scriptures such as Amos seven here is in effect an implicit intercession a request for god to have mercy of course there will be those who are saved Ezekiel doesn't understand who they will be yet other than having heard about the mark on the forehead of those in Jerusalem well now comes the final explanation all and this is this is striking and it's distinctive and it's unexpected all through the Old

Testament hope is based in the promised land in particular in Jerusalem its capital and in particular in its temple in its centre think of Psalm 46 for example there is a city whose streams make glad the city of god it will not be moved though the mountains shake and roar and all of that sort of stuff there are several Psalms along that line Jerusalem will stand Jerusalem will stand we can understand the hope of the people still in Jerusalem the temple will stand we're safe we're secure the Psalms say it God promised the temple he commanded it to be built surely this is our hope no wonder you see Israel presumed that it was safe in these years even after 598 BC but what is so surprising is that the reverse is the case judgment on Jerusalem but the flip side of that now comes in chapter 11 verse 14 verse 15 mortal your kinsfolk your own kin your fellow exiles okay not the people in

Jerusalem but the people already in Babylon who've been there for 5 years or so the whole house of Israel all of them are those of whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said they have gone far from the Lord to us this land is given for a possession that is the people in Jerusalem despise the exiles they said they're the ones being punished not us we're the goodies they're the baddies they're gone the future lies with us that's what the Jerusalemites thought therefore God says say thus says the Lord God though I remove them far away from among the nations and though I scattered them among the countries yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a little while 5 or 6 years in the countries where they've gone isn't that a striking expression sanctuary is a temple word and the temple is under condemnation in these vision where is the sanctuary not in

Jerusalem's temple but in exile the exact opposite of what the people of Jerusalem thought and probably the opposite of what many of the exiles thought as well therefore say thus says the Lord God I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you've been scattered and I will give you the land of Israel not the ones who are still there they're going to be destroyed but I'll give it to the exiles whom I will gather and bring back but it gets better when they come there they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations it's not simply a return back to what it was like and we go through another cycle but now a return without idolatry without abomination I will give them one heart and put a new spirit within them I'll remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them then they shall be my people and I will be their

God what a wonderful promise we're going to see that elaborated on when we get to chapter 36 in particular towards the end of this series so I'm going to say more about it then but this is not simply about getting back to the promised land this is about spiritual vitality the end of sin it's about obedience and faith in God it's about a transformed and renewed people of God something that doesn't happen in the Old Testament of course even when they come back from exile in 538 BC another 60 or 70 or 80 so years 60 or 70 years later but then verse 21 for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations I'll bring their deeds upon their own heads says the Lord God the opposite of what people thought Jerusalem's the place of the goodies and God will bring them hope the exiles of the baddies and that's the end of them no it's the other way around

[52 : 41] God will destroy the ones who are left and the ones who are in exile be brought back but notice there is nothing about the people in exile that makes them deserve this hope from God they're actually no better than the people left behind it's simply that God will pick a remnant he will judge one group but the other group needs internal change by themselves they're no better so the hope for them lies not simply being brought back and the goodies will make a good life but they'll be brought back transformed with a new heart and God's own spirit and then we come to the climax of this vision this four chapter long vision verse 22 of chapter 11 then the cherubim lifted up their wings with the wheels beside them and the glory of the God of Israel was above them and the glory of the Lord ascended from the middle of the city and stopped on the mountain east of the city it's taken off down the runway it's gone east out of the temple it's come out already from the holy of holies through the holy court it's now taken off it seems from the court of men and in the air has gone over the rest of the temple across the

Kidron Valley across what would later be called the Garden of Gethsemane across to the top of what we call the Mount of Olives higher in fact than the Jerusalem Temple mountainside it's left Jerusalem it's gone it's heading east and if it keeps on heading east it will get more or less to Babylon to exile to where Ezekiel is to where Ezekiel actually saw the vision of God in chapter 1 in exile the vision of chapter 1 was not back in Jerusalem but there this vision explains why in exile in Babylon in a pagan country Ezekiel could see a vision of the glory of the Lord normally in the temple but he's been kicked out by the idolatry of his people the vision's over the spirit lifted Ezekiel up and brought him in a vision by the spirit of

God into Chaldea a name for Babylon to the exiles that is Ezekiel actually in the vision sees himself coming back as well that 1500 miles from Jerusalem back to Babylon and I told the exiles all the things that the Lord had shown me it's as though he wakes up it's not just a dream very very vivid as though he'd even been there this is a somber book and a somber section of the book it's a somber warning against idolatry not least among the people of God and though the actual idolatry of these people we don't know of Tamils and Egyptian animals that we might worship perhaps but idolatry is rife in our hearts even amongst the people of God and God is a jealous God he will not brook rivals our allegiance to him is to be entire and exclusive like a husband or wife to the other wrong worship or looking for security in something other than God is idolatry and in the end even if in secret is seen by

God and will be punished by God it's not a light matter and God will not turn a blind eye forever flagrant sin like this we've seen described is usually accompanied by a false security when it comes from the people of God that is we commit some sin and keep committing some sin thinking that we're safe because our safety or security is not actually in God but in something else in the fact that we're church attenders or church elders or baptized or religious people or bible readers or whatever it is as though somehow those things are the objects of our security and therefore we can blithely keep on sinning and we make the same mistake as they then they'd switch their security into the temple and away from the living and holy God and we're prone to make the same sort of drastic mistake God alone a holy God is our security and our worship and yet out of this judgment of

God here comes a surprising hope not where you'd expect it not in Jerusalem not in the temple but far away in exile how can we worship the Lord in a strange land they sang as we know from Psalm 137 what Ezekiel sees in chapter 1 and here now says to the exiles God is with us in exile we don't deserve it we need our hearts renewed we need God's spirit within us we're no better than the Jerusalemites we're guilty of idolatry probably but history records that in fact those in exile became even more religious by way of keeping the laws of the Old Testament it seems they were very observant about Sabbath and food laws by and large not universally it's an undeserved hope of course the Christian hope is undeserved it's a hope of holiness purification and ultimate perfection it's a hope that's only made possible though Ezekiel did not understand this a hope that's only made possible by the cross and resurrection let's pray

[58 : 40] God and Father we've been taken up in Ezekiel's visions of you we recognise the privilege it is to have been participants in Ezekiel's vision responsibility that that carries to us to be people not of idolatry but of exclusive worship of you to be people who grieve and mourn and lament the sins and idolatries of your people and this world Lord our God fix our hearts in security on you alone on nothing else and strengthen our hope of being perfect in your presence on the final day entirely by your grace in and through your Son Amen history

It's fun involved in the chol