

Knowing the Indescribable God

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[0 : 00] Thanks very much, Andrew. It's great to be with you here tonight. Thank you for coming out on a cold night. I pray that we'll be encouraged by God's word.

In the year 403 AD, John Chrysostom, the golden-mouthed preacher, the Archbishop of Constantinople, was in trouble. His religious tolerance was causing conflict with other bishops in different regions.

His hard words about wealth and self-indulgence had won him the enmity of the emperor's wife. So despite his enormous popularity with the common people, the emperor Arcadius ordered him to be banished.

But the bishop was undeterred. As the guards came to arrest him and the people threatened to riot, he stood in the pulpit in Constantinople and calmed the crowds with these words.

The violent storms encompass me on all sides, yet I am without fear because I stand upon a rock. Though the sea roars and the waves rise high, they cannot sink the vessel of Jesus.

[1 : 09] I fear not death, which is my gain, nor banishment, for the whole earth is the Lord's. Christ is with me. Whom shall I fear? Christ is with me.

Christ is with me. Christ is with me. Christ is with me. Christ is with me. Christ is with me. Christ is with me. Christ is with me. And at least on this occasion, he prevailed. And he was able to prevail. He was able to stand strong because he had a big vision of God.

Of course, we can find similar examples in much more recent times. When Pastor Wang Yi from the early rain church in Chengdu was arrested by the Chinese government authorities late last year, he sent out a letter which concluded with these words.

Jesus is the Christ, son of the eternal living God. He died for sinners and rose to life for us. He is my king and the king of the whole earth.

Yesterday, today and forever. I am his servant and I am imprisoned because of this. I will resist in meekness those who resist God and I will joyfully violate all laws that violate God's laws.

[2 : 21] When God's people go through hard times, they need a great vision of God to sustain them. They need to know that God is bigger than their persecutors, transcendent over their circumstances.

They need to know that God is bigger than their circumstances. They need to know that God is bigger than their circumstances. They need and we need a fresh vision of God's glory to get us through. So over the next three weeks, we're going to be looking at three moments of trouble and great revelation through across the scriptures.

Next week, we're going to be looking at Isaiah's temple vision from Isaiah 6. The week after, we'll be looking at John's vision of the slain lamb enthroned in Revelation 5.

But this week, we're beginning with Ezekiel 1. It's a big vision of God that comes to the prophet Ezekiel, a man living in a community of exiles, hundreds of miles from home, a captive citizen of a defeated nation, a spokesman for a God who seems to have been discredited and who seems to have been unable to protect his people.

Babylon, the military superpower of the day, has defeated the kingdom of Judah and they're going to keep on dismantling it across the ministry of Ezekiel.

[3 : 39] Jerusalem has already been captured. Soon it's going to be completely destroyed and even God's temple is going to be burned to the ground. This is the situation Ezekiel finds himself in.

This is the situation he's been called to speak about and speak for God in. And if you're ever tempted to wish that you were born in better times when there was less hostility to the Christian gospel, when our society was more receptive to the Christian message, you can at least thank God that you weren't born in 723 BC, which is when Ezekiel was born.

That's a hard time to be born if you're going to be a minister of God, if you're going to speak for God. So Ezekiel needs a fresh vision of God to get him through this and God gives him one. Before we begin talking about the vision though, I just wanted to step back at the beginning here and ask some more basic questions about visions of God and revelation about God.

And the first question is, how is it possible for anyone to know God or see God? The God of the Bible, you see, isn't just bigger than us and kind of transparent.

[4 : 55] He's utterly transcendent. He's outside the universe. The heavens, even the highest heavens cannot contain you, says Solomon at the dedication of his temple in 1 Kings 8.27.

How much less this building that we've built, this temple that we've built. Solomon understands what emerges as we read through scripture, that God is always above and outside anything that might contain him.

God isn't a being within space-time so that we might go somewhere and see him. He's above and beyond space and time and light.

That means we'll never be able to find him within this world any more than you can find an architect in his plans or a painter in the paint of his canvas. In 1963, after Russian leader Nikita Khrushchev had mocked Christians for believing in God, even though Yuri Gagarin hadn't seen him in space, C.S. Lewis responded by saying that looking for God by exploring space is like reading or seeing all Shakespeare's plays in the hope that you will find Shakespeare as one of the characters.

If God does exist, he is related to the universe more as an author is related to a play than as one object in the universe is related to another. If Hamlet wants to prove there is a Shakespeare, he's not going to be able to do it in a lab, nor is he going to be able to find Shakespeare by going up to the top of the stage.

[6 : 24] The only way he will know something about Shakespeare is if Shakespeare writes something about himself into the play. It's a great point, isn't it? It says, understands that God really is transcendent.

The only way we can know God is if he comes down or writes himself into our story in some sense, speaks about himself in his own way through the story that he's telling.

But this brings us to more problems. If God is so transcendent in himself, if he's so outside our time and space, if he's so different from us in that sense, how can we even talk about him?

How can human words even work in his case? For example, we might say that God sees everything, as the Bible often does. But what does seeing mean for God?

Surely he doesn't have eyes like we do. He doesn't rely on light like we do. Psalm 139 actually makes that explicit. He isn't caught in the flow of time so that things catch his eye like they do for us.

[7 : 35] He's seeing whatever it involves is something completely outside our understanding. God sees, but we don't understand what he's seeing involves.

And you know, once you start thinking about it, there are problems like this everywhere. The Bible tells us that God speaks. He has a powerful word that created the world. But what does that mean? Obviously not that he has lips and vocal cords or breathes air.

The Bible tells us that God is a father, that Jesus is his true son. But that's complicated too, isn't it? Being a parent in our experience always happens with a beginning in time. There's a mother, there's DNA, there's blood, there's physicality.

None of those things are true for God. God is a father, according to scripture, the original and true father, according to Ephesians 3.15. But his fatherhood is different from ours.

So God is very different from us. And theologians trying to point out this difference have come up with words to label it. They say God is invisible. Not invisible like a gas or like radiation, something we look through, but invisible in the sense that an author is invisible within his own text.

[8 : 54] He's completely outside it. And yet ubiquitous, everywhere in it. And God is ineffable. That is, God is beyond description.

He's so completely outside our experience that none of our words will capture him. Now this might seem like a confusing way to begin.

Am I saying at this point that we can't really know anything about God at all? That the Bible can't reveal anything to us about God because God is so different from us? And those are legitimate concerns.

There have always been people who have taken this problem in that direction. In the mystic tradition, there have been many people who take seriously the idea that God is so different from us

that they throw up their hands and say, forget words.

What we need to do is encounter God through direct experience and emotion. We need experiences rather than concepts. In some parts of the liberal tradition, theology has become all about the human effort to generate our own metaphors for God even though we've got no way of testing them.

[10:08] God is so different from us. All we can do is come up with and exchange metaphors that might work. But both these approaches are still too optimistic.

The Bible tells us that human attempts to know God are doomed to fail. God is not like us. We can't know what he's like through our feelings any more than we can get to know him through our intellects ground up.

And thinking up our own metaphors is a shortcut to idolatry and false religion. With whom will you compare God? To what image will you liken him? Says Isaiah 40 verse 18. Or again, later on in the same book, Isaiah 55, 8 and 9.

My thoughts are not your thoughts. Neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, says God.

So, how then can we know God? Well, first, the Bible says that we can know something about God because he has made creation in such a way that it shows us something about him.

[11:21] Just like if you showed me a scarf you needed or a table you built or a painting you painted, I could tell something about you, but probably not a lot. So, creation testifies to God's character and glory to some degree.

The heavens declare the glory of God, says Psalm 19. Heaven and earth are filled with God's glory, says Isaiah 6. So, the seraphim in Isaiah 6. Or Romans 1, people are without excuse because God's eternal power and divine nature have been made known through what has been created. Creation, in other words, gives us hints of who God is and what he's like. Hints. And that's the way Ezekiel 1 works for the most part. Doesn't it?

I don't know if you noticed, but as we read through it, how much of this passage, how much of this chapter describes God kind of tangentially.

Not by speaking about him, but by speaking about the things that surround him. Did you notice how it is crammed with awesome and majestic and mysterious symbols taken from the created world?

[12:34] We see the cherubim, the living creatures that support God's throne with four faces that represent the mightiest and wisest creatures under heaven, the lion, the ox, the human, and the eagle.

We see God's omnipresence. He's being everywhere, symbolized in the strange wheels of the chariot which support God's throne. They're arranged in such a way that they can instantly go in any direction without having to turn.

In other words, God can go wherever he wants instantly. He is everywhere. He's omnipresent. And we also see God's omniscience, symbolized in the eyes that cover all these things.

God is always seeing. He knows everything and sees everything. And then, of course, we hear of all the awesome and spectacular aspects of creation that accompany this vision.

There's references to cloud and fire and lightning and molten metal and thunder and precious stones and the sound of the ocean or an army. We should note in passing, I think, that this vision of God using all these majestic and exalted symbols from general creation would be very valuable for Ezekiel.

[13:53] As I mentioned before, he's one of God's defeated people. He's hundreds of miles from home. He needs to be reminded that God isn't just the God of the Jews or the God of Jerusalem.

He's the God of the whole world. He's not anchored in his temple. His throne has wheels. It goes everywhere. He sees everything.

Everything that is great and glorious in this world is an echo of his true glory. And yet, where is God himself? Not very apparent, at least up until the last couple of paragraphs.

There's a trace of God's presence in the first part of the vision. The spirit who directs the wheels and the creatures in verses 12 and 20 and 21.

God is present by his spirit but it's kind of vague. This is a vision that reveals something of God but not much.

[14:54] It floods our senses with terrifying images that confuse us even as they reveal things to us. It's vague. So, Ezekiel needs God to speak as well as to show.

He needs to hear the voice that comes at the end of the chapter and which will go on speaking throughout the rest of his ministry. And you should note, of course, that really the most important thing that's happening in these chapters is in verse 3, the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest.

We have a big vision, big picture of God in this chapter but it's to prepare the way for Ezekiel to hear the word of the Lord and for us to hear the word of the Lord through him.

If God doesn't speak as well as act, we can never really know him. We'll be back to guessing which parts of creation testify to him and how those metaphors or symbols work.

We need God to explain what the world means and which aspects of our existence point to his transcendent reality. John Calvin, I think, puts it nicely in his Institutes. He says, when speaking about scripture, the revealed words of God, for as the aged or those whose sight is defective when aided by spectacles begin to read distinctly, so scripture gathering together the impressions of deity which, till then, lay confused in our minds, dissipates the darkness and shows us the true God clearly.

[16:36] We need a speaking God as well as a glorious transcendent God. We need a God who explains as well as acts, who reveals himself in creation but also talks to us about his plans and purposes.

And we can almost leave it there because those are great things to take away from Ezekiel 1. God is the God of the whole world. He's beyond our understanding yet he reveals himself both through the symbols of creation and through his own words.

And yet there's one part of the vision that we haven't talked about yet and it's really the most important because it leads us to the greatest way God bridges the gap between himself and us. In verse 22, Ezekiel sees something over the heads of the creatures.

The NIV translates it as a vault of crystal. But the Hebrew word means and always means firmament. It's a symbol of the sky, the blue dome that divides this world from heaven.

In other parts of the Bible it appears as a crystal sea or as the upper chambers where God builds upper waters where God builds his chambers. This barrier or this vault reinforces the idea that Ezekiel's vision up to this point is a this-worldly impression of God's presence.

[18:00] Despite all the glory and terror that we've seen so far with the cherubim and the wheels and the eyes and the lightning and the thunder we haven't even got through the heavens. God is present by his spirit here but if we want to know him as a person he's still above the sky.

Far away but Ezekiel glimpses him right at the end. There's a sound of a great voice like an army or a waterfall a throne of lapis lazuli and verse 26 and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man.

I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal as if full of fire and that from there down he looked like fire and brilliant light surrounded him like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day.

So was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it I fell face down and heard the voice of one speaking.

This is the closest thing we get to a real vision of God in the Old Testament. And even this is very impressionistic isn't it? The appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

[19:16] Yet the mention of the likeness of a man says something significant. It reminds us doesn't it that humans are made in God's image and likeness.

humans are built to know God in a way that no other species is.

They're constituted in such a way that they can receive God's words even though there is such a gulf between us and him. Humans can serve God and become more like God.

They can have a relationship with God. And of course as you might have guessed this also leads us to Jesus the true man of God and the true image of God as we read in passages like Colossians 1. Because the end of Ezekiel's vision gives us a brief moment of hope. God is God in a form that we can relate to. A human form before switching back to images of fire and cloud.

[20:32] Just a glimpse. Just a glimpse that there is something that we can relate to when we get close to God. If we could get close to God. But that's where God's revelation with Jesus begins, isn't it?

With God speaking in human form, coming to meet us in a way that we can understand, with God in person speaking to us at our level.

John 1. 14, the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only son who came from the father full of grace and truth.

John 1. 18, no one has ever seen God but the one and only son who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the father has made him known. When we see Jesus, we see God close up.

His earthly life shows another side of God's glory. A glory that doesn't simply perplex and terrify us but that reaches out to sinners in love and mercy.

[21 : 39] Jesus shows us a God who deals with us gently, who runs to meet us like the father in the story of the parables of the prodigal son. Jesus introduces us to God as a person we can get to know.

And according to the New Testament, this is the ultimate revelation of God. After the Old Testament, with all its sound and fury, the vision of God that Jesus gives us is like the still center in the eye of a cyclone.

He takes us past or through the wind and terror and shows us God as a father who loves his son and who will welcome us into his family if we put our trust in him.

To put it another way, it's like the relationship a great ruler might have with one of his or her children. Imagine what it would be like if you and I tried to get to see or get to meet the queen.

All the barriers that would be put up to stop us doing that. The security, the guards, the guns, the formal protocols, the crowds, the formality.

[22 : 42] It would be very hard for us to approach the queen. But if we knew one of the royal family, we could go past all those barriers and we could meet an elderly lady who loves her children and grandchildren and who goes for walks with her dogs.

Well, Jesus is the one who can bring us close to God. When we go with him, we meet God in an entirely different way. John 1, 12, yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

So the vision of Ezekiel points to three perspectives on God. It reveals God as a glorious and transcendent God who is beyond our understanding but who is hinted at in creation.

It reveals God as a speaking God who explains himself and his purposes. And it also hints that there is a side of God that is more like us, that if we could only get close to him, we would discover a figure like a man.

And we need all these perspectives, don't we? We need a vision of God's greatness and strangeness and power and terrifying otherness for the same reason that Ezekiel needed it.

[24 : 02] Because we live in a world that seems out of control and out of God's control. world. We live in a world that pretends God is nothing or that God is defeated or that God is stupid or that God is just a big version of us.

All day long people fill the air and the internet with that kind of ignorance. We need Ezekiel's big vision of God to clear our heads of all those small and silly ideas that flit about us.

But we also need Ezekiel's vision of a speaking God because we live in a world that wants to shut God up. The postmodern world says that there is nothing beyond your and my ideas about God.

There's no reliable source of information about what God wants. There's just your opinion which is bigoted and hateful by the way. God is infinitely greater than us or his critics.

He is able to speak. He has spoken and his word will achieve the purpose that he intends. Even though we can't trust ourselves to discover the truth and shouldn't, we can trust God to speak about himself.

[25 : 18] If our society wants to throw tantrums about God and his laws, so much the worse for our society. God is not affected. Empires and civilizations come and go just as surely as individuals.

If they ignore God's words, they go faster. But God remains above it all. Transcendent, glorious, eternal. His word will keep working.

God is a great God and a speaking God. But we also need to know that God is a loving God.

We need Jesus to take us through the whirlwind, through the fire and lightning and terror, to meet God as a person, a loving father, a God who deals with us gently and who understands our weaknesses and who has done for us what we could never do by ourselves by taking away our sins through the death and resurrection of his son.

We'll have a lot more to say about this last aspect of God's identity in the next two sessions. But let me finish by inviting you to cultivate these three aspects of God in your own thinking and imagining.

[26 : 33] Last year in my Winter Doctrine series, I commended the ancient practice of Christian meditation where people would spend time slowly thinking through and imagining the meaning and implications of biblical truth.

This would be a great opportunity to do that. Between this week and next week, for example, you could spend some time actively thinking about these three perspectives that we get hinted at or revealed explicitly in Ezekiel 1.

As you listen to the news this week, you could think about what God's transcendence means here, how he's the God of the whole world and how he goes on while nations and civilizations come and go.

If you hear people mocking God's word, you could spend time thanking God that he has spoken and that his word has been working over the last 2,000 years and beyond and will keep on giving life and light to people as it has for all these millennia.

If you feel personally discouraged or overwhelmed by situations in your own life, you could thank God that you live after the coming of Jesus and that as Romans 8 makes so clear, we have a sure way to know what God thinks of us.

[27 : 48] Jesus gives us the final word on how God feels about us if we put our trust in him. Let's finish by praying. living God, we acknowledge that you are far beyond our ability to understand on our own, that you are unlike anything we can imagine.

And yet we praise and thank you for making us capable of receiving your words, for making us humans, creatures that can know you.

And we thank you above all for sending your son as one of us to complete that revelation, to complete that great plan of creation and speaking.

We thank you so much for the privilege of living in the epoch after Jesus' visit to us on this planet.

We pray that you would enlarge our vision of you, that you would help us to treasure your words and that you would help us above all to love your son and love you through him.

We pray that you would strengthen us this week and onward as we spend more time thinking about these visions of you that you've given us in the weeks ahead. We pray all these things in Jesus' name.

[29 : 16] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.