

The Indescribable Glory of God

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[0 : 00] Just like all of us, I suppose Ezekiel was born into a world that was very turbulent, not one that we might have wished for ourselves.

Given the choice, I've heard people say, I would not have been born into this century. I remember a minister, one of Niger's predecessors, an heir who said, I was born into the wrong century, he would have been very happy to have been born into the 18th century, he said.

And I suppose all of us know what he means. We're born into a turbulent world, a world in which sin is really spreading so far and wide and deep, and a world in which God's judgments are evident every single day.

And that evidence is in the hardness that seems to spread from generation to generation. It's not as if there aren't good people in the world, there are good people.

We are people who love the Lord and have been changed by his grace. Just like in Ezekiel's world, there were people in his past like Josiah that was mentioned by Nigel this morning, and he was a good man.

[1 : 17] But his life came and his life went all too fast. And all the good that he did seemed to have been unwound so very, very quickly.

And it's not just what happens in our own day too. It's as if good people are taken away from us as well. Ezekiel was then born to a very turbulent time.

He was born as a priest. But unable to minister as a priest because he had been taken away from the land of Israel as part of the judgment brought upon God.

And he was taken away to the land of his exile by the Kaber Canal. The people who were experiencing that judgment along with them, and there were many, many thousands of them.

Some of these people probably loved the Lord. The kind of people who are spoken of in Psalm 137, they were heartbroken because of what had happened.

[2 : 23] And they couldn't forget Zion, Jerusalem, and the temple, which, at least in Ezekiel's day, were still standing.

But they were far, far from it. But many of the people, even those who were exiled in judgment, they just did not take it all that seriously.

And they began to show that their heart was not good. Ezekiel, was he a good person? And there's no good any of us saying, oh, well, he was born as a priest, therefore he was good.

You and I would never say that. That which is born of flesh is flesh. Just natural birth, even to Christian parents, does not make somebody a Christian.

Not in that sense. Maybe Ezekiel was part of the problem. And yet, the name Ezekiel itself is very interesting, isn't it?

[3 : 30] May God strengthen. That's the name that his parents gave him. And I do think that was an act of faith on their part. They wanted God's strength to be granted to this person and through this person to others.

Hezekiah, very similar name in Hebrew. Yahweh has strengthened. And he was one again whom God strengthened and through him brought strength to his people.

One in the land of Judah and one in the land of exile. God strengthens through people who sometimes don't feel as if they're ready for it at all.

Well, Ezekiel certainly was used to strengthen the people of the Lord in their exile. And I think it began at the time when he saw this intriguing vision described for us in his own words.

You'll see the prominence of the pronoun I, I, I. He saw what you and I read here. Some have laid down the date very clearly.

[4 : 51] July the 31st, 593 BC. That may be rather rigid, but that's what some and quite a number think.

After this initial vision of the glory of God, Ezekiel's ministry began. This was his calling. How was he called?

Read Ezekiel 1 through to 3, verse 14. That's Ezekiel's call. And it led to six, maybe seven years of ministry.

And the whole of the book of Ezekiel comes out of that seven-year ministry. And apparently it took place just before the fall of Jerusalem and its temple back in Judea.

Where did he see this vision? Well, we're told it's by the Kaber Canal in the land of the Chaldeans. What did he actually see?

[5 : 56] It's an intriguing vision. I don't suppose many of you remember Ezekiel Daniken. But he had some weird views.

And he actually thought that this was an early helicopter that was actually mentioned in these verses. The wheels within wheels. And he had this kind of picture in his mind.

An ancient helicopter. But that is just rubbish. Let's explore the vision first. Just go through the vision and then see what we can take from it.

Now, you'll see in verse 4, you've got the introduction to the vision. As I looked, just imagine you were there. 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. So there's a wind coming first. So this is a sound coming.

[6 : 54] A north wind. And there's this huge cloud. It wasn't a small cloud. Like the cloud that Elijah saw to begin with. This was a big cloud from the beginning.

And within the cloud, there was light. There's a lot of light imagery here. A fiery light. But it wasn't just a kind of a steady light within the cloud. It was more like lightning.

So whatever the light was that was in there, it wanted to flash forth. And it wanted to flash forth continually. And in the midst of the fire, what looked like molten metal, the color of amber.

The next thing, as he looks, from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And these living creatures had composite forms.

They had, it looked like human bodies. So if you were to look them from a distance, you'd have seen what looked like a human form. Four human forms.

[7 : 59] And each of these had four faces. And each of these had four wings. Their feet were the feet of calves.

Bovine feet. And they had two sets of wings, each of these living creatures. One set was up. And touching the opposite wings of the other living creatures.

And as far as we can tell, the wings were not used for movement. They weren't used for any propulsion. Under the wings of these living creatures, we read that there were human hands.

Under their wings, on their four sides, they had human hands. So you find a closer description of the faces and the wings. And we're told about these living creatures that they can move in any direction without turning their bodies.

When I used to read this as a youngster, I thought each of them went straight forward. And I thought, but they would all go in different directions. And then I remembered, but each of them have four faces, so where's forward?

[9 : 10] And that's the way to think of it. Because they have four faces, they can all go in the same direction, any direction. The four directions of the cosmos.

And they don't even have to turn in order to do it. The front face of each of these living creatures, we're told, was a human face. But alongside the human face, there was the face of a lion, the face of an ox, and the face of an eagle.

Ezekiel, when he saw this vision first, it would have made perfect sense, believe it or not. You see, the lion, in Ezekiel's world, and in the world in which he was exiled, the lion stood for strength, ferocity, courage.

Symbol of royalty. The ox, a symbol of fertility and divinity. The eagle, a symbol of swiftness and stateliness.

And the human, the image of God invested with divine majesty. In Ezekiel's world, this made perfect sense.

[10:33] Together, these four faces express divine omnipotence and omniscience. This all-powerful, all-seeing God. This is God who has the strength and the majesty of the lion, the swiftness and the mobility of the eagle, the procreative power of the bull, and the wisdom and the reason of mankind.

And each of these living creatures are marked by radiance again. See, like I said, the cloud that came was marked by its brightness, and the living creatures are the same.

There's nothing dull in this set of images. Brilliant radiance. The living creatures darted to and fro like the appearance of a flash of lightning.

And then you come to verse 15. This time we've moved from the introduction, the north wind and the fiery light and the lightning. We've looked at the living creatures.

And now Ezekiel notices beneath the living creatures, wheels, wheels. Between, beneath each of the living creatures was a wheel.

[11:55] Each creature has this identical set of wheels. One wheel somehow composite with the other wheel.

They're not separate. Somehow they're bound together. A wheel within a wheel. We know that these four wheels can move in any direction.

It may be that this is the way they are. One this way, one that way. And they can go in any direction, just like the four faces of the four living creatures.

And there's no resistance whatsoever to the movement of the wheel. Absolutely magnificent to behold, because their appearance was like the gleaming of barrel.

And the wheels had rims, of course, like all wheels do. But these wheels, we are told, had eyes.

[13:02] The rims were tall and awesome. The rims of all four were full of eyes all around in verse 18. Eyes all around. Again, this seems to symbolize the all-seeing and the all-knowing God.

And the wheels seem to have their own source of vitality as well, totally in synchronization with the living creatures. So if the living creatures would move, the wheels would move.

If they went this way, the wheels went that way. If they stopped, the wheels stopped. Perfect synchronization between the living creatures and the wheels.

Determine the direction. But what determined that direction? Remember what we said about the living creatures who had wings. It wasn't the wings that made them move.

And remarkably, it wasn't the wheels that had their motor either. Neither the wings nor the wheels were used for propulsion.

[14:13] It was actually the spirit. The spirit in the living creatures. The spirit of the living creatures. That's what determined and empowered them to move and stop.

The life-giving, energizing power of God. It's no accident that theologians speak of Ezekiel as the prophet of the spirit.

And this is the beginning of his references to the spirit. The spirit made the wheels as alive as he made the living creatures alive.

So, you saw the initial thing. The north wind, the cloud, the fiery light, the lightning. Then you saw the living creatures.

And then he looked below the living creatures. And he saw these intriguing wheels. And then his eyes go above the living creatures. In verses 22 following.

[15:19] Over the heads of the living creatures. There was the likeness of an expanse. Shining like awe-inspiring crystal. Spread out above their heads.

So, there's this kind of crystal. Crystalline platform above their heads. The wings of these living creatures seem to be reaching out and touching the other wings of the other living creatures.

And that seems to be supporting this crystal platform. And at this point, the sound comes from the wings themselves.

When they went, I heard the sound of their wings, like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult, like the sound of an army.

And when they stood still, they let down their wings. So, you've got the sound of wings here. Many waters, the voice of the Almighty, like the movement of an army ready to take action.

[16:31] So, here you've got the idea, when God is on the move, there is not silence, there is great noise. God is going to make his presence known, just as we sang of in Psalm 18.

But then his gaze goes above the crystal platform. And this time he sees on top of the platform, a throne.

Verse 26, Above the expanse, over their heads, there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire. A throne.

The most majestic throne one could imagine. Made of lapis lazuli, one of the most precious stones known to the ancients.

But on this throne, he now notices there's a figure. Upward, above the expanse on the throne, there was a likeness with a human appearance.

[17 : 45] Now, that's quite remarkable. You don't expect this. And that's what it is, though. There was a figure that looks like a human being, but not an ordinary man.

This person had the appearance, the brilliance of amber on the top part of his body, and the fiery, dazzling glow and radiance on the lower part of his body.

Remember what I said, there is nothing flat, colourless, un-majestic about any of the items in this image.

And especially about the one who is on the throne. I saw, as it were, appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him.

And it's interesting. When he comes to conclude this initial description of what he sees, he mentions a rainbow.

[18 : 52] Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around.

The colour must have been breathtaking. If before, up till now, it seemed to have been certain orangey-amber type colours, now we're heading into the full expanse itself of colour.

The rainbow. The rainbow may well speak of Genesis and the end of judgment to come.

It certainly speaks of a God who has something beyond the storm of judgment, just like he has something beyond the flood in Genesis.

And the rainbow reminds the reader, just as it reminds God of the covenant made. The rainbow.

[19 : 57] Like the appearance of the bow on the cloud of the day of rain. The appearance of this brightness all around. It's hard to imagine a rainbow that's all around, because every, or almost every rainbow we see is incomplete.

Sometimes you will see it in a circle. Well, that's the kind of picture it seems we have here. And how did he conclude?

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.

He knew he had seen nothing less than the weight of God's majesty and glory. And under that weight, he fell.

He couldn't stay standing if he had tried. And yet it was also by choice that he fell. In worship. And it's in that position that he begins to hear, probably for the first time, the voice of Yahweh speaking to him.

[21 : 12] The voice of the Lord addressing him. Not only as a priest, but now as one who is to be a prophet, to minister to a disillusioned people who need strength and clarity.

Let's look now over this whole chapter one and just bring out some points to note. It would be quite easy to begin to explore every little item of imagery here and just get ourselves now right tizzy and remain entirely unedified.

That's not what we're aiming at. The first thing to notice here clearly is the God with indescribable glory.

I don't know if you notice as we were reading all the way through. You find Terence like looked like. The appearance of. And that tells you when you're reading the prophet is struggling to know exactly how to write down what he sees.

[22 : 28] Just the same way as John in the book of the Revelation is also looking for language to describe what he sees. He has seen the glory of God.

God chose to reveal his glory in this set of images with lots of component parts but they are all to be viewed as one, not as several.

It defies human description verbally and visually. You could never paint it. You could never draw it. You could never be sure that you've got it right. However great the artists are among us, this would defy them. And you could never describe it with words beyond what Ezekiel himself has done.

And even that would be hard to catch all that is there. One of the things that's very important to note is that it is glory.

[23 : 38] It's glory. When we're talking about glory, we're talking about God's weight, God's impressiveness that's designed to make an impression upon others. And when God wants to make an impression upon people, believe me, he can do it and no one can stop him.

He can take anyone and reveal his glory to them and they will be forever altered and changed. He can do it. And that's what he's doing in this case.

He's changing Ezekiel through this. Ezekiel will never be the same man after this moment. His ministry will be colored by it.

And if you want your life to have meaning, you want to see the glory of this indescribable God.

There will always be more about God than you will be able to define.

More than you'll be able to write. More than you will be able to draw. But it will be as real to you as this God was real to Ezekiel.

[24 : 44] Indescribable, but utterly, utterly impressive. You see, the kind of gods that they had in the place where Ezekiel was now living by the Cape or Canal, they had images to represent these gods.

And they liked to make their images bright. So what would they do? They would literally get their cloths and they would get stones that they had burnished out and they would begin to rub and rub and rub and rub to make the images bright and glorious.

You don't need to do that with the Lord. His glory and brightness come from within. You saw it in the wind.

You saw it in the living creatures. You see it in the wheels. You see it in the expanse. You see it on the throne. And you see it in this person on the throne. The glory comes from within.

You see it in the world. You see it in the world. You can't go to this chapter or any other chapter to find out what God looked like. That's not what it's about.

[26 : 03] But you go here to find out what God is like. You see the difference. You don't go to find out what He looked like. But you go here to find out what He's like.

Heavenly divine realities are explained in this vision. So the God with indescribable glory. The second thing the God outside the box.

You know sometimes we feel that we've got the measure of God. And we think what will God do?

Well God will do no more than live within the box.

We feel that we've got the measure of Him. He'll do this but not that. He'll appear here but not there. He'll change that person but not this one.

He can cope with this situation but not another. If you had met people in Ezekiel's day and you asked them where's God?

[27 : 04] Where's the Lord? Where's Yahweh? Jerusalem. The temple in Jerusalem. They might worship Him and honour Him but basically they have come to think that's His box.

That's where He is. That's where He resides. Here the Lord is appearing in His glory thousands of miles away from Jerusalem.

Far away from the temple. Far away from the capital. Isn't it amazing how He just is so able to appear wherever He wishes? But you might say surely He wouldn't appear to His people in the land of judgment.

When they're under judgment surely God will wait until they have made themselves nice and pure and then He'll reveal Himself to them. No. See, you're thinking of a God inside a box.

this amazing God can appear anywhere to any person and even to those who are under His judgment.

[28 : 16] He can appear in what looks like a divine warrior chariot. Wheels and all. He has this unlimited freedom to instigate, to intervene, to judge, to restore and there are no circumstances that hold Him back.

That's the God who is outside the box. Do you know one of the things that I find moving about this? Ezekiel never sought this mission.

He probably never even prayed for it. Never asked for it. And then there He is by the Caba River among the other exiles.

And He saw it all happening. God intervened so unexpectedly. How brilliant is that? And isn't that what happens when someone becomes a Christian?

Is there anybody here who could testify that they've come to be a Christian because they did good, God took note and then brought them into His family? No.

[29 : 27] Everyone here who knows what it means to be a Christian. They were under God's judgment. They confessed their sins. They agreed with God's judgment and then God in His mercy in Christ appears for their salvation.

Utterly, utterly remarkable. But you see, the God of the gospel is the God who is outside the box. the devil always wants to put it inside the box.

The church of Jesus Christ must allow God to be the God He is in Christ. The third thing, we've had the God with indescribable glory, the God outside the box.

Thirdly and briefly, obviously, the God who is one of a kind. one throne and there's only one person on this throne.

He is unique. There is no one else in this class. The living creatures themselves with two of their wings, they cover themselves in the presence of this person.

[30 : 44] Just like the seraphs, the seraphim in Isaiah chapter 6. He is holy, he is one of, no one is like him.

Fourthly, and following on from that, this is the God who reigns over the entire universe, all directions.

See, the noble creatures, just like with any king, he would be surrounded by nobility. And here's the picture of these living creatures. They surround this throne.

But God himself on that throne enthroned as king over all, all directions, all directions.

It didn't matter which part of the geography, wherever it was, he ruled, totally ruled. He was able with effortless speed to instigate, to intervene, to change.

[32 : 00] He could be anywhere effortlessly in a moment. The wheels, the spirit within the wheels, all motivated by God himself, the God who is in total control, who has total sovereignty.

And the great thing is, this is the truth. At this precise moment back in Judea and Jerusalem, there's also the struggles going on, the people are under judgment.

They're about to lose Jerusalem as the capital, and the temple is going to be torn down. Does that change God in the slightest?

No. See, this is a great thing. Nothing ever changes God. You and I might have our days. Some days we soar, other days we fall, but God never, ever changes.

He is unique, He is one of a kind, and always think of Him on this throne. Always think of Him on this throne. Ruling wherever.

[33 : 19] Doesn't matter where you are, whether in your home or in a palace, whether you're in a hospital ward or in a funeral parlor, whether you're at a graveside.

Often when I'm driving down to pick up place from hospital, I see the windows there of the ward where the new babies are, and it's great to see them.

Well, see, God is there, but He's also at the graves. This God reigns everywhere. So, the God of indescribable glory, think of Him like that.

The God who is outside the box, don't try to manipulate Him, he will not be manipulated. The God who is one of a kind, the God who reigns over the universe.

Next, the God who is interested in man. Genesis 1, 26, 27, man is made in the image of God.

[34 : 25] In this vision, it seems to be that God is saying, how will I reveal myself to people? I'll use the image of man. He actually reveals himself in the likeness of man.

There's this person on the throne, and he has human appearance. Now, in Ezekiel's day, in many ways, they would have baffled his mind.

For those of us who have lived for the last, not lived for the last 2,000 years, but for those of us who have known what the gospel has been for the last 2,000 years, we know that Jesus Christ, God's Son, became a human being as well as being God, so that he could save his people.

For us, we have no difficulty in thinking of God and Jesus Christ, God, man, God as God, God as man.

Two distinct natures, one person forever. Brilliant. But you see, why did God become flesh?

[35 : 39] It's because he's interested in man. He has a concern for human beings. He never stops being transcendent. You don't find this figure in human appearance on the ground.

He's on the throne. human. And this person is human, but look at how radiant he is. The appearance of his waist upwards, gleaming metal, appearance of fire all around, and then down from his waist, the appearance of fire as well, and brightness all around him.

Human, yes. Interested in man, yes. But he never, ever ceases to be the transcendent God.

But this is his way of saying, I am among human beings, even in the exile. Even in the exile. He cares. He never rises above caring, for human beings.

[36 : 51] Does that ever move you? Julia Ward-Howe, this is the year when we remember women's rights and suffrage rights. Well, Julia Ward-Howe, she was a crusader for women's rights, and she invited a senator to come and meet with a young man, a promising young actor, and the senator wrote back, trying to be very tactful, I suppose, and he said, well, the truth is, he says, I have got beyond taking an interest in individuals.

In other words, I do policy, I don't do people. I have got beyond taking an interest in individuals. And Julia Ward-Howe commented in her diary that night, God Almighty has not got so far. God in other words, he always takes an interest. Interestingly, not in some human beings, but everyone.

God is God is God is God is God that God doesn't have an interest in. Nobody.

It doesn't matter how young you are or how old you are, he has got an absolute 100% interest in you. It's that close, it's that dear.

[38 : 23] He is a human being in appearance on this throne and he wants you to know just like Jesus when he became the word in flesh, he dwelt among us, he walked among us because he wants us to know he actually cares.

So the God who is interested in man, the God who judges and saves, we're not going to say much more about that.

This God is nothing less, you know, than the divine warrior. And the divine warrior is a very strong, strong figure.

And the warrior can come and judge. But when the warrior comes to save, you save and you save forever.

And that's the picture here. It's of the divine warrior coming and there will be judgment. Make no mistake about it. But there can also be salvation.

[39 : 40] That's why I love the rainbow. This picture without the rainbow, I think would have left me very nervous.

But the fact that the Lord deliberately allows the rainbow image to be there covering the throne, wow, that's what gives me a gospel to preach.

There is a God who saves, there is a God who is able to bring an end to judgment for his people and a God who is able to bring them into a new world even greater than the world into which Noah stepped out from the ark.

God can do that. The rainbow is there. So the God with indescribable glory, the God outside the box, the God who is one of a kind, the God who reigns over the universe, the God who is interested in man, the God who judges and saves and finally the God obviously who is worshipped.

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

[41 : 10] Suppose these are the three component parts of worship. You see the glory, you respond and fall and then your ear is open to whatever he asks you to do.

Scary though it may be, and he seek you, he would be asked to do the most strange things but he would be doing it because he had seen the glory of God.

I suppose this vision was God's way of saying to Ezekiel, I will be with you. For us, in addition to this, we have Jesus Christ crucified and risen and he meets with the church and he says, look, all authority in heaven and on earth might look less scary than Ezekiel 1, but no less powerful.

I will be with you. When you go out to make disciples in all nations and teach them, I will be with you. Well, this is God's way of saying to Ezekiel, I will be with you.

I will be for you, but I am not like you. He is for us but we must never bring God down to our level.

[42 : 42] We fall down at his feet. However human he looks, however human he is, as well as being divine, he never becomes just one of us.

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. We need profound theologians and by that I mean ordinary Christians to reintroduce people, families, communities to the God of Israel.

We need theologians of the spirit. By that I mean ordinary Christians. who are called, equipped, and gripped by God.

Can I quote Toser in conclusion? What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

Think about that. What comes into your mind when you think about God, that's the most important thing about us. God is the most important thing about God.

[43 : 59] The most important thing about God is the most important thing about God. The most important fact about any man is not what at a given time he may say or do, it's what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.

God is the most important thing about you. We tend toward our mental image of God. What's your mental image of God to which you will, by a secret law, move towards?

What is it that your deep heart, in your deep heart, what is it that you conceive God to be like?

That's the most important thing about you tonight.

Not what you're earning, where you're working, who you're married to, what family you have. Not your health, not how long you live. The most important thing about you is what you think God is like because that will affect how you secretly move towards him in life.

And I hope having looked briefly at that complex chapter and brought out some of the main message. That at least we can move towards this amazing God now revealed for us in and through Jesus Christ and the Spirit.

[45 : 30] Let us pray. Our heavenly Father, we bow in your presence and we seek, Lord, to say to you, show us your glory. We want, Lord, to not only glimpse it but to be motivated by it.

We want, Lord, that you would continue to show us yourself in your word through your Son, by your Spirit. Show us yourself, Lord, in the Gospel. Show us yourself in the law.

Show us yourself so that we may indeed move towards you and serve you. Have mercy upon each one of us, Lord. We know much in our minds but we don't know enough about you that secretly moves us towards you.

Forgive us, feed us, for we ask it in Christ. Amen. Let's close now by singing to God's praise from Psalm 93 in the Scottish Psalter.

Psalm 93. Psalm 93. The Lord doth reign. That's 354. Page 354.

[46 : 43] The Lord doth reign and clothed to see with majesty most bright. His works to show him clothed to be and girt about with might.

As a result of that, the world is also established that it cannot depart. Thy throne is fixed of old and thou from everlasting art.

Whatever the waves are that rise up. The Lord that is on high is more of might by far than noise of many watershires or great sea billows are.

Ezekiel's life would never have been the same afterwards. May the same be true for us. Psalm 93. To God's praise.