

The God of Glory

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Date: 21 September 2014

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- [0 : 0 0] All right. Thank you, Aaron, for this passage. Aaron and I have been on Fetus Island for the past couple days.
- Aaron was working hard. I wasn't. Ivan and Kelsey got married. It was a success. Nobody ran away. Nobody was arrested. We're good to go. All that is to say I'm feeling pretty relaxed right now, which is kind of funny because I'm about to preach on one of the most intense and kind of awe-inspiring visions of God in the whole entire Bible.
- And maybe you feel that way tonight. Maybe you've showed up tonight and you're feeling quite epithetic about life in general. Maybe you've showed up and you're feeling a bit tired. Maybe you're feeling lighthearted and happy and chipper.
- Or maybe you're feeling sad and lonely and distracted or busy. But whatever it is, you're not ready to see a vision like Ezekiel chapter 1. And when you started reading, the scripture reading started about halfway through, you were planning your exit strategy.
- Too late now. I can see you all from up here. But honestly, I mean, isn't this how God works? He meets us in the places in our life where we least expect it.
- [1 : 1 6] And he does it in ways that we cannot fathom. And he comes in all of his glory when we are least prepared for it. You've got to think of Moses. Moses was just tending sheep.
- He was doing his own day job. And God shows up in a burning bush. You've got to think of the Apostle John in the book of Revelation. He's just worshipping in kind of a normal Sunday service like this.
- And God just shows up. And he sees the Lord Jesus Christ. You've got to think of the great 18th century evangelical John Wesley. He's reading a commentary written by Martin Luther on the book of Romans.
- A commentary of all things. And God shows up and his heart is strangely warmed. You've got to think of me. I was sitting when 16 years old on Boxing Day just having a normal conversation with my father.
- And God shows up. And when God's glory shows up and breaks into our lives, when we least expect it, things happen. And that's exactly what happened to Ezekiel.
- [2 : 1 5] He was in exile if you look at the first couple verses. It was 593. He was in Babylon. He was in a foreign land. He was by the Kebar Canal. The Kebar Canal.
- I have no idea where that is. Somewhere in the Middle East. He was with about 10,000 upper middle class exiles from the city of Jerusalem.
- And it was a very, very dark situation for the people of God. The people of God were in a place where they were in pain with no comfort. Experiences with no explanations.
- Promises with no fulfillment. Darkness with no light. And even worse, it felt like they had life with no God. As one commentator put it, the heaven above was as silent as the earth around was threatening.
- This was a dark situation. And right in the midst of this seemingly hopeless situation, God shows up in all of his glory. A stormy wind comes howling from the north.

[3 : 15] And clouds are coming with peals of thunder flowing out. And jagged rods of lightning piercing the night sky. And God comes emerging from the cloud in nothing less than a massive chariot.

A massive chariot made of four awesome living creatures. With four different heads and four wings. And they're riding on a chariot that has four wheels with eyes all around it.

And then above these living creatures, there is a throne. And sitting on that throne is one in the likeness and appearance of a human person. And he has brightness all around him and peals of thunder and lightning.

And when the creatures stop flapping their wings, a voice comes out. And the voice is like the sound of mighty rushing waters. The glory of God shows up.

And Ezekiel falls flat on his face. Ezekiel can't get up when God says get up. Until the spirit of God comes into him and allows him to stand up again.

[4 : 22] So utterly stunned was he by this vision. And if you look at the end of chapter 3, you realize that Ezekiel was so overwhelmed. That he spent the next week just sitting there in silence.

Trying to even come to terms with what in the world he just saw. And so you see, just from a brief overview of what we're looking at tonight, this is a very dangerous passage for us.

Very dangerous. Some of you wonder why dangerous. Because when God's glory shows up in our lives, it changes our lives. It reorients our hearts.

It restructures our priorities. It recalibrates our universe. So that everything once again revolves around the divine glory just like it's meant to. This is a very dangerous thing for us.

Because our lives will be changed if we really see the glory of God. Now, before we dive into this vision and look at some of the facets of God's glory.

[5 : 23] Kind of like attempting to stare into the sun. I think it would be wise for us to take about three minutes and do a bit of a tutorial on what in the world this literature is.

This apocalyptic literature. I've read books on this. So I'm going to try to summarize what people spend whole books writing, talking about in a matter of three minutes.

How are we supposed to read this weird and strange and unfamiliar literature that we're faced with here with so much detail? A few things. First, it's heavenly literature.

Look at verse one. As I was among the exiles by the K-Bar Canal, the heavens were opened. Second, what apocalyptic literature is doing, what this vision is doing, is it is literally pulling back the veil of the heavens.

Parting the clouds. So that we can see who God is and what God is doing in the heavenly realms. So it's literally parting back the clouds so that we can see how God is alive and active in our world in ways, more ways than just what meets the eye.

[6 : 31] So that's what it's doing. It's heavenly, parting the clouds. Second, it's God-centered. Apocalyptic literature, this vision, is about God, not other things.

Look at verse one. The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. There's a lot of detail here. A lot of detail.

But it's a bit like a Renaissance painting. Though there's a lot of detail, the focus is very, very clear. It's about God. And if we forget that, then we're going to make a million mistakes. So we're talking about God here.

Third thing. It's symbolic. It's not meant to be read. I know I'm stating the obvious here. But it's not meant to be read rigidly and literally.

Like you can go, don't go home and try to build this out of Legos or something. It's not going to work. This is highly symbolic stuff. And it's really intentional.

[7 : 26] Because what the author is doing is he's not describing God directly. He's describing God indirectly using symbols. Look at verse 28. Let me show this to you.

Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. That's important. Notice the degrees of removal. He doesn't say, such was the Lord.

He doesn't even say, such was the glory of the Lord. And he doesn't even say, such was the likeness of the glory of the Lord. He says, such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

There are degrees of removal that communicate to us that this God who is being described in very symbolic fashion is beyond all of our mental capacities to even comprehend.

And it is only by an act of his grace that we can ever come to know him. God is an incomprehensible mystery and majesty here. And so the apocalyptic literature, in a way, shows us while I'm revealing who God is here, you're not grasping him like you think you can, like everything else.

[8 : 33] It's highly symbolic. And the final thing is, it's highly imaginative. The intention of apocalyptic literature is to restore the dominion of God in the hearts and minds of God's people.

It's to restore the glory and the weightiness and the majesty and the honor of God in the hearts and minds, hearts and minds of his people.

And the way that apocalyptic literature does that is it uses the imagination. Our imagination is absolutely essential. And it uses our imagination with these symbols to grab a hold of our minds and to sanctify our hearts.

So that's what it is. It's heavenly. It's God-centered. It's symbolic. It's imaginative. And as I've said before, because of all these things, it's kind of like the movie Aladdin. You know the song.

A whole new world. Don't you dare close your eyes. Some of you weren't expecting that, but you're welcome.

[9 : 40] Seriously, though. That's what it's like when you go through this stuff. It's just stunning. You enter into a whole new world. So I want to show you three facets of God's glory. I don't want to explain it.

I just want to hold it up kind of like a beautiful diamond and just turn it ever so slightly so that you see new angles of beauty and light. The first thing is God's glorious freedom.

God's glorious freedom. God is utterly and majestically free. This is communicated by the fact, first of all, that God just shows up. I mean, he shows up. God appears in Babylon.

And for the Hebrews of the Old Testament, this would have been unthinkable. How could God go outside the boundaries of his temple in Jerusalem? But here he does. He shows up.

And he shows us that he can go where he wants, when he wants, and how he wants. And God can go to the places where we least expect him to be. God shows up.

[10 : 41] And when God shows up, we get this picture of dynamic movement. It's not static. It's dynamic movement. Notice how the storm comes. And when the storm comes, there are these living creatures that come emerging out of the storm.

And these living creatures in chapter 10 are identified as cherubim. Talk about them a bit more later. But in the ancient world, cherubim would have been seen as standing still.

They would have been carvings or statues. And they would have been very static, although awesome. But in this vision of God's glory, nothing is standing still. When God shows up, the cherubim are darting to and fro.

And there's movement. Look at verses 13 and 14. As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire. Like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures.

And the fire was bright. And out of the fire went forth lightning. And the living creatures darted to and fro like the appearance of a flash of lightning. There's this active, dynamic, fiery movement going on here.

[11 : 48] And then you look down at verses 15 to 21. And all of a sudden, they're describing wheels for a long time. They're describing wheels. And you realize that God drives a low rider.

Which is awesome. And the wheels have lots of hides. I have some ideas about what that means. You can ask me later. But I really have no clue, to be honest. But what this is all about is the sense of movement and freedom in this image of who God is.

Now, why is this important? It's important for this point. We do not worship a lifeless, static, immobile God. We worship the living God.

The living God. The God who is dynamically free and on the move and coming to us. Not just then and there, but right here and right now. And the images of God's majestic freedom tell us that we worship the living God.

And that presents two things to us. That presents both a challenge and a comfort. A challenge and a comfort. First, it challenges us. God is free to make himself present anywhere.

[13 : 01] Which means we can never run and hide from God's presence. And that's challenging. It doesn't stop us from trying to do so, does it not? The spiritual impulse of our sinful, broken lives is to run and hide from God's presence.

That's what happened at the very beginning with Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter 3. They sinned and rebelled against their God. And when God comes after them to seek them out, they run and they hide.

Because we would much rather not deal with our problems, let alone our sin and our guilt and our shame. So we run. We hide. And this takes a lot of different forms for us.

Some more sophisticated than others. For some of us, it means it looks like we distance ourselves from ever really developing deep relationships and being committed to belonging to the church.

Because we don't want to have to face our stuff. And we don't want people to have to see it. So we hide. For some of us, we distance ourselves from the scriptures which proclaim who God is to us and his ways.

[14 : 06] Because we would much rather not have to listen to him and let him do work on us. For some of us, we distance ourselves from prayer and intimate relationship and loving God and communion through prayer.

Because we would much rather not be intimate with him in that way. For some of us, we avoid confession and repentance and being honest with God and others about our sin.

Because we would rather not humble ourselves and admit that we need help and we need to change. For some of us, we would rather just make ourselves so busy in work, in school, in social life, and you name it, which are all good things.

But make ourselves so busy that we, quote unquote, have no time for God. No time to sit at his feet. I read this wonderful book called A Thousand Gifts a little while ago and she said something very simple.

She said, God made time. And we say we have no time for him. That makes no sense. There are various ways in which we run and hide from God.

[15 : 10] But in the end, God pursues us in his utter freedom. He challenges us to stop running. He searches after us because he wants to do business with us. He doesn't want to leave us alone.

He wants to come after us to save us. And so God's freedom does just that. It comes and runs after us and it challenges us because we like to hide. But it's not only a challenge, it's also a comfort.

For the exact same reason that it's a challenge, it's a comfort. What do you know? God is free to make himself present anywhere, which means that even in the darkest situations of our life, God is right there.

There's no aspect or area or situation of our lives that is off limits to God. He can make himself present in the darkest of times.

And what we see in this vision is that is exactly what he loves to do. It's the darkest of times for Israel and he is showing up. And this is good news for us and for all Christians throughout the whole entire world because this is comfort.

[16 : 12] The comforting presence of almighty God. Whether it be persecution in the Middle East or Africa or alienation right here in Vancouver at school or at work or in your neighborhood.

Whether it be the fact that you wake up in the morning and you feel anxiety and depression that feels crippling or loneliness. Or whether it be that you have a broken relationship that you just cannot imagine God actually being present and at work in that relationship.

Remember, it's the difficulties of being a parent. Or the difficulties of having parents. Whether it be sickness or suffering.

Now or in the future. What this passage tells us is that God in his glorious freedom loves to make himself present to his people right when they feel like they are in the darkness and when they are in exile and they are in despair.

God runs to his people because he is utterly and majestically free to do so. That's good news. Second thing is God's glorious holiness.

[17 : 24] Notice how every part of the vision, all the way from the living creatures to the human person on the throne. Every part of the vision has an aura of fiery ferocity to it. Fiery ferocity.

And you see fire and light showing up all over the place. Look at verse 4. I'm going to take you to a few places. Verse 4. As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north and a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually.

And in the midst of the fire, as it were, gleaming metal. Look at the living creatures. Verses 13 to 14. We've read it again already. But I'll point us to again.

As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire. Like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures.

And the fire was bright. And out of the fire went forth lightning. And then skip down to verses 26 to 27. And above the expanse, over their heads, there was the likeness of a throne in appearance like sapphire.

[18 : 29] And seated upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness with a human appearance. And upward from what had the appearance of his waist, I saw, as it were, gleaming metal. And the appearance of fire enclosed all around.

And downward from what had the appearance of his waist, I saw, as it were, the appearance of fire. And there was brightness all around him.

The vision we have here is not a pretty cutesy little vision. This is no flannel graph business. This is fierce and threatening. And if you read your Old Testaments, you know that fire symbolizes the holy presence of God.

It's God's character as it comes into contact and relates to sin. In the book of Hebrews, the author says, Our God is a consuming fire.

And God's holiness consumes all that is not holy. I like the way that one biblical scholar put it. He put it this way. He said, Throughout the Bible, fire signifies the active holiness of God.

[19 : 37] Holiness is the active, menacing hostility of a holy God to everything that offends his holiness. Now, some of you are going, Some of you are perking up in your seats now when you hear that.

But there's more than just fire. Look, God speaks of living creatures. And they speak, they tell us of God's holiness as well. Throughout the Bible, living creatures, these cherubim, are the ones that dwell most closely to the holy presence of God.

So back to Genesis chapter 3, for example. In Genesis chapter 3, when God kicks Adam and Eve out of the garden because they're sinful, He puts a cherubim at the gate of the garden to guard the human beings from entering back into the holy presence of God.

And then if you fast forward to Exodus chapter 37, God is giving Moses instructions for how to build the holy of holies in the midst of the tabernacle, where God's holy presence dwells.

And the ark of the covenant, which represents God's holy presence, was normally on a mercy seat, just a table type thing. And God said, I want you to build this mercy seat with two cherubim, with their wings and their awesomeness and their craziness, hovering over the ark, almost as if to protect and be a boundary between God's holiness and His people.

[20 : 56] Hovering over it. And if you fast forward to Isaiah chapter 6, you realize Isaiah gets this awesome vision of God. And what does he see? He sees cherubim flapping their wings and crying out, Holy, holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts.

The whole earth is full of His glory. And so when cherubim show up in Ezekiel's vision, it tells us that we are in the presence of the utterly holy God.

Astoundingly holy. This is very important for us. Because the holiness of God resists and shatters all of our attempts to domesticate God to a place where He is manageable for us to deal with.

When we look at God's holiness, we are staring in the face of a purity and a power and a potency that we do not often like to think dwells in the character of God.

Because our sinful human hearts have the tendency to domesticate God. Especially in the modern world, we like to make Him palatable and manageable for us.

[22 : 09] And we do this in some sophisticated ways and not so sophisticated ways. Some subtle ways and some not so subtle ways. Because we want Him to fit into our self-constructed universe which revolves around us.

So we make Him into a therapeutic God that just wants to make us feel good. Or we make Him into a moralistic God who just shows up to teach us how to be nice to each other.

Or we make Him into a deistic God who just leaves us alone so that we can really do whatever we want with our lives. Or we make Him into an inspirational God who just affirms and pats us on the back and serves all of our dreams and aspirations.

Or we make Him into a heavenly Santa Claus. That's a funny image. Dwell on that for a second. But a heavenly Santa Claus that just gives us a bunch of gifts but doesn't call us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Him.

Or we make Him into a dualistic God who fits into the areas of our schedules and agendas that are most convenient for us and for the rest of the world. So Sunday, yeah, He can be around on Sunday.

[23 : 20] Monday through Saturday, no. My private life, yeah, He can be around there. But my public life, no. We set up these false dualisms.

How we try to domesticate God in so many ways. But what's happening here tonight in Ezekiel chapter 1 is God is resisting our desire to domesticate Him. And He's setting Himself against all of those attempts that we have.

And what we see tonight is when God's holy presence shows up, we really only have one option. That's to fall on our face and to bow down and bend the knee in repentance and say, woe is me, I am undone, I am a man of unclean lips.

Our only option is to bow down and worship Him with a cherubim and say, holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory. That's what we do when the awesome one shows up.

We bow before Him and we utter with our lips what only God can show us that we should utter. That He is utterly holy and majestic.

[24 : 32] The final thing. This is the last point. I won't keep you for too much longer. God's glorious goodness. Now I want to admit to you that the picture I've been painting from, that I think this passage paints, is quite fierce and threatening.

But the vision ends on a note of hope. Look at verses 26 to 28. 26 to 28. Actually, let's pick up in the middle of 27.

It's talking about His waist. It says, And like the appearance of the bow, underline that word, not in the pew Bibles, in your own.

That is on the cloud on the day of rain. So was the appearance of the brightness all around Him. So we're looking at a human person, or the appearance of a human person on a throne, brightness all around.

And the last note that the vision ends on is this brightness was the appearance of the bow that is on the day of rain. What is that, guys? Rainbow. Rainbow. That's a rainbow.

[25 : 46] And all of a sudden, your mind's going back to Noah, the ark, the flood. And what the rainbow was, is the rainbow was after the flood, God restarting with Noah and his family, saying, Never again will I ever judge with that sort of intensity and wipe out the whole face of the earth.

This rainbow is a sign of my covenantal faithfulness and goodness and love and commitment to my creation. So much so that never again will I do that.

And here's the bow in the sky so that you remember it often. That I am the covenant God who is for you. Friends, right here in the end of the vision, the brightness of the glory of the appearance of the Lord is the brightness of the rainbow, that he is our covenant God.

What hope would there be in this vision if it were not for this last line? That God, in all of his utter majesty, in all of his utter holiness, in all of his utter freedom, is the God that at the very core of who he is, is committed to coming down and loving and saving his creation.

Because he is good, gloriously good, to the very core. And this God is no different when we get to the New Testament.

[27 : 16] In Revelation chapter 1, the apostle John fell down because God showed up to him as well. And he describes this Jesus Christ who appears to him in the language of Ezekiel 1 because he knows of no other language to use that is as glorious as Jesus really is.

And he's trembling before Jesus' feet because he's so utterly awesome. And what does Jesus do? Jesus stretches out his hand and puts it on the trembling shoulder of the apostle John.

And he says, Fear not. I am the first and the last. I died and behold, I'm alive forevermore. I have the keys of death and Hades.

This is the one who stares us in the face, ultimately, in Ezekiel chapter 1. And gives us words of comfort and goodness and love. Brothers and sisters, allow me to finish by reading a longish quote from C.S. Lewis.

You've heard it before. Half of you know what's coming, but it's worth repeating. The children come to meet the beavers and begin to ask who Aslan is.

[28 : 31] And Aslan is this godlike figure. Who knew that beavers could do theology? This is pretty awesome stuff. So Mr. Beaver begins with a poetic description.

And this is what he says. Wrong will be right when Aslan comes in sight. At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more. When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death.

And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again. You'll understand when you see him. But shall we see him? Asks Susan. Why, daughter of Eve, that's why I brought you here.

I'm to lead you where you shall meet him, said Mr. Beaver. Is he a man? Asked Lucy. Aslan, a man? Said Mr. Beaver sternly.

Certainly not. I tell you, he is the king of the wood and the son of the great emperor beyond the sea. Don't you know who the king of beasts is? Aslan is a lion.

[29 : 32] The lion. A great lion. Oh, said Susanna. I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.

That you will, dearie, and no mistake, said Miss Beaver. If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either the bravest of all or they're just plain silly.

Then is he not safe? Asked Lucy. Safe, said Mr. Beaver. Don't you hear what Miss Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe.

But he's good. He's the king, I tell you. I'm longing to see him, said Peter, even if I don't feel frightened when it comes to the point.

He's not safe, but he's really good. And we long to see him because when we see him face to face, he will stretch out his arm and say, fear not.

[30 : 42] I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.