

The God of Glory

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Date: 21 September 2014

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[0 : 0 0] Let's bow our heads and pray for a moment. Our Heavenly Father, our hearts are weak and easily distracted and we beg you now to humble us before your great glory, pull aside the veil, show yourself to us afresh so that we might see and love you and understand something of our hope.

And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen. Please sit down. It would be great if you took out the Bibles which are in front of you there and turn to Ezekiel chapter 1, page 692, so you can follow along.

There are all sorts of attractional forces at work in our lives every day. Here's a little list. Pleasure, health.

We're committed to pleasure. We're committed to our health. Culture. Finding a home to live in. That was a personal one a little while ago. Family.

Status. Wealth. Sport. Beauty. That's my list for today. Ezekiel chapter 1 is about the one true center for gravity, about the one who alone is worthy of our love and our lives and our worship.

[1 : 3 3] It's about the glory of God. And it's here in chapter 1 because it acts as a kind of a force field orienting everything else in the book around God.

It puts God firmly at the center. We keep putting ourselves at the center. This puts God at the center. And it's the center of a gravitational pull and attraction apart from which nothing makes sense in Ezekiel.

In fact, apart from this, we cannot know who God is. And I think this chapter 1, and I know we're doing it in the third week, and anyone can ask me about that later. That's fine.

But this vision prepares Ezekiel to hear the words that are coming, and it prepares us for the words in Ezekiel. You see, the reason we're looking at this this morning, this ancient vision, 600 BC, and its details, is because it's not a private vision.

It's given for us. It's here in scriptures so that our vision of God might be this biblical vision. Because this vision is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[2 : 4 2] So you remember in verse 1, it opens with the prophet Ezekiel saying, I was among the exiles, a thousand kilometers away, by the Kibar Canal, and astoundingly, he says, the heavens were open, and I saw visions of God.

This is one of these very rare moments in the scriptures, where God takes the veil and the barrier between our visible world and his invisible world, pulls it apart so that we're able to see into the presence of God himself.

The last time it happened in the Old Testament was in the days of Isaiah, about 130 years before, where Isaiah got a vision of God in the temple. You remember, the Lord high and lifted up with the seraphim singing, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of mighty, and the cloud and his majesty, his stately royal presence filled the temple.

This is different. Jerusalem has been captured by the might of the Babylonian army. The treasures in the temple have been carried off, along with all the leading citizens and the royal family, off into exile, a thousand kilometers away, which is all right if you can jump on an airplane, but they had to walk, and every step added to the despair.

They had nothing, and it's the apparent defeat of God, the God of Israel, which is obvious. This vision of God is not a static vision of God resting in his temple in Jerusalem.

[4 : 16] This is God racing across the desert and coming to the exiles in Babylon with fire and danger and storm and movement. And as you'll see, it's like a mobile chariot, a war chariot on which the Lord rides, which is held up by four living creatures of overwhelming power and might.

And even the way Ezekiel describes what he sees puts a distance between God and us. Just look down at verse 28, at the end of verse 28. You see, he said, he didn't really see God, because you cannot see God and live, nor did he actually see the glory of God.

But in verse 28 it says, Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God. This is the language of transcendence.

It's reticent, it's restrained, it's metaphoric. It uses simile and symbol because the glory of God is just, it's too great to describe ultimately.

I think it's one of the reasons we have such difficulty with this idea of glory. What's helpful for us in this passage is Ezekiel keeps using words of comparison.

[5 : 37] He speaks about the likeness, the appearance. It is like this, it's as it were. And I think this whole idea of comparison is a great help for us understanding glory.

Glory has fundamentally two meanings. The first of it, the first meaning, the Hebrew word *kavod* literally means heavy, weighty, substance, honour.

And it describes the impact and the effect of something which has on you, when it comes upon you. It's so heavy, it's kind of disturbing and shaking and shattering.

The best illustration of this is gravity. This is the old illustration. Did you know that our planet is spinning at something like 1600 kilometres per hour? Well, you ask.

Well, we don't fly off, of course, because the earth has a much greater weight than we do. It has a much greater glory than we do. And it exercises its influence over us.

[6 : 38] So if I jump up, I'll come back down to the earth. It's a gravitational pull. But the earth is puny compared to the mass of the sun. And the pull of the sun means that the earth also orients its life around the sun.

Earth has more glory than we do, more weight than we do. The sun has much more glory. Because the earth has more, we orient our lives around this earth. But the earth is influenced by something greater.

Now, why am I saying that? Because the problem here is that the people of God who've gone into exile had done their level best to escape the gravitational pull and glory and weightiness of God.

They've gone after other gods. It would be like you and I trying to live around the gravitational force of Mercury while we lived on earth. I just don't know how that would work. And that is why this vision of the glory of God here in Ezekiel 1 has two sides to it.

It's very dangerous and it's very delightful. And I want to look at the two-sidedness of the glory of God with you this morning. Firstly, the danger, the threat, the threat of undoing that comes about through the glory of God.

[7 : 56] And if you look down in verse 4, the first thing Ezekiel sees is a massive storm. It's a wind storm, a spirit storm literally, rolling in with fire flashing.

It echoes the creation narrative and it also echoes the flood when God destroyed the earth in the day of Noah. Some years ago we looked at that story and we saw that when the flood came, it was God systematically uncreating his world.

He was undoing his creation because of how deeply grieved he was with the evil of humanity. Now this is how God comes to the exiles in Babylon.

The sovereign Lord rides on the wings of the storm. He has not been defeated. He is not asleep. He is not dead. Nor is he restricted back in Jerusalem. He is on the move.

And in the midst of the storm in verse 5, we meet these four living creatures who are darting backwards and forwards at incredible speed, backwards and forwards and up and down.

[9 : 07] And we learn that they are cherubim, which we know from before. They are the carvings on the top of the Ark of the Covenant where God sat. And diagrams of them were on the walls of the temple.

And I just need to say that cherubim are not cute flying babies. That is not what they are. They're angelic beings of devastating power.

And they have four wings and hands. And with two of the wings, they cover themselves. Because even though there's no sin and no evil in them, they are still in the presence of the Lord of glory.

And the creatures represent for us all that's best in creation. There's four of them. They have four faces. Four, four, four. Four corners of the earth. Four points of the compass. And they lift their wings to each other like this.

And they form a fiery cube holding their two wings up. And as Ezekiel tries to describe this, words fail him. Verse 13.

[10 : 12] 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. So the picture is dynamic. There is complete freedom of movement.

And in verses 15 to 21, beside each creature is a wheel within a wheel with eyes all around, which is absolutely impossible to paint or to draw or even to imagine, I believe.

It's the point of it. Even though you'll be pleased to know, commentators have great debates about whether they're gyroscopes or casters. I just kind of misses the point.

The point is that this is a chariot. And a chariot was the state-of-the-art military technology in those days. And this is God's chariot, as it were.

[11 : 12] It's a war instrument of unrestricted movement. The wheels are high and awesome and full of eyes. There's nothing gentle and sentimental about this. God has risen up for battle, which is utterly terrifying.

And he's risen up for battle against his people. Which we'll come back to in a moment. See, in verse 24, When they went, that's the four living creatures, I heard the sound of their wings, like the sound of many waters, like the flood, remember?

Like the sound of the Almighty, the sound of tumult, battle, like the sound of the army. This is a massive assault on Ezekiel's senses. It is like an army at war, a sound that Ezekiel and the other exiles were only too familiar with.

And this is overwhelming, but there's more. Over their heads is this massive platform, this clear platform made of crystal, shining with its own internal light. And above the platform is the likeness of a throne, which may be sapphire, it may be lapis lazuli.

It's the symbol of power and of might and of sovereignty. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, does not rule the earth. The kingdom of God rules over all. And as we come to the description of the one who's seated on the throne, the language becomes more restrained and more humble as the distance between Ezekiel and God is greater, greater, greater.

[12 : 41] Look at verse 26, please, if you have it. Above the expanse, over their heads, there was the likeness of a throne, and in appearance like sapphire, and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance.

Upward from what had the appearance of his waist, I saw, as it were, gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed round about. 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.

We have to feel the danger and the threat of this because God has not come against Babylon, but as we've already seen, and we'll see again and again in Ezekiel, God is coming against Israel.

He's coming against his own people with judgment in his hand. Why? Why does God's glory come like this? Why does God's glory threaten us?

And I wonder if you have your Bible open, put your hand in Ezekiel 1, and just turn right to Ezekiel 14 for a moment. From verse 3 of Ezekiel 14, Son of man, that's Ezekiel, God speaks, these men, the elders, these are the leaders, have taken their idols into their hearts and set the stumbling block of their sin and iniquity before their faces.

[14 : 22] Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them? Therefore speak to them and say to them, Thus says the Lord God, anyone of the house of Israel who takes his idols into his heart and sets a stumbling block of his iniquity before his face and yet comes to the prophet, I, the Lord, will answer him as he comes with the multitude of idols that I may lay hold of the heart of the house of Israel and all who are estranged from me from their idols.

The reason God is coming against his people is because they have consistently turned from God to idols. They have exchanged the glory of the creator God for blocks of wood outwardly and then they've taken those idols into their hearts.

Now, of course, we are all far too sophisticated to do that today, aren't we? We would never do such a thing. No, no, we give our hearts to much more respectable idols.

Remember the list that I gave at the beginning? Pleasure, health, culture, finding a home, family status, wealth, sport, beauty. It'd take you 30 seconds to develop another list or to identify your own on that list.

It's perfectly understandable why we give our hearts to these things. There is a glory in them. The Bible would say it's actually the glory of God that seeps through these things.

[15 : 43] And like the people of Israel, we orient our lives around these things which are good in themselves and then we take them into our hearts and we live our lives around them and gradually we exchange the glory of God for something which, although it's good, apart from God is utterly meaningless.

This is how it works. The first thing we do is we pray for our idols. We offer them up to God. Lord, give me more. Then we try and find other people who have the similar idols.

We're comfortable with them. And then what happens is the idols begin to cut into our commitment and into our obedience to God and we gradually, we take a more casual attitude to God and his word and the fellowship of God's people and then God comes second place and then third place.

And the problem with all these things that if we take them into our hearts as gods, they're so easily threatened. I mean, just imagine you're someone who believes that if you have your health, then you have everything.

But what happens when your health leaves you? Are you nothing? And I think it's difficult for us to understand how offensive taking idols into the heart is to the glory of God and how personally he takes it.

[17 : 03] That's why we've got to see that glory is not just heaviness. There's a second meaning to glory and that is its radiance. It's the personal, deeply personal radiance and light of God.

I mean, heaviness, the gravity illustration falls down, if you pardon the pun, because it's just an object. The glory of God is deeply and intensely personal, moral excellence, luminous radiance.

You notice throughout this vision again and again are words of light, brightness, flashing, gleaming, sparkling, burning, lightning, or inspire shining. And then when we get to the one on the throne, there is brightness, the appearance of brightness all around him.

It is the same glory that shone through Jesus Christ on the day of transfiguration, blinding light, brighter than any human could organize. and the thing about light is that light warns, sorry, it warms and it reveals and helps lead but it also exposes and it burns.

Jesus said, this is the judgment, that light has come into the world and people love the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed but whoever does what is true comes to the light so that it may clearly be seen that his works have been carried out in God.

[18 : 40] This is the danger of the glory of God. It is the undoing and threat of his glory and the obvious question that we ask and Ezekiel asks is how can we be restored to that glory?

How is it possible for us to ever be in the presence of God or to love the light of God's glory here and now? And so we move from the danger of God's glory to the delight of his glory from the threat to the security of his glory.

How can we be restored to his glory? The passage gives us two very clear answers. These are wonderful, these two answers and the first is the rainbow.

Verse 28 if you just cast your eyes down there. What does the brightness around the one on the throne look like? It was like the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain so is the appearance of the brightness all around him.

Now you're probably aware that the rainbow has been hijacked over the last couple of decades. It's not just a sugary, happy, good feeling, togetherness thing.

[19 : 49] It's become the symbol of my own human rights and it's been degraded into a kind of party political icon. This is not the Bible understanding.

There's no word in the Hebrew for rainbow. It is simply a bow as in the archer and his bow. It is a military weapon for of lethal effect which the deadly archer uses and carries.

It's an instrument of quiet and swift violence and destruction. That's what the bow is. There's no rainbow. And the only other place it comes in the Old Testament is back in Genesis 9 at the end of the flood.

And when God has saved Noah and his family from the flood he says this, I read, I have set my bow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth that waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

Bruce Walkie, a wonderful Old Testament scholar, says that God was hanging up the bow of his rainbow as a promise that he would never wage war against the earth by water again. So, do you see what's going on?

[21 : 06] As the glory of God appears to Ezekiel in Babylon, the mark of the light that surrounds the throne is that the bow is not pointed down toward the people, it's pointed up toward God.

Even though his rebellious people deserve his anger and wrath, God will find a way for his glory to dwell amongst us by somehow receiving his own wrath into himself.

Isn't that wonderful? What we looked at last week where God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but rather that we would turn from our wickedness and live that his heart and his joy is in saving us.

Despite the fact that we constantly take his gifts and make them into idols in our hearts and we build our lives around them and not around him, the whole impact of the glory of God in chapter 1 demonstrates his desire and his promise and his work precisely to restore us to his glory.

That's the first thing. And the second way we see this restoration is the form of the one on the throne. He is described as having human form.

[22 : 21] Verse 26, halfway through, seated above the likeness of the throne was a likeness with a human appearance. That's quite amazing really.

No one has ever dared portray God until this point in the scriptures in human form. It is like the reverse of creation in Genesis 1 where God says, let us make man in our own image after our own likeness.

Here God appears in human likeness. And despite the fact that we've defaced and disfigured the likeness of God by worshipping his gifts and not the creator, here the high and holy one, the God of all glory, humbles himself to reveal himself in the likeness of humanity.

This is how he's going to restore us to his glory. This is how he's going to bear his own wrath in himself. This anticipates the great transformation that comes when Jesus, the Son of God, becomes flesh for us.

And you know, rainbows are not mentioned again in all of the Bible until we come to the very last book. And so one more turn and we'll finish with this. Let's turn over to the book of Revelation chapter 4, please.

[23 : 52] It's Revelation singular here at St. John's. So, God appears, he gives a vision of himself and his glory to John the Apostle.

This is after the death and resurrection of Jesus. And you see in verse 1 of chapter 4, a door standing open in heaven. verse 2, at once I was in the spirit and behold a throne stood in heaven with one seated on the throne and he who sat there had the appearance of Jasper and Carnelian.

Around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. And this is new, around the throne were 24 thrones and seated on the thrones were 24 elders clothed in white garments with golden crowns on their heads.

And from the thrones came flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals and thunder. And before the throne were burning seven torches of fire which are the seven spirits of God.

And before the throne there was, it were, a sea of glass like crystal which is the platform Ezekiel saw. And around the throne on each side of the throne four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind.

[25 : 02] But the one on the throne in chapter 5 is joined by another one who is called the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world and directs the course of history verse 6 chapter 5 Between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a lamb standing as though it had been slain with seven horns and seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the world verse 8 And when the Lamb had taken the scroll the four living creatures and the 24 elders this is a picture of the church fell down before the Lamb each holding a harp and golden bowls of incense which are the prayers of the saints and they sang a new song saying worthy are you this is to the Lamb to take the scroll and to open its seals for you were slain and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation and you've made them a kingdom and priests to our God and they shall reign upon the earth

Jesus is the glory of God made visible in Jesus we see the face of God we see God face to face Jesus Christ was born in the likeness of sinful human flesh and he was slain so that by his blood he ransomed for God men and women boys and girls not just here in Vancouver but from every tribe and every nation and every language on this earth and the Christian life and the Christian faith begins and continues by seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and the last thing that Ezekiel does at the end of the vision is he falls on his face which I think is a great place to start flat on your face because then we begin to hear him and it's as we continually behold and look at the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ our hearts reorient around him as God and Lord and he becomes the one to whom our affection and our longing and our love belong and I think that means a number of things it means it means there's no despair ultimately it means there's no panic ultimately it means

Christians who see this vision of God don't use words like I'm devastated but it also means we repent ongoingly daily we ask God to take from our hearts and to forgive us for every rival we've placed there and that's how we come to rest and enjoy his transforming glory as we see that he is our list if you will he is our true home he is our true health he is our true beauty and our culture and our family and our pleasure we learn to sing that song later in this revelation worthy is the lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing and to him who sits upon the throne and to the lamb blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever Amen to the rod and families and might understand this