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- [0 : 0 0] Good evening all, thanks for being in church with us tonight. We have been over the last number of weeks looking at the book of Joshua, developing the Old Testament and particularly seeing there the gradual conquering of the promised land.
- We're now fast forwarding a fair bit of biblical history and we're now seeing how Israel lost that promised land in the book of Ezekiel. So let's pray and we'll know him.
- Father, we thank you that you are here with us as you promised. We ask, Father, that we would not be like your people, either passed through the word or learned but hard in their hearts to it.
- Father, we ask that you might give us soft and tender and receptive hearts to your word. Help us to see you and your purpose for us, that we might love you, we might know you and love you, and be with me, truly blessed you all. Amen.
- Since St Thomas More published his book in 15 and 16, the book Utopia has become a word that's used to describe an idealistic place of perfection.
- [1 : 1 2] We all have our utopias, we all have those places where we like to escape to our concept of what paradise might be. It might, in fact, be an actual place, it might be an activity, it might be a fancy, it might be a fancy, it might be a go to that spot, do that thing, and everything else kind of switches off for you for a time.
- Imagine having that opportunity to eventually escape a place, to go to paradise, to start a life again, to live a new life, to a different life, a life that is away from the best, the grind, the chaos, and the pain that often comes with life in this world.
- Some people actually do it. Back in October 1999, there was a train accident in London that, upon investigation, didn't make a whole lot of sense.
- Two commuter trains slammed into each other with an incredible amount of carnage and loss of life and confusion for a whole heap of people, but particularly the confusion in amongst all of that, some people took that opportunity to walk away from the accident, go to Heathrow, board a flight, an international flight, and start a new life somewhere else in the world.
- Just like that. Imagine doing that. You've got so many issues going on in your life, you're involved in an accident like this, everyone assumes you're dead, you get on a plane and just go somewhere else, start again.
- [2 : 5 0] Running from the issues, keep running, always looking for something better, always hoping that things will be better. To a degree, we'd probably all like to do it in moments, and some of us do, in fact, do that.
- We escape. We might not jump on an international flight and escape, but we do escape, escape for some of us, into the fantasy world of soap operas, into the internet, into magazines, into movies.
- Or maybe utopia is at the bottom of an ice cream bucket. We all have our escapes. Maybe you are, in fact, planning the big overseas trip in search of paradise.

If you feel like a better place exists, a paradise exists, then Ezekiel is for you. Unfortunately, as we begin Ezekiel in chapter one, we see that Ezekiel himself is, in fact, a long way from paradise.

He is captive in Babylon. And so we need to just, as we kick off this series, take a bit of a step back and fill in some of the details of what's happening here in biblical history.

[4 : 03] It's about 600 years before Jesus. It's, in fact, 597 BC. The Middle East was in turmoil, as it often is.

And the regional superpower, Assyria, had pretty much collapsed. And the kingdom of Babylon had taken over as the superpower. And all the small states around Palestine were spoiling for a fight.

After 150 years of oppression from Assyria, they wanted their freedom. They didn't want to be ruled over by this new upstart king called Nebuchadnezzar.

And so in 597 BC, the king of Judah, at that time, a guy named Jehoiakim, decided that he was going to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar was not going to have any of that. And so he attacked Jerusalem. Jehoiakim got such a fright that he surrendered the city and conveniently died.

[5 : 05] He was replaced as the king by the person who is the king who's mentioned here in verse 2 of Ezekiel 1, Jehoiakim. Okay, Jehoiakim, Jehoiakim.

M comes before N. That's how you remember it. Jehoiakim, Jehoiahim. Something like that. Anyway, if you ever need to remember that. To make sure that it wasn't going to happen again, Nebuchadnezzar took a whole bunch of the elite of Israel back home with him to Babylon.

He took them as hostages, including the king who ultimately lost the city to Nebuchadnezzar, that was Jehoiakim, and Ezekiel.

And he placed on the throne in Jerusalem, Zedekiah as a puppet king. And Jeremiah was the prophet in Jerusalem at that time.

So Ezekiel is down in Babylon as a prophet. Jeremiah is back in Jerusalem as the prophet. That's the political picture.

[6 : 18] But there's a much bigger biblical picture that's going on here, which connects really well what we've just been through in Joshua. Way back in the Old Testament, God made Israel his special people by rescuing them from slavery in Egypt.

And he took them to a new home, the place that was called the Promised Land. That's what we've been saw through Joshua as they conquered the Promised Land. And when God gave them their new home, he told them that because they were his people and he was their God, they needed to be obedient to him and to love him and to trust him and to honour him and worship him.

And if they did, life in the Promised Land would just be a life of blessing. It would be paradise. If, however, they took God for granted and they treated him badly and lived as if God wasn't such a big deal, then it was going to be really, really, really bad for them.

In fact, you're going to wish that your mother never met your father. You're going to wish that you were never born. And that's exactly what happened. In effect, what is happening here in Ezekiel with the exile down to Babylon is similar to what a parent might do in disciplining their child by sending them to their room or putting them in the time-out chair for a bit.

The idea is put them away into a spot so that they can think about their behaviour for a bit. God has moved his people to Babylon for 70 years so that they might sit there in the time-out chair and consider what they have done and what's really important and why it's important.

[8 : 13] And so Ezekiel's one of these guys down there in Babylon. What did it feel like to be one of the people of God in Babylon?

It was, in fact, a huge shock. It was unthinkable that such a thing could happen to their city and to their country. They were physically dislocated from their home by force.

They had been psychologically traumatised. They were spiritually hardened and they were also theologically baffled. Where is God?

Why has he allowed this to happen to us? How did they respond? We know from the Old Testament that there are at least four different responses of the people of God, of what had happened to them.

There was backsliding, there was bravado, there was bitterness, and there was brokenness. Four Bs, make it easy. Backsliding, bravado, bitterness, and brokenness.

[9 : 27] We read in Jeremiah that there was backsliding. Some thought, in fact, we're much better off without God. Serving this Yahweh hasn't brought us any favours, and so they rejected God altogether.

There was bravado back in Jerusalem. There were the false optimists, people like the prophet Hananiah, who in Jeremiah 28 says, don't worry, be happy, it's all going to be all over soon.

It's just a small blip. In other words, they didn't think that there was a lesson to learn. The third response was much more pessimistic.

It was bitterness. There were some who expected that or accepted that it was in fact God who had done this to them, but that God was totally unfair.

He was unreasonable in doing this to them. And so they just spiraled down into bitterness. And the fourth response was brokenness. There were some who accepted that the exile was in fact God's action, and that they concluded he was right, we were wrong, but that there was no hope, there was no future, no future for Israel, no future for God's people, and that we had brought it upon ourselves.

[10 : 57] We deserve what we got. And perhaps that how Ezekiel felt in chapter 1, verse 1, says that it was the 30th year. Most likely, it was his 30th year.

In the Old Testament, it says that priests began their public ministry at the age of 30. And perhaps you could imagine this 30-year-old Ezekiel wandering beside the Kibar River, thinking about what could have been.

If he'd been back in Jerusalem, this would have been a time of celebration for him. As the son of Buzi the priest, he too would have been a priest in this moment.

It's his 30th year. And no doubt his father had taught him to look forward to this day ever since he was a young boy. Now would have been a time when he began his long-life service of God in his temple.

But instead, he finds himself 1,500 kilometres away in a foreign land as a captive in a foreign empire. He was a long way from home, both physically and spiritually.

[12 : 03] And so perhaps he was a little depressed, certainly disturbed and bewildered as he wandered aimlessly along the banks of the Kibar River, thinking of what could have been back in Jerusalem.

All that he knew of God was attached to that land, Israel, to that city, Jerusalem, to that temple in the middle of the city, Jerusalem. But without Israel, without Jerusalem, without the city, without the temple, what is left?

All of his expectations about God, his future, and the future of God's people were up in the air. Nothing was clear, nothing was certain anymore.

You can imagine him so deep in thought that he didn't even notice the approaching storm until it was right upon him. Verse 4, I looked, I saw a windstorm coming out of the north and an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light.

Suddenly, he's plunged into a ferocious storm of thunder and lightning. And it's right there in that moment that Ezekiel sees a very strange sight in the most unusual of places.

[13 : 20] someone like, someone like the experience of a Pan Am pilot as he was approaching Los Angeles airport back in the 2nd of July 1982.

As he approached to land his jumbo jet, 3,000 metres up in the air, right in his flight corridor, was a man lying down on a sun lounge.

Can you imagine reporting that? To air traffic control? It turns out Larry Walters had always wanted to fly. And so one day, he packed himself some sandwiches, grabbed a few beers, attached 45 helium-filled weather balloons to his sun lounge, cut the ropes, and flew.

He went as far as four and a half kilometres in the air, straight through Los Angeles flight corridor, before he eventually shot some balloons and landed his sun lounge and was promptly arrested.

It's somewhat like Ezekiel's experience. An incredibly strange sight in the most unexpected of places. Let's read it from verse 4.

[14 : 42] The centre of the fire looked like glowing metal and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance, their form was that of a man, but each of them had four faces and four wings.

There is an incredible amount of detail in chapter 1 that we just do not have time to go into what all the little details mean.

verse 1 tells us what Ezekiel saw. The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

That's what he saw. That's the unexpected bit. On the Kibbar River, 1500 kilometres from Jerusalem with no temple, no priests, God shows up.

God shows up. Everything up to this point led Ezekiel to conclude that God had in fact abandoned his people.

[15 : 46] It's five years into the exile. Five years of questions, five years of depression, five years of uncertainty and then God shows up.

So this is a very surprising but also an incredibly encouraging sight. What Ezekiel saw was a very strange sight of four beasts with odd faces and wings and hands. Let's pick it up in verse 10.

Their faces looked like this. Each of the four had the face of a man and on the right side each had the face of a lion, the left the face of an ox and each also had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces.

Ezekiel saw God but it's pretty clear that what he saw was weird and pretty scary stuff. Note though that in this vision of God it isn't a description of what God actually looks like.

God is strange, God is not like us, he's entirely different than we are but as Ezekiel describes what he sees, he uses words like appearance and likeness.

[16 : 57] It was like a throne of sapphire, it looked as if it were full of fire. He tries to use the things of this world to describe the things which are not of this world.

He sees a weird side of creatures that were a mix of human and beasts and each creature had faces made up of beasts made by God. And these faces were pointing in four different directions all at the same time and they were all looking to the four corners of the earth and a representative of all the creatures that God has made.

Later on we see that these creatures are in fact carrying the throne, that is these creatures that God has made are servants of God.

This vision is meant to represent very simply that all creatures come under his rule, the rule of this God, and all creatures serve this God that Ezekiel saw. We also see for this vision that this throne on which the God of the universe sits is slightly different too.

Verse 15, as I looked at the living creatures I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four faces. This was the appearance and the structure of the wheels.

[18 : 15] They sparkled like crystallite and all four looked alike. Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel. As they moved they would go in any one of the four directions and the creatures face and the wheels did not turn about as the creatures went.

I think what we're meant to do here is to take off our engineering mind and put it to one side and try and work out how this works. But the vision, the overall vision here, the king who sits on the throne spreads his rule wherever this throne goes.

throne goes in all four directions that the creatures are facing.

That is to all four corners of the globe. There is nothing that is not under this God's rule that is under his control.

Notice too the many eyes on the throne. In verse 18 their rims were high and awesome and all four rims were full of eyes all around. This mobile throne from which God rules is covered in eyes which are pointing in all directions.

[19 : 33] This God who rules this world, all creatures in this world, who oversees everything in this world, he sees everything. There is nothing that is hidden from him.

There is nothing that he does not see. There is nothing that he does not know. Nothing takes him by surprise. There is nothing that is outside of his control. Now, the real surprise for Ezekiel was that he was seeing God at all behind enemy lines in Babylon.

The wings, the eyes, the wheels, that is the straitness of the sight and the unexpected place of the sight, the vision that he got only strengthens the point that God rules all, including Babylon.

What a comforting vision for a young man and a nation under the rule of a foreign power, 1,500 kilometers from home, who at this point had no hope for a better future whatsoever.

God can do anything. This God can do anything. He is everywhere and he knows everything. It's the picture that we see right throughout the Bible of God.

[20 : 50] The Bible calls God holy. It's not that he possesses holiness, but that he actual fact is holy. It signifies everything about God that sets him apart as being different to us and what he made.

And that makes him an object of awe, makes him an object of adoration and, in fact, of dread. The word holy covers every part of his total greatness and moral perfection.

It's the sum total of his attributes. Every part of his nature and his character is holy because of course he is God.

At the core of its concept is his purity, which cannot tolerate sin or wrong or evil or impurity in any form.

And so what happens when a sinful, imperfect, dweeb of a human being like me gets confronted with a God like this? Verse 28.

[22 : 00] This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell face down. That's the response.

That's the response that God's been wanting from his people the whole time that they're in the promised land. And the reason that they're here in Babylon is because that's not what they did when they were in the promised land.

They took him for granted. It's the position of submission. Humble submission is the only option. The vision, the God of God didn't make Ezekiel any more casual about God.

This is the lesson that Israel, in fact, had to learn. We see a similar thing with John, as Chris read out to us in Revelation chapter 1. When he saw the glorified Lord Jesus, like Ezekiel, bear in mind that John is Jesus' best mate when he was here on earth.

John was exiled, the island of Patmos, a prisoner, just like Ezekiel, when he received a vision of Jesus. And it was a strange and terrifying sight.

[23 : 15] Jesus was there, even in the island of Patmos. It was there in the most unexpected place. He saw the all-conquering and ruling Jesus. And what did John do? Exactly what Ezekiel did when confronted with the glory and holiness of God.

He fell face down as if dead. That's the response that he's been calling from his people all along. He was Jesus' best mate.

But he knew that the glorified Jesus was not to be treated lightly or carelessly or recklessly. The vision of Ezekiel reveals how terrifying, but also how good God is.

God's people might be in the time-out chair in Babylon, but he was not done with his people despite their failure. And so this vision told Ezekiel that God is in fact up there, that God is in fact out there in control, but also that God is right here with them right now.

Notice right at the very beginning of the prophecy in verse 3. By the Kibai River, in the land of the Babylonians, there the hand of the Lord was upon him.

[24 : 41] Right there, in that place, God was with his prophet. If you've got your Bibles open, flick over 48 chapters later to the very end of Ezekiel.

Right at the end of the chapters, we're going to get to this in a few weeks, the final chapters of Ezekiel are that there's this wonderful description of paradise that God has prepared for his people.

It is a perfect place. The last word of this prophecy, it's a picture of this paradise, of this city of perfection.

The last words of this prophecy is the name of that city. The Lord is there. Right there in Babylon, and right at the end in paradise, after God has brought his people into their glorious future, the city, paradise, is called the Lord is there.

He's there in Babylon. He's there in paradise. You see, Israel thought that the promised land was paradise. They thought that the Davidic kingdom, the kingdom under David, was paradise.

[25 : 59] They thought Jerusalem was paradise. They thought the temple in Jerusalem was paradise. But strangely, they found real paradise while in exile in Babylon.

It wasn't Babylon that was paradise. It was the Lord. It was the Lord coming to his people. Paradise is not so much a place.

Paradise is where God is. That's paradise. Paradise. It is relationship with God.

It's a relationship of trust and obedience. This relationship with him is the only way that we'll ever find true paradise. We can pursue everything in this world, but we'll only ever find it in him.

Jesus made it pretty explicit for his disciples. When we as Christians think about paradise, we automatically say heaven. That's paradise. We think of eternal life in heaven.

[27 : 05] Jesus said this in John 17, verse 3. This is eternal life. That they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

What Jesus is saying there is that paradise isn't so much a destination as it is a relationship. Eternal life is to know God through Jesus Christ.

Heaven is paradise only because God is there. The purpose of the prophecy of Ezekiel is, and Chris has mentioned this at the beginning, was to reintroduce God to his people, to reestablish that relationship.

Again and again throughout the 48 chapters, God says to Ezekiel to speak to his people that you may know that I am the Lord.

The exile, all the judgments which are executed, and we're going to get into that next week, and all the mercy that's promised, the whole prophecy has that one end in mind that they may know that he is the Lord of all that is.

[28 : 28] Ezekiel discovered on that day by the Kibar River, in all his pain and anguish and confusion, that paradise was in fact not lost. God was there, right there in pagan, unclean Babylon.

God was there. He was there for Ezekiel. He was there for his exiles in Babylon. He was there for John on Patmos, and he's right here for you right now.

This, I believe, is a word of comfort and purpose for Christians living in a rapidly changing society. The people of God, in Ezekiel's time, found themselves in a society not unlike ours, a society that's not shaped by a biblical worldview.

It's not shaped by biblical values. Not that long ago, in the Western world, a whole bunch of people, most people, would have called themselves Christian. Other religions existed, and yes, there were sceptical philosophers and there were atheists, but they were kind of regarded as more bizarre, sometimes even scandalous.

Those were the days of Christendom. But that is how it used to be. Christendom's gone. It's over.

[29 : 51] The 20th century saw an incredible reversal. Tolerance of all ideas is the new idol. The world has become a global village.

The new society has emerged in the West. Church spires still exist, but they are dwarfed by the skyscrapers of contemporary commerce. Christians are in positions of power, but they are less influential.

The Christian church has virtually no political power whatsoever. And for us, in our own context, SRE is under fire. Marriage is being redefined. There's no moral compass in our society.

Christendom is over. So are we asking ourselves why as the church?

Has God put his church in the West in the time-out chair? There is a lesson here.

[30 : 58] There is no place for bravado. We are a minority under fire, and there is a temptation, I believe, for the Christian church to bunker down, to retreat into a Christian subculture, take on a siege mentality, wait for Jesus to return, and to hell with the rest of you.

What did God require his people in exile in Babylon? Jeremiah 29 tells us.

29 verses 4 to 7, this is God's instruction for his people living in a foreign land. This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

Don't we treat? Bless. And I believe that it's absolutely impossible for us to do that unless we are totally convinced that God is here with his people, on his throne, and he's ruling not just us, our lives and our church, but he rules all of Australia, all this world, governments, people, everyone.

[32 : 26] Let me just leave that as a side thought. Bring it down to something personal. I think there's a personal word of comfort for us.

Some of us who might be feeling something of the fourth response of the exiles, and that is the brokenness. Those who feel that God right now seems just so far away from you.

Maybe you feel that there is no possible hope or future in your life or in your family. There is, just seems like God's not there. If God feels a long way from you right now, take this word as hope and promise.

God is with his people wherever they are. As Jesus promised, surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.

God doesn't promise that he will always take away the difficulty that we're facing immediately. Ezekiel is about to face another five years of the most uncomfortable message that any prophet ever had to bring to the people of God.

[33 : 39] But there's also comfort and hope and reassurance of forgiveness. Why? Because God was there. And he was in it.

And when God is there, paradise is always there. There is hope. Our God is still on his throne.

And our God is still in charge of the world. And our God is right here where we are, with us in this place, 2015, and fulfilling his purpose amongst his people.

But personally, he's not just here in this church where we gather right now, but he is there with you tomorrow and the next day and the day after that, wherever you go and whatever circumstances you find yourself in, trust him.

Trust him. Submit to him. Obey him. Love him. Worship him. Honor him. Let's pray.

[34 : 50] Father God, I pray that we would learn the lesson of the exile as your people.

We pray that our response to you, regardless of the circumstances that we face day by day or even the church collectively, might indeed be one of total submission to you. Change our hearts, Lord, so that we would not be like your people, Israel.

Help us not to be hardened to your word, where they took on all kinds of forms of religion. They were apathetic. They took you for granted.

Father God, I pray that you would change us and that you would comfort us and that we might indeed seek the blessing of many because you are right here with us.

Father God, we're tempted in this world to chase all other kinds of paradises. Help us to see it. It is with you and in relationship with you that we might indeed find that place of security and hope and future.

[36 : 00] Amen. Amen.