

The Majesty of Christ and the Storms of Life

From Ezekiel

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Bible Text: Ezekiel 1:1-28

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Please turn in your Bibles, if you would, to the first chapter of Ezekiel.

If you get in your car and go down to Interstate 70 and start going west you will come pretty quickly to Ohio. Then you will pass through Indiana and Illinois. It is a little longer trip getting through Missouri. But then you will come to Kansas. Soon you will be on to the high plains. And once you get onto those plains, if it is in the Springtime and in the afternoon, as you are on the road you may encounter in the distance a thunderstorm coming from the west. You will be able to see the dark clouds in the distance because the land is flat. And you will be able to see the lightning in those clouds and, if the sun is just right, you will be able to see a bright aura around those clouds shimmering in brightness. There is light around the darkness of those clouds.

And as you approach closer and you get into the rain and the thunder rumbles and the lightning crashes it can be quite terrifying. But as you emerge from the storm and the sun is shining you will often see the rainbow. And not just a piece of a rainbow, but a rainbow across the whole of the horizon, a complete arc of color. And you know that God in his grace has been with you through the storm and you can proceed on your journey.

And it is like this in life. When you come to the storms of life you have to pass through these storms and in these storms you seek the refuge of God. You wonder about the judgments of God and you think about the grace of God. Then you emerge from the storm. You are able to give thanks to God because as you pass through that storm you likely have a better understanding of God's judgments and a better understanding of God's grace.

When we come to Ezekiel chapter one, Ezekiel is in the midst of the storm of the exile. He is approached by the glory and the majesty of God. Part of the lesson that Ezekiel must learn is that God is great. Even in the midst of that exile, even in the midst of this great storm of life, he needs to come to grips in a better way and the people need to come to grips in a better way with the judgments of God and through this with the grace and the mercy of God.

And so this is the lesson I want you to get this morning as we look at this text in Ezekiel chapter one. When the storms of life do come along you must take refuge in the majesty and the glory of Christ. You must understand the judgments of God. And you must experience the grace of God. In the storms of life when we see the glory of Christ and take refuge in him, you have a better understanding of God's judgments and of God's grace.

Let's look at our text now, first, verses one through three.

Now it came about in the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, while I was by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. (On the fifth of the month in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's exile, the word of the LORD came expressly to Ezekiel the priest, son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and there the hand of the LORD came upon him.¹

Ezekiel was in exile and he had been taken into exile about five years previously with King Jehoiachin of Judah. The great storm of the wrath of God upon Jerusalem was yet to come. Ezekiel was taken in the second deportation of three. Nebuchadnezzar was to come a final time and to utterly destroy Jerusalem. Ezekiel was now in Babylon and many of his brothers and sisters were in Jerusalem. And Jeremiah was there. Jeremiah was preaching in Jerusalem and forecasting the final destruction of that great city.

But the people of Jerusalem and the people in the exile were not taking heed to the words of Jeremiah. In fact, they did not like the words of Jeremiah at all. And the people of the exile did not believe that Jerusalem would find its final demise. They thought the people in Jerusalem were better off than they were. They were in exile. But those people back there were still in the city and enjoying the things of the city. But it was not to be so.

There were also the faithful who remained in Jerusalem and there were the faithful who were now in exile, separated from those who were in Jerusalem, along with those who were sinners and reprobates. All together that group of people had been taken into exile showing us—and it is a good lesson for you and me—that the faithful do not escape the heavy hand of God's providence.

And so this was the scene. And there Ezekiel was by the river Chebar. And as our text says, "The heavens opened and he saw a great vision."²

Look at verse four. "As I looked, behold, a storm wind was coming from the north, a great cloud with fire flashing forth continually and a bright light around it, and in its midst something like glowing metal in the midst of the fire."³

¹ Ezekiel 1:1-3.

² See Ezekiel 1:1.

³ Ezekiel 1:4.

There, Ezekiel saw it across the plain, the great storm was coming, not from the south as was the custom of those storms, but this storm was coming from the north. And he could see the lightning. And perhaps, in the distance, he could hear the rumble of the thunder. This storm was unique because it was coming from the north. And even at a distance Ezekiel could perceive the bright light, the aura surrounding the storm, as it slowly approached he and the exiles who were by the River Chebar.

This was a great vision as verse one tells us and as verse four tells us. But also in verse 28, at the very end of the chapter it says there was, “As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face and heard a voice speaking.”⁴

Ezekiel understands it is a vision of God. It is the glory of God coming, coming to the exiles. And this is extraordinary because the glory of the Lord had been back there in Jerusalem, back there in the temple, back there hovering over the holy of holies. This was the appropriate place for the Shekinah glory and the attending accoutrements of the glory of God. *There* was the place for the manifestation of God’s presence. But now God’s presence was departing from that temple in Jerusalem and God’s presence was coming, coming, coming inevitably in a great storm, coming to the exiles who were, themselves, seemingly in the midst of a storm of life.

And as we look at our text, we see that as the storm comes closer, Ezekiel is treated with a better vision, a better view of this approaching glory of God. There are great creatures and wheels and a great firmament upon which there is a great throne. Look with me now at verses five and following. “Within it,”⁵ that is, within the approaching storm,

...there were figures resembling four living beings. And this was their appearance: they had human form. Each of them had four faces and four wings. Their legs were straight and their feet were like a calf’s hoof, and they gleamed like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides were human hands. As for the faces and wings of the four of them, their wings touched one another; their faces did not turn when they moved, each went straight forward. As for the form of their faces, each had the face of a man; all four had the face of a lion on the right and the face of a bull on the left, and all four had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above; each had two touching another being, and two covering their bodies. And each went straight forward; wherever the spirit was about to go, they would go, without turning as they went. In the midst of the living beings there was something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches darting back and forth among the living beings. The fire was bright, and lightning was flashing from the fire. And the living beings ran to and fro like bolts of lightning.⁶

⁴ Ezekiel 1:28.

⁵ Ezekiel 1:5.

⁶ Ezekiel 1:5-14.

We can only hit the high notes. These living creatures, having the form, basically, of a human, are very striking and very different; they each had four faces. How could this be? They had the face of a man and the face of a lion and the face of an eagle and the face of a bull. And these would have been familiar faces to those who were in captivity. The bull and the lion and the eagle were often at the gate of a city or at the door of a temple. They represented the false deities of Babylon. In the vision, the great God of heaven is seated above them. The great God of heaven is superior to them and in this vision Ezekiel saw that this was the case.

And they each had four wings and they covered their bodies and they stretched out their wings and touched one another. And then there were great wheels that were beside these living beings.

Verses 15 and following.

Now as I looked at the living beings, behold, there was one wheel on the earth beside the living beings, for each of the four of them. The appearance of the wheels and their workmanship was like sparkling beryl, and all four of them had the same form, their appearance and workmanship being as if one wheel were within another.⁷

Wheels within wheels; this is where this saying comes from. Perhaps you have heard it, very extraordinary. And here were these great wheels. I doubt whether this auditorium could contain one of them, so awesome and so lofty and so great were these wheels. And they were of beryl. Pure beryl is translucent and so the lightning flashes come through this translucent beryl and sparkle and shine and are awesome in sight.

Reading on. “Whenever they moved, they moved in any of their four directions without turning as they moved.”⁸ The wheels within the wheels were likely wheels that were perpendicular to each other so that when they rolled in one direction they could do so and when they rolled in another direction they could do so with ease.

“As for their rims they were lofty and awesome, and the rims of all four of them were full of eyes round about.”⁹ This sounds like a science fiction flick, doesn’t it? You can imagine and picture of this awesome sight.

Verse 19.

Whenever the living beings moved, the wheels moved with them. And whenever the living beings rose from the earth, the wheels rose also. Wherever the spirit was about to go, they would go in that direction. And the wheels rose close beside them; for the spirit of the living beings was in

⁷ Ezekiel 1:15-16.

⁸ Ezekiel 1:17.

⁹ Ezekiel 1:18.

the wheels. Whenever those went, these went; and whenever those stood still, these stood still. And whenever those rose from the earth, the wheels rose close beside them; for the spirit of the living beings was in the wheels.¹⁰

It appears that the wheels were actually the power, the motivation, the transport of the great chariot upon which God was riding. And the wings of the cherubim, as they are later designated in chapter 10 are not the power moving this great chariot throne. The wings are not the propulsion system. But these great wheels, which portrayed that they are somehow somehow, able to see, able to move, a representation of the spiritual world in which these great cherubim were living.

But then Ezekiel sees something else in this vision as we come to verse 22. There is, as it were, a great platform, a great dome of crystal over the cherubim. Verse 22. “Now over the heads of the living beings there was something like an expanse [a firmament], like the awesome gleam of crystal, spread out over their heads.”¹¹

This was probably a great dome that looked like the dome of heaven. And, of course, you know, crystal is clear. If you understand the heavens correctly, the heavens are clear. You can see through the heavens to the glory of the stars and the sun which is much closer. And so it was with this dome that was a covering over the cherubim and the wheels.

Under the expanse their wings were stretched out straight, one toward the other; each one also had two wings covering its body on the one side and on the other. I also heard the sound of their wings like the sound of abundant waters as they went, like the voice of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army camp; whenever they stood still, they dropped their wings. And there came a voice from above the expanse that was over their heads; whenever they stood still, they dropped their wings.¹²

And so this is expanse over the cherubim. We have no idea how large, how awesome, how great this great expanse and this sight of the cherubim might be. I don't know if any of you have been to Florida and visited the NASA sight and seen some of the rocket engines and some of the older rockets. When you stand beside these engines it seems as though you are an ant or a small fly, these engines are so great and they hover so high.

I expect the vision that Ezekiel saw was greater than this. It was a representation of the glory and the majesty of God coming to him. And as Ezekiel looks and ponders, he sees, high above the firmament, the throne.

We read further in verse 26.

¹⁰ Ezekiel 1:19-21.

¹¹ Ezekiel 1:22.

¹² Ezekiel 1:23-25.

Now above the expanse that was over their heads there was something resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli in appearance; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, was a figure with the appearance of a man. Then I noticed from the appearance of His loins and upward something like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of His loins and downward I saw something like fire; and there was a radiance around Him.¹³

Yes, on the throne above the firmament was a man and the throne had a bluish, dark blue color and it sparkled with gold. And I am sure this was due to the lightning flashes that were occurring. And the man, the appearance of the man, the image of the man on the throne, was brightly glowing with bronze. We are reminded of Revelation and the representation of Jesus Christ in the book of Revelation. Verse 28 reads. “As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.”¹⁴

I submit to you, friends, this was likely a pre-incarnate manifestation of the second person of the trinity, Jesus Christ, who was coming to the exiles. And the tokens of judgment were coming with him. But not only were the tokens of judgment coming with him, but also the tokens of grace, the tokens of the covenant promises of God, the tokens of his mercy.

Look at verse 28, once again. “As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance.”¹⁵

And all around that great vision there appeared this glowing rainbow reminding the people, the exiles, and reminding you and me, of the rainbow that God set in the heavens after the great flood promising that he would never again destroy the earth with waters as he had done. It is the token of God’s covenant, the token of God’s mercy.

The rumbling thunder and the clouds and the lightning represented the judgments of God. The exiles were feeling the smack of these judgments. They could taste the bitterness of these judgments. Yet they also understood that God was displaying to them the fact that mercy and grace were coming to them in the midst of the judgment storm in which they found themselves.

All of this, friends, looked forward, to another time 500 years later, when the people of God were rebellious and Jesus Christ walked away from them. The glory of God in Jesus Christ walked away from the temple. Look with me at Matthew chapter 23 and verses 37 and following.

¹³ Ezekiel 1:26-27.

¹⁴ Ezekiel 1:28.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Matthew 23:37-39, Jesus says:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, "BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!"¹⁶

Why would Jesus Christ leave the temple in Jerusalem desolate? And why, in 70 AD, would the temple then be destroyed as it was destroyed in the time of Ezekiel, subsequent to this vision we have been just looking at in Ezekiel one? Why would Jesus Christ leave the temple and why would it be destroyed? So that God's mercy in Jesus Christ would come to you and to me, so that God's mercy in Jesus Christ would not be reserved for a people, a small group of people in the Middle East. So that God's mercy would come to you and to me.

Please go back to Ezekiel chapter one verse four. "As I looked, behold, a storm wind was coming from the north, a great cloud with fire flashing forth continually and a bright light around it, and in its midst something like glowing metal in the midst of the fire."¹⁷ And, again, verse 28. As the vision comes closer what does Ezekiel see? He sees, "As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face."¹⁸

Why were the people in Exile? And why was that temple going to be destroyed? So that through the storm they might experience not only the judgments of God, but the mercy and the grace of God.

Who are you and who am I? I submit to you, friends, you are the people of the exile. You are the people who are sojourning in a foreign land. Is this not the case? Your citizenship is in heaven. And the glory of God is pleased to come and visit you, you who are strangers and sojourners and members of the exile.

Yes, the judgments of God are falling all around. We know this is true because we live in a fallen world. And we see the judgments of God all around. In many ways we experience the judgments of God in disease and in death. Oh, no, it is not because there are particular judgments attached to particular diseases. This is not the point. The point is, friends, that we live in a fallen world. You live in a fallen world. And that cancer and that leukemia and those other diseases, what are they? They are incipient death. And those murders that take place on the street. Of what are they all the result? In the end, they are a result of our living in a fallen world. They are the consequences of sin. And yet in the midst of a fallen world in which the judgments of God are falling all around us,

¹⁶ Matthew 23:37-39.

¹⁷ Ezekiel 1:4.

¹⁸ Ezekiel 1:28.

what does God do? He sends his Son Jesus Christ to the likes of you and me in the midst of the storms of life. The great God of all comes to us in his glory, wrapped in that rainbow. He comes with his promises saying to you and to me, "Remember, remember. Yes, you are exiles. You are sojourners in a foreign land, but I am with you in the foreign land."

And this is our point. In the storms of life you must take refuge in the glory and the majesty and the greatness of Christ. And as you do so you understand his judgments and you experience the mercy of his grace.

When I sat in the car, I listened to the radio and I heard the testimony of a mother who just lost her son in a tragic murder. She cried out, "Oh, God, why? Why did you take the son whom I love?" She had to admit she had a younger son she did not want. And in the midst of that storm in her life God taught her the need of forgiveness for the murder of that eldest son whom she loved. And God also came to her in mercy and taught her to love the younger son who for decades she regretted she had.

And is this not how God deals with you and me? In the storms of life when you see the glory of Christ and take refuge in him, you have a better understanding of God's judgments, of God's grace, and of God's mercy.

Let's pray together.

Father, open our hearts to the wonder and the majesty of the Christ. Thank you that although we are aliens and strangers in the world and your judgments fall all around us and in many ways we walk through them, yet your mercy and your grace is great. We thank you that this is the case. May we take refuge in you and better understand your judgments and also, Father, through Jesus Christ experience your grace. Bless us to this end we do pray in the good name of Jesus Christ who is the Lord. Amen.