

Ps 104:1

Yarrow, March 20, 2011

Ps 97:1,6

Ps 29:1,2,.3

Ps 18:4,5,6

Hy 10:2,8,9,10

Ezekiel 1

Genesis 11:31-12:3

Ezekiel 1:28b: "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD."

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

You and I have never seen God. Ezekiel did – and fell flat on his face. That’s intriguing. Though we do not see God, we believe –on the authority of Scripture itself– that the Lord is never absent from us; always He is present with “His divinity, majesty, grace and Spirit,” we confess in Lord’s Day 18. But be knocked off our feet by the awareness of His presence – no, we’re not. We keep on doing the bits and pieces that make up our daily lives, including what’s obedience to God’s law *as well as* what’s not obedience to His law.... In a word, we take God for granted....

That may be understandable. Life, after all, has it’s own bits of busyness to absorb our attention, and so the idea that God is with us sticks with us but floats to the back of our minds. And life carries on....

So it was too for br Ezekiel and the exiles with him in Babylon. But when the God who never forsakes His own revealed Himself to Ezekiel for who He was, well, yes, it blew Ezekiel well and truly off his feet. It hit him like a brick: what a God he had!

This revelation is preserved in Scripture for our edification and instruction today. So I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD CONFRONTS A DESTITUTE EXILE WITH HIS GLORIOUS MAJESTY.

1. The setting for God’s self-revelation.
2. The substance of God’s self-revelation.
3. The comfort of God’s self-revelation.

1. The setting for God’s self-revelation.

God revealed Himself to Ezekiel. Who, congregation, was Ezekiel? Where was he?

Apart from a couple of biographical details mentioned in the course of Ezekiel’s book (eg, he had a house and a wife), we know nothing about the man except what is mentioned in vss 1-3 of our chapter. Here we learn that Ezekiel was an exile from Jerusalem, forced to live “by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians” (vs 3). We also learn that his father was a priest named Buzi. For the rest, the Bible nowhere mentions Ezekiel. In the course of church history, the church fathers struggled to come to grips with Ezekiel’s prophecy, Luther showed little interest in Ezekiel’s prophecy, and even Calvin –though he prepared commentaries on most of the books of the Bible– left his treatment of Ezekiel to the very end of his life; in fact, Calvin was at chapter 20 when he died.

There’s a reason why people are reluctant to study the book of Ezekiel. The prophet begins his book by relating a vision so bizarre that we are left wondering what to make of it. As

one gets further into the book, one is taken aback by Ezekiel's relentless criticisms of his fellow Jews, taken aback too by his unconventional (not to say impossible) behaviour; imaging eating a book (chap 3), or lying on your one side for 390 days and then rolling over on your other side for 40 more (chap 4). On top of that, Ezekiel took no stock of culturally sensitive language, let alone being politically correct in his formulations. Ezekiel can be blunt, and very, very crude; he certainly does not come across as a polished and sensitive leader. Result: the book of Ezekiel is not an attractive read....

Despite all that, congregation, this book is part of the Word of God, given for our instruction as we walk the roads of life. So we do well to pay attention to what the Lord has revealed here about Himself.

Ezekiel, says vs 3, lived "in the land of the Babylonians." That's very noteworthy. The land of Babylon is the very same part of God's world that's described in Genesis 11 as the land of the Chaldeans. In fact, it was specifically *out of* the land of the Chaldeans that the Lord had called Israel's ancestor Abram (cf Acts 7:2ff; Gen 11:27ff). You recall: God called Abram *away* from his father's house and his father's gods (that will be the gods of the Chaldeans), promised to give Abram his own land and through it all *make him a blessing to the nations*.

How did it happen, then, that Abraham's descendent Ezekiel was back in the land of the Chaldeans? In vs 2 reference is made to "the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin." From the books of Kings and Chronicles we learn that Jehoiachin was king on David's throne in Jerusalem when Nebuchadnezzar captured the city. 2 Kings 24 tells us that Nebuchadnezzar "carried out from [Jerusalem] all the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king's house.... Also he carried into captivity all Jerusalem: all the captains and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths. None remained except the poorest people of the land..." (vss 13f). Ezekiel was one of those inhabitants of Jerusalem now carted off into exile. This descendant of Abraham, then, was in the land of the Chaldeans distinctly against his own wishes. He'd lost his inheritance in the land of promise, was now a destitute and landless refugee in the land from which God had called his father....

Why had Ezekiel, and so many of his brethren with him, been dragged off into exile? Was God not big enough to keep the promises He'd made to father Abraham? The answer lies in the wonderful –and awful– reality of God's faithfulness. You recall: God established His covenant of grace with Abraham, and repeated the same covenant with Israel. He promised His people that if they would "diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments," then the Lord would bless His people abundantly. Similarly, if they would "not obey the voice of the LORD..., to observe carefully all His commandments," the Lord would curse. Amongst the curses mentioned (Deuteronomy 28) is also this one: "the LORD will rejoice over you to destroy you and bring you to nothing; and you shall be plucked from off the land which you go to possess. Then the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods..." (vss 63f). Over the course of many years, Abraham's offspring did precisely what God forbade. Though the Lord sent prophets to warn His people, they continued in their sins. So the Lord, faithful as He is to the promises made in the covenant, sent them out of the land of their inheritance, back to where their ancestors had come....

For our part, congregation, we need to be aware of how *devastating* this exile was for the pious in Israel. Of course, every Israelite was *financially* devastated by the destruction of home and business, and being dragged off as nobodies into a strange land. But let's leave the economic

impact aside for now. The *spiritual* impact can scarcely be underestimated for those who sought to serve God – as Ezekiel apparently did. Every God-fearing Israelite knew that God had long ago ordained Jerusalem as the place where He would live among His people (Ps 132:13f) in the temple; here the sacrifices were made which proclaimed the gospel of forgiveness of sins. That's why the saints could rejoice when they heard the invitation to come to Jerusalem's temple (Ps 122). And it was known too: through the gospel of the temple, the LORD would make Israel to be a blessing for the nations. But see: *Ezekiel and the other exiles couldn't go to the temple anymore!* They'd been expelled from the Promised Land; *God cast them out* of their inheritance, *away from His dwelling place*, away from His presence, away from the proclamation of the gospel!

Try, brothers and sisters, to grasp what sort of questions this terrible reality raised in their minds! Did this not mean that God *rejected* them? All the years of privilege, the centuries of being God's people with rich promises – did their return to the land of father Abraham with its paganism not mean the end of God's special care for them? He'd dumped them, jilted His people?? And whose fault was that? Their own?? Or, or, might it be that their sins weren't so bad as to deserve exile..., but that God was too weak to protect them...?

Ezekiel was born into a family of priests. As soon as he turned 30 years of age (Num 4:3), he was, by God's ordinance, to serve as priest in the temple..., charged to perform the sacrifices and so to preach the gospel of God's grace to sinners. But here he was now, an exile amongst the captives.... Without gospel, without God, without hope, without future.... We empathize with the man....

But behold: in a setting of such rejection, Ezekiel suddenly "saw"! What he saw? That's our second point:

2. The substance of God's self-revelation.

The vision starts off at a distance – vs 4. Out of the north comes this storm, this windstorm, "a great cloud with raging fire engulfing itself." As the whirlwind came nearer to Ezekiel in the land of the Chaldeans, the dejected exile could make out more detail. At eye level he saw –vs 5– "the likeness of four living creatures". On the earth below eye level were wheels associated with the four living creatures – vs 15. When Ezekiel raised his eyes he saw above the living creatures –vs 22– "the likeness of the firmament." On top of that firmament –vs 26– "was the likeness of a throne," and "on the likeness of the throne was a likeness with the appearance of a man high above it" – *God*. We need to understand: God does not reveal Himself directly to Ezekiel, but shows him first a whirlwind-in-the-distance, then details of living creatures, firmament and a throne (in that order), before causing the vision to climax in God Himself. And it's "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" that caused Ezekiel to fall on his face. Why did God not reveal Himself directly to Ezekiel? Why the various steps along the way?

Here we need to realize, brothers and sisters, that God showed Ezekiel this whirlwind, these living creatures and the firmament *not* for the sake of the whirlwind or the living creatures or the firmament. These in-between steps serve to point up *who* the God is that has come to Ezekiel in the land of the Chaldeans. To get a sense of the awe that struck Ezekiel when He saw "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD", we need to pick up on some of the details of this vision.¹

¹ See Jeffrey Niehaus, *God at Sinai* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), pg 255ff.

Whirlwind

Ezekiel sees “a whirlwind ... coming out of the north” – vs 4. The Lord God has used a whirlwind in the past to show that *God is present*. I read in Job 38 that “God answered Job out of the whirlwind” (vs 1). God took Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1,11). Point is: by showing a whirlwind to this destitute exile in the land of the Chaldeans, God was telling Ezekiel that *He was there*.

God underlined that message in the further details. Ezekiel sees the whirlwind as “a great cloud with a raging fire engulfing itself.” “A great cloud with a ... fire”: our thoughts go to Israel’s exodus from Egypt, when “the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light” (Ex 13:21); the cloud and the fire symbolized God’s presence with His people. Think also of the time God called Moses from out of the burning bush (Ex 3:2); the fire symbolized God’s presence. And think of the time the LORD established His covenant with Israel on Mt Sinai; He indicated His presence with His people at the covenant making ceremony by means of fire and smoke on the mountain (Ex 19f). That Ezekiel now sees “a great cloud with a raging fire engulfing itself” is then a direct message for the exile in Babylon: here *God was coming to the exiles!* Ezekiel adds a couple of elements not found in earlier revelations of God, for he says in vs 4 that “brightness was all around it,” and that its colour was “like the colour of amber.” The reference to ‘brightness’ and to ‘amber’ comment on the *intensity* of what Ezekiel saw. The fire was not dull, as in covered with smoke or burning many impurities; the fire was rather bright, deep orange – pure fire. *God* in His holiness and majesty – now present in the land of the Babylonians!

This whirlwind, this cloud –God!– comes “out of the north.” Israel, Jerusalem, is due west of Babylon. But to get from one place to the other you can’t travel due west (or east), since there’s a harsh desert between Israel and Babylon. So all travel went via a loop to the north (cf Jer 1:14). That’s how father Abram traveled the route to the land that God promised to give him, and that’s how Ezekiel and the other exiles with him traveled back to the land of the Chaldeans; they entered Babylon from the north. Now Ezekiel sees visions of God “coming out of the north,” and that’s simply to say that the LORD is traveling via the known route from Jerusalem to Babylon. We catch the message: the God of majesty, Israel’s God-by-covenant, *was coming to His people in exile!*

Living Creatures

As the vision of God came closer, Ezekiel saw more detail. Yes, it was a vision of God, but No, the LORD did not directly show *Himself* to this exile. God first had Ezekiel see the four living creatures at eye-level. He tells us much detail about these living creatures, and so we could say much about them too – their legs, their hands, their wings, their faces, and their wheels. I don’t have time to go into all the details, but a couple of aspects are significant in relation to the vision of God.

The first is that these four are *creatures*. That’s to say: they were created in the beginning when God made the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1). These creatures are not eternal, and they are not divine; they are finite, limited.

At the same time, we need to note that they are not of this earth. Notice how often Ezekiel uses the word ‘likeness’ and the word ‘appearance’. Ezekiel wants to describe these four creatures, and of necessity he has to use earthly terms (because that’s all Ezekiel and his readers are used to). But he can’t find fitting comparisons on God’s earth to describe these residents of heaven. That’s why we shouldn’t try to draw a picture of these creatures either. Let’s instead

content ourselves with the knowledge that these living creatures had all the gifts they needed – including wings and hands, faces and legs and wheels– to carry out to perfection the task that God had assigned them. That is the point: the God who comes to the exiles in Babylon is *so great* that He comes with majestic servants, each of who do precisely the bidding of their Master and Maker. Notice vs 12: these living creatures “went wherever the Spirit wanted to go.” This is the Holy Spirit, God’s Spirit giving instructions to the living creatures. Further, as servants of God labouring in the presence of God, the creatures also reflect some of the glory of their Master. Vs 7: “they sparkled like the colour of burnished bronze.” And vs 13: “their appearance was like burning coals of fire.” As something of God’s glory rubbed off on Moses’ face when he came away from the presence of God (Ex 34:29ff), so something of the glory of the God these creatures were serving rubbed off on these servants of the Most High. All of it together impresses upon Ezekiel the greatness and glory of the God who came out of the north.

But just how were these living creatures serving? What are they doing in this vision? They appear here, congregation, –literally– *under* God; above them was a firmament, and above that firmament something like a throne, and high above that the throne God Himself. That is to say, the living creatures are depicted here as carrying God, transporting God. Here is the same picture as David had earlier described in Ps 18. He said of God: “He bowed the heavens also, and came down.... And He rode upon a cherub, and flew...” (vs 9f). These living creatures –Ezekiel tells us in chap 10 that they are cherubim– are here doing what David had earlier said of God; using their wings and their wheels these servants of God carry the Almighty from Jerusalem to the land of exile. And that again serves to point up something of the splendour of the God who came to visit the exiles. What a God-of-glory He is!

Firmament & Throne

That message is driven home further for Ezekiel as he lifted his eyes above eye-level. He saw above the heads of these servants of God “the likeness of the firmament.” This firmament was a divider,² separating the creatures underneath from the presence of God above. The divider is a ceiling for the servants, but a floor for the Almighty (cf Ex 24:10). The fact that there’s a divider between the living creatures and the throne serves to point up again the greatness of the God on the throne; the creatures are but creatures, created being, and God too great to have mere creatures so close to His presence. Yet –and this is again the marvel– this great God comes to His covenant people in their exile. Servants must keep a distance, but God comes to His children-by-covenant!

From above the firmament Ezekiel heard a thunderous voice – vs 24. Here I need to tell you that Ezekiel uses the same word five times in vs 24, a word that’s translated three different ways in our translation: noise, noise, voice, tumult, and again noise; in Hebrew all the same word that means ‘thunderous voice’. This thunderous voice is the sound of the Almighty, and it’s a concept Ezekiel was familiar with. After their fall into sin, Adam and Eve “heard the *sound* of the LORD God ... in the garden” (Gen 3:8) – and here the word ‘sound’ translates the same Hebrew word as in our chapter. The result of hearing this sound was that Adam and Eve ran to hide themselves; such was their fear of this God. It’s the same word as we find in Ps 29: “The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders” (vs 3). Result: the cedars break, the wilderness shakes, the deer give birth (vss 5ff). That is: the voice of the LORD produces terror; *God*

² See Paul Seeley, “The Firmament and the Water Above,” *Westminster Theological Journal* Vol 53, No 2, pg 238f.

comes, and who can stand before Him?! Well now, as Ezekiel's attention is drawn to the firmament and what is above it, he hears this thunderous voice of God, and that's to say he's confronted with a God *terrifying in His majesty*.³ What a God this is!

Then he sees "the likeness of a throne, in appearance like a sapphire stone" (cf Ex 24:9f), and "on the likeness of the throne was a likeness with the appearance of a man high above it." Notice again how Ezekiel struggles to find words that describe what he sees. He doesn't see a throne, but "the likeness of a throne," and he doesn't see a man but "a likeness with the appearance of a man." Earthly terms simply don't do justice to the majesty he sees. And the man "high above it" has again the descriptions of vs 4; "the colour of amber", "the appearance of fire", "brightness all around" – all references to the greatness and majesty of God. And he couldn't help but see it; as an eye can't help but notice a splendid rainbow in an overcast sky and marvel at its beauty, so the brightness of God's shining stood out to grab Ezekiel's attention. He couldn't get away from it: here was the king of the world, the God of glory, Yahweh, Israel's God-by-covenant – awesome, majestic, splendid beyond words.⁴ The living creatures with their wings and their wheels and their faces, the firmament and the likeness of a throne: the splendour of these things around God climaxed in this stunning vision of the "man high above it", awesome in glory, so awesome that Ezekiel fell on his face.

That brings us to our last point:

3. The message of God's self-revelation.

What, brothers and sisters, did God communicate to Ezekiel through this revelation of Himself? As He came to His people-by-covenant in the land of their exile, what was He saying about Himself?

There is first of all this: Israel's God remained *awesome in majesty*. The point is important. Babylon had defeated Jerusalem, and that's to say to the minds of the people of the day: Babylon's god (his name was Marduk) is stronger than Israel's God. But God is emphatic that it is not so. The God of Israel defeated, but a small God? No, no! Behold His splendour: carried by servants, possessing a glory too bright to behold, speaking in a voice that fills with terror. How awesome He is, and therefore worthy of praise!

But more importantly: this sovereign and glorious God *has not forgotten the people of His covenant!* O yes, this people had been dragged off into exile, and now live far away from God's dwelling place in the temple; in the land of Babylon they feel lost, rejected by God. But see: *they weren't!* For: *He comes!* And He comes to His people in exile not with His tail between His legs, as if to offer His people an apology for letting them down in the day of their distress; no, He comes with majesty and splendour exactly because their exile was *His punishment on their sins*. That punishment was not an expression of rejection, but the chastising of a father who loves His children (cf Prov 3:11f). This Father-by-covenant now comes in terrible majesty, but not to unload another ton of affliction upon His sinful children. Ps 30: "His anger is but for a moment, His favour is for life; Weeping may endure for the night, But joy comes in the morning" (vs 5). Though He comes in awesome majesty, God's coming was first of all mercy; notice that though Ezekiel is so overwhelmed as to fall flat on his face in worship, *God spares this creature's, this sinner's life*. Truly, what a God this is!

³ Niehaus, 259.

⁴ See vanGroningen, *Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), pg 742ff.

Yet even that is not all. When the LORD had called Abram out of the land of the Chaldeans years ago, He'd said: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3). With their return to the land of Babylon, one would conclude that these destitute exiles could in no way be a blessing for the nations anymore. But this glorious God is faithful to His promise, and so He visited His people in exile because *a remnant must survive* so that the Saviour of the world could one day be born.

So it happened. When the time had fully come, the promised Saviour was born – no, not in the land of the Chaldeans, but in the land God had promised as an inheritance to Abraham's descendants. But have you noticed, congregation, that Jesus' ancestry *included one of Ezekiel's fellow exiles*? Vs 2: one of those in exile with Ezekiel was none less than the king of Judah, the heir to David's promises – Jehoiachin. But the fact of his exile doesn't mean the end for God's promises; this Jehoiachin is mentioned in Matthew 1 in the lineage of Jesus Christ! Here is God's grace; He'd promised to send the Saviour into the world, and He'd said the Saviour would come from David's line, and so God saw to it that the exiles were not forgotten. God's plan of salvation had to come to pass, salvation for the exiles, salvation for the Jews, salvation for the world, salvation *for you and for me* – and that, ultimately, is why He came in Person to the exiles in their misery! Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of this God of glory!

The exiles forgotten? No, *never!* At the time of His choosing, Israel's God-by-covenant came to His own to remind them of His faithfulness to His promises, remind them of His mercy. How encouraging for them!

And nothing has changed on this point since then. The Son of Jehoiachin was born, true God and true man, a blessing to the nations. No, the world did not see the majesty of God as revealed in Ezekiel 1 when the Son of God became flesh in Bethlehem; only the shepherds heard the living creatures –the angels– sing their songs of glory. His splendour was not evident either when He hung on the cross of Calvary; and this time the living creatures neither sang their praises nor fought for their Master's honour. The Son of God hid, as it were, His glorious majesty so that His time in the flesh was without whirlwind and fire, without servants in the form of living creatures, or even a firmament separating holy God from creatures. In fact, the Creator *became a creature, in order that He might save a people for Himself*.

And see: the majesty and the splendour belonging to the Son of God were restored to Him. John saw a vision –Rev 4– that has so many similarities with the vision Ezekiel saw. Yet in one particular point it's so different. For John sees 24 thrones placed around the throne of the God Almighty, upon which sit 24 elders. These 24 elders represent the people of God from the old dispensation and from the new; 12 from the old symbolizing the 12 tribes of Israel, and 12 from the new representing the work of the 12 apostles. The catholic church, the people of God from every tribe and tongue and race, are *in the presence of God*, creatures in the proximity of the Creator! What was outlined vaguely in Ezekiel's vision –that God came to His people-by-covenant to obtain their salvation– is now fulfilled; *redeemed sinners in the presence of God!*

God's people forgotten by God? To our sinful hearts it may seem so. But, beloved of the Lord, it is never so. With respect to His divinity, majesty, grace and Spirit, the God of glory is never absent from His own. It is a reality our naked eye might not see, but a reality nevertheless.

That is why we can be confident in the trials of life; the God of infinite majesty is *with us always*.