

Messages from Captivity

Sermons on Ezekiel 1-24

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The likeness of the Lord's glory

Ezekiel 1:28

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

Ezekiel's ministry was carried out in Babylonia, far away from Judah. He was one of the Jews who had been taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar, some eleven years before the destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem in 586BC. Though he was thus banished from Jerusalem yet his prophecy is full of references to the temple of God. He dwells much on the corruption of the temple worship at the beginning of his prophecy but at the end his attention focusses on its restoration through the great mercy of the Lord. This emphasis on the temple is no surprise when we learn that Ezekiel was a priest, as many of the other prophets were, including Samuel and Jeremiah. His whole heart and mind were taken up with the glory of the Lord's holy worship and he longed for the revival of true religion and pure worship in the church of God.

We see a clear parallel here with our own day when we have recently been unable to gather in the courts of the Lord's house. The longing of God's people is to be brought once again to the gates of Zion, to the solemn assemblies, and for a spiritual reviving and a loosing of our present bondage. Like the captives in Babylon, they today find themselves hanging their harps upon the willows in an increasingly strange land.

Before the divine blessing could be restored to the ruined and captive church there would have to be judgement upon them for their sin, in order to bring them to repentance. Without repentance people are not ready to receive spiritual blessing. The sin of Judah would meet its reckoning, but so would the sins of the neighbouring nations bring judgement upon them also, for they had led the Jews further away from God through their idolatry and immorality. This is why so many of the chapters contain threatenings of judgement to the various nations. But it was all to pave the way for future blessing. Indeed, Ezekiel's prophecy contains a great deal that would encourage the godly remnant in his day to hope for a much better future.

We can therefore see that the background to this wonderful book contains many parallels with our own day, when judgements are upon church and nation. But we look for a glorious future for the church and people of God, just as Ezekiel did in his own day. Undoubtedly, there are many difficult and mysterious passages in this long prophecy, but its very size alone ought to make us realise that it is an important and significant part of Scripture. May the Spirit of God help us to understand it better. 'Do thou lead me in thy truth, therein my teacher be.' (Psalm 25:5)

In the chapter, we see the vision of the angels (verses 5-14), then their role in the working of God's providence (verses 15-25), and finally, the wonderful view Ezekiel witnessed of the glory of the Lord on the throne of heaven (verses 26-8). The lesson we learn is that a view of the glory of the Lord by faith is needed to humble us and make us worship and serve him.

1. The glorious things Ezekiel saw

The inhabitants of heaven

In this opening vision Ezekiel saw 'living creatures' (verse 5). These were angels. Different orders of angels are mentioned in

Scripture—archangels (1 Thessalonians 4:16), seraphim (Isaiah 6:2), and here the cherubim. They are all God's special ministers (Psalm 104:4). They worship around his throne and serve him constantly. They often acted as his heralds in the Old Testament, and at the beginning of the New Testament. They are pure spirits, confirmed in holiness since the fall of their fellow angels at the foundation of the world. Here in verses 5-14, they are seen as preparing the way for the even greater sight the prophet was going to witness, recorded at the end of this chapter (verses 26-28). The same God who dwelt between the cherubim in the temple was still able to grant his blessing to the captives in Babylon.

The description of the cherubim here is difficult for us to understand, as we have no adequate terms in this world for describing the things of the world of spirits.

We see, however, firstly, that the cherubim resemble humans in some ways (verses 5, 10) but in other ways they are quite unlike us (verses 6-9, 11-14). Angels were created to glorify God, and mankind was created with that purpose also. We have souls and bodies but they are simply spirits. Therefore, the bodily representations here must surely point to their activities, more than to their actual appearance. They vastly differ from us in power and intelligence. Their multitudinous eyes (verse 18) indicate that their knowledge and perception is the highest created intelligence and life in the whole universe (verse 20). The combination of human and animal faces (verse 10) seem to indicate that they have strength greater than the most powerful earthly creatures (verse 10)—see how they cover the whole earth, and how rapidly they move (verses 14, 17).

Notice, secondly, that the cherubim act in perfect accordance with the mind of the Spirit of life (verses 9, 12, 20). If we are praying, 'Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven,' we are really praying

to be able and willing to know, obey and submit to God's will as the angels do in heaven (Psalm 103:20, 22).

We see, thirdly, that the cherubim reflect the glory of God to a high degree. Glory is the outshining of perfection. God is 'glorious in holiness,' and the angels around his throne have a pristine holiness. The intense purity of God's nature and actions is reflected here in the descriptions of his holy creatures. 'Their appearance was like burning coals of fire.' (verse 13)

The mysterious processes of God's providence

The next sight of the angels in the chapter portrays them beside wheels of vast proportions (verses 15-25). This indicates that they are instruments in God's hands for executing his will in providence. It is a considerable mystery as to precisely how spiritual beings can influence physical events in time. But Scripture shows that this is so, even though it is difficult for us to understand (Isaiah 37:36).

The angels are ministering spirits sent forth to minister to those who shall be heirs of salvation (Hebrews 1:14). In Gethsemane, an angel ministered to Christ, just as angels had done after the temptation in the wilderness (Luke 22:43). In Ezekiel's vision, the wheels moving within the wheels indicate that all things act in accordance with the will of God, 'who worketh all things according to the counsel of his own will.' (Ephesians 1:11) What a comforting thought it is to the tried people of God that, however difficult their providential circumstances may be, the Lord is watching over his people! He uses his angels to minister to them in ways we will never know here in this world, as we learn in Psalm 91:10-11:

No plague shall near thy dwelling come;
no ill shall thee befall:
For thee to keep in all thy ways

his angels charge he shall.

The fact that the wheels revolve within other wheels seems furthermore to point to the mysterious twists and turns of providence, the revolutions and out-workings of the world's history. God's wise and gracious purposes for his people are difficult for us to understand as they unfold in providence. But let us be thankful that 'all things work together for good to them who love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.' (Romans 8:28) God has a glorious plan, and everything is ordered in the minutest detail to accomplish that plan. One of the Puritans said that if we try to carve providence for ourselves we will only cut our fingers. How sharply that lesson has to be learned time after time by the people of God! It is good if we are learning to leave everything in the Lord's hands while seeking to follow him in all the paths of commanded duty.

The likeness of the glory of the Lord

Here was the most wonderful sight that a mere man—a sinner saved by grace—could ever see in this world. Notice how Ezekiel speaks of 'the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord' (verse 28), as if the direct vision of the divine glory cannot be fully gazed upon in this life. He saw what God was pleased to reveal, and no more—but this was itself most glorious!

He saw the throne of heaven (verse 26), demonstrating the power and majesty of the one who rules over all. He saw the perfection of the divine holiness shining forth in bright splendour.

He saw the rainbow around the throne, signifying that God's throne is a throne of grace, even for those who have rebelled and destroyed themselves. The covenant of grace remains operative even in the cloudiest and darkest days of the church on earth. 'For this is as the waters of Noah unto me, for as I have sworn that the

waters should no more go over the earth, so have I sworn that I would not be wroth with thee, nor rebuke thee.’ (Isaiah 54:9)

And would it not be a marvellous matter for Ezekiel to behold that the one sitting on the throne appears in the likeness of a man? (verse 26) As someone put it, Christ delighted to try on human nature in Old Testament times before he came into the world at his incarnation. The glory of the person of Christ is infinite. It can never be fully comprehended, even in eternity. In him dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily; he is Immanuel, God with us. ‘Do not I fill heaven and earth?’ he asks, yet he dwells with the poor, the contrite and those who tremble at his word (Isaiah 66:2), and their eyes ‘shall see the king in his beauty, they shall behold the land that is very far off’ (Isaiah 33:17).

Believers do not need to be prophets, honoured with glorious visions like Ezekiel was, in order to see something of the glory and majesty of the Lord. We cannot see it with the bodily eye, but neither could Ezekiel. He saw it in a vision. The Lord does not communicate new revelations by visions any more in the New Testament era. But we can see the glory of God if we have faith in what the Bible tells us. To see the glory of the Lord does not involve physical sight or even the vivid use of our imaginations. Rather, it is to be taken up with the wonderful things God tells us about himself in his Word.

Do you believe that the person who was born in Bethlehem, died on Calvary, rose again on the third day and ascended up to heaven, is the Lord of glory? Do you see a wonder in his dying for sinners on the accursed tree, breathing out love to his enemies, purchasing eternal life for ungodly, ruined sinners? Do you rejoice to think of him entering glory with a human nature, having won the great victory over sin and Satan, going there to prepare a place for his people? Is that not glorious in your eyes? Do you desire that the one on the throne would rule you through his holy

commandments as well as save you by his grace? Do you ply his throne with prayer to make you holy as he is holy, to make you fit at last for the inheritance of the saints in light?

If you can say 'yes' to these questions, then you have something of a sight of the 'glory that excelleth,' the glory of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. 'God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in your heart, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' (2 Corinthians 4:6) The glorious gospel is like a magnifying glass to the faith of the believer. It brings heavenly things home to the soul. You see Christ darkly today, as through a glass, but in heaven, faith will be swallowed up in victorious vision. You shall see him eye to eye, and say, 'When he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.' (1 John 3:2) 'I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness.' (Psalm 17:15)

What an encouraging thought in such a dark day as Ezekiel's was, that the Lord was on his throne! He was 'doing his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth,' as proud Nebuchadnezzar was compelled to acknowledge when the Lord overmastered him (Daniel 4:35). What a great encouragement to us likewise to know that the one who is on the throne is the man Christ Jesus, the one who has a brother's heart for his poor, afflicted people!

'We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.' (Hebrews 4:15) Yes, Christ is not a king only but also a priest. As Zechariah says, he is 'a priest upon his throne.' (Zechariah 6:13) He ever lives to make intercession for poor sinners who come to him. He will never turn any away who come to his throne as beggars and suppliants for mercy. The publican's prayer, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner,' is sweet melody in the hearing of the priestly king of glory! 'If any man sin, we have an

Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous. And he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.’ (1 John 2:1-2)

Isn’t that an encouraging statement, that the atonement of Christ is suitable for any sinner in the whole world who will come and plead forgiveness on that sure and certain ground? Perhaps there is someone reading this who feels that their prayers are not heard because of the greatness of their sin, or because they question whether there is mercy in God for such a wretch as they find themselves to be. But the language from the one surrounded by the rainbow is, ‘The companions hearken to thy voice: cause me to hear it.’ (Song 8:13) ‘The companions,’ Christ’s people, recognise your witness, which you cannot recognise. They sympathise with your agonizing and your endeavours for holiness, they know all about the longings for mercy that they perceive to be in you too, though you can hardly perceive it in yourself. Christ bids that poor soul welcome to pour out their complaints and petitions before him as well. ‘Cause me to hear it!’ O what wonderful mercy! Has he not promised (Psalm 102:17), ‘The prayer of the destitute he surely will regard’?

Christ secured access to the throne of grace for sinners by satisfying divine justice in his death on Calvary. He endured the cross, despised the shame, for the joy that was set before him. He took the deserved judgement of the sins of his people so that they would never be condemned before the judgement seat at the last day. Are you thankful that he is still on a throne of grace this day, and that he has not summoned you to the personal judgement that awaits unbelievers at death, away from all hope of obtaining mercy? Then may we pressingly heed Paul’s advice, ‘Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.’ (Hebrews 4:16)

2. The impression this made on Ezekiel

He fell on his face

What an awe-inspiring vision this must have been! Sometimes the glory of the heavenly host of angels has been seen by people mentioned in the Bible. It never failed to make a great impression upon them. Some fainted with astonishment (Daniel 8:27). Some even mistakenly began to worship the angel (Revelation 22:8).

It is one thing to be impressed with the inhabitants of glory. It is another thing to admire the wisdom and power of God in ordering providence. But to get a sight of the God of all grace as he reveals himself in Christ is what really matters! This is what really empties the Lord's people of their pride and self-dependence and makes them to be humble and penitent before him. A sight of the grace of God in the gospel will always empty the sinner. When Christ himself gave displays of his glory in the miracle of the fishes (Luke 5:8), Peter cried out, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.' Have you joined the godly in their self-emptying approaches to worship the Lord, conscious of your own great sinfulness and of his glorious holiness?

O come and let us worship him,
 let us bow down withal,
 And on our knees before the Lord
 our Maker, let us fall. (Psalm 95:6)

He listened to the Lord's words

Ezekiel was now prepared to listen to the Lord's words. Until we have been arrested and humbled by a sense of our own nothingness and of the authority and glory of God, we will not be in a position to listen to what he says to us. Have you heard the Word of God now with a different appreciation and desire? Have you recognised the authority of God in the Word, and are you seeking grace to submit to the claims of his Word upon you? It is

a marvellous thing when the Lord opens our eyes to behold his glory in the gospel and opens our ears to hear the joyful sound of grace, mercy and peace, from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

I'll hear what God the Lord will speak:
to his folk he'll speak peace,
And to his saints; but let them not
return to foolishness. (Psalm 85:8)

3. What it means to see the Lord's glory

Seeing the Lord's glory is transformative

Faith purifies the heart (Acts 15:9). We must strictly examine ourselves as to what effect the belief of the truth has upon us. We may believe it with our heads, but unless it is received also into our hearts, it will not affect our hands and our feet to go on the highway that is called holiness. That is the only road where we are to journey, if we are to see Christ in glory at the end of our days, for without holiness no man shall see the Lord. It is along that road that the ransomed of the Lord will be conveyed to heaven, and the further along that road they progress, the nearer they are to seeing the Lord with open vision.

Seeing the Lord's glory is desirable and attainable

Beholding Christ by faith should be something we would all seek to experience. To see him as our own Saviour, our prophet, priest and king, should be the desire of us all. Is it your desire above everything else? Can you join in David's heavenly aspiration, 'One thing I of the Lord desired and will seek to obtain ... that I the beauty of the Lord behold may and admire...?' (Psalm 27:4)

Here you may be encouraged, however, that a view of the glory of the Lord is something that is attainable through the gospel. 'We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father,

full of grace and truth.' (John 1:14) Trusting in Christ through the Word will bring the soul to know something of his glory.

Seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ

Have you seen something of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ? If so, even a little glimpse of that glory in the gospel will be more precious to your soul than everything in this world. Your soul now can never be filled or contented with anything less than this.

That is why Paul was pressing toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, keeping the body under, not turning back to the world but reaching forward to the heavenly glories revealed in the gospel. This sight will keep you empty and needy as long as you retain it in your memory. If you hope this is true of you, see that you walk humbly, circumspectly and worthily of the glorious one whose likeness is 'fairer than the children of men ... He is thy Lord and worship thou him.' (Psalm 45:2, 11)

If you have not come to view something of the glory of God in Christ, consider your condition very seriously. Christ is willing to reveal his glory to sinners in the gospel. Moses asked, 'I beseech thee, show me thy glory.' (Exodus 33:18) We should reverently ask that also. Will you not call out with Bartimaeus, 'Lord, that I may receive my sight'? Bartimaeus was not turned away and nor shall you be if you sincerely call on him while he is near in the invitations of mercy.

Seeing his glory in heaven

Seeing the glory of God in heaven is the eternal prospect of the godly. However bleak the day may be at present, the day of glory will dawn and the shadows shall flee away. Christ prays for the glorification of his people, and that prayer will be answered for every one of them in due time. 'Father, I will that they also whom

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thou hast given me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory.' (John 17:24) Will you be among that blessed multitude?

May the Lord bless his Word to us.