

A Vision of God

Ezekiel 1:1-20

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The topic of my sermon is strange. Most sermons today seem to be on how to have victory over too much sin in your life or weight on your body, or over too little money in the bank or self-esteem in the heart. We hear sermons on family life, on personal wellness. Sermons on how to use time or strengthen friendships. Sermons on loving yourself or managing your money. Sermons on politics and government. But, as I say, I have a most unusual topic for a sermon these days, one that is even more needed than it is unusual.

I want to help you answer the question, “What is God like?”

To do that, I want us to turn to one of the most vivid records of a vision of God in the Bible. It is found in the first chapter of Ezekiel.

Ezekiel’s situation is an interesting one. A captured Israelite in forced exile, Ezekiel is a young man of about 30, recently relocated to the most powerful city on earth at the time, and God requires him to begin preaching to His people.

Now, in all honesty, I have to tell you that Ezekiel was “far from an ordinary individual.” W. F. Albright described Ezekiel as “one of the greatest spiritual figures of all time, in spite of his tendency to psychic abnormality—a tendency which he shares with many other spiritual leaders of mankind.”¹ The book Ezekiel produced has struck many as rather strange and difficult. In fact, there was a tradition among the Jewish rabbis that young men were not allowed to read Ezekiel until they were 30, lest they would

become discouraged at how hard the Scriptures were to understand and come to despise them.

But as strange as the early parts of this book may sound at first, I do not think that they are that hard to understand, and they are *rich* in meaning. From Ezekiel one, I want you to notice five things that we learn about God.

God is Not Like Us

This is where we really must begin if we are to understand this vision of God, and, more to the point, the God that Ezekiel envisages here.

The Old Testament prophets knew from personal experience that God was not just like you and me. They assumed what theologians call the “otherness of God.” So, too, the Psalmist in Psalm 50:21 represents the Lord’s rebuke to one human worshiper, “You thought I was altogether like you.” In fact, the Bible clearly presents the fact that God is not like us. The vision that God gave to Ezekiel made this abundantly clear.

If you stop and think about it, though, you see that non-Christians *don’t* seem to assume this. Tommy Bolt, a well-known golfer earlier in this century, renowned for both his graceful swing and his terrible temper, once, after lipping six straight putts, shook his fist at the heavens and shouted, “Why don’t you come on down and fight like a man!” His frustration was genuine, but his thoughts about God were incredibly wrong.

Now I don’t know how serious Tommy

Bolt was about his view of the nature of God, but others have quite deliberately taught that, in fact, God is just like us. Mormonism, for example, teaches the doctrine of eternal progression. “As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become.” This doctrine does sound like some words in the Bible: “You will be like God.” Those, however, were the words with which Satan tempted the first woman in the garden to disobey God. That disobedience would be rooted in the idea that Godhood was somehow within her grasp. From her heart, to the hands of the idol-maker, to the doctrines of the Mormons, to our own latest disobediences, we cannot claim that this misunderstanding is strange to any of us.

We are especially tempted to make God over in our own image in terms of His character. Toward the end of his life, Henry David Thoreau was visited by a pious friend who kindly inquired, “Henry, have you made your peace with God?” Thoreau replied, “We have never quarreled.” A few years ago, the movie “Forrest Gump” has the title character being asked “Have you found Jesus yet?”, to which he responded simply, “I didn’t know I was supposed to be looking for him.” That sums up much of our society today: mired in the hopeless confusion of not knowing God and not even realizing that they don’t know Him.

The relevance of Ezekiel’s vision here should be clear to us as Christians. We must guard against assuming too much. Things that we take to be self-evident may, in fact, be wrong. As Will Rogers said, “It’s not what you don’t know that will get you in trouble, but what you know for certain that just ain’t so.” We must study scripture to check our tendency to “make God over” in our own image. God is unusual.

The Bible calls God “holy.” It is interesting that the Bible does not teach that God merely possesses holiness as a dispensable attribute, but rather that He *is* holy.

Therefore, we must show reverence. Throughout Ezekiel’s encounter with God recorded in this first chapter, there is no doubt about this. If you look at the vision presented here, building up throughout it is a palpable sense of awe. Even the reduction to mere writing and the passage of time cannot hide this from us.

Some may remember the scene in “The Wizard of Oz” where Dorothy finally gets into the Emerald City and then into the Great Hall to see the Wizard. Once through the door, she and her companions go down a long hall, which then turns into an even more imposing one. Their journey finally culminates in a room with a great flaming centerpiece and a loud booming voice. Throughout, the movie builds tension, wonder, and awe. The same is true of Ezekiel. The only difference is that the Wizard was a fake. The God whom Ezekiel encountered is real.

In this vision, the excitement, the wonder, and the amazement increase. After the initial storm and the brilliant light (v. 4), we find a lengthy description of strange creatures (vv. 5-14). Their presence only heightens our interest. In verses 15-21, the attention is deflected away from the creatures themselves to the wheels about and underneath them. From the beginning of the vision through verse 24, meticulous care is given to recording a most bizarre and almost fantastic spectacle. And yet, with verse 25 comes the realization that this lengthy description is all intended to lead to something else!

That something else is clearly a representation of God Himself—the God who is inexhaustible, incomprehensible, and

almost indescribable. Did you notice Ezekiel's evident hesitancy to describe what he was seeing? Throughout this account of his vision, he refers to what "looked like" this or that, what had the "appearance" of this, or the "form" of that, (vv. 4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 16, 22, 24). As Ezekiel comes to the end of the chapter these verbal stumblings increase in number, as if the penetrating reality slips further and further away from Ezekiel's ability to describe with words what he was seeing.

In verse 28, we see what Ezekiel did when he was confronted with a vision of God: Ezekiel fell face down, even after all his theological training. In this sense, Ezekiel is like Job in Job 42, where the knowledgeable and holy Job feels undone, feels his knowledge is paltry and his holiness tawdry when he comes to be in the presence of the One who is Truth and Goodness Himself.

As for us, we must see God not as the old man upstairs, not merely as a kindly grandfather or a friendly neighbor or a pal or chum. He is not like us. Ezekiel was unforgettably reminded of this. So must we be reminded today.

God is All Powerful and All Wise

As with His unusualness, God's power and omniscience would not have been news to the Hebrews of the sixth century B.C. Ezekiel would have known of and have believed in God's comprehensive power and wisdom long before he ever had this vision. Nevertheless, for the readers of our own day, we should take careful note of this.

Note the body of this vision (vv. 4-24) and try to picture those creatures being described. This strange description has brought everything from strange medieval illustrations to strange modern expla-

nations. Illustrators have tied themselves in knots trying to depict this scene. Erik von Daniken even went so far as to suggest that this is a description of some kind of ancient alien helicopter!

The main section of the vision falls neatly into halves. The first half (vv. 4-14) is taken up with the living creatures, and the second (vv. 15-24) with the wheels. In both sets, though, it seems that the details, while true renderings of what Ezekiel saw, also had a greater significance for him. I think that when Ezekiel saw the living creatures with faces in each direction, he would have understood them to represent God's omniscience. And in the mighty wings, outstretched above the creatures, able to defeat space and time with their movement, Ezekiel would have understood the indescribably great power of God Himself.

Again, this pattern was repeated with the descriptions of the living wheels in verses 15-24. Did you notice that these wheels were reported as having eyes? Rather than simply trying to imagine how you would visually represent such a thing to a group of children in Sunday School, expend your imagination on trying to consider the significance. What could the import of these eyes be? Could they be a reflection of the function of the faces of the living creatures turned in all directions?

Now we find eyes that look in every direction. And then the wheels themselves seem to have the kind of power to move effortlessly and in any direction, the kind of power that seems to be possessed by the winged creatures as well. Surely the wheels reiterate the presentation of omniscience and omnipotence—of all-seeingness and almightiness that has already been presented to us in the first

half of Ezekiel's vision. Surely they were showing Ezekiel that God was never limited by ignorance or inability, but that time and space themselves served as no barriers to God.

As Christians, such a vision of God's power and wisdom should inspire humility and trust. In my own life, I have found that I could follow different and difficult directions from God when I realized that God loved me more than I loved myself, and that He knows what is best. When we realize God's love towards us, combined with His knowledge of us and of the future, and add to that same understanding something of His power and ability, we find that here is the God that we can worship, that we can trust, that we must follow, wherever He might lead us.

Friend, what is your reaction to sensing the presence of God? Too often in our churches, we have acted as if casualness toward God was a sign of our intimacy with Him. Yet if we really come to better understand the God of the Bible, as Ezekiel did here, then our trust in Him will be matched by our reverence for Him. This God is not like us. He is all-powerful and all wise. He inspires awe in us.

God is Not Limited by Circumstances

It was perhaps a new thought for the priest-trained, now-exiled Ezekiel that Yahweh, the Lord God, was not limited to Jerusalem! All his life, he had been trained to treasure the Temple and to fear expulsion from it. Exile from God's Promised Land was a reversal of the Exodus, a divine rejection (see Dt 28), a kind of death. Surely, Ezekiel and his fellow exiles in Babylon had been taught all this.

As true as it all may have been, even as Jeremiah focused on the death of God's

unfaithful people, God brought Ezekiel to focus on the hope for resurrection. Even before we get to the celebrated vision of the dry bones in chapter 37, there is hope in this book. It all springs fundamentally from this new understanding of God that Ezekiel was being taught by seeing what he saw here.

Simply put, the question that must have been in their minds was this: in losing their land, had they lost their God? And the unmistakable answer that this vision presents to this question is "No!"

The movement in this chapter—the storm coming, the mobile creatures, the wheels—all seemed to show that God is not bound to a place, whether Jerusalem or any other. Ezekiel's ancestors had known that. Abraham had heard the call of God in Ur. The distressed children of Israel had been heard by God during their sojourn in Egypt. They had witnessed the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night through the wilderness wanderings. Now God would give these exiles a renewed vision of this principle.

The vision Ezekiel had was really a vision of a chariot, with its great wheels and lightning speed. (Remember there were no cars or jets in ancient Mesopotamia!) Even more significant, did you notice that this chariot was very much like the ark of the covenant, with the creatures with wings outstretched, and a place in the middle for God, high and lifted up?

The message to the exiles was clear: God needed no temple. While He clearly had chosen to fill the Temple that Solomon had built for Him in Jerusalem, never had He taught them to think that He was limited in any way to the means that they provided for Him. I wonder if even the rainbow (v. 28) would have been a reminder to them of God's universal

concern (see Ge 9:8-17), unbound by ethnic descent or national location?

Friend, you realize, don't you, that God is not limited to where you last think you spotted Him? He is not bound by our perceptions of Him or our expectations for Him. He can come in the most surprising ways and at the most amazing times! Now that can be troubling or encouraging, depending on how you feel. It is troubling to you if you thought that you had escaped from the threat of God, if you thought, as John Bunyan put it, you were "free among the dead, and counted among the number of those that He remembereth no more." The sinner is always troubled by the approach of God. Like the freshly fallen Adam, his instinct is always to run and hide.

But the news that God is not limited to circumstances is great news if you love God, and have come to think, for whatever reason, that you had put yourself beyond the bounds of His concern. Bunyan writes, "Sometimes a man...is, as he apprehends, so far off from God, that...they think themselves beyond the reach of God's mercy." But, he adds, "It becomes thee, when thou canst not perceive that God is within the reach of *thy* arm, then to believe that thou art within the reach of *his*; for it is long, and none knows how long."²

Dear Christian friend, beware! Don't be too dependent on particular means, whether an author, speaker, preacher, church, worship style, friend, job or cherished dream. Here's hope, even if you're separated in time or circumstance from some past place of blessing, from your Jerusalem. Realize the truth of what Paul learned: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any

powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ro 8:38-39). Things do not have to be the same in order to know blessing. God doesn't find Himself bound by circumstances; rather God limits circumstances.

God Initiates

Did you notice the divine initiative here? Again, that God initiates would have been assumed at the time (even though they would have been surprised that He initiated with them even when they were in Babylon!).

We're not told that this vision came to Ezekiel because of his piety, his studiousness, his fasting and praying, or his holiness. He is simply presented as "among the exiles" when the "the heavens were opened" (v. 1). The passive tense here does not suggest that it was Ezekiel who was reaching up and ripping them open, but God who was rending them and stooping down. So we read again in verse 3 that "the word of the Lord came." We don't read of Ezekiel going to get it, but of God speaking to Him. Again, in verse 4 we see that the vision itself began with the storm that came to Ezekiel. He did not set out to experience God; rather God set out to show something of Himself to Ezekiel.

Again at the end of the vision, after Ezekiel has marveled over the fantastic sights he has beheld in the storm and the creatures and the wheels, we read in verse 25, "Then there came a voice." So as the word of God had come, as the storm had come, as the living creatures and chariot had come, so, too, here the voice came. And it came, we read in verse 28, because "of one speaking."

Francis Schaeffer entitled one of his

books *He is There and He is Not Silent*. God was not being quiet in this case. Rather, out of love, God came and spoke. Like Moses and the burning bush, and Isaiah in the temple, and Paul on the road to Damascus, it is the human part to hear and respond; it is God's part to come and speak. God did with Ezekiel in this vision what God always does. God took the initiative

If you are hearing this message today as a non-Christian, I urge you most solemnly: Be responsive to God's advances. God does delight in forgiving the sins of those who repent and trust in Him. Some people find it inconceivable that God could care for them, but friends, the inconceivable in this case is *true*.

Once when Julia Ward Howe, the well-known crusader for women's rights and the author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," invited a certain senator to come and meet an up-and-coming young actor, the senator wrote back, "The truth is, I have got beyond taking an interest in individuals." Mrs. Howe commented in her diary, "God Almighty has not got so far." Thank God, that's true. But friend, be responsive. Cherish any inkling of true faith. Don't be presumptuous. The decision that we are called to make to follow Christ is costly, and it is urgent. It is urgent partly because God is not always initiating in the same way. Although whoever will may come, people are often disinterested. There are seasons of greater and lesser openness and concern about matters of the spirit in people's lives.

As Christians, the great truth of God taking the initiative with us should make us humble and prayerful. As we recall that it was He who called us, and that we did not call ourselves, we find our own opinion of ourselves and our goodness declin-

ing even while the vision of God and of His glorious grace increases. And so our response is to praise Him, and to humbly come in prayer and supplication to the One Who takes initiative, Who will come, and Who will save.

God initiates.

God Communicates

Communication is really at the heart of this chapter.

As surprising as it may be to us, Ezekiel's vision climaxes in voice. The order here is one of sight, then sound, then speech. Israel's God was not a mute idol; He was a God who had shaped His people by His Word. He would do so again with these exiles in Babylon.

It is striking to see this vision build as it does, with strange detail and significant descriptions of things that Ezekiel saw, only to have it culminate with something that he heard. Now we would not do it this way. Today, we are creatures of show and spectacle, impatient with the curse of faith, desirous to replace it with what we can see. But until we come to the Heavenly City, we are not in a position to lay aside faith for sight, and so we must content ourselves with faith in what we hear, rather than simply the more immediate seductive sights that we can see.

It seems strange to us, but so it was here—this vision climaxed with a voice! After the splendor of verses 1-24, the creatures lowered their wings in verse 25 as if in expectation that One greater than they was approaching. So He was. But He came, not swaggering into sight, but speaking from on high, even to Ezekiel.

The God of the Bible, you see, wants not mere adoration from a distance, but personal relationship. He seeks not mere encounter and sensation, but covenant

love.

And what of you? If you honestly evaluate your own spiritual life, do you find yourself satisfied with mere sensation? Don't be. God wants more than that. He wants a relationship with you, and verbal communication is essential for relationship. Even the deaf and the mute can have that verbal communication, even the blind and the illiterate. Verbal need not mean logically complex, or mere words, but it must include some kind of transfer of information, with an ability to reflect on the one speaking, and the one hearing.

I know that some of you may object that what I am saying is self-evidently false, because, you may say, you have a wonderful relationship with your dog, and *he* doesn't talk. But, my friend, imagine this—what if you got home today, and your dog *did* talk to you? I suggest that you would quickly and certainly enter a new level of relationship, so significantly different from the “good dog's” and “roll over's” that went before, that, in comparison, you may feel that your earlier relationship was no relationship at all.

What I am urging is that you not be satisfied with mere superstition, with reverence to a mute god. This vision of Ezekiel and the Christian Scriptures as a whole are united in presenting the true God as a God who communicates.

So we Christians must never discount the importance of that communication. We must not do anything to detract from the centrality of the Word of God in all aspects of our lives. How much time have you spent reading the Word today? How much time have you spent reflecting on it? How much time do we in our church, or you in the church you come from, spend reading the Scriptures in our public services? Do our announcements and

songs take longer than speaking our prayers to Him, and hearing His Scriptures read? If so, what does this say about our understanding of God? Who is the God that we really are worshiping? Is He the God who spoke to Ezekiel?

Friend, never underestimate the seminal power of the Word of God. People often asked Luther how he accomplished the reformation. He explained, “I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept...the Word [worked]. I did nothing. The Word did it all.”³ The centerpiece of our Christian worship and lives must be hearing the Word with heart-obedience and with prayer.

So in our churches, we must realize the importance of preaching, Scripture reading, and prayer over vague notions of “worshipful experiences.” No amount of purported emotional engagement will ever make up for stopping up our ears to Him.

Have you ever had a friend who was too busy, who just wouldn't stop and listen and talk? It takes a toll on the relationship, doesn't it? Don't let that be your situation with God. The true God, the God that Ezekiel encountered here in chapter one is a God who communicates.

Conclusion

A. W. Tozer wrote in *The Knowledge of the Holy*,

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.... The gravest question before the Church is *always* God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God.⁴

If you have any hesitation about the truth of this statement, just go down the list of things we've said this morning. What difference does it make:

If you think that God is just like you?

If you don't think that God is wise or able?

If you decide that God is limited to this place, or that situation?

If you think that He simply stands and waits for your initiative?

If you think that He's mute—that there's no way you can know what God thinks about you, life and the universe?

What difference does it make? All the difference in the world—and more.

ENDNOTES

¹William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1957) 325.

²John Bunyan, *The Saints Knowledge of Christ's Love: Vol. 2*, ed. George Offor (1854; rpt. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1991) 5-6.

³Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988) 53.

⁴A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Lincoln, NE: Back to the Bible Broadcast, 1961) 7.