

Ezekiel Sees the Glory of God

Ezekiel 1

Turn to Ezekiel 1. Ezekiel was 30 years old, a priest in exile in Babylon, and had the most remarkable vision of God. Before Ezekiel, no one ever saw God like this, and afterward they borrowed from Ezekiel, especially Daniel and Revelation.

And the central message of Ezekiel's vision is that God is completely mobile. God, in all his heavenly majesty and power and holiness, can show up anywhere at any time in the full glory of his presence. The full glory of his royal presence and his throne moves like lightning.

But first some history. We covered the three invasions before, in one of the Jeremiah sermons, but we'll begin with that again, to put Ezekiel in his place. 2 Kings 24-25.

First Invasion. The powerful Babylonians invaded Judah the first time in 605 BC. To make peace and not be destroyed, Judah gave the Babylonians many treasures from the temple and the king's palace, all that wealth that Hezekiah had showed the Babylonians 100 years earlier (Isaiah 39). Judah payed Babylon a huge amount to go home and leave them in peace.

The Babylonians also took their best young people. Daniel and his three friends were a part of this. The Babylonians would train them and use them. And of course the Jews had to pay heavy taxes to Babylon every year.

Second Invasion. A few years after the first invasion, the Jews rebelled against Babylon, stopped paying taxes. They would take their chances. The Babylonian army came back in about 598, about seven years after the first invasion. This time they were much more severe. They taught the Jews a lesson. They killed many, and took eight to ten thousand exiles back to Babylon.

Jeremiah wrote a letter to exiles, to settle down and live in Babylon, you're not coming back soon. He wrote to this group (Jer 29). The Babylonians at that time took the king as a prisoner. Jehoiachin was king of Judah at that time. He was only 18 years old, had been king 3 months. God let the Babylonians take the David king captive and send him into exile.

Ezekiel was in this group, in those 8-10 thousand people taken to Babylon after the second invasion. He dates his vision as happening when he was 30, and in the fifth year of the exile of king Jehoiachin. That means the fifth year after the second Babylonian invasion.

Third Invasion This happened 11 years after the second invasion. The Jews had again stopped paying taxes. This time Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. The years between the second and third invasions are the end of Jeremiah's ministry, and the beginning of Ezekiel's ministry; remembering that Jeremiah was still in Jerusalem during this time, and Ezekiel was in Babylon.

Cherubim – Most of Ezekiel’s vision is not actually of God himself, or the throne of God, but the four living creatures. Verses 5-24, almost all the vision, is about these four.

We’ll start with Moses. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and to Mt Sinai. There God covenanted with Israel, and at Mt Sinai, God told Moses exactly how to make the tabernacle, which they made. In the center of the tabernacle was the holy of holies, and in there was the ark of the covenant. A golden box the size of a medium coffee table.

On the lid were two golden cherubim, golden angels with two wings, facing each other. They understood the invisible God to be enthroned in that space between or above those cherubim.

In the ancient world, in case someone who wanted to assassinate the king, the king would have two powerful warriors standing beside his throne, fierce soldiers, completely loyal to him. They were guards. God does worry about his enemies killing him, but the cherubim are in that role.

In Isaiah 6, Isaiah had a vision of God in the temple, and he saw two seraphim, another word for the same thing, six wings each, beside God. To each other they called “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, the earth is full of his glory.”

Ezekiel sees four of them, and they are called “living creatures” instead of cherubim or seraphim, and they have four wings instead of two or six. In Revelation, John sees four living creatures as well, six wings each. These are all variations of the same theme, the two cherubim.

Now, finally, let’s read Ezekiel.

God Visits the Rejects. 1:1-3

Ezk 1:1 In my thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. ² On the fifth of the month—it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin—³ the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the Lord was on him.

Try to feel Ezekiel’s astonishment; he still can hardly believe this. Everything about their setting says God has rejected them. He’s among the exiles, by the Kebar River to be exact, in Babylon, the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin, God let them take the David king captive, by the Kebar River, in the land of the Babylonians. Could any Israelites be more rejected by God?

There, in that awful place, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel. Even there, in the land of the Babylonians, beside a Babylonian river, the hand of the Lord was on him! How is that even possible?

And let's be clear: these exiles are not godly people, they are not repenting of their sin and idolatry, they are still stubborn and stiff necked and resistant to God, and Ezekiel is only a little better. More on Ezekiel next week. These people are not humbling themselves and seeking God.

Even there, the heavens were opened, and Ezekiel saw visions of God, and the message of the Lord came to Ezekiel, and the hand of the Lord was on him.

Brilliant Storm and Four Living Creatures 1:4-9

⁴ I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, ⁵ and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was human, ⁶ but each of them had four faces and four wings. ⁷ Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. ⁸ Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. All four of them had faces and wings, ⁹ and the wings of one touched the wings of another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved.

Probably the most significant thing here is the number four. Four in the Bible suggests earth in some way, four directions, “the four corners of the earth,” four seasons. There are four living creatures. That name, “living creature,” sound like earth creatures. Cherubim and seraphim sounds more like heavenly beings than “living creature,” though they are heavenly beings.

Four creatures, four faces, four wings, “under the wings on their four sides” they had human hands, whatever that means – four hands? And their basic form was human.

Faces, Wings, Flames, and Flashes 1:10-14

¹⁰ Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a human being, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle. ¹¹ Such were their faces. They each had two wings spreading out upward, each wing touching that of the creature on either side; and each had two other wings covering its body. ¹² Each one went straight ahead. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, without turning as they went. ¹³ The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire moved back and forth among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it. ¹⁴ The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning.

Four faces: human, lion, ox, and eagle. Human, then lions, the most noble of wild animals, then ox, the most valuable and powerful domestic animal, and eagle, the most honoured of birds. Ezekiel is seeing a vision of God, the appearance of the glory of the Lord. The glory of God himself is reflected in humans and animals: wild animals, domestic animals, and birds.

Beyond that, living creatures look like fire, like bright torches, and they are incredibly mobile, do anywhere, on the move, they speed back and forth like flashes of lightning.

Wheels 1:15-21

¹⁵ As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four faces. ¹⁶ This was the appearance and structure of the wheels: They sparkled like topaz, and all four looked alike. Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel. ¹⁷ As they moved, they would go in any one of the four directions the creatures faced; the wheels did not change direction as the creatures went. ¹⁸ Their rims were high and awesome, and all four rims were full of eyes all around.

¹⁹ When the living creatures moved, the wheels beside them moved; and when the living creatures rose from the ground, the wheels also rose. ²⁰ Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, and the wheels would rise along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. ²¹ When the creatures moved, they also moved; when the creatures stood still, they also stood still; and when the creatures rose from the ground, the wheels rose along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

We'll not get into detail here. The four living creatures are each bound to a wheel, and the wheel is actually two wheels crossing in some way. Picture a single wheel. It can roll along a straight line, either forward or backward, north or south. Ezekiel seems to be picturing another merging wheel crossing it, a wheel aiming east and west, two wheels across each other.

In actual practice I don't think such a thing can work, but in visions these things can be arranged. Whatever the details, the meaning is that the wheels, like the living creatures, can go any direction without turning. All directions are immediately possible. And they can lift off the ground, creatures and wheels, and rise into the air.

Ezekiel seems to have in mind a four wheeled chariot. Roman chariots had two wheels, but four wheeled chariots were also well known in the ancient world. Imagine a four wheeled chariot, and the four living creatures with their wheels are both the wheels and the horses. God rides around on a four wheeled chariot, and these four living creatures carry it and move it. It's fast, they *speed back and forth like flashes of lighting*. These four are both wheels and horses.

There are a few places in Psalms where the psalmists picture God on a chariot-throne, and the cherubim are a part of this. See Pss 18:10-12; 68:32-33; 104:3-4.

Something else: Ezekiel has trouble describing what he saw. He struggles to find a way to describe it, because it is not like anything he's seen, and some things he says hardly make sense. This is actually a part of the message. God can appear in ways that are clearer, if he wants, like Moses at the burning bush, Isaiah's vision in the temple, etc. God is telling us something here.

God is very hard to describe. He is too big, too far above us, to be properly understood and described. We need to understand that. Some things are clear, but much is hard to figure out. That's our God. His ways are not our ways. He's good, and trust him, and he's far beyond us.

The Crystal Platform 1:22-24

The crystal platform begins in Moses. After God and Israel made their covenant, this happened (Ex 24): *Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up Mt. Sinai and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli (that's the platform), as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.* These 70 look up and see God through this bright blue pavement that is transparent. They are below it, eat together before God.

Ezk 1:22 Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked something like a platform, sparkling like crystal, and awesome. ²³ Under the crystal platform their wings were stretched out one toward the other, and each had two wings covering its body. ²⁴ When the creatures moved, I heard the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty, like the tumult of an army. When they stood still, they lowered their wings.

This crystal platform represents the holiness of God. In Isaiah, the seraphim said, “holy, holy, holy.” Here the crystal platform separates God from his creatures. “Holy” at its core means “set apart,” and God himself is set apart, above this transparent pavement, everything else below.

The other striking thing here is the power of the wings: *I heard the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty, like the tumult of an army.* In Isaiah’s vision, the **voice** of the seraphim was enough to make the ground shake under the temple. Here it is the **wings**. Each wing sounds like a jet engine going at full blast. These four living creatures are great and powerful, with mighty wings. That’s God’s transportation.

God in the likeness of human appearance: 1:25-28

²⁵ Then there came a voice from above the platform over their heads as they stood with lowered wings. ²⁶ Above the platform over their heads was what looked like a throne of lapis lazuli, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. ²⁷ I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. ²⁸ Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him.

Here is v26 in the ESV, a more literal translation: *Above the expanse over their heads, there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. On the throne: a likeness with a human appearance.*

In Genesis 1, humans, male and female, were made in the image and likeness of God. Here that works in reverse. If people were made in the likeness of God, then God must in some way have the likeness of human appearance. Ezekiel describes Yahweh, God the Father, as *a likeness with a human appearance*. Wow! I don’t think there is anything like that elsewhere in the Bible.

In v5, the living creatures had a human likeness, and here God himself is a likeness with a human appearance. He's NOT human, that never crossed Ezekiel's mind, but he is a likeness with a human appearance. He's like glowing metal, surrounded by a rainbow of brilliant light.

This (whole vision) was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. That summarizes the whole vision, beginning the windstorm coming out of the north. *This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.* So, what have we seen? Two things:

1, God is holy and heavenly, and so are his angels, and yet God's presence has the likeness of humans and of life on earth. God's glory includes animal faces. Earthly life and God himself are bound together, so much so that God himself is a likeness with a human appearance.

2, God is completely mobile, and he does not travel alone. He travels like a king, with royal guards and heavenly staff and royal transportation suitable to the Lord Almighty, the Maker of Heaven and Earth. When the Almighty Maker of Heaven and Earth is on the move, what would suitable transportation look like? Not walking down the road with a suitcase.

Ezekiel sees the Lord Almighty on the move, and it seems at first a great fiery windstorm in the distance, and then we get more details. It is a four-wheeled chariot, put together the Almighty Creator himself, a vehicle suitable for him.

This God moves. God, in all his heavenly majesty and power and holiness, can show up anywhere, at any time, in the full glory of his presence. The full glory of his royal presence and heavenly throne moves like lightning.

He goes where he wants, and he came to Ezekiel among the exiles: rejected and dejected exiles, homeless and disobedient exiles. But God was not finished with them, so he came in his full splendor to Ezekiel, who was among the exiles in Babylon. Our God is like this, and he's still not finished with his people. Amen.