

Ezekiel 1B

- Imagine you're talking to someone who has been blind since birth trying to explain the concept of colors
 - How would you describe to that person what the colors red or blue looks like?
 - The person would have no point of reference to understand what you're describing
 - He can hear what you're saying, but what you're saying would probably make little or no sense
 - I think that's the kind of problem Ezekiel faced when he was called by God to relate the vision he experienced in chapter 1
 - Ezekiel saw things no one sees, heavenly things, things that just don't make sense to someone bound to earth
 - He tried to describe his vision using simple language, but still the overall description may seem nonsensical to us
 - Some have even accused Ezekiel of being psychotic or on LSD
 - But we know the Lord presented Ezekiel with this scene to communicate some truth to Israel and to us
 - That means despite that the otherworldly nature of these events, they ARE understandable by the Spirit
 - We CAN know what the Lord was trying to teach us by these visions, even if the details remain mysterious in some cases
 - You could say the same for all Scripture
- God has the power to make Himself known in His word irrespective of our own abilities or effort
 - Let me illustrate what I mean...

Alexander MacKay was a Scottish missionary pioneer to Uganda. How did he learn of God's call to become a missionary? His story starts with the story of another missionary, David Livingstone, the Englishman who traveled into the heart of Africa as an evangelist in the mid 1800s. After a number of years, a British newspaper sent reporter Henry Stanley to find Livingstone. When Stanley came upon Livingstone, he uttered those famous words, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"

Stanley was so moved by his time with Livingstone that he himself later became a missionary, and he went to the heart of Africa, to Uganda. In April of 1875, Henry Stanley wrote a letter appealing for workers to come and evangelize the region with him. He gave the letter to a French colonel who then left by caravan for the coast. But the Frenchman was suddenly attacked by a savage tribe. He was killed and his body was left unburied on the sand where it was discovered by some English soldiers who happened to be passing that way. The soldiers buried the French Colonel, but before doing so they pulled off his boots. In one of them was Stanley's letter, stained with the dead man's blood. They sent the letter to an English General in Egypt who sent it to a newspaper in London. Six months later, in December of that year, Alexander MacKay read Stanley's letter in the London newspaper. Through that letter, God spoke to MacKay and called him to be a missionary to Uganda.

- My point is that God's message will find its way to its intended destination, one way or another
 - So as we dive into Ezekiel's first vision, be prepared for the likelihood that you may not understand every detail of the vision
 - But you can have confidence you will come away with the understanding God intended
- Last week we stopped at v.4, where we learned that this vision concerns the judgment God has brought upon Judah for their sins under the Old Covenant
 - The Lord executed His judgment at the hands of the Babylonians, just as He promised He would through Isaiah and Jeremiah
 - The cloud represents the glory of God moving moving to keep His promises in Israel
 - In the midst of God's glory was a glowing representation of God's judgment
 - And since the storm came from the north, it reminded the exiles their northern oppressor, Babylon, has been appointed by God
 - So now let's pick up there and move forward into the next section of the vision

Ezek. 1:4 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.

Ezek. 1:5 Within it there were figures resembling four living beings. And this was their appearance: they had human form.

Ezek. 1:6 Each of them had four faces and four wings.

Ezek. 1:7 Their legs were straight and their feet were like a calf's hoof, and they gleamed like burnished bronze.

Ezek. 1:8 Under their wings on their four sides were human hands. As for the faces and wings of the four of them,

Ezek. 1:9 their wings touched one another; their faces did not turn when they moved, each went straight forward.

Ezek. 1:10 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.

Ezek. 1:11 Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above; each had two touching another being, and two covering their bodies.

- Perhaps now you feel like that blind person contemplating colors I mentioned a moment ago? It's hard to wrap our minds around what Ezekiel is describing
 - Ezekiel sees four figures emerging from the center of the storm, from the place of light
 - Since we know the cloud pictures the glory of God, then we understand that they are stationed at the heart of God's glory
 - From the descriptions Ezekiel gives us, they sound like aliens or monsters from a sci-fi movie
 - We're going to consider his description in detail, because I want you to obtain a clear picture of this scene in your mind
 - First, these four creatures are living beings, which means they were created by God and given life
 - They have a human form or likeness, so that's our point of reference for understanding their appearance
 - Yet it's quickly apparent they are very unlike human beings in many ways
 - Key among those differences, they possess four faces each and four wings each

- The four faces were that of a man, a lion, a bull and an eagle
- Interpreters have long sought to explain the meaning of these four choices
- Usually such interpretation is little more than speculation
- I'll offer an interpretation too, but let's finish building our picture of their appearance first
- Their legs were straight Ezekiel says
 - The Hebrew word translated as "straight" is literally the word for "right" which can also mean upright
 - So Ezekiel's saying the four creatures were standing erect on two legs each
 - Though the legs were like those of a man, the feet were like those of a calf hoof
- And the legs were like shining bronze
 - Burnished bronze is a picture of withstanding judgment
 - So it suggests these creatures have been tested in a judgment fire and have been proven pure and holy
- Moving on, they have four wings each, and under each wing they possess the hand of a man
 - Two of these wings are raised high above them, while the other two are lowered to cover their bodies
 - The two raised wings are touching the adjoining creatures
 - So the upper left wing of one creature is touching the upper right wing of the creature standing to the left
 - While the upper right wing is touching the upper left wing of the third creature on the right
 - And so it goes around from creature to creature
 - Which means these four creatures are standing in a square formation
 - Each one facing a cardinal direction

- And they are adjoined at the tips of their upper wings so they must move as a single unit
- Their lower wings are covering their bodies in an act of humility since they stand in the presence of the glory of God
- And their four faces are positioned in a similar, fixed manner
 - The faces of each created are planted on a single head and neck
 - Ezekiel says the lion and bull faces were on the right and left
 - This implies that the human face is always looking outward from the formation
 - While the other faces are fixed in the other cardinal directions
 - The human face was outward, the lion on the right, the bull on the left and the eagle on the back
 - Since the four creatures are standing in opposing directions, someone looking upon this group would see all four faces from any angle
 - And the faces do not turn Ezekiel says in v.9
 - Rather they each look straight ahead without turning as the creature follows the Spirit of God without deviating
 - Which means the four faces continued to look in each of the cardinal directions regardless as the creatures moved about in perfect obedience to the leading of God's Spirit
- Let's try to understand the meaning of their unique faces
 - It seems each of the faces represents the highest creature among the major divisions of the animal kingdom God established in Genesis
 - Man is the greatest of all living things God made, as scripture testifies
 - Man is the greatest of all creatures on earth, and so the face of the Man is in the first position on each creature
 - Furthermore, each creature has a general appearance of a man, Ezekiel says

- And among the animal kingdom, God created beasts (wild animals), cattle (domesticated animals) and fish and birds
 - Lions are king among beasts
 - A bull is the king of domesticated animals
 - And eagles are the kings among birds
 - While we might suggest other choices (like an elephant), these animals were known within Israel as the greatest beasts
- So what are these creatures? And what do they represent?
 - It may surprise you to know these four creatures are common characters in scripture
 - They are mentioned 91 times in the Bible, mostly in the Old Testament as well as once in the New Testament
 - Ezekiel himself names them later in this book, in chapter 10

Ezek. 10:20 These are the living beings that I saw beneath the God of Israel by the river Chebar; so I knew that they were cherubim.

Ezek. 10:21 Each one had four faces and each one four wings, and beneath their wings was the form of human hands.

Ezek. 10:22 As for the likeness of their faces, they were the same faces whose appearance I had seen by the river Chebar.

- These four creatures are cherubim
 - Cherubim are part of the angelic realm
 - We use the word “angel” in a very loose and general way, but the Bible describes angels far more specifically
- Altogether, there are three classes of angels described in the Bible
 - First, the lowest rank of angelic beings are angels
 - The Bible always portrays angels as having the appearance of adult men (never as women or babies)
 - They do not have strange features; they do not even have wings
 - They are so “human-like” that they are usually mistaken for regular people

- And the Bible says angels exist to be ministering spirits sent to the elect of God
- Next are seraphim, the second class of angelic beings
 - This group is mentioned least in the Bible, only in Isaiah and Revelation
 - Seraphim have a single face and six wings that cover different parts of their form
 - Some seraphim have the face of a man, some of a lion, some of a calf and some have an eagle's face
 - They are covered with eyes on all sides, all around
 - They serve God around the throne continually praising Him, pronouncing judgments, leading worship, and attending to the altar of sacrifice in Heaven
- Finally, we have cherubim, the highest order of angelic being
 - As we've seen, they resemble seraphim in some ways, but they are distinct in other ways
 - They have all four faces rather than just one
 - They have four wings rather than six
 - They too operate around the throne of God, but they function as guards
 - In fact, the word cherubim comes from a root Hebrew word meaning "to guard"
 - What the cherubim guard is God's glory
 - We see this role reflected in numerous places
 - Cherubim guarded the way into the Garden after Adam and Eve were sent out of the Garden
 - They served to remind early man that sinful flesh could not coexist with the presence of God's glory
 - Golden cherubim guarded the mercy seat in the tabernacle and were embroidered on the curtains leading into the tabernacle

- They are seen serving around in the throne room of God in various places in the Old Testament
- But Ezekiel gives us the most detailed descriptions of the appearance and role of cherubim, including this description here
 - Later in this book Ezekiel will highlight the story of one infamous cherub in particular
 - In chapter 28 Ezekiel tells us that the most powerful cherub was appointed to guard the glory of God in the heavenly tabernacle
 - But this cherub became so taken with his privilege and beauty that he allowed his position of importance to go to his head
 - And as a result of his pride, he fell into sin thinking he could become God
 - That cherub was named Satan (we'll study this more later)
- So God shows Ezekiel this vision of His glory bringing judgment for Israel, with cherubim guarding the glory of God
 - And now Ezekiel describes how these creatures serve the glory of God

Ezek. 1:12 And each went straight forward; wherever the spirit was about to go, they would go, without turning as they went.

Ezek. 1:13 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.

Ezek. 1:14 And the living beings ran to and fro like bolts of lightning.

Ezek. 1:15 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.

Ezek. 1:16 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.

Ezek. 1:17 Whenever they moved, they moved in any of their four directions without turning as they moved.

Ezek. 1:18 As for their rims they were lofty and awesome, and the rims of all four of them were full of eyes round about.

Ezek. 1:19 Whenever the living beings moved, the wheels moved with them. And whenever the living beings rose from the earth, the wheels rose also.

Ezek. 1:20 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 the wheels.

Ezek. 1:21 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.

- The cherubim can move, as fast as lightning by means of special wheels
 - In v.15 Ezekiel says there was one wheel under each cherub for a total of four wheels upon which the entire group of cherubim move
 - The wheels were made of beryl, which is topaz, a bluish-yellow crystalline stone
 - In v.18, he says they are lofty and awesome
 - But in the original Hebrew, the words means exceedingly high and terrifying
 - So these wheels are huge
 - Furthermore, each wheel was actually made of two wheels, as if one wheel were inside the other
 - The two wheels were set perpendicular to one another
 - Imagine something like a gyroscope assembly
 - This assembly allowed the cherubim to move in any cardinal direction effortlessly without turning
 - And neither of the wheels turned, nor did the faces or bodies of the cherubim turn
 - So the cherubim could move to any place without diverting their attention, and they could do so as fast as lightning
 - They could even move straight up, because the wheels rose off the ground with them
 - Finally, Ezekiel says the wheels are full of eyes and of the Spirit
 - When the Bible describes something as “full of eyes” it means it cooperates with the omnipresence and omniscience of God
 - How can a created being possess these characteristics that are uniquely qualities of God?
 - Ezekiel says they do so by means of the Spirit of God

- These cherubim can know and follow the will of God perfectly because they are led by the Spirit of God
- So the cherubim rely on these special wheels to accompany the glory of God as He moves within Creation
 - The wheels transport the cherubim in perfect harmony with God in keeping with God's omnipresence and omniscience
 - Though the cherubim are created beings, nevertheless, they can accompany an infinite God because these wheels are under the control of the Spirit, Who has perfect knowledge of God's will
 - The cherubim never divert their attention away from God, because the Spirit ensures they were always in the right place
 - It's as if the Spirit is the navigator for these creature ensuring they are always in perfect sync with God's glory
 - And between these cherubim we find a coal fire with lightning, which again pictures the glory of God
 - Speaking of the glory of God, Ezekiel finishes chapter 1 with a description of the glory of God inside this cloud

Ezek. 1:22 Now over the heads of the living beings there was something like an expanse, like the awesome gleam of crystal, spread out over their heads.

Ezek. 1:23 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.

Ezek. 1:24 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.

Ezek. 1:25 And there came a voice from above the expanse that was over their heads; whenever they stood still, they dropped their wings.

Ezek. 1:26 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.

Ezek. 1:27 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.

Ezek. 1:28 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.

- Ezekiel sees a manifestation of the Glory of God seated on a throne over an expanse of crystal
 - This expanse is another common scene in both the Old and New Testament
 - This is the way God represents His place in the heavenly realm
 - We know this is not an actual image of God the Father, because scripture says it is not possible to witness such a thing

1Tim. 6:15 ... He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 1Tim. 6:16 who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.

- Despite the fact that no man has seen God on the throne, nevertheless He manifests His glory from time to time in a representative way
 - He represents His glory with brilliant light, reflected by gems and crystal and rainbows and with tremendously powerful sounds
 - In the midst of these things we typically find a figure like a man, surrounded by fire and glowing metal
 - Isaiah and the Apostle John saw similar things in their visions
- According to the New Testament, these manifestations are always the appearance of Christ

Heb. 1:3 And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power...

Col. 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

- Christ is the member of the Godhead Who represents God to and in the physical world
- So every physical manifestation of God is actually a manifestation of Christ, who is the image of the invisible God
- So we have a manifestation of God's glory seated on the throne, and upholding the glory of God are the cherubim
 - They are underneath the expanse, supporting it

- In fact, Scripture says that the glory of God is resting above the cherubim

**Psa. 99:1 The Lord reigns, let the peoples tremble;
He is enthroned above the cherubim, let the earth shake!**

- They are guardians of God's glory and they move everywhere He goes in perfect harmony with the Spirit to accomplish that mission
 - And in that detail we begin to gain an understanding of this entire scene
 - We come to understand why the Lord manifested Himself to Ezekiel in this way with cherubim on display
- Ask yourself this: Is God's glory ever in jeopardy? Does it need protecting from some enemy? Could anything threaten or diminish God's glory? No
 - No, because God's glory stands apart from His Creation
 - It's possible for someone or something in Creation to deny or blaspheme God's glory
 - But His glory isn't lessened...it's just unappreciated
 - So why did God need cherubim to guard His glory?
 - Why are they upholding the glory of His presence?
 - Why must they accompany Him in perfect harmony always guarding His glory?
 - The answer is they serve as ideal examples to mankind for how we are to glorify the Lord
 - Remember, cherubim guarded the entrance to Eden so that mankind would understand that sin separates us from God's glory
 - And cherubim decorate the curtain guarding the entrance of the Holy Place to teach Israel that access to God's glory was guarded from sin
 - And cherubim guarded the glory of God over mercy seat of the ark to remind us that God's glory is His greatest concern

- In other words, the cherubim are poster children for how we should relate to the glory of God
 - The Creation and all it contains was made to reflect glory upon the Creator
 - And while the cherubim have a unique role in guarding God's glory
 - We are all called to emulate that example
- The cherubim guard the glory of God in a very literal fashion...it's their specific mission and purpose for existence
 - But we too exist to glorify God, though in a less direct fashion
 - Jesus said we glorify our Father in Heaven through our life of obedient service

Matt. 5:16 "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

1Pet. 2:12 Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.

- And Israel specifically was called to glory God among the nations through her obedience to the covenant

Deut. 7:6 "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth."

Deut. 7:7 "The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples,

Deut. 7:8 but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

- So Lesson #1 for Israel and for us is guard the glory of God
- Moreover, the cherubim demonstrate that guarding the glory of God depends on living in harmony with the will of God
 - The cherubim never divert or turn from their appointed post in service to God

- They follow God everywhere, under direction of the Spirit with perfect knowledge of His will
- They move with lightning speed
- They never turn away from God, their attention always fixed on Him
- That's how we guard the glory to God...through our obedience
 - Imagine the glory you would bring to God if your every thought and action were perfectly in tune with His
 - If you remained fixed on the Lord while you let the Spirit "turn" you in the proper direction
 - If you could move with the speed of lightning to follow the Lord in your life
 - If our lives were consumed with concern for obedience so we could protect and uphold His glory
 - And if we were humble enough to cover ourselves in the process
- Obviously, we aren't cherubim, so we can't do what they do, at least not to the degree they can
 - But we are supposed to make a goal of living in that way
 - And so was Israel as a nation
- God called them to be concerned with the glory of God, to glorify Him among the nations
 - But they traded that mission for one of worshipping false gods, engaging in selfish pursuits and living like the pagan world
 - In the process, they brought shame upon God's name
 - Which is why they now find themselves sitting in Babylon
- The more you understand the importance of the glory of God, the more likely you will be to guard it in your own life
 - Conversely, if you give little or no thought to God's glory, then your walk as a Christian will inevitably drift away from God's priorities
 - The fact that so many rabbis in Israel's day rejected Ezekiel's visions as mere fantasy tells us they missed the point

- It's proof of how little appreciation Israel had for the glory of God
- Which is why the Lord appeared to Israel in this way, so they might appreciate the God they were in covenant with
- And unfortunately, many modern theologians have likewise rejected Ezekiel's vision as allegory or fantasy
 - They reject that cherubim even exist
 - Or that this vision was an accurate depiction of God
 - Which may explain why so many in the church have moved so far away from a God-fearing life of obedience to His word
 - We just don't understand or appreciate the importance of the glory of God or how we are called to guard it
- A.W. Tozer made the following observation

The church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted it for one so low, so ignoble as to be utterly unworthy of thinking, worshipping men. This she has done not deliberately, but little by little and without her knowledge; and her very unawareness only makes her situation all the more tragic. The low view of God entertained almost universally among Christians is the cause of a hundred lesser evils everywhere among us. A whole new philosophy of the Christian life has resulted from this one basic error in our religious thinking. With our losses of the sense of majesty has come the further loss of religious awe and consciousness of the divine Presence. We have lost our spirit of worship and our ability to withdraw inwardly to meet God in adoring silence. Modern Christianity is simply not producing the kind of Christian who can appreciate or experience the life in the Spirit. The words, "Be still, and know that I am God," mean next to nothing to the self-confident, bustling worshiper in this middle period of the twentieth century. This loss of the concept of majesty has come just when the forces of religion are making dramatic gains and the churches are more prosperous than at any time within the past several hundred years. But the alarming thing is that our gains are mostly external and our losses wholly internal; ... The decline of the knowledge of the Holy has brought on our troubles. A rediscovery of the majesty of God will go a long way toward curing them. It is impossible to keep our moral practices sound and our inward attitudes right while our idea of God is erroneous or inadequate. If we would bring back spiritual power to our lives, we must begin to think of God more nearly as He is.