

Ezekiel (Perplexing Passages)

Week 1/2 “The Glory of God”

by the Rev'd Michael Marklew (20/09/2026)

Bible Passage: Ezekiel 1-2

Loving God, please give us hearts to hear your word, open our eyes and the eyes of our nation to the truth of who you are, and give us hearts filled with hope. In Jesus Name. Amen.

Today was to be a day for celebration, a day of promotion and significance, except you find yourself sitting by a river in Babylon, all alone. You are depressed by the fear, dishonesty, injustice and hopelessness that you see all around you, and you are hurting deeply, for your people have lost everything and still will not repent.

It is in this moment, that the heavens open, and the likeness of the glory of the Lord falls down around you and when you see it, you fall face down, it is so amazing, so perplexing that no words will ever be enough to explain what you have seen.

Three things today,

1-God comes to the place of exile (v1:1-4,28)

Not in Jerusalem, not in the temple, not on the mountain top, but here by a river in Babylon.

2-God is far more holy than our words can hold (v1:5-27)

The only possible response to the Holiness of the Lord, is to fall flat on our faces.

3-God's Spirit now lives in us (v1:28-2:2)

No longer is God's spirit given to a few people for a specific task, but through faith in Jesus, his Spirit is given to all who seek him.

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Ezekiel 1 is a perplexing passage indeed, no less than a visual smorgasbord, with its out of this world imagery and apocalyptic language pointing to a reality that is beyond words. Lets open it up.

Ezekiel chapter 1 verse 1

1-God comes to the place of exile.

Not in the temple, not on the mountain top, but here by the river.

Verse 1.

In my thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the River Kebar, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. (Ezek 1.1)

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The year is 592 BC, one of God's People, a prophet and priest, Ezekiel, finds himself on the year of his 30th birthday as a captive in the pagan city of Babylon.

This happened to him, because 5 years earlier the notorious Nebuchadnezzar had attacked his city Jerusalem, looting and taking captives including Ezekiel and his king, to teach them a lesson for siding with Egypt.

History would say that it was the king's betrayal of Babylon that turned Nebuchadnezzar's attention and wrath upon Jerusalem and Ezekiel's people. Yet we learn from his story that it was God himself who left Jerusalem and used the pagan king to exact his wrath and judgement upon them.

Judgement, brought about because the Israelites had turned their back on their creator, and instead had put their trust in their wealth, their government's power and their own plans.

You know what they say? Pride comes before a fall.

And you know what else they say? God whispers on the mountain tops, but yells in the valleys.

And here God is visually yelling to Ezekiel, coming to him, not in the temple, not in a Church, but in the place that he least expected, in his weeping and lamenting by the river of Babylon.

Now what does this mean for us? It means that God is not limited to the places that we think he should be.

Now my story is similar in a way, for me, the fancy church building, the stained glass windows, the steeples, none of it really held anything for me, for me, God was so personal that the church building felt unnecessary.

That is until I was sent to a classic 18th century church to begin my priestly ministry. I wasn't against it, but it held little for me.

This changed when a homeless person walked in and asked, "what is the meaning of all these stained-glass windows?".

I looked up and around, and it hit me like a tonne of bricks. The windows told the story of the Gospel, one after the other, from Jesus's birth, his teaching, his death, his resurrection and the final window at the back was the moment before his ascension, his return to heaven.

Friends, God often appears where we least expect him, in the questions of a homeless person, in the sanctuary of an old church, by our bedside as we lament, in a daycare centre or by the rivers of Babylon.

God comes to the place of exile, and is more present than I think we often realise.

And

2-God is far more holy than our words can hold.

And the only possible response is to fall flat on our faces.

Verse 10.

¹⁰Their 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.

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¹¹Such were their faces. They each had two wings spreading out upwards, each wing touching that of the creature on either side; and each had two other wings covering its body.

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¹²Each one went straight ahead. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, without turning as they went.

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¹³The 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.

¹⁴The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning. (Ezek 1.10-14)

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Now lots of people have tried to explain what this means.

Some have said that the 4 faced creatures are an example of God's perfect nature. Strong like a lion, Diligent like an ox, Intelligent like humans and all seeing like the eagle.

Others have said that it is an image of the future, of how Christ is portrayed in each of the 4 Gospels. He is the lion of Judah in Matthew, He is a servant like an ox in Mark, He is the perfect human in Luke and of course He is all seeing, divine like the eagle as the Son of God in John.

But each and every single one of these ideas is not the whole picture.

For the point is not to explain what we see here, but to see how unexplainable it is.

For our God is so great, so just, so awesome, so mighty, so wonderful, so powerful, strong, so great... so mighty... so just...

I've run out of words, haven't I? And that's the point.

Our words can only go so far to explain how holy, how other the God who created us is, and Ezekiel takes this to the highest level possible, with such vivid and out of this world imagery.

So other and out of this world, that what he is seeing can only be what he fears it is.

Verse 28.

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell face down, and I heard the voice of one speaking (Ezek 1.28b)

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Wait a second? After all that, what we read here is just “the likeness of the glory of the Lord”.

Surely it is more?

But no, our prophet admits that it can't be anything more than a likeness, for anything more would surely destroy him. None but Jesus can withstand the full glory of the Lord, let alone explain it with words.

And at this sight, what does our prophet do? He did the only thing he could do.

He falls flat on his face! For God is far more holy than our words can hold.

And this is a reminder for us not to shrink God to the size of our politics, our comfort, our story. This vision will not let us, Ezekiel will not let us.

Yet, the amazing part isn't the vision, it is God's Spirit who lifts Ezekiel to his feet. Our 3rd point.

3-God's Spirit now lives in us

Not just Ezekiel and a select few, but all of those who put their faith in Jesus.

Chapter 2 verse 1.

He said to me, “Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.” As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. (Ezek 2.1-2)

This is incredible and perplexing, yes?

Now what if I said that this isn't just for Ezekiel, that this is for everyone. For the same Spirit that raised Ezekiel to his feet is the Holy Spirit.

It is the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead and the same Spirit that was poured out and continues to be poured out upon all people, starting at Pentecost.

This same Spirit lives in those who have put their trust in Jesus.

But we are only getting started, chapter 2 verse 3, and this is God speaking.

He said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day. The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn." (Ezek 2.3-4)

Clearly there is nothing new under the sun as God continues to call Spirit filled people to speak truth to a hurting world.

People like you and me.

But it is hard, and it can be scary, and we may be tempted to fear. Yet, to Ezekiel and to us, God says do not be afraid.

Verse 6.

And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briers and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or be terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people. (Ezek 2.6)

That's 3 times God said to Ezekiel, "Do not be afraid". And equally as Christians we can be many things, but we need not be afraid, for God is with us and his Holy Spirit dwells in us.

It is not just perplexing, but it is intense, yes?

Well, before we wrap up, let's just look briefly at the 4 things that God told Ezekiel to do and not to do.

God said.

1-Do not be afraid.

2-Speak my words.

3-Do not rebel like them.

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1-Do not be afraid.

As I said, we can be many things, but fear not, for the Lord is with us.

2-Speak my words.

Chapter 2 verse 7

You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious. (Ezek 2.7)

For us, this means holding culture with our fingertips and God's word with both hands.

I'll never forget a short form video I saw a while back. In the video, a woman was earnestly praying for God to speak to her, to guide her and to help her, and as she was praying the camera pans to a dusty Bible on the shelf with eyes and lips, saying "here I am", "pick me, pick me".

We hold culture with our fingertips and God's word with both hands, so we do not rebel like them. God's 3rd command to Ezekiel.

3-Do not rebel like them.

Chapter 2 verse 8

But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious people; open your mouth and eat what I give you." (Ezek 2.8)

It isn't just God's word in both hands; it is consuming it for ourselves, exactly what we talked about last week.

Let's wrap up.

1-God comes to the place of exile (v1:1-4,28)

I am the first to admit that too often my messes are just my pride taking a fall.

But then, it is in the moments when we have exhausted our own ability and are truly ready to rely on him, he is there.

2-God is far more holy than our words can hold (v1:5-27)

The only possible response to the Holiness of the Lord is to fall flat on our faces.

Let me ask. When was the last time that we were overcome with the holiness of the Lord? Tears during worship, profound peace or conviction reading God's word, great thankfulness at what Christ has done?

Sadly, this kind of thing rarely happens when we have been captured by the busyness of life.

It doesn't have to be this way..

Tell me, why is it that we stop to eat food whether we are hungry or not, but why is it so much harder for us to stop and consume the word of God, in the good times and the hard times?

Quite simply, there is an enemy who is actively trying to stop you reading and consuming the word of God.

And lastly.

3-God's Spirit now lives in us (v1:28-2:2)

The same power that saw Ezekiel flat on his face and raised him to his feet, is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. And this same power lives in every Christian.

Not distant, mute or lame. But in us and with us.

Sadly though, I worry that the Spirit can be like gravity for us Christians who are a bit longer in the tooth, something that we don't notice or seek after, until we stumble.

It doesn't have to be this way. His Spirit is in you. Open his Word, and lean on him in the good and the hard, for he is always with you.

Let's pray.

Thank you God for your Spirit that lives in us. Remind us of your great love and glory. Help us to lean on you in the good times and the hard times. In the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus we pray.
