God sends his prophet

Text: Ezekiel 1:1-3:3

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** 1 Peter 1:3-17; Ezekiel 1:1-3:3

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 171, 359, 137b, 389, 529

Series: Ezekiel (sermon #1)

Theme: Ezekiel, a priest who had been deported to Babylon after Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem in 597 BC, receives revelations from God through a vision of the glory of the Lord, a call to prophesy to the rebellious nation of Israel and a command to ingest God’s Word.

Proposition: Compelled by a passion for the glory of God, with the enabling of the Holy Spirit, go and speak God’s Word which has become part of you.

**Introduction**

Do you know what it feels like to be a long way from home in a foreign country? Some of us here today have come to New Zealand as adults, we know what it is like to live at a distance from the land of our birth, away from the place where we used to belong. Away from the origin of fond memories in our homeland. A place where we once knew familiar sights, sounds, smells, climate and culture.

Some people have come to New Zealand because of war in their country of origin. They are refugees whose lives have been battered, and who struggle to resettle in a nation of very different language, culture and customs to their own. The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that there are currently 68 million people who have been forcibly displaced worldwide, 40 million of these within their own countries, 25 million are refugees, 3 million asylum seekers. Although the current global refugee crisis is certainly of enormous proportions, the distress and pain of the forced movement of people as a result of conflict is nothing new in the history of this war-torn world.

A ‘refugee crisis’ forms the background to the book of Ezekiel in the Bible. This book contains many detailed dates which correlate with the world events at that time. Precisely 2,616 years ago, in 597BC, the Babylonians had captured Jerusalem, deporting the King (Jehoiachin), the royal family and the leading citizens and craftsmen (2 Kings 24:14) including Ezekiel, who was a priest and who is the author of this book. These deportees were forcibly taken from Israel to Babylon (the region of modern-day Iraq).

To be a refugee is to be wounded, weakened, vulnerable and grieving in a place which is far away from home. Jewish professor and author Tamara Eskenazi expresses something of the trauma of exile in these words: “*It is not simply being homeless. Rather it is knowing that you do have a home, but that your home has been taken over by enemies. Exile is not being without roots. On the contrary it is having deep roots which have now been plucked up, and there you are, with roots dangling, writhing in pain, exposed to a cold and jeering world, longing to be restored to native and nurturing soil. Exile is knowing precisely where you belong but knowing that you can’t go back, not yet*”.

Singer Paul Simon expressed the experience of many of the early settlers who came to a new land to escape the troubles of Europe when he wrote the song ‘American Dream’:

“I don’t know a soul who’s not been battered,

I don’t have a friend who feels at ease

I don’t know a dream that’s not been shattered or driven to its knees”.

In a somewhat similar sentiment, Psalm 137 expresses the grief of the Israelites who were in exile in the land of the Chaldeans (another name for the Babylonians): “*By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion*”.

Ezekiel was among the exiles by the water which flowed through the Chebar canal when he saw visions of God (1:1). This brings us to our first point:

1. **Ezekiel’s Vision**

Vision is what you have when you can see. In the English language, the word vision is used for the action of seeing with the physical eye. For example, I need to wear spectacles so that my vision is clear.

The word vision also refers to something which is apparently seen otherwise than by ordinary means – a prophetic or mystical revelation presented to the mind in sleep or an abnormal state.Visions were one of the means by which God revealed Himself and his plans and purposes to certain people at certain times in history. A truth which the writer to the Hebrews expresses this way: “*Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets*” (Heb 1:1).

The book of Ezekiel includes quite a number of these kinds of visions, chapter 1 containing the first. Other key visions later in this book are of the abominations which cause the glory of the Lord to depart from the Jerusalem temple in chapters 8-11, the renewal vision of the dry bones in chapter 37 and that of the new temple in chapters 40-48.

One of the key challenges to understanding the visions of the Bible is to identify the meaning without assigning obscure or hidden spiritual significance to minor details of the images. Focusing on finding spiritual meaning in minor details is the essence of the allegorical method of interpretation. If you ever comes out of a church auditorium after hearing a sermon and everyone is saying things like ‘Iwould never have thought of that!’, “I’ve near heard that before”, ‘what a gifted and innovative preacher to bring out so much hidden truth’…be careful, it’s possible that you may have heard a highly speculative message which used the allegorical method of interpretation.

As an example of this, the church father Gregory the Great, in reflecting in the East Gate in the vision of the renewed temple in Ezekiel 40:6-8 identified the following:

a) The temple is Jesus.

b) The steps leading up to the gate are the merits of the virtues that lead to salvation.

c) The threshold of the gate are the ancestors of Christ.

Having said all this, there is much that we can understand from Biblical imagery like that of Ezekiel chapter 1, without resorting to highly speculative allegory of details in the vision. Let’s see three things which are very clear.

**Firstly,** this is a vision of the glory of the LORD, the covenant God of Israel, as stated in v28: “*Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD*”. God’s glory is the ‘weightiness’ of His holy character, His majesty, splendour and dignity. In great brightness, God sits on an elevated throne. Below Him are cherubim (Eze 10:1), like heavenly bodyguards. They are reminiscent of the figures who supported the ark of the covenant (1 Sam 4:4) which rested in the temple in Jerusalem – the place where God’s presence dwelt within in the Holy of Holies. These four creatures represent the dominant lifeforms in His creation. They each have four faces: that of a man (the highest creature on earth), a lion (highest wild animal), ox (highest domesticated animal), and an eagle (highest bird).

**The key message here: God gloriously rules in absolute authority over all His creation.**

**Secondly,** this is a vision of rapid movement, of activity, of motion. There is no stillness here, but a stormy wind with fire flashing forth continually (v4). The four living creatures all have legs and wings and they are in constant motion. In v14, Ezekiel writes that they ‘*darted to and fro like the appearance of a flash of lightning*’. And then there are the wheels! These indicate great mobility. That is not hard to understand! Just think of bicycles and cars! The rims of the wheels also have eyes all around! This is a ‘throne-chariot’ bearing the Lord himself who is not restricted by geography to reside in one place but goes wherever He wishes (v20)and sees everything that takes place in his creation.

Now, to you and me, whilst the imagery of this vision may seem strange, bizarre and quite confusing, however the truth which is conveyed about God is quite familiar to us. God is both omnipresent (everywhere present) and omniscient (all-knowing). He is not restricted to one place and there is absolutely nothing he does not know.

This theology was not so evident to the exiled Israelites in Babylon. They may well have felt that God was unaware of their plight as exiles, far away from home. They understood that God was present amongst His people in the temple in Jerusalem, as he had previously been in the tabernacle in the wilderness, but Ezekiel and his countrymen were a long way away from Jerusalem. They were distant from the temple and therefore, it would seem to them, separated from the presence of the Lord. So there is encouraging revelation here in this vision.

**Here are two more key aspects to the message:**

**God is present with His people in their exile.**

**God sees what takes place everywhere – He knows the plight and pain of His people: wounded, weakened, vulnerable and grieving.**

This is a comfort for you and me, brothers and sisters, God is not distant from us, nor is he unaware of our particular troubles in life. However there is another aspect to this vision which was not immediately encouraging for God’s people to know.

**Thirdly,** this is a vision of judgement.This is an image of the Lord riding a fierce storm approaching from the north (v4) – the direction from which first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians came. The fire and lightning indicate the coming of God, the divine warrior (Ps 18:9-14, Nah 1:3). There is great noise like the coming of enemy troops, Ezekiel writes of ‘*a sound of tumult like the sound of an army*’ (v24)

**Here is another key part of the message:**

**God is coming, not firstly to wage war on Israel’s enemies (that will come later), but to bring judgement on his rebellious, covenant-breaking people.**

Before the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem as the agents of God’s judgement (Hab 1:5-11), the prophet Jeremiah had rebuked the complacency of his fellow Israelites for their trust in the physical temple building – thinking that this was a sure indication that the Lord was with them (Jer 7:4). As we sang in Psalm 137, the exiles longed to return to the temple, to be back in God’s presence. However later, Ezekiel would see a vision of the glory of the Lord leaving the temple building in Jerusalem (10:18-19). The destruction of the temple and city would be subsequently confirmed when a fugitive arrived in Babylon from the war zone (33:21-22). God was making war on his own people! His glory would depart from the promised land of Israel.

Ezekiel’s vision was both awe-inspiring and fearsome. 2616 years ago this priest, the son of Buzi, had a life-changing encounter with the LORD. He had not sought this out through some mystical desire to experience a ‘spiritual high’. God had sought Him out! The Lord’s divine purpose is reflected in Ezekiel’s name which means ‘God makes strong, hardens’. God had intervened dramatically in Ezekiel’s life in order to strengthen him for the challenges of service - which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Ezekiel’s Call**

People enlist in the armed forces for a variety of reasons, and recruiters want to make the choice to serve as attractive as possible. The NZ defence website has the slogan ‘Match your passion to your career’! You’ve likely heard the phrase “Join the Navy and see the world”!

If we were to put Ezekiel’s call to serve in the Lord’s army, it might go something like this: “*Join the prophets and be cast among briers and thorns and sit on scorpions*” (ref. v6). God’s call to Ezekiel was not so much attractive as it was compelling. Ezekiel was to be driven by a passion for the glory of God. In that sense his passion would be well matched to his ‘career’.

Three-times the Lord tells His prophet not to be afraid (v6). I remember as a child entering a reptile house for the first time at the zoo, my parents already knew that I really don’t like snakes and they said something like ‘no need to be afraid’. When you hear someone say ‘Do not be afraid’ it’s almost a guarantee of frightening circumstances yet to come! It certainly was for me in the reptile house at the zoo and so much more for Ezekiel in his ministry to a people who didn’t want to listen to God’s Word!

Ezekiel was to be given both a task and a message from God. He was commissioned by the Lord. Notice some key aspects of Ezekiel’s calling:

**Firstly**, he needed to be filled with the Holy Spirit (v2). In fact, he couldn’t even stand up in the glorious presence of the LORD, apart from the Spirit’s aid. Just as Adam received the breath of life from God (Gen 2:7), so Ezekiel receives the Spirit of God to enable him to obey the Lord.

**Secondly**, he was to be different to rebellious Israel, who God describes as: a ‘*nations of rebels*’ (v3) who had ‘*transgressed against me to this very day*’ (v3). They were ‘*impudent and stubborn*’ (v4), ‘*a rebellious house*’ (v7) who refused to hear when the Lord spoke to them (v7). In contrast to Israel, Ezekiel is called to be different. "*But you, son of man, hear what I say to you. Be not rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you*." (v8). He is to be a ‘stand out guy’. A true ‘tall poppy’.

Notice that having seen the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD, Ezekiel is different. He listens to what God says to him and he willingly submits himself to do God’s will. This is precisely what the Israelites had consistently and persistently not done. The essence of the people’s rebellion against God was their refusal to recognize his rightful rule over them.

Sometimes the obedience of a child is tested at the dinner table when the parental call is to ‘eat what’s put in front of you’. Sometimes the presence of peas, broccoli, or Brussel sprouts challenges a child’s willingness to submit! Ezekiel was tested by the Lord when called to eat what was put in front of him…as we’ll see in our 3rd point shortly.

**Thirdly**, Ezekiel was sent out to speak God’s words to Israel, whether they heard or refused to hear (v7). He was called to be a prophet – God’s official spokesman whose words of authority are preceded by the introduction “*thus says the Lord*” (v4). Prophesy is the declaration of God’s Word.

**Fourthly**, Ezekiel was a human being of flesh and blood very much like you and me. He is addressed by the Lord as ‘*son of man*’ (literally ‘the son of Adam’) an expression which occurs over 90 times in this book, and only 14 times elsewhere in the OT. Ezekiel is a mortal man who is being addressed by the immoral God.

When we heard the name ‘son of man’ we rightly think of Christ, spoke of in the prophesy of Daniel as ‘one like a son of man’ (7:13). Jesus came to this earth as a man of flesh and blood. The Spirit of the Lord was on Him and He was called to ‘proclaim good news to the poor’ (Luke 4:18). Jesus is the last prophet of God (Heb 1:1-2). Jesus is the second Adam who by his obedience reverses the effects of the first Adam’s fall (Rom 5:19; 1 Cor 15:44-49). Like Ezekiel, Jesus came to his own and his own did not receive him (John 1:11). Through his obedience, Jesus brought glory to the Father’s name (John 12:27-29).

We are not called to be prophets in exactly the same way as Ezekiel was. We have not received individual revelations of the glory of God, as Ezekiel did that day on the banks of the Chebar canal. But we have received the supernatural revelation of Christ. By faith, brothers and sisters, we have beheld his glory, ‘*glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*’ (John 1:14). Like Ezekiel, apart from the Holy Spirit within us, we can do nothing to effectively serve the Lord. Our need in the church is not so much to be more active, but for the Holy Spirit to be more active in and through us.

Like Ezekiel, we are called to be different. We are to be ‘stand out’ people in the midst of the ‘evil and adulterous generation’ (Matt 16:4) in which we live. Like Ezekiel, we are sent to speak God’s word to others, whether they hear or refused to hear. We are called to communicate the gospel to people who are ‘*dead in …transgressions and sins*’ (Eph 2:1).

Like Ezekiel, we are mere human beings of flesh and blood, chosen by God to speak his word so that his power may be made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor 12:9). Like Ezekiel we are to consume a special diet which is given to us by the Lord Himself, which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **Ezekiel’s Diet**

It is good to eat healthy food, and marketers are always looking for new ways to sell us their latest gastronomic products. For example, here’s a recent advertisement for “Ezekiel bread”: “*tasty*and*nutritious, which means you can get your sandwich fix without the guilt. One slice of Ezekiel bread is only 80 calories and loaded with nutrients and a bunch of other good stuff that’ll keep you slim and satiated. Plus, its ingredient list is totally pronounceable because it contains 100 percent wholesome good-for-you ingredients*”.

So what, you might ask are the key ingredients of Ezekiel bread? You’ll find them listed in Ezekiel 4:9: wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet and emmer (emmer is a type of wheat). Next week, we’ll see (God willing) why Ezekiel eat bread made of these wholegrains (here’s a hint – it wasn’t for nutritional reasons!).

In our text today, Ezekiel is commanded by the Lord to ‘*eat this scroll*’ (3:1). Back 2616 years ago people did not write in books with pages which could be turned and a binding to keep it them all together. Instead, they used scrolls. A scroll was made of parchment or papyrus, in a long strip wound round a central spindle. You’ve likely heard of the ‘Dead Sea Scrolls’ found at Qumran which are over 7 meters in length.

Ordinarily, the writing on a scroll would be only on one side, but the scroll which the Lord presents to Ezekiel in this vision is packed full with words on all surfaces. God had much to say to His people by the Chebar canal in Babylon! Both sides of the scroll were covered in ‘*words of lamentation and woe*’ (v10). It was not that the words themselves were sorrowful but that they would cause mourning and distress to those who listened to them and took them in.

Here God was testing Ezekiel, very much as Adam was tested. Would he eat what the Lord commanded? The food offered to Ezekiel was certainly not ‘pleasing to the eye’ (Gen 3:6). He was to ingest the words of God, just as John in the book of Revelation would later be called to do (Rev 10:9). God’s Word was to literally become part of God’s prophet. The same scroll that would taste bitter to the house of Israel, tasted sweet on the new prophet’s tongue.

That is the dual nature of God’s Word as Paul expresses to the Corinthians: “*For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life*”. (1 Cor 2:15-16a) The true gospel is ‘bitter-sweet’.

Ezekiel was sent to a people who had already proven themselves to be unresponsive to God’s word and would continue to be so. The primary goal of Ezekiel’s ministry was not to see people respond to the message he brought, but to bring glory to God by preaching, teaching and modelling the message he had been given through willing obedience to God’s call. That obedience meant much suffering for him – as we’ll see in this book.

We always need to be careful not to base our motivation for serving the Lord upon tangible, visible ‘results’. John Calvin said *‘When God wishes to move us to obey him, he does not always promise us a happy outcome to our labour; but sometimes he wants to test our obedience to the point that he will have us be content with his command, even if people ridicule our efforts’* (commentary on Ezekiel I, 61). The result of faithful ministry can look anything other than successful at times.

Like Ezekiel, we must be ‘people of the Spirit and people of the Book’. We are called always led by the Holy Spirit according to the Word of God. The Bible puts it this way “*When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth*” (John 16:13). Like Ezekiel, we must ingest the Word of God, not physically as in this vision, but spiritually.

Like Ezekiel, in reliance upon the Spirit we are called to willingly go wherever the Lord sends us. Like Ezekiel and the other deportees, we are resident aliens in a strange land which is not our permanent home. Today we do not dwell by the Chebar canal in 6th century BC Babylonia, but near the Avon River on the other side of the globe in 21st century New Zealand. However, like Ezekiel and the Israelites, we are, in a sense, not living in our homeland.

Neither was Jesus when He came to this earth, leaving behind the glories of heaven. He came, like a refugee, as a result of the cosmic warfare which has torn this earth apart since the fall. His soul was battered here, and his life was not lived at ease. Yet, He was compelled by a passion for God’s glory and willing went where His heavenly Fathers set Him. In his ‘high priestly prayer’ in John 17, Jesus says to His Father ‘*I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do*’. That work, given to the Son of Man, was to ‘*seek and to save the lost*’ (Luke 10:10).

Has Jesus sought you out? Have you responded to His call for you to come to Him?

Brothers and sisters in our Lord, our immigration status today is not so much citizens of this earth, but temporary residents awaiting transit to our final destination. As we heard earlier from 1 Peter 1:17b God calls us to “*conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile*”. At times the experience of our ‘exile’ is that we are wounded, weakened, vulnerable and grieving in a place which is far away from home. Our souls can by brutally battered and our lives not at ease.

Yet by the grace of God’s revelation in His Word, we are compelled by a vision of the glory of God in Christ, with the enabling of the Holy Spirit, to be prophets who consume the Word of God and then proclaim that Word to others, whether they hear or refuse to hear.

AMEN