

Strong in the Broken Places

1. God is in Control

July 18, 2021

Welcome to the first week of our series “Strong in the Broken Places.” Over the next several weeks we’re going to look at some key themes in the book of Ezekiel and let God speak to us about how to experience his strength and direction. If you have a Bible you can turn to Ezekiel 1.

I was at a hotel a while back and when I got on the elevator, I saw that there was no floor number 13. I understand that’s pretty common, because a lot of people consider 13 bad luck and would never stay on that floor.

Someone researched the most common superstitions of each state. For Ohio and West Virginia, it was throwing salt of the shoulder produced good luck. For Pennsylvania, it was the good luck ladybug.

And superstitions are common in the sports world. For example:

- Peanuts in the shell are almost never sold at a NASCAR event because they are considered bad luck by the racing community. And so are \$50 bills, for some reason.
- I read that Pittsburgh Penguin Sidney Crosby is superstitious about his hockey sticks; once they are taped, no one can touch them. If someone accidentally touches any one of his sticks, Crosby takes all the tape off and completely re-tapes it.
- But baseball players are the most superstitious of all. Wade Boggs was a Hall of Fame baseball player. Early in his career Boggs ate chicken before a game and then got several hits. So, he decided to eat a whole chicken before every game he ever played – all 2,432 of them. Then he would take batting practice at exactly 5:17pm, followed by sprints at 7:17pm before taking the field for night games.
- And it’s not just the players; baseball *fans* have their own superstitions. Whether it is wearing their lucky jersey or wearing their caps inside out – fans want to do their part to help the home team win.

Of course, rationally we *know* that these superstitions don’t change the outcome of a game. I have never heard a coach in a post-game press conference say, “The main reason we won today was that Josh Patterson in Dormont wore his lucky shirt.” I’ve never heard anyone credit their success in life with seeing a ladybug.

Superstitions are not logical; but they do show **our deep desire to be in control of what happens around us**. When we care deeply about something, we will do anything that offers the slightest chance of helping us influence the outcome.

Luckily, I don't have any superstitions, knock on wood ;-), but I have to admit that I prefer to be in control of my life as much as possible. And my guess is that is true for most of us in the room.

Yet, the reality is we can't control nearly as much of the future as we'd like to think we can. A pandemic surprises us. A job offers comes out of the blue. An old friend reconnects. A family member moves away. Sometimes life turns out the way we planned, sometimes not.

Trying to control everything around us is exhausting. It can leave us stressed out, anxious about the future, or even angry. That's why we need to hear the message from Ezekiel 1 today, which is that God is in control, so we don't have to be.

Ezekiel was a Jewish prophet who spoke to a shattered people who were living in exile in Babylon in the 6th BC. The Israelites had not stayed faithful to God. For centuries they ignored his command to stop worshipping idols. So, God allowed the Babylonians to conquer them and take them captive back to Babylon.

Ezekiel was living in exile with people who had lost their homes and their freedom. They were captives of a pagan nation. They lost their ability to worship God in the temple. They were in a broken place. And that's when God sent Ezekiel to speak his message. The name Ezekiel means "God strengthens." The message God gave him strengthened those exiles, and for over 2,500 years it has strengthened all of God's people, especially those in broken places.

The book of Ezekiel begins with a surprise:

Ezekiel 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.

Ezekiel could not have been more shocked. He was shocked to see a vision of God, for sure. And he was even more shocked by *where* he encountered God's presence: on the banks of the Kebar River in Babylon. That was the last place he would have expected to see God's glory.

You and I know that God is everywhere. But at that time, the Israelites believed God's presence dwelt only in the temple at Jerusalem, and certainly not in a pagan country.

Since the Israelites were in Babylon, the people assumed they had no access to God's presence.

The fact that Ezekiel saw God's glory in Babylon was a powerful statement; it means: **No matter how dark the moment, God is present.** Life was dark and difficult for the Israelites. They were living in exile under the thumb of ruthless pagans. And yet – Ezekiel sees a vision of God *at the Kebar River*.

Ezekiel 1:2-3

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.

Ezekiel must have wondered, “God, what are you doing *here*?” “What’s a good God like you doing in a pagan place like this?” By showing up to Ezekiel, God is telling his people: “I know where you are. I am with you even here.” And without a doubt, it was God that Ezekiel saw:

Ezekiel 1:4-6 (NLT)

As I looked, I saw a great storm coming from the north, driving before it a huge cloud that flashed with lightning and shone with brilliant light. There was fire inside the cloud, and in the middle of the fire glowed something like gleaming amber. ⁵ From the center of the cloud came four living beings that looked human, ⁶ except that each had four faces and four wings.

Ezekiel is seeing the glory of God. His vision might sound a little bizarre because he and trying to describe the indescribable. So, he uses symbolic language. His vision is full of motion and action. He sees the Lord in the midst of a windstorm.

The creatures around his throne have wings and legs, and they are darting as fast as lightning. Ezekiel describes wheels in motion. Wheels represent a chariot. In those days the most powerful warriors used chariots. The wheels had eyes. That represents that God is present everywhere and is able to see all things. All this says that God is present and on the move. The people may be in exile, but God is with them and active.

The vision goes on to describe four creatures around the throne of God in verses 7-14. If you drew a picture of these creatures, it would look more like a nightmare than a word from God. But again, these are symbolic images. Ezekiel wasn't saying that his descriptions were accurate --- all through the vision Ezekiel uses the words “looked something like”, and “appeared as...”

The four creatures are angels, who surround the throne of God. They have four faces that represent God's character:

- a man – representing intelligence
- a lion - the highest wild animal, the King
- an ox - the highest domestic animal, representing diligent serving

- an eagle – the highest bird, representing God’s high and seeing all.

Then Ezekiel sees the throne of God:

Ezekiel 1:28 (NLT) *All around him was a glowing halo, like a rainbow shining in the clouds on a rainy day. This is what the glory of the LORD looked like to me. When I saw it, I fell face down on the ground, and I heard someone’s voice speaking to me.*

Ezekiel was overwhelmed by the glory and presence of God – so he falls face down. Most of us won’t see a vision like Ezekiel’s, but his vision reminds us that God is with us even in tough times, and knowing that gives us strength. Maybe that’s why we read Psalm 23 at funerals:

Psalm 23:4 *Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.*

That’s been my experience. In the most difficult times of my life, I have found that God was with me. I didn’t always feel it, but I knew it.

A friend of mine who in full-time missionary work texted me that he had to cut short a trip because his wife was taken to the hospital. It turned out to be leukemia. I asked how they were doing, and he texted me,

“She has been doing incredibly well, considering. I have been through a gamut of emotions but currently at peace. I was dreading chemo’s side effects, but they have fortunately been minimal.

The prognosis is that the leukemia is quite aggressive and will take her in a year to 24 months. Without treatment she would have a month or less. The doctor seems to think it will be less than a year. We know God has her in His hands, and statistics are not the ultimate determination. God is good and faithful, and we are grateful.”

In the most painful of moments, they are at peace because they recognize God is in control and that he is good.

“God is in control, and he is good.” It is no comfort to think that God is in control if he is not good. And if God is good but not in control, we will feel the need to control our own lives. But when it sinks into our souls that God is both good *and* in control, we won’t fear the future or feel the need to control the uncontrollable.

That’s what Ezekiel’s vision showed him. This vision tells us: **No matter how powerful opposing forces seem to be, God is in control.** The Babylonians were the strongest superpower of that day. They held the Israelites captive.

But Ezekiel sees a power much greater than the Babylonians; he sees the power of God and understands nothing can stand against it. The Babylonians might have control over the Israelites, but the Lord controlled the Babylonians.

That truth can give us great peace, too. We know that **God is in control of every nation during every era.**

God is in control of all the nations of the earth, whether it is USA, Argentina, Norway, Zimbabwe, or Belarus. Not just today, but all throughout history. For 2,000 years the Church has taught:

Romans 13:1 Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

That means God is the one ultimately in control. (And remember, that guy who wrote Romans 13 was persecuted by the government and would eventually be executed for his faith.)

As Americans today, this truth can help us stay centered when others are distressed over the state of our nation. We know who is in charge. Yes, we should exercise our right to vote. But as we do, we remember that in the end our future does not depend on who sits in Washington. Our hope doesn't come from there.

Yes, our elected leaders have authority, but they have that authority because God allows them to have it. So, we Christ-followers have an advantage today; we don't have to get caught up in conspiracy theories because we know that God is in control. We don't need to waste one minute speculating or fretting over whether some secret elite group is controlling national or world events. We know who truly orchestrates the global stage: it's not The Illuminati or an anonymous person called "Q" at a computer – it's the Lord who is in charge.

Ezekiel's vision reminds us that God is in charge of our lives. We often speak about "giving our lives to Christ." That means we place our lives in the hands of Jesus. And we are in good hands! Jeremiah 29:11 was written to the Israelites who were suffering in exile:

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

It might have been hard for the Israelites to believe God had a good plan for them while they were mourning the loss of their homes and land. And it can be hard for you and me to see God's hope and future when we encounter pain, disappointment, and failure. But God promises to use all things to accomplish his purposes for us.

Back in the 1800's A young man from a difficult and poor background dreamed of a better life for himself and his family. He saved all he could and went deeply into debt to start a grocery store in a town called New Salem. But his partner had an alcohol problem, and he ended up deeply in debt. It took him more than a decade to pay off his failed dream.

He gave up on business and went into law, and then politics. In 1860 Abraham Lincoln was elected president. He came to believe deeply that God worked in all things; both in his own life, and also in the nation. His entire second inaugural address is a profound reflection on how God was at work in the Civil War in ways more mysterious and profound than any human being could fathom. We can all be grateful that Lincoln's little grocery in New Salem went bankrupt.¹

Sometimes life doesn't work out the way we expect it to, but God is always at work. For example, our lives were definitely out of our own control during Covid. But we know that God was in charge and at work. Because God is in charge, we can surrender control.

Ezekiel didn't want to be living in exile in Babylon. He probably had some ideas about what should happen to change that. But when he saw the glory of the Lord, he fell to his face on the ground. He surrendered control. He acknowledged God was in control.

When we try to control the uncontrollable, we are saying "I don't need you, God – I'll take it from here." And eventually we will sag under the pressure.

Today we're gathered in the presence of the same God that appeared to Ezekiel, so it is appropriate to respond like he did. Maybe there are situations in your life that you want to change. What would happen if you surrendered them to God?

Let's take a posture of surrender to him today – I invite you to kneel before the Lord. Maybe someone you love is making bad choices and you want them to straighten up. But you don't have control over that - only God does. Offer that to him today. Hold out your hands to him palms up.

Maybe your life plans aren't working out as you pictured. Offer them to him today. Maybe things are going really well for you and you want to keep it that way. Will you offer your future to him?

¹ PT Source: John Ortberg, *All the Places You'll Go. Except When You Don't* (Tyndale, 2015), pp. 216-217