

Well, the prophets are still speaking to us even today.

We heard from Isaiah, and his message was, Repent and return to me, says the Lord.

Then last week we looked at this prophet Amos, and he encouraged us, did he not, to quit going through the motions and just playing religion to be real and to make our religion count.

And remember, I gave you a homework assignment.

Anybody remember?

It was to do one thing this past week to show God, maybe show yourself that you're not just going through the motions, you're not just floating through life, that you really do love Jesus and you love serving Him.

I wonder, this might be rhetorical, maybe not, I wonder if anybody can think of something you did or were last week to show God that you're serious with Him, that you're not just playing religion.

Anybody have an example?

I thought it might be a rhetorical question.

Maybe it's the way that you spent time with God in a very real way.

You listened to His Word.

You didn't just read it.

You basically said, Speak, Lord.

Your servant is listening.

Maybe it was something about being in His Word.

Maybe it was an intensive time of prayer.

Maybe it was inviting the kid to VBS.

Maybe it was rolling up your sleeves and helping out and doing something.

but proving that your faith is real.

Well, we're looking at another prophet, and this one has these crazy visions.

In fact, we're looking at Ezekiel, and some people believe that there's mentions of UFOs, extraterrestrial life in this prophetic word of Ezekiel.

But when we unpack it, you're going to see, no, God had a purpose for this apocalyptic language, this symbolic language that Ezekiel used.

Well, Ezekiel is a Bible name.

And by the way, why do we need to trust?

Well, what's going on in the world, right?

Like Iran, right?

Like wars, like the economy, everything that's going on.

And not just bad stuff, but there's opportunities.

The Holy Spirit is alive and at work and He wants us to join Him.

Ezekiel is a biblical name.

One of my sons is Matthew, the other is Micah.

Those are biblical names.

I looked some up.

Anybody remember what Jabez, you know what the prayer of Jabez means?

It means I bore him in pain.

So Jabez means painful.

That hurt, right?

Esau means Harry.

Belshazzar, the evil king of Babylon,

whose reign ended with the handwriting on the wall.

Remember that story?

His name means Bel protect the king, like this pagan god Bel, protect the king.

Bel didn't do it.

He was murdered that same night as the handwriting on the wall.

Basha, the evil third king of Israel means to stink, right?

Gareb, one of David's 30 mighty men, you know what his name means?

Scabby.

A Christian man listed in Romans 16, Nurus, means lump.

Can you imagine that?

But Ezekiel has a good name, is where I'm getting at.

Ezekiel means God will strengthen.

God will strengthen.

And you're going to see why that's such a great prophetic name for this prophet.

He was a preacher's kid.

And he and his priestly family were stolen away and taken captive in 597 BC to Babylon.

He was just 25 years of age, and his call to the ministry came five years later.

And so what he did is Jeremiah, the other prophet, he prophesied from Israel.

Ezekiel was over in Babylon, and that's where he prophesied.

down by the river Shabbar at Tel Aviv.

He was married to one woman who was the desire of his eyes and yet God let him know that his wife was going to die.

One of the saddest notes of his life.

You can read about this in Ezekiel 24.

The prophet was told that on the very day that he would receive his revelation, his wife would die and Jerusalem would be attacked.

and the holy item stolen out of the temple.

And he was commanded not to grieve the death of his wife, but to steel himself for this tragedy, even as God strengthened himself for the death of his beloved city Jerusalem.

Ezekiel shows us just how ugly and serious sin is to God and that we can't play around with it, that sin is always going to cost you and me something.

It's going to kill something.

Well, this book carries out some statements of judgment, but we're going to focus on chapter one this morning because it kind of sets the stage for the whole book.

And it tells this beautiful story that even though the glory would depart from Jerusalem with its destruction, that one day it would return.

And that gives us hope.

What's going on here?

We're just jumping into this prophetic book.

What's going on is the kingdom of Judah had suffered greatly at the hands of Babylon, and many Jewish people wondered if Jehovah was still the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

I mean, God had given them the promised land, but was He still with them?

Because now He was taking it away.

Were the Jews not His chosen people still?

Was Jerusalem not still His beloved chosen city, holy city?

Did He not still dwell there spiritually in the holy temple?

Because now His chosen people were exiles in a pagan land.

And Jerusalem was devastated and it was in enemy hands and the temple had been robbed of its precious treasures.

I was just reading this week in Psalm 79 and it's a Psalm of Asaph and this is what it's referring to, right?

The destruction of Jerusalem.

Oh God, the nations have come into your inheritance.

They have defiled Your holy temple.

They have laid Jerusalem in ruins.

They have given the bodies of Your servants to the birds of the heavens for the food, the flesh of Your faithful to the beasts of the earth.

They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem and there is no one to bury them.

We become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those around us.

How long, O Lord, will You be angry?

Forever?

And that was the question that they were dealing with.

God, where are You?

How long is this going to last?

Will the glory ever return?

Well, we pick up this story here, and this is a message of hope today.

It's a message that even as they were saying, God, where are You?

And will things ever get better?

that God, through images, through this vision to Ezekiel the great prophet, gave them assurance that one day the glory will return.

So don't give up.

You can have hope.

And that's the message for us today.

Well, let's look at these symbols and see what they mean to us today in a practical way.

And I want you to lean in and listen today because there's hope in this prophecy.

I know it's about judgment and all that.

There's hope today.

Well, the first image we see is the whirlwind storm, verses 1 through 4.

And the Scripture gives the time, the thirtieth year, the fourth month, fifth day.

Ezekiel is down by the river.

He gets this vision on the fifth day of the month.

The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest, and the hand of the Lord was upon him there.

This is all in Ezekiel 1, the first three verses.

Verse 4, as I looked up, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north and a great cloud with brightness around it and a fire flashing forth continually and in the midst of the fire as it were gleaming metal.

So these Jewish exiles were gathered down by the river to encourage each other, to pray, to cry together.

It's like the first Christians many times met at a gathering place down by a river.

Think of Philippi called Philippi today and that river there.

And that's where Lydia and her friends were down there.

You know, Lydia, the seller of purple, a woman of some means.

And Paul led her to Christ and then baptized her.

And I'll show you a picture because this means so much to me.

I took a group to

footsteps of the Apostle Paul in Greece and into Turkey.

And on one of the journeys, we went to Philippi.

And this guy's named Rob.

And he came with his parents.

There was, I don't know, 30 of us or something like that.

Came with his mom and dad.

He's from New Jersey.

They're from Omaha.

And he wasn't a believer.

But he came and day by day he went by and he saw the biblical evidence and every night we would have someone on the team give their Christian testimony.

And so we got to Philippi, Philippi, and went down to the river to look at that river and he's sitting on a rock just contemplating.

And I knew the Lord was working on him.

So I went down and sat on this rock next to him and I said, Rob, what's going on, man?

And he talked about struggling with his faith and I asked him, What would it look like for you right now?

just to finally settle this.

I can see God's drawing you and just place all of your hope and trust in Jesus Christ.

And he said, yeah, I want to do that.

And so he prayed to receive Christ and then he said basically what that Ethiopian eunuch Philip said, what would prevent me from getting baptized.

And so we found some shorts and a t-shirt for him and he went and sat down in this ice cold spring fed river

And he allowed me to baptize him.

And it was the highlight of the trip.

All the incredible things we saw in Ephesus and Corinth and Thessalonica and all of that paled in comparison to see a man who was born again, a new creation in Christ.

that's just a story has nothing to do with this.

I just wanted to tell you the story because it's just touching me.

But the point is, that's where Ezekiel and his friends gathered.

He's down by a river and they had their prayer meetings and God worked.

And God called Ezekiel to his ministry when he was at that prayer meeting.

If you remember the prophet Elisha,

He was out plowing a field when God called him.

Paul and Barnabas were at that first church, Antioch, and they were worshiping when God called them out to send them on a missionary tour.

And when Ezekiel, think about it, went down to the river again to pray and to meet with the other Jews there, he probably thought it was just like any other day, and yet it wasn't.

God had a calling on his life.

God had a vision for him.

You might have come to church today thinking it's just any other day.

It's going to be another hot, humid day, another Sunday, right?

And who knows if God doesn't have a divine opportunity or appointment for you today?

I wonder what word of the Lord God is going to speak to today in this message, or maybe you've already had it in your core group lesson, but it was a word for you today.

I believe the Holy Spirit has those words for us to get our attention.

It might be a word of encouragement or rebuke or strengthening or insight, but surely God has brought you here for a purpose today, yes?

And our job is to listen in and respond to Him.

Well, the word of the Lord used in this passage that came to Ezekiel, verse 3, the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel.

And it also says in verse 3, and the hand of the Lord.

So we have the word of the Lord, right?

And the hand of the Lord.

The word of the Lord is used 55 times in the book of Ezekiel.

The word of the Lord.

The word of the Lord.

And it is the Word of the Lord that gives us strength every day.

I pick up the Word of the Lord every day and I want the living Word and His Spirit, the Holy Spirit, to illuminate, to open this Word up to me, to speak to me about my condition and my job assignments and what He wants me to do for the day and to give me strength or to correct me.

It's the Word of the Lord.

But there's also the hand of the Lord and that's

the symbolic hand of God that strengthens you.

Anybody need strength today?

The hand of the Lord is with you when you're with Him.

Well, what's the image?

This storm.

It's the image of a whirlwind.

And artists can't picture it completely, but this fiery whirlwind.

You know, in the Bible, the storm many times refers to God's judgment.

This huge whirlwind and a vision came from the north, so it symbolized Babylon, which is in the north, coming down to attack them and destroy the city.

And the bright light in the storm that looks like molten metal as Ezekiel describes it.

By the way, the word like, of course it's in Hebrew, but our English word like is used over 25 times to show that these visions are meant to be symbolic.

There's no UFOs.

There's no spacecraft.

These are symbols and they all mean something.

In this case, well, let me ask you, who is the consuming fire?

Our God is, Hebrews 12:29.

And so the fire in this whirlwind is to show that this is from God Himself.

God used fire.

He used it for good, remember, in the wandering of the children of Israel in the desert for 40 years?

What led them by night?

The pillar of fire.

What was Elijah taken up in at the end of his life?

A chariot of fire.

So fire isn't always bad, but in this case it was bad.

It meant that God's judgment was sweeping down from the north, Babylon, modern day Iraq,

And it was bad.

It was going to destroy the city.

Fiery punishment.

And it goes back to what I've said so many times, storms of correction in our lives that God uses, along with storms of perfection.

And it's a terrible thing to be opposed by God, and that was what was happening here.

Well, that's the first symbol, right, the whirlwind.

The second one is the cherubim.

What's a cherubim?

An angel, right?

The cherubim, we can read about them after the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden.

They're kicked out of the garden, and who was there to make sure Adam and Eve didn't sneak back into the garden?

The cherubim, these angelic beings.

We'll look at verses 5 and following.

From the midst of this storm came the likeness of four living creatures.

We can read about them in Revelation 4 and 5, right?

We're at a throne of God.

And this was their appearance.

They had a human likeness, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings.

Their legs were strength, and the soles of their feet were like the soles of a calf foot, so like a hoof.

That's crazy.

And they sparkled like burnished bronze.

And under their wings on their four sides they had human hands.

And the four had their faces and their wings thus their wings touched one another.

Well, that's why in the temple on the ark, the mercy seat, their wings touched each other.

I get it.

And each one of them went straight forward without turning as they went.

So they had these four

faces and the wings.

And it says, skip down to verse 13, as for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures.

And it was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning, and these creatures darted to and fro like the appearance of a flash of lightning.

So one artist

has done this kind of a thing.

It's kind of creepy.

But it's, okay, so what do you think that's supposed to represent?

Like, why to have a lion and a cow and a man and an eagle?

Well, we know that those represent the order of creation, right?

Man is the highest of God's creatures being made in the image of God.

The lion is the greatest of the untamed beast.

The cow, the greatest of the tamed beast.

The ox, the strongest of the domesticated beast.

The eagle is the greatest of birds.

And so it represents all of creation.

Well, Ezekiel identifies these living creatures as the cherubim.

And cherubim were, if you remember, they were kind of sewn, embroidered into the tabernacle curtains.

They were on the golden covering of the ark, the mercy seat.

We can see them in the book of Revelation.

And they do God's bidding and they are symbols here.

And you remember,

The connection here, it's not just that, but if you remember the connection with the covenant that God made with Noah, what was it?

That He would never destroy the world with a flood again, right?

And what was the sign?

Rainbow.

I will set my bow in the sky, right?

He gave that promise to Noah and his descendants, if you remember, and the birds and the livestock and the wild animals.

It was a promise for all of them.

And so you see them represented here.

Again, this is an apocalyptic, symbolic book, and it uses that language to represent God, to represent us, to represent creation.

And it reminds us that all of creation is used by God to bless or to chasten His people.

They are all part of God's judgment.

Well, these cherubim are types of angels.

Angels are real, yes?

Angels are ministering spirits.

You could have been helped by an angel before and you did not even realize it.

These cherubim were a special class of angelic creatures, just like the seraphim from Isaiah 6 are a special class of angels.

And one day you're going to see these cherubim.

As you look into God's throne room, what an amazing sight that would be.

Well, all of creation is subject to God's sovereignty, but we also know a third of the angels rejected that, yes, fell, and we call them demons today.

But in the end, as part of God's creation, we've all got to make that choice to love and to serve and choose our God or not.

And it's up to you and it's up to me.

Well, the cherubim.

Well, what's the next image?

Look at verse 15 and following.

It's these wheels that some would call UFOs.

Now, as I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them.

So each cherubim

had a wheel inside a wheel assigned to him.

And these are gleaming, and these could move in any direction without turning.

And the rim, scripture says, were full of eyes all around.

And wherever the living creatures went, these angels went, the wheels went beside them.

And wherever the spirit wanted to go, they went and the wheels would raise up or go down.

They would turn and they would move in a lightning flash.

Well, how do we make any sense of this?

Could it, well, we know certain things, right?

That these eyes on the rims, what would eyes, what would that wheel with the rim being totally covered in eyes, what would that suggest to you?

All those eyes that could see, what would that suggest to you?

that God can see everything.

God is not only omniscient, He knows everything, He's omnipresent, He's everywhere.

And they moved with a lightning flash.

And one commentator I love, Warren Wiersbe, he says this, now we get the total picture.

A heavenly chariot with four wheels moving quickly from place to place at the direction of the Sovereign Lord.

And as it moved, the noise of the wings of the cherubim sounded like the noise of great waters coming together like the voice of the Almighty.

We can read about that in the Book of Revelation.

It all ties together.

And the wheels symbolize the omnipresence of God.

God is everywhere.

And He can go everywhere.

By the way, just like Jesus in His glorified body could appear and disappear, just like the heavenly body you'll have one day.

And Ezekiel was beholding this representation of the sovereignty of God and the providence, the will of God being worked out in the world.

So it's not about UFO aircraft.

It's not about ET or aliens.

This is apocalyptic language.

And what's the truth here?

God is all-knowing.

He knows your stuff.

He knows my stuff.

He's all-powerful and He's present everywhere.

He's the God who saw.

This was the assurance of Ezekiel.

This was the assurance that

God saw what was going on hundreds of miles away in his beloved city and the people that were being starved to death, the people that were being murdered, the temple that was being destroyed, the holy things defamed.

God saw it all.

And Ezekiel needed to hear that.

Nothing escapes him, including your stuff and my stuff, including what's going on right now in Iran. in Ukraine and in Gaza and with all of the groups he knows and he sees.

Well, there's also the throne, verse 26 through 28.

And that's the last symbol we're going to look at.

Ezekiel gets this message, and 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.

I wonder who that could be.

What do you think?

What form of God, the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, what form?

Have you ever thought about this?

What form does Jesus take in heaven?

I know He is symbolically pictured as the Lamb that was slaughtered.

I think Jesus is going to have a human appearance.

He's God in the form of man.

And when he returned to God the Father, I think he's going to keep that form.

And so Ezekiel looks up on this throne and there's the appearance of a man.

And it's important to believe in not just the Son of God, but God the Son, yes?

So it wasn't a door knock, but it was a ding-dong, actually a ring doorbell.

And it was two gentlemen from the
Watchtower Society.

Jehovah's Witnesses came to talk.

My wife passed them on to me right away.

And I don't blame her, but I love talking to people about that.

And so I went out on the porch and we talked for a while, really nice guys.

And I said to them, listen, I don't want to talk about whether you accept blood transfusions or not, or you celebrate Christmas or Christmas trees or any of that stuff.

Here's the deal.

It's Jesus Christ.

Have you trusted in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation?

Not knocking on doors, not doing good works, not knowledge.

Are you trusting in Him to get to heaven, to pay the penalty of your sins?

And they said, yeah, we are.

He's our Savior.

And I said, okay, good.

I'll accept that word from you.

The other difference you know that we have, and I was very respectful, is we see Jesus differently, yes?

And they said, yeah, we do.

And we talked for a while and you do know that Jehovah's Witnesses believe that God created Jesus, just like God created Satan, or God created you and me.

Jesus is just a created being.

So they can call Him the Savior, they can call Him the Son of God, but not God the Son.

And I said, that's the difference.

And they said, Well, that's because He refers to His Father in the New Testament.

Read it.

Jesus calls God His Father.

And I said, Well, have you read it all?

He says, The Father and I are one.

Before Abraham was, I am, Jesus declared.

All those statements.

But anyway, it makes a difference if you believe in the Son of God, Jesus,

and leave it there, but not God the Son Jesus, the second person of the Trinity.

So there's this human appearance.

I think it's one of the many, many, many pre-incarnate, I'll put it that way, appearances of Jesus in the Old Testament.

Well, so there's this throne.

It's beautiful.

It was azure blue, flashes of fire within it, symbolizing what?

Holiness of God.

There's a rainbow around it, symbolizing the covenant that God has, a covenant of grace, not of good works.

Grace.

It's interesting.

Like I said, Noah saw the rainbow after the storm.

The Apostle John saw it before the storm in Revelation 4.

You can go back and read that.

Ezekiel saw it over the storm.

and in control of the storm.

The glory of the Lord is one of the main key themes in the book of Ezekiel.

The prophet, when you read this book, so I hope you do, the prophet will watch the glory depart from Jerusalem, but then one day he will see it come back over Jerusalem, the glory of the Lord.

That's God's promise that it will return.

So how do we wrap this up?

What's the whole message here in the midst of all these weird visions and symbols?

Because one day I think if you're a true believer in Christ, if you put all your hope and trust in Jesus for salvation, yes, you're going to see God's throne room.

You're going to see how that glory has returned.

You're going to see the four living creatures and the 24 elders.

You're going to see Jesus Christ at the right hand of the Father.

And we can look forward to that.

But here's my takeaways, the summary.

Number one, even though His beloved nation and the sacred holy temple were being destroyed,

Ezekiel was assured that God was not absent.

He knew about it.

In fact, he was there.

In fact, he was still on his throne when those bad things happened.

I wonder what's happening in your life where you need to be assured God is still on his throne.

Second thing, Israel was not a victim.

Think about this.

God used an evil world power to destroy Jerusalem.

But in the end, it wasn't Babylon.

It's not the Medes or the Persians.

It's not China.

It's not Russia.

It's not Iran.

God was at work to bring judgment on His people who had walked away from Him.

And that's the scary lesson here.

The Bible says your sins will find you out and there will be a consequence.

That's the lesson for you and me.

The third thing is this, that even though

Everything that Ezekiel held dear was gone.

His wife, his beloved homeland, his city.

He was assured that God still loved him and that God had not forgotten him.

The promise of this prophetic book, we'll put it up there, the promise is this, despite times of worldwide turmoil, one day the glory of God will return, so keep trusting Him.

And I got to apply this.

You see, the glory of God is not just reserved for the millennial kingdom when it comes back with Jesus reigning.

The glory of God can rest on any individual Christ follower who's indwelt with the Holy Spirit, filled with the Holy Spirit.

See, others can see the glory of the Lord in your life.

And they can hear it in the words you speak.

You can carry the glory of the Lord and that's your duty and mine as we follow Him closely and trust Him through the good times and the bad.

If we draw near to Him, He's going to draw near to us.

And here's my promise.

If you're discouraged today, if you're hopeless, if you're struggling, I promise that God will be there for you.

How do I know that?

Do you know what Ezekiel called God?

Jehovah Shema, the Lord is there.