



# Ezekiel 1-3

Ezekiel #1 | Apr 14, 2024 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 | Preached by Steve H

## Series Introduction

Good morning. I'm excited to begin a new sermon series with you today! In this series, we are going to explore a book of the Bible, taking a high-level look at the *overall* contents as well as taking an in-depth look at some *specific* passages.

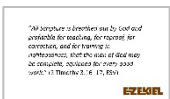


*Our approach is like ordering a sampler platter at a new restaurant. The sampler helps you get a feel for the **type** of food the restaurant offers, and hopefully gives you a chance to discover some **new favorite** dishes. And once you've tried it, the hope is that you **return** and try a **full** meal instead of just a few bites!*

Today, we are going to sample the Old Testament prophetic book of **Ezekiel**! And it might not be like any “sampler” you’ve had before. It’s not the familiar “*bar and grill*” platter of the Gospels or the letters of the New Testament. It’s not the “*tour of Italy*” platter of Psalms or Genesis. It’s more like the “*shwarma*” platter or the “*Ethiopian*” platter – a little different and maybe exotic for some of us here in Kansas. But I think you’re going to appreciate the food once we help you get used to it!

### How many people remember ever going through sermons on this book of the Bible before?

It’s rare. Many churches value Scripture, but they often fail to venture into the (dare I say?) *weird and strange* sections. Either it takes too much effort, or they worry about the reaction, or they are so focused on the New Testament’s presentation of the Gospel that they ignore Old Testament foundations. I understand the mentality, but I don’t want you to be short-changed as students of the Bible. If we value Scripture and believe that...



*“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16–17, ESV)*

...then we can’t ignore this stuff. We need the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). If you want to understand Jesus and your Christian faith, you need the Old Testament!

Dr. Tim Ross puts it this way:



*It is impossible to overstate the importance of the Hebrew scriptures for the life of the Church. You name it, it’s there—the roots of history, faith, salvation, worship, theology, psychology, our journey with the One whose name is ‘I Am.’*

*The narratives introduce us to odd, wonderful people who followed hard after God...and who often failed spectacularly. ...The Hebrew scriptures comprised Jesus' prayer book, hymnal, field guide, mission statement, and life narrative.<sup>1</sup>*

There is a blessing in knowing the Old Testament! If you understand the backstory, you understand Jesus! If you explore and expose yourself to these portions of Scripture, you gain important insights into the nature and character of God. If you study the full story leading up to Jesus – including the Law, Wisdom Literature, and the Prophets – you'll know and love Him more.

Our study of Ezekiel will help us to understand and love Jesus better. And as a bonus, our time in Ezekiel will also provide truths and principles that apply to our present-day situations. As we work past the strangeness of the book, we will discover much that is helpful, inspiring, and inspired!

Our series will take 9 weeks to sample the 48 chapters of Ezekiel, and in those nine weeks of samples, it is my prayer that you will gain an appreciation for the “cuisine” of Ezekiel, and that you will taste and see that the word of the Lord here is good!

Today, we will experience the dramatic opening chapters to Ezekiel's message and consider the question of whose voice matters most.



## ***Meet Ezekiel (1:1-3)***

Let's begin with the opening verses of Ezekiel 1:1-3. If you have your Bible with you today, please turn there (about 2/3 of the way in, past Jeremiah and Lamentations, right before Daniel). I'm going to be reading from the New Living Translation today, because I feel like the NLT's more conversational English will help us remove at least one layer of difficulty in understanding the text.



*“On July 31 of my thirtieth year, while I was with the Judean exiles beside the Kebar River in Babylon, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. This happened during the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's captivity. (The LORD gave this message to Ezekiel son of Buzi, a priest, beside the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians, and he felt the hand of the LORD take hold of him.)”*

(Ezekiel 1:1–3, NLT)

Right away, we get some helpful information that sets the stage for us.

*Sometimes in a movie, you have an opening scene where they show a wide shot of a location, with a date and a place name superimposed over top: “Germany 1939” or “China 1967.” The details prepare you for what you are about to see and experience, setting expectations and bringing in the appropriate emotional baggage. “Germany 1939” makes you think about Hitler and Nazi Germany. “China 1967” puts you in the middle of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.*

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in an email from Milligan's Ministry Resource Center <mrc@milligan.edu> (4/8/2024)



In Ezekiel, the wide shot would be the ancient Middle East, on the bank of a river with a major city in the background, with the words “Babylon, 592 BC.”

What feelings and associations should we have as we read this? To understand, let’s do a quick rundown of the relevant history.

- The nation of **Babylon** (named after its capital city of the same name) rises to power twenty years ago in **612 BC**, overtaking Assyria as the dominant superpower in northeast Mesopotamia.
  - They push west to crush Assyria and all who support Assyria, like the nation of Egypt. Anyone who gets in the way suffers...
  - And, the small **nation of Judah** gets in the way! This is the nation of God’s people (the Jews), the home of the city of Jerusalem, where the temple of God sits.
- While Judah tries to lean on her Egyptian allies for support, Babylon is too strong. They **defeat Assyria and Egypt** at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC, and they push south...**invading Judah** along the way.
- After Judah’s first defeat, Babylon begins deporting young Jewish nobles back to Babylon where they will live in **exile**.
  - Babylon’s strategy is to take skilled, successful, and powerful people back to their home city so their talents can benefit the homeland.
- Time passes, the Jews rebel, there is another defeat...and Babylon is even more forceful in its punishment. In **592 BC**, they defeat the Jews and take **more people into exile**...including **King Jehoiachin**, his family, the priests, and the leading officials.
- Time passes, the Jews rebel again, and in a final defeat, Babylon destroys Jerusalem in **586 BC**. The temple is destroyed, the city is turned to rubble, and its people are decimated.
  - But that’s **six years** from the start of Ezekiel’s message! It hasn’t happened yet.

As readers of Ezekiel 1, we know what is coming. And so that helps us have the right emotions when the book starts. As the prophetic message opens – as “Babylon, 592 BC” flashes across the screen – in three short verses, we learn that:

- **Ezekiel** (whose name means “the Lord strengthens”) was a **priest living in exile**. He was taken five years ago at the same time King Jehoiachin was taken. At age thirty (the same year he would have begun serving at the still-existent temple) Ezekiel is now living as a captive among the other exiled Jews.
- Ezekiel is spending time near the **Kebar River** in an area of Jewish settlements in the nation of Babylon, located in modern-day Iraq.
- But Ezekiel is living in a **time of difficulty** – his people are on the brink of disaster, though their hometown remains. Some of the exiles hold out **hope** that

Jerusalem will again be victorious and independent. You and I know that's not going to happen...but the hope remains.

However, now something extraordinary is about to happen on the banks of that river!



## ***Encounter the Glory of God (1:4-28)***

Ezekiel encounters the glory of God! It happens in such a strange way, though, that you need to hear it. You need to experience it. I don't want you to start reading this on your own and look around the room confused; that's why we're doing this together. Suspend judgment and just go with it for a minute:



*"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.*

*From the center of the cloud came four living beings that looked human, except that each had four faces and four wings. Their legs were straight, and their feet had hooves like those of a calf and shone like burnished bronze. Under each of their four wings I could see human hands. So each of the four beings had four faces and four wings. The wings of each living being touched the wings of the beings beside it. Each one moved straight forward in any direction without turning around. Each had a human face in the front, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle at the back. Each had two pairs of outstretched wings—one pair stretched out to touch the wings of the living beings on either side of it, and the other pair covered its body.*

*They went in whatever direction the spirit chose, and they moved straight forward in any direction without turning around. The living beings looked like bright coals of fire or brilliant torches, and lightning seemed to flash back and forth among them. And the living beings darted to and fro like flashes of lightning.*

*As I looked at these beings, I saw four wheels touching the ground beside them, one wheel belonging to each. The wheels sparkled as if made of beryl. All four wheels looked alike and were made the same; each wheel had a second wheel turning crosswise within it. The beings could move in any of the four directions they faced, without turning as they moved. The rims of the four wheels were tall and frightening, and they were covered with eyes all around. When the living beings moved, the wheels moved with them. When they flew upward, the wheels went up, too. The spirit of the living beings was in the wheels. So wherever the spirit went, the wheels and the living beings also went. When the beings moved, the wheels moved. When the beings stopped, the wheels stopped. When the beings flew upward, the wheels rose up, for the spirit of the living beings was in the wheels.*

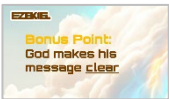
*Spread out above them was a surface like the sky, glittering like crystal. Beneath this surface the wings of each living being stretched out to touch the others' wings, and each had two wings covering its body. As they flew, their wings sounded to me like waves crashing against the shore or like the voice of the Almighty or like the shouting of a mighty army. When they stopped, they let down their wings. As they stood with wings lowered, a voice spoke from beyond the crystal surface above them.*

*Above this surface was something that looked like a throne made of blue lapis lazuli. And on this throne high above was a figure whose appearance resembled a man. From what appeared to be his waist up, he looked like gleaming amber, flickering like a fire. And from his waist down, he looked like a burning flame, shining with splendor. 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..." (Ezekiel 1:4–28, NLT)*



If you struggle to grasp what is being presented, you're in good company. This is weird stuff! It's so weird that some people have tried to use it to claim that Ezekiel saw a UFO in ancient Babylon! Others read it and wonder if Ezekiel might have been "collecting some mushrooms" by the river...if you catch my meaning.

But God's appearances are often strange and overwhelming, whether they come in a burning bush, a transfiguration on a mountain, or a vision on the island of Patmos. Such appearances might leave doubt after the fact (e.g. "Was I dreaming?"), but God can and does provide clarity and certainty to know that it is Him speaking.



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### *Bonus Point: God makes his message clear.*

If you ever feel like God is telling you something, test the message. God's message will always be **consistent** with His character. It will never **contradict** Scripture. It will sometimes **challenge** you to act beyond what you would normally do, but He will **confirm** it through His Spirit, through situations, or through other witnesses. In other words, as Jesus puts it:

*"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."*  
(John 10:27, NLT)



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I don't give the UFO thing any credence, but Ezekiel definitely saw something "out of this world." He saw a type of chariot or moveable platform, powered by fantastic creatures and technology. And the One enthroned upon it was God Himself!

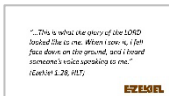
Ezekiel gets credit for trying to describe things that are beyond him. The details he shares are intense, even if they are unfamiliar to us. Some of the imagery is symbolic; some of it contains references that are culturally significant to Ezekiel's audience.



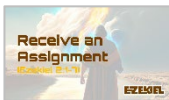
For example:

- **“Four”** is symbolic of “the whole earth” (i.e. the four corners of the earth). With four creatures and wheels, God’s throne is not limited in where it can go.
- The creatures’ **faces** represent a wide range of Creation. Lions, eagles, and oxen dominate wild animals, the skies, and domesticated animals, respectively, while humans are the pinnacle of creation.
- The **wheels** are unlimited in where they can go, and the fact that they are covered with eyes shows awareness of everything going on, as a picture of God’s *omniscience*. Their placement **underneath the throne** is symbolic of God’s rule.
- The **materials** used are precious and beautiful, adding to the impressive and awesome nature of this vision.

You don’t have to understand the whole thing. You don’t have to think it’s normal. You just have to appreciate and respect that Ezekiel finds himself in the presence of the awesome, holy, majestic, overwhelming glory of God!



*“...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 1:28, NLT)



## **Receive an Assignment (2:1-7)**

What would be your reaction to this vision? I think I would be like Ezekiel – falling to the ground! This would be an overwhelming experience!

Yet the focus isn’t just on *Who* Ezekiel saw; it is on *what* the One on the throne said.



*“And he said to me, “Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you.” And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.”* (Ezekiel 2:1–2, ESV)

Ezekiel receives an assignment!

What God did with Ezekiel was unusual and rare. Scripture is filled with so many special encounters with God and special assignments from God that we start to think such meetings and callings are normal. They aren’t. There were millions of Israelites and Jews in the Old Testament; a tiny fraction got a message from God, many of them only one time in their life. These moments were rare!

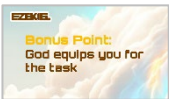
Today, living on this side of the cross, the pace of these moments has increased. I believe that God does frequently guide and direct us through His Spirit...especially in moments of prompting (“call this person” or “go make a hospital visit now”). But moments of “calling” or “visions” are still special, infrequent moments in an otherwise mundane life.



My own personal calling to ministry had a moment of **direction** when I was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade (“go into ministry” – my bedroom in Norton, KS) and a moment of **confirmation** when I was in 12<sup>th</sup> grade (“vocational ministry” – CIY in Durango, CO). I’ve had a couple of other times when I’ve felt like God made my direction clear. But in between the moments of calling there are hours, days, weeks, months, and even years that pass when nothing special happens.

So, instead of looking for dramatic revelations and commands, most of the time, our “call” is simply to follow and be obedient to what God has already revealed! (e.g. “Should I murder people? No. Should I love my neighbor? Yes. Should I follow Jesus? Absolutely!”)

We are all given tasks to obey...even if they don’t involve encounters with glowing creature/wheel chariots by a river and special empowerment by the Spirit!




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### *Bonus Point: God equips you for the task.*

If God ever gives you a task (special or ordinary), He will equip you for it. Here, Ezekiel is given the indwelling Spirit to help him stand and receive God’s message. For us as Christians, we have the indwelling Spirit to help us **know and recall** more than we could on our own. He provides **spiritual gifts** to allow us to do more than we can on our own. And He produces **spiritual fruit** to help us act better than we would on our own.

*“And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.”  
(Philippians 1:6, NLT)*



A Spirit-enabled Ezekiel stands and hears a message.

*“Son of man,” he said, “I am sending you to the nation of Israel, a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me. They and their ancestors have been rebelling against me to this very day. They are a stubborn and hard-hearted people. But I am sending you to say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says!’ And whether they listen or refuse to listen—for remember, they are rebels—at least they will know they have had a prophet among them.*

*“Son of man, do not fear them or their words. Don’t be afraid even though their threats surround you like nettles and briars and stinging scorpions. Do not be dismayed by their dark scowls, even though they are rebels. You must give them my messages whether they listen or not. But they won’t listen, for they are completely rebellious!” (Ezekiel 2:3–7, NLT)*



## ***Listen to One Voice Alone (2:8-3:27)***

As a prophet, Ezekiel will **receive** and **declare** the message of God.

- Ezekiel is called to receive a message from God.
- Ezekiel is called to declare that message to the people of Israel.

The contrast between the one giving the message and the ones receiving is striking!

God is pictured in holiness, awe, sovereignty, and splendor. He commands respect! He has authority! (*“Thus saith the Lord God!”* – Ezekiel 2:4, KJV).

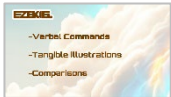
The Israelites are pictured as rebellious, stubborn, mean, and dismissive. They reject authority! They scoff at holiness!



Ezekiel is caught between the two, and he must decide who has the louder voice. He must listen to one voice alone. Will he listen to the God who tells him to speak, or will he listen to the crowds who want him to be quiet?

You and I can relate. We may not have a special assignment and message to share, but we have a general command to share the good news of Jesus with people who reject Him. And we must decide who has the louder voice. Will we listen to the God who expects us to speak, or will we listen to the crowds who want anything but Jesus?

To help Ezekiel decide, God presents the message in multiple ways:



- God presents the message with **verbal commands**. He tells Ezekiel to share the messages he is given, regardless of the outcome or the opposition. He is not responsible for the outcome, just for sharing the words.
- God presents the message with a **tangible illustration**. He has Ezekiel eat a scroll. The words of the scroll are words of “lamentation and mourning and woe” (2:10), but as Ezekiel obediently consumes it, the scroll tastes sweet. In other words, the illustration showed that the prophecies will be harsh, but Ezekiel’s obedient acceptance of those words will be the better path.
- God presents the message with a **comparison**. The Jewish people Ezekiel will share these prophecies with (aka God’s chosen people) will be more stubborn than foreigners who don’t even know God!

Ezekiel still must decide, but the answer seems obvious...especially after the way God revealed Himself to Ezekiel! The glorious vision impacted his obedience. Ezekiel had been living among the people; he had seen their attitudes and behaviors and wasn’t excited to face them. But after Ezekiel had an encounter with the living God? There was no question of who he should follow!





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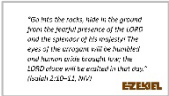
## ***Bonus Point: Be motivated by God's glory.***

An awareness of God's presence and glory is important when we are trying to follow His voice above others. In the absence of your own Kebar River vision, you should still be aware of God's glory and allow the truth of who He is to motivate your obedience!

When we understand His glory in its fullness, it is humbling! For example, a passage in Isaiah shows how fragile we are when we meet God's presence:

*"Go into the rocks, hide in the ground from the fearful presence of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty! The eyes of the arrogant will be humbled and human pride brought low; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day." (Isaiah 2:10–11, NIV)*

Don't ever substitute the glory of God for anything or anyone less. Just pay attention to who He is while considering what He has revealed and allow His glory to motivate you!



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Ezekiel knew he had no choice but to listen to God's voice alone. God told him it would be hard. He would face opposition from people, and God was going to make Ezekiel's life a demonstration to others in a way that wouldn't be fun (*ex: Ezekiel would not be allowed to speak unless he was speaking God's messages – 3:26-27*).

How could He refuse? When you see the glory of God, you are a fool if you reject it!!!

## ***Closing: Whose voice matters most?***

In these first few chapters of Ezekiel, we find some stuff that is strange and challenging (Trust me, there's more to come!). But as you consider:

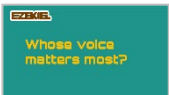
- The vision...
- The glory of God...
- The message Ezekiel should deliver...

I just want you to ask yourself, *"Whose voice matters most?"*

Are you afraid of the voice of others? Are you afraid of ridicule, of insult, of condescension? Do you allow fear to silence you from talking about what you believe?

Or will you listen to the voice of God, obeying him in the special callings and in mundane obedience? Are you inspired by His glory, by His holiness, by His majesty, by His transcendence?

You aren't Ezekiel. You aren't being called to be a prophet to a nation. But the SAME GOD who appeared to Him is the SAME GOD we worship. And He continues to call us to live differently, to reject the sins of our culture and to listen to His voice alone.



If you can read Ezekiel 1-3 and say, “*Of course* Ezekiel should do the crazy difficult, insane stuff God’s got in store for Him...,” then you must ask yourself, “Would *I* do the same if God asked *me*?”

You can. And you should.

Church, listen to His voice!!!!



## ***Prayer***

## ***Invitation***

Is God calling you to greater obedience? Is He calling you to submit your life to Jesus? Is He calling you to serve more? Is He calling you to minister to someone?

If God is calling, listen to His voice!

We would love to pray for you if you are looking to follow Jesus more closely. If you need prayer or want to share a decision to follow Him, please come forward to talk to me while we stand and sing today’s song of invitation.

## ***PRAYER REQUESTS:***

# Notes

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***Meet Ezekiel (1:1-3)***

***Encounter the Glory of God (1:4-28)***

*Bonus Point: God makes his message clear. (John 10:27)*

***Receive an Assignment (2:1-7)***

*Bonus Point: God equips you for the task. (Philippians 1:6)*

***Listen to One Voice Alone (2:8-3:27)***

*Bonus Point: Be motivated by God's glory. (Isaiah 2:10-11)*

***Whose voice matters most?***

# Discussion Questions

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*Use the following questions based on today's sermon as a starting point for spiritual discussions with your family or a small group of Christian friends this week.*

## ***Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose***

- As we begin a new sermon series today, what do you remember about the last series? Are there any points, truths, challenges, or questions you took away from it? How can you hold on to those insights while we move on to a new topic?

## ***Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters***

- Have you ever read through the book of Ezekiel? What do you know about it or remember about it?
- Read Ezekiel 1:1-3. What are some things we learn about Ezekiel the prophet in these opening verses?
- What would you expect an encounter with God to look like? Would it be similar to Ezekiel's vision in 1:4-28? If so, how? If not, how would it be different?
- How does Ezekiel's vision highlight the glory of God? What elements create a sense of wonder?
- Read through the vision again and note the references to God's "Spirit." What role does the Spirit play in the vision? How does He equip Ezekiel? (See Ezekiel 2:2 as an example).
- What is Ezekiel called to do (2:3-7)? How will the people respond to his message (3:7)? Why do you think their response is rebellious instead of obedient?
- How would the lack of a positive response to God's message affect you if you were a prophet? Why?
- Do you have an adequate understanding of God's glory? What steps can you take to gain a greater appreciation of it?
- Why is His glory a motivation for obedience? How does it motivate you?

## ***Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God***

- Pray for God to help you grasp more of His glory. Ask for forgiveness for the times you have treated Him too flippantly and casually.