

The God of glory revealed - Ezekiel 1: 1-28

What is the most amazing thing you have ever seen in your life? Perhaps it's the sea or a particular landscape? Perhaps it's the stars and the universe? Chances are it probably isn't a vision of God's glory. In Scripture, we discover that various people were given visions of God's glory at particular times. Some of these examples include:

- Isaiah who had a vision of the Lord *high and exalted* seated on his heavenly throne (Is 6)
- Moses who saw God's glory on Mount Sinai - this vision was so glorious it made his face shine (Ex 33: 18-23)
- When the Jerusalem Temple was dedicated, people witnessed it being filled with God's glory-cloud (1 Kings 8: 10-11)
- In Revelation, John has a vision of the heavenly throne room and so on

The point is, God grants these visions of his glory to different people in different ways at different times for different reasons. When we read these visions and the language used to describe them, we need to recognise just how inadequate our language is. It is much like telling someone that you love them - whilst saying 'I love you' is an important statement to make, it simply does not adequately describe what we may feel about them.

As we come to Ezekiel's vision, we need to recognise that although God's glory is indescribable, Ezekiel's description paints a vivid picture for us that we can make some sense of. So turning to his vision. In verse 4 we read: *I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The centre of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures.*

The first thing this tells us is that God is not dead or sleeping, nor is he restricted to the temple or a geographical location; on the contrary, he is living and active and on the move.

The second thing we learn is found in the use of the imagery of the Lord riding on the storm surrounded by fire and lightning, and the subsequent references to wheels from verse 15 onwards, that represent the chariot throne that divine warriors would ride in. Such imagery was used fairly commonly in the Ancient Near East as a way to describe the coming of a divine warrior. As such, these images are used too, by the Old Testament prophets to depict God as warrior.

Now, in other biblical prophetic writings, the image of God as warrior often depicts God as the one who brings deliverance. However in Ezekiel's case, God comes not to bring deliverance but judgement - judgement that is not temple or geographically bound - judgement that takes place where the people are found, even in exile.

We know this because verse 4 also tells us of the direction the violent storm is coming from - in this case it is coming out of the north - the place of Judah's enemies. As one Bible Commentator says *The divine warrior is here approaching to wage war against his own people, not to deliver them. The covenant-breaking people can find no comfort in the imminent personal arrival of their God.* (p58 Duguid).

The vision then continues in verses 5-21 to provide us with a description of four strange creatures and a complex wheeled chariot throne. These verses tell us that the Lord's chariot throne is supported by living creatures - creatures that are identified in Ezekiel chapter 10 as Cherubim.

As one Bible Commentator writes of these: *These extraordinary winged creatures have nothing to do with the rosy-cheeked, naked infants of popular mythology. They have four faces each: that of a man [the highest of God's creation]; a lion (the highest wild animal); an ox (the highest domestic animal); and an eagle (the highest [flying] bird) - symbolising the fact that they embody within themselves all of the highest attributes of living creation. Thus they are appropriately called 'living creatures'.* (p58/59 Duguid).

Alongside each creature we discover are wheels that we told in verse 16 *sparkled like topaz, and all four looked alike. Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel.*

All of these wheels move together and stop together under the control of the spirit of the living creatures. Here we have a picture of harmony and complete unity - the way things have been created and intended by God. Can I encourage you later to read this amazing description a few times to take in God's amazing heavenly creations.

The passage then finishes with verses 22-28, containing a vision of God enthroned on high and although God comes to judge and not deliver, there is hope in verse 28. We read:

Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him.

As a Bible Commentator says of this: *While the emphasis of Ezekiel 1 is almost exclusively on the gathering clouds that threaten rain, yet the mention of the rainbow allows the possibility of a ray of hope even in the midst of the gloom. That hope does not deny the possibility of judgement, any more than the rainbow denies the possibility of rain. Indeed, without the rain there could be no rainbow! What the rainbow asserts is the faithfulness of God even in the midst of over-whelming judgement. It is a sign of God's self-commitment to his promise. God's judgement must fall on his rebellious people, yet because of commitment to his covenant, he will not wipe them out. In the darkness of exile, God's covenant faithfulness, his hesed, was Israel's only hope. (p59 Duguid)*

We learned about God's hesed in our series on Ruth last June! This is a Hebrew word that has no direct equivalent in the English language but it conveys a depth of relationship that encompasses 'covenantal loyalty, faithfulness, kindness, goodness, mercy, love and compassion'. This is who God is even when administering judgement! So what does this all mean for us today?

First, we need to remember that God is not a tame God (like Aslan in the Narnia stories who is anything but a tame lion). We cannot box God up or seek to manipulate Him. If we think we've got God sussed, think again! We need to allow God by the power of his spirit to refresh us, teach us, challenge us, correct us daily, especially through seasons of huge change, such as we are living through at this time - there is no going back...!

Second, we need to be aware that God's presence in the midst of his people is not always good news because he is a Holy God who will judge evil. For those who think they can two time God, beware - God will call you to account, even if you think you're getting away with it now. The judgement upon churches and Christians is severe as we see in the book of Revelation, where churches ceased to be!

Third, we must make sure we don't lose our first love for God. We need to learn how to live our daily lives loving God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength, together with loving each other as we love ourselves. We need to learn to live lives that reflect God's hesed. So what will your response be?