

MAKING SENSE OF IT

ALL

SERIES: KNOWING THE GOD OF JUSTICE AND HOPE



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Ezekiel 1:1-28
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Ezekiel 1:1-28

Today we are starting a new series at PBC. It will be an in-depth look at one of the most difficult to interpret books of the Bible. A book full of mystery, imagery, judgment, prophecy, and promise.

Before we get started, let us take a few minutes to consider something from our own culture that combines many of those same elements. Of course, you must realize that I'm talking about the HBO television show, *Silicon Valley*.

It is fascinating to watch a television series designed around a unique part of the world in which we ourselves live. It's like someone reading your diary. Let's watch a brief, 12-second video clip of the opening sequence of the show. The video follows a drone path over a rendition of the various companies and happenings in Silicon Valley.

Those 12 seconds capture a decade's worth of coming and going around here. The rise and fall of companies. The excitement over new ideas. Even the frenetic and chaotic feel of the video reminds us of where we live and work.

Someone put together an eight-minute video analyzing and explaining all the cultural references that are present in this short sequence. I'm convinced that one of the goals of this show is to make sense of all that is happening in the Silicon Valley. The innovative technology, the young billionaires, the publicized startup successes and the quiet failures, the competition and the creativity.

We live in a crazy part of the world at a crazy time in history. How do you make sense of it all? What is going on around us? How did we find ourselves here?

The book of Ezekiel addresses some of those very same questions. It takes place shortly after God's people find themselves displaced from their homes and living in exile. It opens with a fast paced frenetic vision that combines scenes and images from the long history of

the people of Israel. There are references to the Exodus and the tabernacle and the land and the temple and creation itself.

The book of Ezekiel is answering the questions that the exiles are asking. How did we find ourselves here? What is going on around us? How do we make sense of it all?

In fact, answering these kinds of questions is the main goal for most of the prophets. Prophets don't primarily predict the future. Sometimes they do. But their main vocation is to make sense of the present. Their goal is to open the windows and let in the divine light so that God's people can see what he is doing in the world.

Ultimately, the prophets are helping God's people to answer the big question. Not just, "what is going on?," but, "who is this God? Who is the one who allows this to happen? Who is the one who has led us here?"

This morning, we begin our series entitled *Knowing the God of Justice and Hope*. Over and over again, over 70 times in the book of Ezekiel, we will hear a phrase that explains what God is trying to accomplish through his prophet: "That you may know that I am the LORD."

Prophecy is given "that you may know that I am the LORD." Judgment is given "that you may know that I am the LORD." Promises are given "that you may know that I am the LORD."

Isn't this what we need? To see what is going on around us in light of who God is? To look around at our world: politics, government, economics, corporations, career, parenting, romance, school, and everything else. And to answer the question: how did we find ourselves here? What is God doing? And who is he anyway?

Ezekiel helps the people in his time to see what God is doing and to know who he is. Our challenge will be to apply those lessons to us today. God's purposes are different in the 21st century Silicon Valley than they were in the 6th century BC Babylon. God's purposes are different, but God's character is not.

We hope that knowing who God is and seeing what he was doing in Ezekiel's time will help us in our time. We need this help. We need the curtains to be peeled back. We need to see God in the midst of all the confusion around us. We need to make sense of it all.

We need this help for ourselves, but we also need this so that we can bring that kind of a perspective into our culture. This reason is part of what led us to study the book of Ezekiel: the idea that as the people of God, we have some prophetic vocation in the world. Perhaps it is through our lives, or through our words, or something else entirely.

As people who know the living God, we have a calling to reveal his perspective on events that are happening in the world around us. Our calling is not to align ourselves with this partisan group or that partisan group. We don't pick sides. Our voice is a third voice. It is a prophetic voice that calls forth truth regardless of which side it's on.

The class that we've asked Professor Jeff Louie to teach is going to address those particular issues in a more practical sense. What does it look like for the church to have a prophetic voice in the world? On Sunday mornings, we'll be doing a deep dive into the book of Ezekiel and applying it to our lives.

This morning we begin by looking at the opening vision of Ezekiel. We'll see the arrival of God to people who are confused by their circumstances. We'll see God show up to them and help them to see him in a new light. And we'll see a glimpse of his judgment on them and his promise for them.

HBO's *Silicon Valley* is a great show. The writers and producers have captured so many of the dynamics and curiosities of our part of the world. But they haven't made sense of it. Only God can do that. As we see Ezekiel making sense of God in his world, I hope that the Spirit moves through these texts to help us make sense of God in our world.

Who is God? What is he doing?

Background

We'll start by reading the first few verses of Ezekiel and reviewing some of history.

Ezekiel 1:1-3:

In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. 2 On the fifth day 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, in the land of the Chaldeans by the Chebar canal, and the hand of the Lord was upon him there.

These verses place this particular scene in Ezekiel around 593 BC. This is a very significant time in the life of Israel. The Northern tribes of Israel had already been conquered by Assyria 130 years earlier. But about twelve years before this vision, the southern tribe, headquartered in Jerusalem, began to fall to the Babylonians.

The conquest of Jerusalem and deportation of her people would happen in several waves over 20 years. This vision is received in the middle of that period. It's like a snapshot in time. The nation of Israel was falling, but it hadn't completely fallen yet. We're watching a train wreck in slow motion.

The exiles in Babylon who received this vision had already walked over one thousand miles to arrive in Babylon. That journey likely took over four months. They were tired and confused, and they were living in a historical moment for the life of Israel and the purposes of God.

This is when God tends to show up—when we need him the most. Things are confusing. A lot is going on. We find ourselves asking more and more, “what is going on?” Maybe you are in the midst of a time like that. This is a great time to listen to God. To try to find him in the chaos.

As the vision progresses, we'll look at five different elements that appear in turn. Then we'll put it all together and try to make some sense of it all.

The Fire Cloud

The vision begins.

Ezekiel 1:4:

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

For those of you that know your biblical history, this picture should ring a bell. Where have we seen a cloud and fire before?

Over 800 years earlier, God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. In an incredible display of power, he had led them out of the land of their oppressors. Exodus 13:21 says, “the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light.”

The story of the exodus was one of the foundational stories of God’s people. That was where they became a nation. We celebrate our Declaration of Independence. Jews celebrated the Exodus.

God led them out of slavery with a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. But now, we see the fire cloud arriving after he has led them into slavery. This is no Exodus. This is a kind of reverse Exodus.

Can you hear them asking, “What is happening? Our God is a God of redemption. How is this happening?”

Ezekiel’s vision begins by helping God’s people to see that the same God who rescued them in the Exodus is still working through the exile. God is the same in the Exodus and the Exile.

I grew up without too much pain in my life. I remember wondering in my teen years whether my faith in God would survive facing really difficult times. Well, I haven’t faced as much as some, but I have faced harder times than I ever thought I would. And I have found God in even deeper ways in the midst of my own exile.

Ezekiel’s vision begins with this reminder” God leads us in victory, but he also leads us through pain. God is the same in the Exodus and the Exile.

The Four Living Creatures

First is the cloud of fire. Let’s read the second part of the vision.

Ezekiel 1:5-10:

And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, 6 but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. 7 Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf’s foot. And they sparkled like burnished bronze. 8 Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: 9 their wings touched one another. Each one of them went straight forward, without turning as they went. 10 As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle.

If Ezekiel described a vehicle with the body of the Tesla, the screen of an iPhone, and the sound of a Dolby movie theater, we could easily picture this. But this vision is hard for us to imagine because the only place most of us have seen oxen, lions, and eagles are in the zoo.

I debated about showing a picture of these four living creatures, but I think we are meant to imagine these creatures in our minds.

They look roughly human with two legs. They have four wings, two of which are used for flight and two which seemed to be spread out touching each other. Instead of one face, they have four—one on each side of their head. The ox was known for its strength, the lion for being ferocious, the eagle for its flight, and humans for their intelligence.

These creatures combined the best features of many different animals into one super-creature. It’s like the Avengers team: all the superheroes combined into one team of incredible power. The power of the Hulk, the intelligence, and technology of Iron Man, the hammer of Thor, the good looks of Captain America, and the sticky webs of Spiderman.

These creatures are the ultimate war animal.

But they also remind us of heavenly creatures that we’ve seen before. The ark of God—the box that held the presence of God within it—was protected by cherubim like this. They sat atop the ark with their wings outstretched. They protected the presence of God. In

fact, this is what the cherubim were known for in the Old Testament. They were like God's bodyguards. They were the guardians of God's holiness.

But these creatures are not seated like statues on top of the ark. They are on the move. Why would God's bodyguards be leaving the temple? Where is God going and why?

What is even more strange is how they are moving. That comes next.

The Wheels

We've seen the fire cloud roll in with four living creatures. Now we find out how they are moving so fast.

Ezekiel 1:15-18:

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. 16 As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction: their appearance was like the gleaming of beryl. And the four had the same likeness, their appearance and construction being as it were a wheel within a wheel. 17 When they went, they went in any of their four directions without turning as they went. 18 And their rims were tall and awesome, and the rims of all four were full of eyes all around.

The four living creatures stationed at the four corners of something. Under each creature was apparently a wheel. More specifically, a wheel within a wheel. It's probably one wheel with another perpendicular wheel within it. The significant thing about these wheels is similar to the way that the creatures movement was described: "they went in any of their four directions without turning as they went."

With the addition of the wheels, we're starting to realize that this is a kind of chariot. When the chariot had been invented 1300 years earlier, it revolutionized warfare. But lately, armies were discovering that soldiers riding horses—a cavalry—were more maneuverable. Chariots were fast, but they were clunky.

Chariots suffered the same problem that every type of military vehicle has always had: a glaring vulnerability. It's almost impossible to solve. The flank. The side of the vehicle. When a vehicle is moving in one direction, it is vulnerable to attack on its side.

But what if that vehicle could change directions without turning? What if it could violate the basic laws of physics and momentum and immediately start moving in another direction?

These wheels describe a technological breakthrough that hasn't even been accomplished today.

Unless you count luggage. When they started putting wheels on suitcases, you could only pull them in one direction. That was nice, but now we have spinner luggage. The wheels can spin. You can push, pull or swing your luggage in any direction. It is a technological marvel.

This cherubim chariot is similar, only much better. Not only can it go in any direction. It can change directions instantaneously.

With the fire, the ultimate war animal creatures, and the any-direction wheels, this chariot is becoming the ultimate unbeatable military vehicle. Two more parts of this vision to go.

The Expanse

So far, most of the elements of the vision have pulled in references from the history of the nation of Israel. But now the vision gets cosmic.

Ezekiel 1:22:

Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads.

Now we're going all the way back to creation. "Expanse" is the word used in Genesis 1 as part of the creation story. It's used in the Psalms to speak of how "the sky above proclaims God's handiwork."

So now we have the ultimate war chariot carrying the cosmic expanse of the sky. This image is getting more and more powerful.

Then the sound is turned on. Up until this point, we've seen it play on mute. In the next verse, we hear something.

Ezekiel 1:24-25:

And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army. When they stood still, they let down their wings. 25 And there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads. When they stood still, they let down their wings.

The vision comes alive with sound. Many waters, the sound of the Almighty, a tumult like an army. Not just any sound, but deafening, tumultuous sound. And finally, a voice. A voice from above the expanse stops all the motion.

Then we see the final part of the vision.

The Glory of the Lord

The pinnacle of the vision arrives in the last few verses. This is what the whole vision has been building toward.

Ezekiel 1:26-28:

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. 27 And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. 28 Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around.

Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

Now the picture is complete. The voice belongs to an individual in the likeness of human appearance sitting atop a throne. He is a king.

Now we understand the fullness of the vision. What we are seeing is God arriving as a king on the ultimate war chariot. The glory of the LORD has arrived enthroned on his war chariot.

This is an image that would be somewhat recognized by people in the ancient near East. Archaeologists have discovered Syrian and Persian seals of what they call “sky bearers.” These are four winged humanoid heavenly beings, often with animal faces that carry their deity enthroned above the sky. It’s a strikingly similar picture to what we hear Ezekiel describing.

That means that these readers would have had an easier time than us figuring out what was going on. God is coming, borne by his sky bearers, driving the ultimate war chariot.

The glory of the Lord has left the land of Israel and has come to meet the exiles in the land of Babylon. God has come. The king has arrived riding on the expanse of heaven rolling on any-direction wheels, borne by war animals and led by a fire cloud.

But why? Why has God left the land, abandoned his temple and come to meet his people in Babylon?

The Judgment of God

When I first started studying this passage, I wanted this to mean that God was coming to comfort his people in exile. But as I kept studying it, I had to admit that this was not a picture of a comforter. This was a warrior king.

Maybe he came to fight the Babylonians and save his people? No. The vision is for the Jews. This warrior king has not come to save his people. He has come to judge them. We have hints of this judgment in this passage, the raised bow and the threat of violence. And as we continue reading in Ezekiel, it becomes abundantly clear that God has come to do battle against his people.

God has Come to Judge

This vision from Ezekiel appears later in the Scriptures in Revelation 4 and 5. The four creatures, the wings, the throne, the glory of the Lord. And in Revelation, the purpose is even more clear. This is the king, come to judge his servants.

On my way to church this morning, I was driving out of my neighborhood. There was a woman standing on the side of the street, and we made eye contact. I’m not sure what I was doing wrong, but it was something. Clear judgment in her eyes. Is this what God has come to do? Glare at us?

That kind of judgment turns a lot of people away from religion. Who wants to be part of a judgmental community? But this is different. This isn't people judging each other. This is the God of the universe, judging his people for centuries of injustice, idolatry, abuse of power, and oppression of the poor.

We want a God of justice. We want a God who judges terrorism and white supremacy and the sexual exploitation of children and greed and anger and narcissism and violence. What good is a God who doesn't judge injustice and oppression? We want a God who judges evil.

And when we are honest with ourselves, we want a God who judges those things, even when he finds them in his own people. If we are racist or greedy or oppressive or abusive or narcissistic or evil, if those kinds of things are within our hearts, don't we want a God who judges us? Do I really want a God who is convinced by my attempts to appear righteous? Is a God whom I can fool a God that I would want to believe in?

Don't we want a God who judges evil no matter where he finds it?

This is part of what it means to have a prophetic voice. God's people aren't exempt from judgment just because they are "on his side." You aren't a better person because you're sitting in church on a Sunday morning. God doesn't take sides or pick teams. This isn't me judging you. It's not us judging them. This is God judging all of us.

Our God judges evil no matter where he finds it.

So what good is it to be here? How can we even begin to approach a God who comes to us as a warrior?

When we see this vision again in Revelation, there is something slightly different about it. The Son of Man is no longer Ezekiel. The Son of Man is a lamb. A lamb who was slain.

Our God is a god who judges. But ultimately, this God will turn his judgment upon himself. God judges evil, but he is willing to take upon himself the consequence of that judgment. God has come to Judge.

God will come to restore

Revelation 5:9 reads, "And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.'"

Our king. Our god. Our judge has been slain, and by his blood, he has ransomed his people for God. Our God is a god who judges. But he accepts that judgment upon himself. That gives us hope. That gives us the promise of something more.

And so it is this combination. This mystery. This paradox. This is what makes the God of Israel the one whom we want to know and worship. Because he is the God of justice and hope.

When my children were little, I was always struck by how they reacted when I would discipline or punish them. They were sad and hurt, but they still came to me for comfort. Even though I was the one who disciplined them, they wanted me to comfort them.

Maybe that's connected to what Jesus said when he told us to have faith like little children.

All throughout this series on Ezekiel, we will have to deal with the reality of judgment. The first part of this book deals mostly with judgment. First on God's people, then on the nations around them. No one is immune.

But the second part happens after Jerusalem is destroyed. At that point, God begins to speak of restoration and hope and healing.

And God will remind us over and over again that everything we are shown is so that we "may know that I am the LORD."

Can we know this God who will judge and restore? Can we come close to him? Can we trust him? Can we give ourselves to him?

I'm convinced that knowing God is what we need. We're lost and confused and wondering what is going on in our world. We're trying to make sense of it all. But maybe we're not capable of understanding it. Maybe it's all just too complex for us to wrap our minds around. Maybe we can't make sense of it all.

But we can know this God. He offers us himself. He is a God of judgment. He is a God of hope.

Conclusion

My prayer is that throughout this book of Ezekiel, we can find comfort in knowing this kind of a God. When we are honest, this is the exactly the kind of God that we most desire to worship. A God who judges evil but who has mercy on evildoers. A God who disciplines his children, but goes to great lengths to restore them to him. A God who holds us accountable, but offers us forgiveness.

We find ourselves in the middle of a crazy time in history. Self-driving cars, delivery drones, and artificial intelligence. What is going on around here?

The people of God found themselves in a crazy time as well. Jews living in Babylon, God leaving the land, and an exile instead of an exodus. The God of judgment would reveal himself to them. He gave Ezekiel this vision so that they could see him and know him.

If we don't respond to this vision of God coming on the ultimate war chariot with fear and trembling, then we haven't understood it properly. This God is terrifying.

But he is also tender and compassionate. As the glory of God appears in the finale of this vision, he is framed by the bow in the sky. The ancient reminder of God's judgment mixed with the promise of his restoration.

I know it's scary, but we can embrace this God. Our king has come to judge. Let's welcome him.