

'You shall speak my words' Ezekiel chapters 1-3

Today we start Ezekiel..

Ezekiel is a book like no other. It is extreme, whether that is felt in the language and imagery, sometimes sexual and often very confronting, the prophet uses, or the actions the prophet is called upon to perform – like acting out the privations of the siege of Jerusalem by eating rationed mixed grain cooked on cow dung for 390 days, or the scrupulous dating of his prophecies, or the relentless focus on the judgment of Jerusalem for the first 33 chapters, or the grandeur of his vision of the future given from chapter 34 on. It is intense.

And it is a big book, 48 chapters, so we will be dealing with it in selected large chunks over about 13 weeks.

Today we will start with a large chunk, chapters 1-3, to see the lengths the Lord goes to to ensure that His word is heard through His human messenger, Ezekiel.

God speaks, and He is determined His word heard. He wants His hearers to know they have heard His word, whether they believe it or not, for it is through His Word the LORD will both judge and save, and through His word He will vindicate His holy name, bring all to see by the fulfillment of His word in history that HE is the God He says He is, the only God.

We start by meeting the human messenger the LORD has chosen to bring His word to the exiles in the area around babylon, Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 1: 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.

We meet Ezekiel at the beginning of the book only because God met Ezekiel first, giving him visions and placing His strong hand upon him. Ezekiel was not looking for God, but God was looking for Ezekiel.

We need to remember that because it is easy to become fascinated with Ezekiel's experiences, with thinking about what it would be like to be called on to have an obedience like Ezekiel's. That has a place, but those experiences

themselves are signs as we will see, given to communicate and reinforce the Word, the message, the LORD God has called Ezekiel to speak. This book is not about Ezekiel, but the message God speaks through Ezekiel.

But this brief introduction orients us to the context in which the LORD speaks His word, to Ezekiel's circumstances and those of His listeners.

We learn that Ezekiel is a Jew, and a priest, living amongst 'the exiles by the Chebar canal'. That brief phrase says a lot about the circumstances of the people he is addressing.

He is living amongst people who have been deported, exiled, from Jerusalem, caught up in the complicated relationship between King Nebuchednezzar of Babylon and successive Kings of Judah. You can read about that in 2 Kings 23 to 25 and I have put a timeline of the events around that time on the web.

Ezekiel was deported from Jerusalem in 597 BC when King Jehoiachin had surrendered to Nebuchednezzar and himself been taken into exile.

Ezekiel and others of the exiles have been relocated to the Chebar canal in the land of the Chaldeans, that is the Babylonians, now in modern Iraq. Chaldean is an ethnic term, and Babylon was their principal city. The Chebar canal was one of a network of canals that irrigated the plain between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Ezekiel and his band of exiles are not in Babylon like Daniel, but have been relocated to a town called Tel-abib [3:15] which was to the south east of Babylon.

And Ezekiel also gives us a date for the beginning of his ministry – two in fact *In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month,*

The first date is thought to be a personal date, giving Ezekiel's age. It is a measure in a sense of Ezekiel's loss, for as a priest Ezekiel would have entered temple service in his thirtieth year.

But the next date – telling us his prophesying commenced on the fifth day of the fourth month in the fifth year of exile, 593 BC, – is the public dating system he will use repeatedly throughout his book. He will give dates for several of his prophecies, dates that allow us to relate what he says to events happening in his world, and particularly back in Judah.

² *On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin*

More importantly, those dates will show that the prophecies were given before the events that fulfilled them, show that it is the LORD's will and purpose announced by His prophet beforehand that is now being accomplished. Those dated prophecies become a record revealing that the LORD rules and His word is sure and true.

Commencing his ministry in 593 BC means Jerusalem was not yet destroyed – it was still standing, and there was still a Jewish population in Judaea.

Many of Ezekiel's audience, his fellow exiles would still have relatives in Judaea, and the focus of their hope was on returning to Judaea

And as exiles they were dislocated and discouraged, and their understanding of God had been challenged

For many of the Jews the LORD was a local, national, god tied to a people and a place, a God whose commitment to Jerusalem and to His temple could be taken for granted, regardless of their behaviour. It was His job to defend them.

That view of the LORD as a national deity, inseparable from His people, set them up for a false hope, and a false despair

A false hope, that the LORD would always defend Jerusalem, that it could never be destroyed.

And a false despair, that now, in a foreign country they were away from the LORD, outside his care and control, that they were finished as His people, could expect no good from Him.

Many were probably tempted to think that Marduk, the god of the victorious Babylonians was stronger, especially in Babylon, tempted to start worshipping the god of their conquerors.

593 BC may be a long time ago, but that false hope and false despair is something we know.

False hope – God will never judge. His job is to forgive us, to look after us whatever we do or whether we listen to Him or not.

False despair – God has been driven away, fallen to the idols of our age, and we have gone beyond His help. We are left with an uncaring universe and purposeless lives, with no hope outside of ourselves and our own abilities and possibilities – and for the poor and the mortal, that is no hope.

What can counter that false hope and false despair, then as now?

Only the word of the LORD. Only the Word of the LORD can bring them to know the LORD as HE is, the only true God, the LORD of heaven and earth, righteous and faithful

The just judge of the whole earth who shows no partiality and judges the sins of his people, of all people

The almighty God who could give the remnant of a destroyed nation, a dead nation, hope when all human hope had gone,

The almighty God who can give hope to those dead in their sin

So, on the Chebar canal, living amongst the exiles, the Lord calls Ezekiel into his service as his messenger, his prophet, first by giving Ezekiel a vision of what Ezekiel calls 'the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord', and then by speaking to Him, commissioning Him as His prophet

The Lord is Determined His Word be Heard through His human messenger

The Vision the Lord gives Ezekiel 1:1-28

To read chapter one is to see that Ezekiel is struggling to convey what he has seen.

It's a bit choppy, a bit repetitive and there are a lot of 'likes' and likenesses

v. 5 'the likeness of four living creatures, v. 13 -14 their appearance was like

v. 16 was like the gleaming of beryl, the same likeness

v. 22 the likeness of an expanse

Piled on in vv. 26-28

Ezekiel 1: ²⁶ 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.

He is trying to describe what he sees by analogy, by drawing an association between what he is seeing and some familiar part of his and our experience.

Conclusion v. 28 b – ‘the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord’

Did not see the Lord

Did not even see the glory of the LORD cf. Moses 33:18-23

He sees the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord, yet it is an awesome display of brightness and light

The vision is organised in three parts

The living creatures vv. 5-14

Composite creatures – with elements from humans, angelic wings, feet like calves, powerful creatures

Not as unfamiliar to first hearers who saw similar composite creatures in sculpture and are as it is to us.

Ezekiel 1:¹⁰ 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.

Their faces tell you that they embody all that is royal and dignified in creation – for the faces of the human, the lion, the ox and the eagle are faces of creatures who were associated in the culture of Ezekiel’s day with rule, strength, courage, swiftness, stateliness and fertility

The wheels vv. 12-21

Their magnificence is stressed in v. 16 and 18 but what is emphasised is

Their freedom of movement v. 17, 20-21 in harmony with the living creatures.

Ezekiel 1:¹⁷ 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. ¹⁹ And when the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them; and when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose. ²⁰ Wherever the spirit wanted to go, they went, and the wheels rose along with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

They travel without hindrance wherever the Spirit wills

What is borne by this chariot, the throne over the heads of the living creatures vv. 22-28a

Ezekiel 1: ²⁶ 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.

A boundary v. 22, 26. The firmament or expanse represents a boundary between heaven and earth, creature and creator

And here we get an impression of difference – a likeness of a ruler on a likeness of throne, but it is all engulfed in light and fire, and surrounded by light of many hues

We could spend a lot of time on the details, but better to ask what does this vision convey of the God who will address Ezekiel, for what Ezekiel sees is given to support what Ezekiel hears.

What does the vision convey?

The LORD is glorious – you cannot see even the appearance of the likeness of His glory without being overwhelmed

The LORD is sovereign. He is seated on His throne. He rules in mighty power. The four living creatures, embodying in their faces all created majesty and power, serve Him.

The LORD is holy, separate from all creation, transcendent. He rides above all creation. He is above the expanse, and that is boundary creatures do not cross

The LORD is free – HE goes wherever He wills, without interruption, and it is He, His Spirit, who sustains the movement, not the living creatures or the wheels

The LORD is King everywhere, even by the Chebar canal. His is a mobile throne, not a static one bolted down in Jerusalem. Everywhere HE comes HE comes as King

And coming in might and power the LORD is able to execute His judgements anywhere. Fire is associated with judgment and this is a fiery coming.

The glorious Lord lifts Ezekiel up by His Spirit so that He can speak with Ezekiel, commission him as His messenger, His prophet, to the exiles of Israel

The Commission the LORD gives Ezekiel

It is clear that the initiative and origin of Ezekiel's ministry is with the LORD

“I send you” 2:3, 4; 3:4

Ezekiel 2: ³ And he said to me, “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. ⁴ The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD.’

He goes because he is sent.

And he is sent to speak the word of the Lord. There is to be no doubt that what Ezekiel says comes from God

‘You shall say ... “Thus says the LORD God” 2:4, 3:7, 3:27

That is repeated three times

The words that come out of Ezekiel's mouth and now written down for us are the words of God.

That is emphasised

Ezekiel 2: ⁷ And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house.

3: ¹⁰ Moreover, he said to me, "Son of man, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart, and hear with your ears. ¹¹ And go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD,' whether they hear or refuse to hear."

That commissioning to speak the word of the LORD is symbolised in eating the scroll

Ezekiel 3: And he said to me, "Son of man, eat whatever you find here. Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel." ² So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. ³ And he said to me, "Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it." Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.

3:1 eat and speak

The message is to be received 2:8, accepted and not resisted by Ezekiel – he must be distinct from his contemporaries, model reception of the word, embody trust in and obedience to the word of the LORD

It is to be internalised, made his own

And in that believing obedience he finds the word sweet, even though a message of lamentation, mourning and woe

The LORD is determined that Ezekiel speak His word, and so as part of that commissioning he is prepared for the reception he will receive from a rebellious people

And promised that he will be strengthened by the LORD – 3:9

Ezekiel 3: ⁹ Like emery harder than flint have I made your forehead. Fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house."

Why this vision and commission?

So people will hear "Thus says the LORD"

So that firstly the people of Ezekiel's community – there, outside Israel – will know that they have been addressed by the LORD

So that we will know that in Ezekiel's words we are being addressed by the LORD

In these words we are listening to God, can come to know God, hear His warning and His promise

We may find the content of what God says difficult to hear especially when it rebukes our sin, declares judgment on rebellion,

but we should recognise that in itself to hear the living God, to hear the word of the One who knows all things and can do all He says, and so to have a word that is true and sure in a world of competing and conflicting opinions, is a Great grace, great privilege

We have human authorities. We have been hearing a lot from them these days – authorities on disease transmission, authorities on epidemiology.

And great and costly decisions are being made on the basis of their authority.

We hope they are good – but what we see is that there is always doubt attached to their words, a shadow of uncertainty surrounding their pronouncements, maybe even alternate authorities with slightly differing views. It will always be so – for they do not know everything, and they do not know the future, and they cannot control the future

But the LORD knows everything, and as HE will demonstrate He can speak with authority on the future because in His almighty power He brings about what HE has said will happen.

His is a word like no other, a word which should be entirely trusted.

It is a privilege to hear God speak, whether what HE says suits us or not

And that privilege is given to us at a cost to His messengers for the LORD makes clear that speaking His word to a rebellious people requires both faithfulness and suffering

The LORD is determined His Word be heard through His human messenger – so speaking that word requires both faithfulness and suffering.

3:17 "I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel"

Ezekiel 3:¹⁷ "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. ¹⁸ If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning,

nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand.

A city watchman would stand on the wall or in a tower to warn the people of a city of impending danger so that they could get ready to meet it or take steps to avoid it, arm themselves or flee to safety.

What was required of them was that they should stay at their post, stay alert, and sound the warning when danger threatened

What God requires of Ezekiel, what He will hold Ezekiel responsible for, is sounding the warning.

When he 'hears a word from my mouth' v. 17 he is to transmit it faithfully, including words that warn of God's judgment on sin – 'you shall surely die.'

It may not be effective in turning someone away from sin, but Ezekiel is responsible to speak it. He must be faithful in conveying the word of the LORD

And the LORD makes clear that faithfully conveying His word to a rebellious people will involve suffering, suffering so that they know, whether they believe it or not, that the word spoken is the word of God.

Ezekiel 3:²⁴ But the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and he spoke with me and said to me, "Go, shut yourself within your house."²⁵ And you, O son of man, behold, cords will be placed upon you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people.²⁶ And I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be mute and unable to reprove them, for they are a rebellious house.²⁷ But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God.' He who will hear, let him hear; and he who will refuse to hear, let him refuse, for they are a rebellious house.

Firstly there is the suffering of confinement – whether self imposed or imposed by others. We know how much the restriction of freedom is hard. Ezekiel's movements are to be restricted

We are not sure how long that was to last, for later we see Ezekiel performing physical signs like building a model of the siege of Jerusalem. But like his speaking, it would appear His movements were to be controlled to support the word he would speak.

Then there is the suffering of being dumb – you shall be mute. HE will only be able to speak when the LORD speaks to Him v. 27, when the LORD opens His mouth to speak the LORD's word, to say 'Thus says the LORD ...

This was to last until the fall of Jerusalem – Ezk. 24:25-27, 33:21-22, about seven years

And Ezekiel's role is to be limited in its function .. 'unable to reprove them', or unable to intercede for them, unable to influence decisions and behaviour beyond the word God gave Him to speak.

What was the net effect of these limitations?

It would be clear to his fellow exiles that he was a man under the control of the Spirit, and they would know that when he spoke it was the word of the LORD, and only the word of the LORD that came from his mouth

So they could not dismiss what Ezekiel said, the word of judgment they did not want to hear, as if it came from his own imagination, or had its origin in his personal feelings

Nor could they confuse the gracious word God would speak through Ezekiel as an expression of Ezekiel's own wish

And they would not be able to relate to him as an intercessor, someone who could negotiate with God on their behalf.

All they could do is hear his word and decide how they would respond to the God who had spoken it.

In chapters 1-3 as we Hear of the vision God gave Ezekiel and Ezekiel's commissioning, hear of the demand for faithfulness and the necessity of suffering on the part of God's messenger

We see the LORD has gone to great lengths to ensure that we know Ezekiel is speaking His word, only His word, and all the word that He gives Ezekiel

Whether Ezekiel is speaking insistently of judgment – as he does in chapters 1-33, or of an extravagant salvation, as he does in 34-48, we know He is speaking the word of the LORD

When we hear Ezekiel speaking a word that in many ways was unthinkable to the first hearers, a word of judgment and salvation that is still unthinkable to

many today, God has made sure through this call that we know it is His Word, that HE is the God who can both speak and do what we find unthinkable.

Why this determination that His human messenger be known to speak His word, and only His word?

We will see that answer throughout the book in a phrase that is repeated more 72 times 'and they shall know that I am the Lord.' [Block p. 39]

That phrase is used when speaking of the fulfillment of prophecies of judgment

7:4

15:⁷ And I will set my face against them. Though they escape from the fire, the fire shall yet consume them, and you will know that I am the LORD, when I set my face against them.

32:15

It is used when speaking of the fulfillment of prophecies of salvation

16:62

20:⁴² And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I bring you into the land of Israel, the country that I swore to give to your fathers. ⁴³ And there you shall remember your ways and all your deeds with which you have defiled yourselves, and you shall loathe yourselves for all the evils that you have committed. ⁴⁴ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I deal with you for my name's sake, not according to your evil ways, nor according to your corrupt deeds, O house of Israel, declares the Lord God."

37:27-28

Through this word the LORD will vindicate His holy name

When in both judgement and salvation people seeing Him act in faithfulness to His word, seeing His Word fulfilled, they will know that HE is the God He has said He is

The LORD, the ruler of heaven and earth, just and righteous, merciful and gracious, always faithful to His covenant

The God who in His sovereign freedom, in His determination to be the God HE is, is free to do what is unthinkable to us.

Through His determination that Ezekiel speak His word He gives us a glimpse of His glory

More, as we see His unthinkable word of judgment proves true, the word Israel and we do not want to hear, He gives us confidence that the unthinkable word of salvation will also prove true

In bringing us to know He is the LORD he will give hope beyond the despair of death

It is for the sake of His Holy Name, so that we will know He is the LORD, that

The LORD is determined His word be heard whether it is believed or not.

The Lord knows Israel is hard hearted people, stubborn in their rebellious rejection of His word

But the LORD insists that His word be spoken 'whether they hear or refuse to hear' [2:7, 3:11, 3:27]

Ezekiel 2:⁷ And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house.

He does not think it a waste of time to speak to stubborn people

Nor does He think His word needs to be vindicated by popular opinion.

He doesn't consult anyone but Himself in declaring what He will do, in speaking His judgments and promises

And the problem with reception won't be in the clarity of the word

As we will see Ezekiel is shockingly clear, insistent, attention grabbing, repetitive

The LORD ensures there is no deficiency in making His word known

The problem is in the reception, in the refusal to hear, in their determination not to hear a word that conflicts with what they want to believe.

"The house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you for they are not willing to listen to me." The LORD says to Ezekiel

Ezekiel 3:⁷ But the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me: because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart.

The problem is in their hearts, in their pre-existing rejection of the LORD.

Like all Adam's children, like us, we do not want to hear a word that challenges our sovereignty, our rule over our own lives, as the word of the true ruler always does.

The LORD is determined His word is heard as His word

The living God speaks. He is determined His word be heard even by a rebellious people, and He will vindicate Himself through His word, through the fulfilment of His word.

Because the living God speaks knowing God is not a matter of speculating, of imagining what God is like or what God can or cannot do

It is a matter of listening, listening to a word we may not want to hear.

For He has sovereign freedom to say and do whatsoever He wills

Unconstrained by our expectations or acceptance, by what we would want Him to be like or do.

The living GOD has spoken by His prophets, very clearly by Ezekiel – the whole purpose of these first three chapters is that we would know Ezekiel is speaking His word even when it shocks, and it does shock

But He has not only spoken to us by His prophets.

As the author of Hebrews says

Heb. 1: Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

God is so determined that His word be heard in a world where from Adam on His word is rejected,

He has spoken to us by His Son – whether He is believed or not

The Son who faithfully conveyed the word of God to us, for His word is the word of God

The Son who suffered to bring God's word to us, to guarantee to us the truth of the message He speaks,

Think of the limitations He accepted to humble Himself to take on our humanity

Think of His enduring the cross to rise again on the third day, just as He said

So that we would see that every promise of God finds their yes in Him [2 Cor. 1:20]

And like Ezekiel – it is an unthinkable word that He speaks to us

A word of certain Judgement for sinners who will not repent e.g. Matt. 13:41-43, 49-50

A word of Salvation – not for the righteous but for sinners

And through the word the Son speaks and fulfills He brings the whole world to know that the God of Israel is the LORD, the only God, the only Judge and Saviour of all

God has spoken.

What should we do with His word, the word spoken to us through the prophets, the word spoken by His Son?

We should receive it with grateful fear – Isaiah 66:1-2, humbling ourselves to believe it, to conform our thinking and acting to what the LORD says, conforming our expectations of what God will do to what He has said.

In fact we should be terrified not to believe it – all of it – for whether we approve or not the word He speaks is the word of God, transcendent, holy, almighty, and it will be proved true

We should be terrified to alter it, or to suggest to people that they disregard it

And when we share it, share the word of God by sharing the gospel of GOD – we should be sharing it as the word of the God who speaks [1 Thess. 2:13 – as what it really is, the word of God]

Not as an opinion

Not as one possibility amongst many as to what God is like or will do

Not as a piece of life advice they can take or leave

Whether people want to hear it or not, when you share the gospel – you are saying Thus says the LORD

And people should know that they have heard the word of God that declares a certain judgment and a certain salvation

And like Ezekiel and our Lord know that to speak that word amongst a people who do not want to hear it because they do not want to hear God will be to suffer

But that word alone will bring them to know the LORD, save them from false hopes and false despair.