

EZEKIEL: WHEELS, BONES, AND RESTORATION

by Ray C. Stedman

A man was up on his roof fixing his television aerial when he slipped and began to slide down toward the gutters. He tried to catch himself, but he went over the edge. He managed to grab hold of the eaves troughs as he dropped, and he hung there, suspended from the eaves. He couldn't look down and he didn't know how far it was to the ground, and in his desperation he cried out. "Oh, God help me!" And a voice replied, "I am ready to help you." And he said, "Tell me what to do." The voice asked, "Do you trust me?" He said, "Yes, I trust you." The voice said, "All right then. Let go." And man asked, "Is there anybody else up there who can help me?"

This is always the problem of men who, because of circumstances, will not believe in God, who refuse to put their faith and trust in a God who has revealed himself to them as perfectly adequate and perfectly trustworthy and perfectly faithful.

The French philosopher Montaigne, writing quite apart from Christian revelation, said, "Every man carries within himself the history of the world." By that he meant that history is simply a written record of what is already written in the confines of the human heart. The history of the world is only an extension of any individual life. The book of Ezekiel traces the causes of the captivity of the nation Israel, and why it was in so much trouble. This is the story of the nation, but it is the story of any individual as well. And because it is the story of any individual, it is the story of the whole of mankind. The books of the Old Testament were written with this principle in mind. They are, therefore, extremely valuable for us -- what happens to the nation is exactly what happens to us. By looking carefully, we can see our problems and circumstances exemplified in the problems and circumstance set forth in these books.

Ezekiel was a captive in the land of Babylon. He had been carried away by Nebuchadnezzar when the nation of Judah was taken captive, as described by Jeremiah's great prophecy. So, Ezekiel is the first prophet of the captivity. There were two prophets during the captivity -- Ezekiel and Daniel. Ezekiel was older than Daniel and prophesied during the first twenty or twenty-five years of that seventy-year period when Israel was held captive by Babylon.

The story of this book is the story of human life and the book begins with a tremendous vision of God, because all life starts with God. God is the greatest fact in existence, in history. If you are going to think about anything, you have to start somewhere. Anyone who wants to think logically about life must always begin with God. That is where the Bible begins. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." This book of Ezekiel begins, then, with a mystic vision of God. The glory of the prophet Ezekiel was that he saw God more clearly than any of the other prophets. If your heart needs to be set on fire by the revelation of the character and glory of God, read Ezekiel. He is the great prophet who saw the glory of God.

The book opens dramatically with the vision that Ezekiel saw by the River Chebar in the land of Babylon:

As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness round about it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming bronze. {Ezek 1:4 RSV}

That is a sight dramatic enough to arrest anyone's attention. Then he says,

And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. {Ezek 1:5a RSV}

And he describes these creatures to us. Each had four faces -- the faces of a man, an eagle, an ox, and a lion. These four faces turned in every direction, faced every way. After he saw the four living creatures, he saw certain wheels. (These are described in an old song: "Ezekiel saw a wheel, way up in the middle of the air; the big wheel ran by faith and the little wheel ran by the grace of God, a wheel in a wheel, away in the middle of

the air.") Ezekiel saw that these wheels were turning, one wheel within the other. As he watched he also saw a firmament above, shining in splendor, and above the firmament, as he lifted his eyes higher, he saw a throne. And on the throne sat a man.

Now, if you have read the book of Revelation you will recognize great similarities to what John saw. John also saw four living creatures. He, too, saw a throne, and on the throne a man. This, then, is a revelation of the greatness and the majesty of God. told in symbolic form.

We can't interpret all of this, because there is a mystery about the person of God. But what Ezekiel sees is, generally speaking, the power and the majesty of God. It is interesting that the four living creatures setting forth the character of God are always described as having the faces of a lion, a man, an ox, and an eagle. And throughout all of history these things have symbolically represented certain qualities. A lion is always a picture of sovereignty, of supremacy -- "the king of the beasts." A man is the picture of intelligence, of understanding. An ox is always the symbol of servitude, of sacrifice. And an eagle is the symbol of power and deity, of soaring over all creation. Now the significant thing is that the four gospels present exactly these same qualities in Jesus Christ. He appears first in the Gospel of Matthew as the king -- the lion, the king of beasts, the sovereign of all. He appears in the Gospel of Mark as the servant, the ox. In the Gospel of Luke, he is man in his intelligence, in his insight, in his understanding of life. And in the Gospel of John he is deity. These four reflect the character of Jesus Christ.

Now, even though Ezekiel doesn't understand this, even though he doesn't perceive the significance of his vision; he saw nonetheless the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 4:6) That is because God reveals himself through Christ. Ezekiel saw as clearly as he could the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Then Ezekiel moves quickly into prophecies that have to do with the failure of man. And these are described at great length. As Ezekiel watches in visions, he sees the glory of God departing from the temple in Jerusalem, leaving the inner court and moving to the outer court, and then rising and moving out to the Mount of Olives, and rising up from there.

Of course, this prophecy was fulfilled when our Lord moved out of the temple, down across the Kidron Valley, up the side of the Mount of Olives, and into the Garden of Gethsemane. And later, after the crucifixion and the resurrection, he ascended from that mountain into glory.

At this point there comes a lengthy passage where Ezekiel traces the degradation of man, the result of men's rejection of God's grace. And he tells how God struggles with those people, calling them; how he tries to win them, to waken them to the foolishness of turning their backs on the glory of God. At last they go through times of difficulty and heartache and punishment, as God seeks constantly to bring them to their senses, to waken them to what they are doing -- to show them that man is made to fellowship with God and that without God he only goes farther and farther into weakness and folly and degradation.

The prophet is called upon to convey God's message in symbolic and dramatic ways. On one occasion he is asked by God to lie on his left side every day for 390 days (that is more than a year of lying on his left side!), and then to lie on his right side for 40 days -- all of which is a picture of the 390 years that God had struggled to try to bring this nation to its senses and the final 40 years when judgment was imminent. God kept his hand back from judgment all those years, until at last he allowed Nebuchadnezzar to come in and sweep the people away, sacking the city and desolating the temple and taking all the people into the land of Babylon.

Here you find the reasons why man is debauched and degraded, and Ezekiel sets forth the righteousness of God's judgment. When man chooses to avoid the God who made him. what else is there but judgment? If we neglect God, who is utterly essential to our being, and we refuse to give heed to his love and his grace. then the only thing left for us is to experience the results of turning our backs to him.

The prophet sees through all the judgment that came upon this people, he sees through to the forces behind. In chapter 28 there is a remarkable passage where the prophet speaks about the judgment upon the land of Tyre and Sidon. He speaks of the prince of Tyre and, behind him, an individual whom he calls the king of Tyre.

Most Bible scholars have recognized that, because of the height of vision from which this prophet speaks, he is talking not only about the actual prince of the city of Tyre -- the man who was then on the throne in that seafaring city -- but he is looking beyond him and the visible things of Tyre, to that sinister individual he calls the king of Tyre. This king symbolizes what are referred to in the New Testament as principalities and powers, the world rulers of this present darkness who manipulate things on earth and cause events we see recorded in our daily newspapers. In other words, these are the Satanic powers.

In chapter 28 you have a passage that many Bible scholars think can be fully understood only as it applies to the fall of Satan himself. And this is one of only two passages in the whole Bible that describes the fall of Satan:

**"Your heart was proud because of your beauty;
you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor.
I cast you to the ground;
I exposed you before kings,
to feast their eyes on you.
By the multitude of your iniquities,
in the unrighteousness of your trade
you profaned your sanctuaries; ..." {Ezek 28:17-18a RSV}**

The reason for Satan's fall is given in Isaiah 14, where the Prince of Darkness says "I will" five times. And here God judges that pride, which exalts self instead of God.

Now the prophet turns to the restoring grace of God. and in chapter 37 is the remarkable vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones. This, also, has given rise to well-known song. The prophet see this vision as he looks out over the valley of dry bones: the bones join together at the command of God, but there is no breath in them. And then God comes and breathes upon them and they come to life again. This picture of God's restoring grace illustrates what God intends to do with the nation Israel As far as God is concerned, it has been lying now for more the nineteen centuries in a state of death, but a day is coming when God will breathe upon this nation. Like these dry bones. it will receive new life. and God will use it to re-establish his kingdom on earth.

In chapters 38 and 39 the prophet sees into the far distant future to the last attack upon Israel, when enemies of the land will be met by heavenly forces that will judge them upon the mountains of Israel and bury them there.

Then, beginning in chapter 40, the restoration of the millennial temple is foreseen. In this great vision the prophet is shown the temple in precise detail: the glory of God returning to the Holy of Holies, the Shekinah establishing itself in the Holy of Holies once more. The book closes with the wonderful passage in chapter 47 that describes his vision of the throne of God. Underneath the throne comes the river of God, sweeping through the temple. out into the eastern side, down across the land. and into the Dead Sea to heal its waters. It is a marvelous picture of the Spirit of God in the day of the millennial kingdom.

Now that is the literal interpretation of this book -- a prophecy of the restoration of Israel. But that does not by any means exhaust the meaning of this book. If we read this as referring only to that literal fulfillment, we will miss much of the value and all of the beauty of this book. For this entire story can be applied to you as an individual. What God does on a large scale in the history of the world, he is ready to do on a smaller scale in the history of your life. As he is ready to call back out of death and to give life to a nation that turns to him in the midst of its degradation and weakness -- as he was ready to do for Israel -- so he is ready to do with an individual. Here, then, is a beautiful picture of the saving grace of Jesus Christ, making us alive in him, calling us back into the glory of the manhood and womanhood that God intends for us. Then follows a picture of the enemies we face, and how God goes before us and destroys them one by one as we walk by faith.

Finally, there is the wonderful picture of the restored temple in man. Now what is the temple in man? In the New Testament. Paul says that we are the temple of the living God. (2 Cor. 6:16) But what in us is the temple in which God dwells? It is the human spirit. Our spirit was made to be a holy of holies in which the living God dwells. The secret, then, of a full human experience -- an exciting life, a life of continuing significance and meaning -- is a life in which the resources of the Holy Spirit are discovered. Now this is beautifully portrayed

for us in this picture in the forty-seventh chapter of Ezekiel. I want to end with this, for I think this highlights the whole emphasis of the book:

Then he [the angel] brought me back to the door of the temple; and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me round on the outside of the outer gate, that faces toward the east; and the water was coming out on the south side.

Going on eastward with a line in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the loins. Again he measured a thousand, and it was a river that I could not pass through, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through. And he said to me, "Son of man, have you seen this?"

Then he led me back along the bank of the river. As I went back, I saw upon the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other. And he said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the stagnant waters of the sea, the water will become fresh. And wherever the river goes every living creature which swarms will live, and there will be very many fish; for this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes." {Ezek 47:1-9 RSV}

Does that remind you of anything? Do you read in that and hear in that our Lord's words recorded in John 7 when he stood at the temple on the last day of the feast and said, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink... Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water. Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive..." (John 7:37-39) This is the resource of the Christian life.

Let us look at the various aspects of this resource. First of all, there is the source of the river. Where does it come from? Ezekiel said, "I saw a throne and issuing out from under the throne came the river." The waters of the Spirit come from the very throne of God, from the supremacy of his authority, the highest point in the universe, the place where our Lord Jesus received the promised gift of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

As the prophet watches, he sees that it takes its way down past the altar, the place of sacrifice. And one of the great things that we have to learn as Christians is that we can never drink of the river of the Spirit unless we are willing to do so by means of the cross of Calvary. It is only as we are willing to accept the judgment of death upon the flesh -- the natural man and his abilities, ambitions, and desires -- that we can drink of the river of the Spirit of God.

Then, notice the power of this river. It has quickly grown large enough to swim in, yet there is no other river adding to it. No tributary streams are coming in. It is a great, gushing, mighty torrent of life coming out from under the throne of God.

As you read this, notice the experience of the prophet. He is led into this step-by-step; three times he says, "And he led me through." Is God leading you through? Have you ever had that experience? The first step is to the place where the waters are ankle deep. Isn't that a picture of a man who has experienced only a shallow sense of God's grace and power in his life? He is a Christian but he is what the scriptures call a carnal Christian -- still filled with bickerings and fightings and inner turmoils. He has not learned anything of the peace of God. He is disobedient. He fights against God's grace very time he turns around. He's in just ankle deep. And a lot of people stay there.

But then the prophet says, "He led me through, and it was knee deep." The waters get hold of his knees. Have the waters got there with you yet? Have you begun to hunger and thirst and to pray and to seek the face of God? Here is a man who is not satisfied any more with just being born again. He is hungering after

something. He is on his knees. He is crying out to God, yearning for more.

"And he led me through," he says, and the waters come up to the loins. It is beginning to possess him. There is less of him now, and more of the grace of God. The loins are always the symbol of power and he has come, then, to the place where he has begun to grasp something of the power of God, to grasp the fact that it is "not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord" that the Christian life is lived. (Zech. 4:6) It is not his eager desire to do something for God, or his consecrated zeal to flow it through, but rather, his quiet dependence upon an indwelling Spirit that is the secret.

Then he goes one step further and says, "He led me on and the water had risen and it had become a river to swim in." Here is someone who is utterly committed. He is over his head. He is out there where he is swept along in the current of God's grace. And what is the effect of this river on the land? As the prophet is led back along the banks he says, "I see trees on either side of it" -- fruitfulness. The barrenness of the land has been healed. The river is fertile; everywhere the river flows, things begin to live.

Have you learned this yet? All of this is written for us. John sees the same river, in Revelation. "Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God...through the middle of the street of the city..." (Rev. 22:1, 2). It flows right through the middle of life. Have you found the river of the Spirit yet? It is as we learn these mighty truths that Christian life begins to make sense. Until then, it is nothing but a plodding, dogged, difficult path, a struggle to try to keep things straight. But when we begin to experience the mighty, gushing torrent of the rivers of living water -- the flow of the Spirit of God right through the center of life -- everything begins to live, and life becomes significant and full for us.

The prophet sees this. And he closes this beautiful book with a description of the temple (which, by the way, may ultimately picture the resurrection body which is the new temple for God). But look at the last verse of the prophecy. He says:

The circumference of the city shall be eighteen thousand cubits. [Vast, unlimited, a great city.] And the name of the city henceforth shall be, "The LORD is there." {Ezek 48:35 RSV}

That is what Ezekiel called it. The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. They did not call themselves Christians. They were called Christians. Christian means "Christ-one" -- one who belongs to Christ. And as the people in Antioch looked at these peculiar people, they called them "Christ-ones" because the Lord was there.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that this may be our experience, that we may see this mighty flow of the river of God in our lives and, discovering its power and its grace and its depth, commit ourselves to you so that there may be healing and fertility and escape from barrenness in our lives. Thank you, Lord, for this beautiful picture and for the truth that lies behind it. Thank you that these things can be our experience right now through Jesus Christ our Lord, the one who is the fulfillment of the image of God -- that as we look at him, we are changed from glory to glory, even into the same image. We thank you for these mighty things, and ask that they be true in our experience as well as in our faith. In Christ's name, Amen.

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