

Wheels and Wings

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[0 : 00] Well, tonight we're beginning a new series on, it's a short series on the book of Ezekiel. Now Ezekiel, as many of you will know, is a massive book.

It's actually the fourth longest book of the Bible, if you count up all the words. And it's a fascinating book, full of remarkable and unusual narrative and imagery.

But despite that, it's also maybe a bit of a neglected book, perhaps one that we don't read that often. And it's possibly fair to say that at first sight, it's not the most straightforward book of the Bible to read.

Over the next six weeks, we're going to look at what we're entitling as six epic images that are contained in this book.

So tonight's title is Wheels and Wings, which is focusing on chapter one. And we're going to look at the image of an abandoned baby in chapter 16, then the Watchman, which is a theme running through the whole book, the Shepherd in chapter 34, the Valley of Dry Bones, chapter 37, and then the last chunk from 40 to 48, the last eight or nine chapters, look at this amazing image of a new temple.

[1 : 16] So rather than go through it sort of chapter by chapter, it's just a short study picking out these six epic images that Ezekiel presents before us.

Tonight we're in chapter one. Let's read again the first verse. In the 30th year, in the fourth month, on the 50th of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Hebar Canal, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.

Now as we embark on this study in Ezekiel, it's important to begin by getting our bearings a wee bit. And so approaching the book, it's maybe helpful just to ask three very simple questions, when, where, and what as we approach this book.

So when was Ezekiel written? So if you look at an Old Testament timeline, you can see various key dates there. So Abraham about 2000, 2100 BC, Moses 1400 BC, David is an easy one to remember, always remember David 1000 BC, that's kind of a good one to remember.

Follow the northern kingdom, Easter is in 722 BC, and follow the southern kingdom is 586, and the return from exile is 535-ish.

[2 : 38] Where's Ezekiel? It's about there. Ezekiel was a prophet between five, probably between 59, well definitely between 593 and 571 BC.

So it's at that time where the southern kingdom fell, when Jerusalem was destroyed and the people were taken away to Babylon in exile. When it says in verse one, the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiakene, that's 593 BC.

The reference to the 30th year, the very first clause of verse one is probably a reference to Ezekiel's age, although we're not 100% sure that, but it's pretty likely.

What I want to emphasize is that this is a massively important time, both in world history and in terms of the Old Testament narrative. You'll see there's some dates at the bottom of the slide there. 605 BC, the battle of Karchimish. That was like, well if we talk about World War I, this was like World War Zero.

[3 : 45] This was a massive, massive battle. It was between the Assyrians and the Babylonians, which was basically the two superpowers of the day. Today it would be like the USA against China.

And at that battle, the old established power, the Assyrians who had dominated the world for the last couple of hundred years, were defeated by the new rising power, the Babylonians, under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar.

So there's a huge turning point in world history. And Nebuchadnezzar and the rest of the Babylonian Empire began to spread their dominance across the known world.

And bit by bit they conquered the land surrounding Jerusalem where God's people remained. In three stages, the Israelites were shifted from the promised land to Babylon.

603, Nebuchadnezzar comes for the first time and he takes some people away, particularly the leading individuals in society among them would have been Daniel. 597, there's a second deportation, the king gets taken and a bunch of other people including Ezekiel.

[5 : 01] And then the final stage is 586 BC when Nebuchadnezzar returns to Jerusalem and this time he doesn't just take people out, he destroys the city and the temple and the people go into exile.

And so Ezekiel is a prophet across this key stage both before and after that pivotal moment when Jerusalem fell. Later in the book you read in chapter 33 verse 21, in the 12th year of exile, in the 10th month on the fifth day of the month, so this is now in 586, a fugitive came from Jerusalem, came to him and said, the city has been struck down.

Now we really have to try and grasp the magnitude of what is being said there. Imagine maybe today, if you turned on the news when you got home just now and it said the White House has been overrun and demolished.

That would seem almost unthinkable to us. But the Jews, Jerusalem and the temple being crushed and destroyed was unthinkable.

But here in the lifetime of Ezekiel it happens. There's two other big prophets at this time. We mentioned Daniel already, the other one is Jeremiah.

[6 : 25] So when you think Ezekiel, think Daniel, think Jeremiah, they're all prophesying at the same time. So that's the when. What about the where? Well, the where is pretty straightforward.

It's in the land of the Chaldeans, which is another word for the Babylonian Empire. And that's an area in sort of southern area of modern Iraq.

We're not 100% sure where the Habar Canal is, but it's probably about there, just slightly south of Babylon. The key point is that it's not Jerusalem.

It's not in the Promised Land. It's a foreign land, a completely different geographical location for God's people.

So the what, the where, and finally the when, the where, and finally the what. And that's again pretty straightforward. This is a book of prophecy. Ezekiel's called to be a prophet, and that basically means that he's here to be God's spokesperson.

[7 : 26] That's what prophets did. They communicated God's word to the people. And throughout the Old Testament, you had different prophets speaking at different times and in different contexts. But across all these prophets, they had one thing in common.

They all delivered a message of judgment and salvation. So whenever you read one of the prophets in the Bible, always have these two things in mind, judgment and salvation.

Another way of saying that is that Ezekiel and other prophets always delivered a message of warning and of hope. They warned the people of the dangers of abandoning God and turning away from their relationship with him.

But they also gave a message of hope that no matter how bleak things looked, there was God's offer and promise of salvation.

And I suppose if you think about it, all the best and most important messengers that communicate with us give us messages of warning and of hope.

[8 : 32] So if you are maybe heading into the sunset of your life and you had a very unhealthy diet and a very inactive lifestyle and you went to your doctor, they would give you a message of warning and of hope.

They would say you can't carry on with that diet and lifestyle. But if you do address it, then you'll recover. Same if your car is running badly, a good mechanic will give you a message of warning and hope.

You'll say your car is going to conk out completely if you don't fix it, but I can fix it. Same if you're not pulling your weight at work, a good boss would give you a message of warning and of hope.

Ezekiel as a prophet is presenting a warning of God's judgment against the wrongdoing of the people. But at the same time, he presents us with an amazing message of hope and salvation.

So when you approach Ezekiel, when you think Ezekiel, you need to think in terms of the fall of Jerusalem. You need to think in terms of the people going into exile. You need to think of judgment and salvation.

[9 : 40] You need to recognize that this is a really, really low point in the history of the Old Testament. In the midst of all of that mess, Ezekiel was called to be a prophet.

And his prophecy begins with this remarkable vision of chapter one. And we can come to a chapter like this and we can think to ourselves, how do we read a passage like chapter one?

We're told that Ezekiel sees a vision of God. And then the rest of the chapter tells us what he saw. And we're given this really quite astounding description of this vision that was presented before him. And we need to ask ourselves, how do you go about explaining and understanding a passage like this? What are all these wheels and wings and faces and fire about?

Well, coming to a passage like this, there's two mistakes that we can make. The first mistake is that we can underanalyze it. And we can think to ourselves, well, there's no way I can make any sense of this.

[10 : 50] I can't get my head around it. That's not true. The Bible is never inaccessibly complicated. Even a passage like this most definitely can be understood.

So we mustn't just underanalyze and think, oh, well, we've got no chance. But at the same time, we must not overanalyze a passage like this. That's another mistake we can make. We can look for too much in all of these details.

There's a risk that we can read too many things into this passage. And that's been done throughout history. So for example, in verse six, I think, it speaks about four living creatures with four faces. Way, way, way back about 1500 years ago, there were some theologians who said that these four faces represented the four gospel writers. So in the New Testament, you've got Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and so you've got four of them.

You've got four faces. That's what these four faces are representing. But it wasn't just way back 1500 years ago that people were creative in their interpretations.

[11 : 55] One week ago, just one week ago, I read an article on the BBC News website, which was a fascinating article about Christians with disabilities.

And they interviewed one person who said that passages in the Old Testament like this one, which talk about God's throne and which talk about wheels, lead us to the conclusion that God has a wheelchair.

And therefore, he can identify with disabled people. And now the points behind those interpretations are true. There were four gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

And God is deeply compassionate towards people who are disabled, and he understands what they're going through. But these conclusions are reading too much into a passage like Ezekiel 1. So how do we get it right? How do you read a passage like Ezekiel 1 and figure out what's this saying? How should you approach it? So you do need to ask questions, but we need to make sure it's the right questions.

[13 : 07] And I would maybe like to suggest that it's important to avoid the tiny questions. So sometimes you can come to a passage like this and ask tiny questions.

So you could say, why is the lion listed before the ox? Or why is it that the lion's face is on the right and the ox's face is on the left?

Do the wheels have spokes, if so, how many of them? And if there's a wheel within the wheel, how do the spokes not hit each other? We can get bogged down into all sorts of little questions like these.

And I'd like to say that these questions are completely unnecessary and are really quite unhelpful. Because we have to remember that this vision that Ezekiel saw is exactly that.

It's a vision. It's not to be taken literally. It's a picture. It's not telling us that God literally has four faces. It's not telling us that God is literally on fire all the time.

[14 : 04] And the reason we know that is because as you, as Billy read through this chapter, he kept on repeating phrases like, as it were, and appearance, and like.

So he saw a vision containing elements like fire, like human appearance, as it were gleaming metal. It's all a likeness. It's not literal, the tiny details are not the important point.

And so instead of asking these tiny questions, we need to think about the big questions. In other words, we need to ask, what is this imagery pointing us towards? What should it make us think about?

And that's, it's with that in mind that we have to approach this passage. So if you want, you can close your eyes. You don't have to, but I want you to either, with your eyes open or your eyes shut,

use your imagination and think, what's Ezekiel wanting us to think about?

What do we see in this vision? Well, you can imagine you're going to see clouds, big, big, big clouds. You're going to feel the wind, feel a really, really strong wind blowing against you.

[15:07] You see flashes of lightning. You see fire. You can feel heat. It's really hot, like molten metal hot. You can hear noise rumbling, thundering.

It's like a deafening waterfall, really, really loud. You can see these four living creatures, their wings are outstretched. They're on some kind of platform and there's wheels. And the wheels have got wheels that go forwards and then they've got wheels that are probably at 90 degrees going the other way, like a kind of gyroscope sort of shape.

And this chariot platform with wheels thing is constantly moving and it's moving fast here, there. Quick, quick, quick, quick, it's darting. It's bright. It's gleaming.

It's sparkling. And it's big. The wheels are very, very, very, very big. And above that chariot, there's a throne gleaming with fire, brightness all around.

It's hot. It's loud. It's bright. It's windy. It's fast. It is an epic image. And all of that imagery is showing us loads of important things about God.

[16:13] And I'm going to list 10 of them very quickly. Number one, energy. There is light, heat, noise, movement. This is a God who's powerful and active.

There's motion, constant movement in this chapter. It's not a static image. It's not a static God. He's not confined. He's not restricted. He's not stuck. There is speed.

Everything is fast. Now, often we think of God. We think of God as kind of slow. But here we've been told to think of God as fast, fast, fast, fast, fast, fast.

There's brilliance. Everything is gleaming, sparkling. There's a majestic, stunning beauty in it all. God's glory is shining really, really powerfully in this image. There's holiness.

So this imagery of fire is not just speaking of energy. It's also speaking of purity. God is our holy God. He's pure, undefiled. Fire has that refining effect.

[17:09] There's an unapproachableness to the whole thing. You can't just waltz into the middle of a fire. You have to keep back. These winged creatures express the same idea. You'll remember from other parts of scripture at Eden and in the temple, the winged creatures were almost like a kind of guard saying, no entry, keep back.

There's sovereignty. And so we have a throne. We have that image of God's absolute authority. He's ruler. He is judge. That's why we have a lion, an ox, and an eagle.

You think of wild animals, who's the biggest, strongest wild animal? It's a lion. You think of domestic animals, who's chief among them? It's an ox. You think of the birds. What's the biggest, strongest bird?

It's an eagle. These are the ones who are rulers of their respective realms. And all the movement we're seeing is under complete control. Although God is fast, it's not chaotic.

It's very, very precise. The wheels, they can go in any direction, but it's always under the guidance of the spirit. It's moving carefully. There's complete control.

[18:14] And these four creatures, the fact that it's four probably corresponds to the imagery of the four corners of the world. That's a kind of colloquial expression to refer to the whole of the earth.

In other words, there's total authority. There's knowledge. So when you see a pastor that's talking about eyes, so you see the rims of the big wheels.

They've got eyes all over them. We can kind of think, that sounds a bit strange, but it's pointing us towards the fact that God can see everything and knows all things.

We're being presented with the image of a warrior. These wheels are chariot wheels. That's confirmed by the fact that it's the noise of an army that Ezekiel can hear.

It's a military image speaking of God's might and strength and courage in the face of enemies. Then there's life. The whole image is one of abundant life.

[19:13] They are living creatures. The natural world is displaying all its power, clouds and wind and light, electricity, fire. There's movement, energy, activity, life.

God here is not dead. He's not a statue. He's not a lifeless idol. He is alive, powerful, and he's the giver of life and energy and movement.

And then there's one more thing that I'm not going to tell you what it is yet. So when you read this passage, please don't think, I can't understand this.

You can. It's not impossible. But just don't get bogged down in the details. You're not meant to ask every tiny detail of a passage like this. You're meant to focus on the big picture because in terms of that big picture, we are being told some amazing things about God.

We've been told that He is powerful, full of energy. We've been told that God is moving. God is fast. God is bright and brilliant. God is holy and pure. He's sovereign. He is all-knowing.

[20 : 17] He is a mighty warrior and He is alive. People really did see an image of the glory of God.

But why is all that important? And what difference does any of that make? What difference did it make to these exiles? Why did these exiles need this epic image? Why do you need to see this epic image?

Well, part of the reason why this is so important is because of the when and the where and the what that we spoke about. Because in terms of the when, this was a time when everything looked doomed for God's people.

Jerusalem, their city is about to fall. Half the people are already in exile. The rest of them are just about to join them. The temple, that great symbol of God's presence on earth is about to be destroyed.

At a glance, God's people look crushed. God's city is crumbling. God's presence is departing. God's plans seem to be failing. And the only people who look strong at the moment are the Babylonians.

[21 : 25] The God of the Israelites looks finished. But this epic image says no way.

And this, yes, might be the lowest point in Israel's history, but God is still God. The when is so important. And so is the where. It is crucial as well. Back in these days, everybody associated their God with a location.

So God, the God of the Bible was associated with Jerusalem and with the temple. Other nations did the same thing. So your God would be in a particular temple in a particular city. And there was this sort of like idea that a God was confined to a particular location.

So that was very often the view. Nations are different gods, each in their own specific place. So the cultural thinking is if Jerusalem falls, then the God of the Bible falls with her.

Ezekiel's vision says no. And that's why the fact that we're here at the Hebar Canal is so crucial. It's emphasizing that God is not confined to Jerusalem.

[22 : 37] And in fact, he reigns over the whole earth and over the whole of creation. And as the God who reigns over all, he is the one that these Israelites have to listen to.

And that's why the what is so important. This is prophecy. This is the word of the Lord. That's why I wanted to read into chapter two where God says Ezekiel, stand up because I'm going to speak to you.

God wants to speak to Ezekiel because he's got a message for his people. And yes, that is a message of judgment. Jerusalem is about to fall because the people have rebelled against God again and again and again.

But it's also a message of hope. God is talking to Ezekiel to say it's not over.

And in all of that, I think there's two crucial lessons for all of us in this. Number one, when it comes to judgment, you must not mess about with God.

[23 : 49] Reading Ezekiel chapter one reminds me in many ways of my former job as an engineer. Before I became a minister, I worked as an engineer and we worked in an engineering workshop.

And in many ways, Ezekiel one is like an engineer's dream. There's wheels and there's metal and there's fire and electricity and movement. It's all so cool when you think about it all.

But at the same time, this is all stuff that you do not mess with. When Ezekiel speaks about a wheel, it reminds me of a lathe spinning.

So a lathe, as I'm sure you know, is that tool that functions by a chuck that spins very, very quickly holding a piece of metal or plastic or whatever you're working on. Very, very fast, very, very powerful machine in terms of its spins.

And you watch that wheel spinning, spinning, spinning, spinning, spinning. One key rule if you ever use a lathe is that you never, ever touch it when it's turning.

[24 : 54] Ever. Same with hot metal, you do not mess with it. Likewise electricity, you don't go and play on a pylon.

And all these things in this image are the same. You don't mess with a lion, you don't muck about with an ox, you don't go and play with an eagle. You don't mess about with precious jewels.

If you go down into one of the jewelers on Princess Street, if they take out something, they put gloves on and they're incredibly careful. They do not mess about. You don't mess with a wind or a storm. So when you hear of storm, force winds in the Karengoms, you don't go out.

You don't mess with mighty rushing water. So if you think of the Atlantic Ocean battering the West Coast in the middle of winter, or if you think of a river in spate after days and days and days of heavy rain, you don't jump into that.

You don't mess about with it. And you most definitely don't mess with an army. You think of the noise of a mighty army. You do not mess about with that. All of these things, they are awesome.

[25 : 54] We admire them. We value them. We hate them, but we do not mess about with them. And if that is true of lathes and lions and rivers, then surely it's true of God.

And yet these people, the Israelites, had majorly messed with God. That was why they were in this situation and they're being judged. Not because God's a cold, hard, merciless God, but because they had repeatedly, repeatedly rejected him.

They had tossed him aside, thinking that they could do fine without him. They'd forgotten about him. They'd provoked him. They'd rejected him. They'd abandoned him. And if Ezekiel 1 teaches us anything, it should teach us that that is absolutely crazy.

And yet we live in the midst of a city and a nation that's doing exactly the same thing. So we think we're smarter and stronger and wiser and better than God.

We think we don't need him. We don't want to listen to him. We do not most definitely do not want to accept any kind of accountability towards him.

[27 : 11] And instead, we replace God with other things. We worship money. We worship possessions, pleasures, attention. We put all our energy into trivialities that ultimately aren't that important.

We invest our time in stuff that will ultimately leave us empty. And all the time, people mess about with God. So he's just a swear word or an irrelevance or a joke.

And you and I have got to ask ourselves, are we messing about with God? Now I hope that there's nobody in here who treats God as a swear or a joke or an irrelevance.

But you need to ask, is God just a wee thing in your life? Is he a maybe in your life? So you think, well, maybe I'll live for God.

Maybe I'll trust him. Maybe I'll follow him. Is God sometimes in your life? So sometimes he comes into my life. Sometimes he doesn't.

[28 : 24] An absolutely crucial lesson from this chapter for us all is don't mess about with God.

But the second lesson is that when it comes to salvation, God will not mess about with you.

This vision that Ezekiel saw is showing both him and the people in exile that the fall of Jerusalem is not going to mean the fall of God.

God is not confined, God is not beaten, he is not weak, he is not finished. Here God comes before Ezekiel and he presents his massive, massive energy.

But what is God going to use that energy for? How is he going to deploy it? What's he doing with that energy? Well, that takes us to item 10 on our list because in this vision we see energy, motion, speed, brilliance, holiness, sovereignty, knowledge.

[29 : 31] We see a warrior, we see life and we see a rainbow.

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, the glory of the Lord.

When I saw it, I fell on my face and I heard the voice of one speaking and he said to me, Son of Man, stand on your feet and I will speak with you. Now you might be thinking, what a rainbow?

It kind of seems a bit soft in amongst all of this energy and power. We often associate a rainbow with tranquility. I don't know why this is the case but for some reason whenever I think of a rainbow, I think of Postman Pat because you watch these programs and it's all idyllic and there's a rainbow. Of course today rainbow colours are used as a symbol for equality in a different sense altogether. In the Bible, the rainbow was a very specific sign.

[30 : 35] It's a sign of God's promise. He gave that rainbow the significance of this sign after the flood with Noah. It was a sign of God's covenant commitment.

And so when we see this rainbow in the midst of the epic image of Ezekiel chapter one, it is telling us that God has not given up on his people.

So yes, there is going to be judgment there right in the midst of it but alongside that warning and reality of judgment, there is a message, an amazing message of hope.

And the rest of Ezekiel and the rest of these epic images are pointing us towards the fact that God's promises are actually way, way bigger than what these Israelites were expecting.

They went into exile and what they wanted more than anything else was to get back to their land and to get back to their city. They wanted to get their old life back but Ezekiel is going to show us that God's plans are way bigger.

[31 : 34] God's not really bothered about getting back to the old life. God wants to offer them and the whole world new life. And Ezekiel is that key turning point where the Old Testament really powerfully recognises that something way bigger is coming.

And that's why the image in Ezekiel one and all the epic images that we're going to look at are pointing us forward to Jesus Christ. It's in Jesus that God's promise, the promise that the rainbow reminds us of, that all the promises that he made in the Old Testament, it's in Jesus that these are fulfilled.

He's the one who's come to deliver us from judgment. He's the one who's come to take that judgment in her place, who deals with the consequence of her sin, he's the one who's come to give us eternal salvation.

That prophetic message of judgment and salvation is pointing us towards Jesus. That's why it's really interesting if you go home tonight and read the very last book of the Bible, especially probably Revelation chapter four, but also other places in Revelation, you'll see that the description of God with Jesus exalted at his side is using exactly the same language that Ezekiel uses.

This God of massive energy is accomplishing his purposes in and through Jesus Christ.

[33 : 01] Ezekiel saw that vision of the glory of God that's pointing us forwards. What did we read at the very start of the service? That the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

You've seen his glory, glorious of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. All of that energy is being pointed, is pointing us towards the Persian and work of Jesus Christ.

That is telling us that all of this power and speed and strength and energy set before us in Ezekiel chapter one, all of that is being channeled into saving you.

God does not mess about when it comes to saving you. You are not some casual plaything in God's eyes.

You're not some irrelevance that he does not need. You are the goal that he's aiming for. You're the target that he's focused on. You're the people that he has come to reach. This glory of God that Ezekiel shows us and that's fully revealed in Jesus Christ is a glory that is full of grace and truth.

[34 : 17] It's full of grace, meaning that God wants to pour out his salvation on everyone who needs it. It's full of truth in that God will require everything that is needed.

God is not messing about with your salvation. He is absolutely committed, absolutely committed to being gracious to you and to bring you hope, to be true to his promise, to save you.

And so when we see a God full of energy in Ezekiel one, that energy means he will never give up on you. He'll never run out of energy for you.

His motion means that he's always active, always alert, always ready for you. His speed means that if you need him, he's there.

God is fast, so he is fast for you. If you call out to God, it's not like, oh, well, I'll be there in a few minutes. He's fast, fast, fast, fast, ready to be there for you, using that speed for you.

[35 : 25] His brilliance is for us to enjoy and marvel at and to share. His holiness is reminding us that he wants to take us out of this broken creation and into a new realm where all the rubbishness and muck of life has gone.

His sovereignty tells us that he's completely in control and he's exercising all his authority to make you his own. His knowledge tells us that he knows you. The eyes and the faces are reminding us that he's always, always, always watching over you.

The image of a warrior is telling us that God is ready to defend you from every enemy and that nothing can penetrate his defense of you.

And the life that's bursting forth before us in Ezekiel 1 is a life that we will enjoy in him for all eternity.

All of this is telling us that when it comes to saving you, God never, ever, ever messes about.

[36 : 35] This powerhouse God of Ezekiel, this God of massive energy is saying, I want you. I want to save you. Trust me and with my inexhaustible energy, I will never let you go.

I will never give up on you. I will never stop loving you. My wheels will never stop turning for you. And that's how no matter how abandoned, lost, vulnerable you might be, Jesus will reach you.

Never a moment when he won't be watching over you.

He will shepherd you forever. He brings life to the dead. And his great goal is to bring us to dwell with him forever in his temple.

The massive inexhaustible energy movement, speed, authority and power of God is being poured into saving you because as far as God is concerned, you are far, far too precious for any messing about.

[37 : 52] And if that's not enough reason for you to put your trust in Jesus, then I don't know what is. God still gives us an epic image because we have an epic God.

Let's pray.

Dear God of all glory and power and majesty and also the God who is our amazing Father We almost don't know what to say when we think of the imagery that Ezekiel presents before us.

But how we thank you that because of Jesus we can say you are our God. We are your people.

Please may that be true of us all. Amen.