

WHEN GOD PASSES BY

Today's Text: Ezekiel Chaps 1-2

Extracts:

Now it came to pass... as I was among the captives by the River Chebar, that the heavens were opened and I saw *visions of God*... Then I looked, and behold, *a whirlwind was coming out of the north*, a great cloud with raging fire engulfing itself; and brightness was all around it and radiating out of its midst like the colour of amber, *out of the midst of the fire*. Also from within it came the likeness of four living creatures... they had the likeness of a man. Each one had four faces, and each one had four wings.... And the living creatures ran back and forth, in appearance like the flash of lightning.... The likeness of the *firmament* (was) above the heads of the living creatures... and above the firmament over their heads was the likeness of a *throne* (on which) was a likeness with the appearance of a man high above it... So when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard a *voice of One* speaking.... The *Spirit* entered me when He spoke to me, and set me on my feet; and I heard Him who spoke to me [Ezek. 1: 1, 4-6, 14, 22, 26, 28; 2: 2].

In one of my favourite poems, Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), an English poet, writes, "Who has seen the wind? Neither I nor you: but when the leaves hang trembling, the wind is passing thro'. Who has seen the wind? Neither you nor I: but when the trees bow down their heads, the wind is passing by."

*The wind is invisible to the naked eye. Therefore, the only way that we can know that it is passing by is to observe what it touches. The leaves hang trembling; the trees bow their heads. When it comes as a storm, such as **Hurricane Katrina** (2005), damage to lives and property is evidence of the wind passing by. However, neither the trembling leaves nor the bowing trees nor the hurricane damage, nor even all taken together, can fully describe the wind.*

In like manner, no human being has seen God at any time [Jn 1: 18]. When Moses asked to see His glory, God replied, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me and live" [Ex. 33: 18, 20]. Yet, the Bible is full of stories of human encounters with God. How do we know that that voice or those signs and wonders are true evidence of God's presence? How can we know that the Almighty God is passing by? Let us find out from today's lesson, based on Ezekiel's experience.

1. How can you describe heaven with earth's vocabulary?

The beauty of the English language is that it does not hesitate to borrow new words from other languages. When it comes across a foreign word which is not in its vocabulary, it simply takes it as a new word which may appear in the next edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* or any of the other pace-setting ones. So, you find words like *bouquet* or *tête-à-tête* from French or *paparazzi* from Italian, and so on. However, it is possible to do so because words already exist in such other foreign languages to describe the phenomena under consideration. What if we had to describe heavenly or out-of-this-world things for which we had no earthly equivalents? Would we use our limited vocabulary or use “the language of angels”? The former would amount to oversimplification. The latter would be incomprehensible.

This point is illustrated in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, on what it means to be born again. In response to the Lord's statement that a man must be born again in order to see or enter the kingdom of God, Nicodemus asked, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” As Jesus tried to make it clearer, using the analogy of the wind, “the teacher of Israel” became more confused and he asked Jesus, “How can these things be?” Jesus replied, “If I have told you *earthly things* and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you *heavenly things*?” [Jn 3: 1-12].

Prophets that had visions of God recorded their experiences by using their limited human vocabulary. Therefore, upfront, we can assert that what they have written is *much less than* what they had seen or heard. Our task, therefore, is to show that the little that they have recorded is true evidence of their close encounter with the true and living God. The Lord rewards those who diligently seek Him by faith [Heb. 11: 6]. Therefore, He will show Himself to His servants in such a way that they cannot miss the reality of His presence. Let us use those lenses to analyse Ezekiel's experience.

2. Ezekiel experiences God passing by

Ezekiel, a priest, was one of the Jewish exiles carried to Babylon. Our story is set in the fourth month of the thirtieth year of their captivity [Ezek. 1: 1]. It was a time when a new generation of Jews born in exile needed to be reminded of what brought them into exile in the first place and the hope of restoration that awaited those of them who were ready to repent. They had seen the wicked use of power by the rulers of Babylon and might have wondered if God really existed and whether He was the one who had performed the wonders among their ancestors that had come out of Egypt. We face similar circumstances today when believers that are trying to remain faithful see how the wicked prosper. All in the name of progress, laws have been passed to legitimize sin, such as abortion and same-sex marriages. Where is the God that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for similar

sexual immorality? Therefore, we can appreciate Ezekiel's ecstasy when God showed up.

In a vision by the banks of River Chebar, Ezekiel saw the heavens opened and he "saw visions of God" [Ezek. 1: 1]. He saw a whirlwind coming out of the north, "a great cloud with raging fire engulfing itself; and brightness was all around it and radiating out of its midst like the colour of amber, out of the midst of the fire" [v. 4]. Within that spectacle, Ezekiel saw the following:

- *The Four Living Creatures*

Ezekiel saw *the likeness* of four living creatures that had the *likeness* of a man. Each of the creatures had *four* faces and *four* wings. The hands of a man were under their wings on their *four* sides, each with faces and wings [vv. 5-8] The *likeness* of the four faces of each of the living creatures was as follows: the face of a *lion* on the right side, the face of an *ox* on the left side, the face of a *man* and the face of an *eagle* [v. 10]. The living creatures had the *likeness* of burning coals of fire and they ran back and forth *in appearance* like a flash of lightning [v. 13].

- *The Four Wheels*

As Ezekiel looked at the living creatures, he saw a wheel on the earth beside each living creature. The four wheels had the colour of beryl and "the appearance of their workings was, as it were, a wheel in the middle of a wheel" [vv. 15-16]. The wheels went wherever the living creatures went "for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels" [vv. 20, 21].

- *The Firmament*

Ezekiel saw "the *likeness* of the firmament" above the heads of living creatures, and its colour "was like ... awesome crystal stretched out over their heads" [v. 22]. The living creatures flew under the firmament and their wings sounded "like the voice of many waters, like the voice of the Almighty, a tumult like the noise of an army." There was a voice from above the firmament over the heads of the four living creatures [vv. 24, 25].

- *The Appearance of a Man*

Above the firmament where the voice came from, Ezekiel saw the *likeness* of a throne "with the *appearance* of a man high above it." From the waist up, the man had the colour of amber "with the *appearance* of fire all around within it." From the waist down, Ezekiel saw "the *appearance* of fire with brightness all around." Then, he saw the *appearance* of a rainbow in the cloud on a rainy day [vv. 26-28]. Immediately, Ezekiel

recognized what he had seen as “the *appearance* of the *likeness* of the glory of the Lord.” He fell on his face. Then he heard a voice “of One speaking [v. 28], who went on to give him specific commands on his commission [Ezek. 2: 1-7].

3. How do we know that it was God that passed by Ezekiel?

Ezekiel used such words as “likeness,” “appearance,” and “like” to describe what he had seen. Therefore, he was using the human vocabulary available to him to try to explain what he had been shown. It was at the end of the experience that he had the confidence to say, “This was the appearance of *the glory of the Lord*” [Ezek. 1: 28], popularly referred to as the *Shekinah*. How can we be sure that it was in deed the true and living God that showed him a glimpse of His glory?

An African proverb says that the snake seen by one person is always longer than the stick to which it is compared! We need more evidence, for the word of God says that, in the mouth of two or more witnesses, the truth is established [Deut. 17: 6]. There are numerous similar *Shekinah* experiences recorded in scriptures, some of which are as follows:

- Isaiah the prophet “saw the Lord sitting on *a throne*, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple.” Above the throne were *seraphim* (angelic beings), each with six wings, that flew, crying to one another, saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!” The temple was full of smoke. Isaiah immediately confessed his sins and admitted his human failures. Then, one of the seraphim touched Isaiah’s mouth with a live coal taken with the tongs from the altar, saying to the prophet, “behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.” Isaiah heard *a voice* which he immediately recognized as “the voice of the Lord” giving him a new commission [Is. 6: 1-13]. Here, as in Ezekiel’s case, the Lord appeared in the likeness of a man sitting on a throne.

In reporting another vision of the glory of God departing from the temple in Jerusalem, Ezekiel wrote, “This is the living creature I saw under the God of Israel by the River Chebar, and *I knew they were cherubim*” [Ezek. 10: 20]. The cherubim, like the seraphim, are angelic beings that manifest the glory and majesty of God [2 Sam. 22: 11]. The seraphim in Isaiah’s vision are similar to the four living creatures in Ezekiel’s. Also, like Ezekiel, Isaiah heard a voice giving him his commission.

- In the vision of the coming of the Son of Man, Daniel saw “the Ancient of Days” seated and “His garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head was like pure wool.” His *throne* was “a fiery flame, its *wheels* a burning *fire*” [Dan. 7: 9]. Here again, we see the likeness of a man sitting on a throne on wheels. It confirms several aspects of Ezekiel’s vision.

- While in exile in the island of Patmos, Christ showed the apostle John a vision of heaven. He saw “a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne... and there was a rainbow around the throne” [Rev. 4: 1-3]. Around the throne were “four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back.” The first living creature was like a lion, the second like a calf, the third like a man and the fourth like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings. The four living creatures glorify God endlessly, saying, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” [vv. 6-8].

Clearly, John’s vision is a definite authentication of both Ezekiel and Isaiah’s visions. So, we can conclude that it was God Almighty that revealed Himself to Ezekiel.

4. Implications for modern believers

When God showed His glory to Isaiah and Ezekiel, it was to commission them to do His work. In the case of Daniel, it was to give him a glimpse of the glory of the coming of the Son of Man, Jesus the Christ. In the case of John, it was to give him a glimpse of how God is glorified and worshipped in heaven. Therefore, *God has a specific purpose for every appearance He makes to mortals.*

But does He have to come each time in such “elaborate” pomp and majesty? No. For example, He appeared to Moses in the form of “a flame of fire from the midst of a bush [Ex. 3: 2]. In the case of Elijah, after his spiritual battle with the prophets of Baal, God told him to go and wait for Him on the mountain in Horeb [1 Kgs 19: 11]. We are told [vv. 11-12]:

The Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

In this case, God *chose* to reveal His glory to Elijah through a still small voice. After Adam and Eve had disobeyed by eating the forbidden fruit, “they heard the sound of *the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.*” We are told that Adam and his wife hid themselves among the trees of the garden “from the presence of the Lord” [Gen. 3: 8]. Therefore, *God chooses* how to make His presence felt. He does not use one approach; otherwise worshippers may think that they can “conjure” Him to appear by using some mantra!

5. Conclusion: God passes by when you are with Jesus!

The word of God says, “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” [Jn 1: 18]. Jesus is the

visible “image of the invisible God” [Col. 1: 15], and in “Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead *bodily* [Col. 2: 9]. In Ezekiel’s vision of the glory of God, as also in John’s, the four faces of each of the living creatures were those of a lion, an ox (or calf), a man and an eagle [Ezek. 1: 10]. The four faces in the vision can be seen as symbols of the four faces of the Messiah when He came in flesh. The lion is the symbol of kingship. Jesus is the Lion of Judah and the gospel of Matthew focuses on His kingship. The ox or calf is a symbol of service, and the gospel of Mark focuses on Jesus the Servant. The face of a man symbolizes humanity and the gospel of Luke focuses on the humanity of Jesus. Finally, the eagle symbolizes deity and the gospel of John focuses on the Divinity of Jesus.

Clearly, through Jesus, God lives among true believers as Immanuel [Matt. 1: 23]. He is with them always till the end of the age [Matt. 28: 20]. So, if you do not as yet know Him, He is daily standing by the door of your heart and knocking. If you hear and open, He will come in and sup with you and you with Him [Rev. 3: 20].

As we approach another Christmas, which commemorates the birth of Jesus, it is the right time to know that God has not forgotten or abandoned you. The going may be rough. Relief may seem quite remote. But be anxious for nothing because God is passing by. Jesus is on your case!

Merry Christmas.