

Ezekiel's Vision and Commission

1. Intro

- In 1882 Friedrich Nietzsche famously wrote 'God is dead'¹
 - What he meant was that God was no longer taken seriously by western cultures, particularly when it came to Christianity being the foundation for cultural morality and ethics
- As you survey the culture we live in today ... it would be easy to agree with Nietzsche and think 'God is dead' > that God is irrelevant today
 - You can look to any number of factors that would indicate that's the case
 - 1950 > 44% of Aussies regularly attended church
 - 2007 > 17%
 - According to McCrindle research of those Aussies who don't go to church, 47% = irrelevant in my life
- We also see other factors at play too
 - We've seen a movement away (as Nietzsche feared) from traditional moral and ethical view points
 - Sexual ethics have become more and more liberal
 - Traditional views of marriage are being challenged with greater and greater hostility
 - Scripture is school is under attack
 - Christian view point is mocked and often excluded from public debate
- God is dead ... or so it seems

- Easy to be discouraged hearing all that and living in the culture we are in
 - Easy to think that God is not all powerful and sovereign over all the earth ... because he seems to be having less and less influence in our world
 - Easy to doubt the truth about God when it seems the prevailing culture is winning
- What do you do with that?
 - Do we give up and fall in with the culture around us?
 - Or is there something that would indicate that that's not the full story?
- Our passage today looks at this issue
 - At a time when it seems God is dead ... he emphatically shows that not only is that not the case ... but he reveals himself as the glorious and majestic Lord who rules over all people and all nations

Pray

¹ A Gay Science, Section 125 - 'The Madman', 1882

2. The glory of God revealed

- **Illustration – Larry Waters**

- Larry Walters was a truck driver in the United States, who satisfied his passion to fly by tying 45 weather balloons to his lawn chair
 - Unfortunately things didn't quite go to plan
 - When Larry cut free the anchor he shot up to an altitude of 11,000 feet!
 - He shot a couple of balloons to help him descend but then dropped his gun over the side
 - Larry was finally rescued when he drifted into the approach corridor for Los Angeles International Airport and was spotted by a Pan Am pilot
 - Can you imagine the conversation between the Pan Am pilot and the LA airport tower?
 - I would have love to have heard the pilot trying to convince air traffic control that he just flown past a guy on a banana lounge 3 km up!
 - It was a very strange sight in a most unexpected place
- The Book of Ezekiel also starts out with a very strange sight in a most unexpected place
- Ezekiel 1:1-3
 - *In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. On the fifth of the month-- it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin-- the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the LORD was upon him.*
- The time of Ezekiel was a momentous time in Israel's history
- You can see from the timeline that the time of Ezekiel was well down the line in terms of Israel's history
 - We are centuries past Abraham, Noah, Moses, Joshua and David
 - You can see its about 600BC and God's people from Judah have been taken in to exile by the Babylonians and Ezekiel is one of them
- **History of Exile**
- Let me give you some back story to the Babylonian exile
- 604 BC the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar had invaded Judah and King Jehoiachim was forced to become Nebuchadnezzars vassal
 - Jehoiachim complied for three years > 601 BC rebelled and withheld tribute

- 598 BC Nebuchadnezzar captured Jehoiachim he was killed
- Jehoiachim's son Jehoiachin took the throne
- He only ruled for 3 months before Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 597 BC
- 10,000 of the cultural elite were deported to Babylon including Jehoiachin and Ezekiel

- Now for those exiles in the Babylon this would have been a distressing time
 - You've heard of the Bonney M song – 'By the rivers of Babylon'
 - Taken from Ps 137 > 'By the rivers of Babylon, where we sat and wept when we remembered Zion'
- The exiles were weeping in Zion because
 - Not only are they forced to leave their country, homes, friends and loved ones
 - But also because it seemed God was dead
 - Because as they were languishing in captivity ... they were no doubt thinking
 - Will we ever see the Promised Land again?
 - Has God reneged on his promises?
 - Is he powerful enough to reverse all this or is he impotent to do anything?
 - Did God lose? Have the gods of Babylon defeated God?
 - Does God really love us?
 - Is this the end of us as God's people?
 - Maybe he's had enough and he's abandoned us and turned his back on us?
- They would've been wrestling with all these questions and doubts and weeping over their situation

- So here is Ezekiel ... 5 years later, by the river, among the exiles in Babylon, on his 30th birthday ... and it's into this situation we see in v4 God gives Ezekiel a vision ... and it is a strange vision indeed!

- See in v4-14 Ezekiel looks and sees
 - *a windstorm coming from the north - an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The centre of the fire looked like glowing metal*
- And in the midst of all this Ezekiel sees four heavenly creatures supporting the throne above

- These four figures are not chubby little babies with halos, wings and harps
- They are awesome creatures of great symbolism
- Told they have wings that touch each other and they go straight ahead
 - Means they are facing outwards on the corners of this throne > facing four points of the compass
- Each has four faces
 - Man, lion, ox and eagle
 - the man (being the pinnacle of creation)
 - the lion (the king of the beasts)
 - the ox (the leader of the domestic animals)
 - the eagle (the king of the air)
 - We could say that these faces indicate superiority > greatness > strength > speed & wisdom
- So brilliant and radiant were these creatures that Ezekiel describes in v13 – *The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches*
 - This is just the attendants to the one on the throne
 - How much more glorious must he be!
- 15-21 Ezekiel describes the wheels on which this whole thing was moving
 - These were not ordinary Bridgestones!
 - They were while like castors or gyroscopes
 - It meant the creatures could move in any direction without turning > they were adaptable and mobile and had unrestricted freedom
 - And in addition, the wheels were covered in eyes
- v22-25
 - Describes the platform which forms the chariot and separates what is above from the creatures below
 - It separates God from his creation so that God alone on his throne above all things
- Finally 26-27 describes the one on the throne
 - Figure like a man and *"that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him."*
- When Ezekiel sees all this – v28 ... he falls face down on the ground in reverent, speechless awe and humility

- Putting this altogether ... what Ezekiel is seeing ... is God
 - in all his majesty and glory
 - radiating his awesome power, purity and authority
 - seated on his throne like a king > but he is high and lifted up > ruling over all of creation > all nations and all people
- Don Carson says ... 2,500 years before the mobile phone > here we see the mobile throne!
- It's a weird vision > but it's a meaningful vision
 - Eyes everywhere, because God sees everything
 - Wheels everywhere, because God can get to everything
 - Creatures with lots of faces carrying the throne, because God is served by everything
- It's a picture of a the Lord of Heaven and Earth who sees all, knows all, and who rules over all
 - Nothing escapes him, nothing goes unseen
- **Implications**
- Now you can read that and think that that is very weird and strange and reasonably conclude that Ezekiel must have been tripping on some serious drugs
- But for Ezekiel who is among the exiles in Babylon, this would have had profound meaning to him
- Because as he and the exiles wrestle with the questions and doubts about God's power and promises to them ... what this vision shows is
 - Contrary to what they all thought ... God is very much alive and on his throne ... even in Babylon behind enemy lines!
- It shows
 - Exiles have not been forgotten by God > God has not abandoned them > he's not a long way off
 - That God's presence is not limited to Jerusalem > he's the Lord of all people and all nations
 - God is revealing himself as supreme in all his glory > enthroned above and ruling over all creation
- **Illustration - Soldiers**
- If you can imagine soldiers in the trench of battle and they're cold and tired and frightened and unhappy and they're missing home

- And as they are fiddling with their two-way radio they suddenly get a message that the full weight of the armed services is on the way to help them, and that the enemy has been reduced to almost nothing and this simple piece of information transforms their experience in the trenches
- It hasn't lifted them quickly out of the trenches, but it has changed their perspective and their attitude in the midst; and that is what God does for His people, through this vision he give Ezekiel
- **Application**
- Like Ezekiel ... we're living in a foreign land > a hostile environment > surrounded by false gods and idols of our culture
- Australia is a post-Christian culture ... like the exiles no longer living in the Promised Land
- In the midst of all this ... it looks like God's reputation is in tatters and that he's redundant
 - Easy to think that God is losing the battle
 - That God is dead
 - On Friday I learnt that Channel 7 and Channel 10 and some radio programmes are choosing not air a 45 sec ad about same-sex marriage
 - The ad isn't provocative, abusive, insensitive
 - All it does is say SSM is not as simple as we think and calling on Aussies to consider the broader issues of changing the definition of marriage
 - And yet these stations chose to censure that Christian voice
 - Ok to have sexually explicit TV programmes and ads > but it's not okay to have a Christian view point on TV on an important social issue when it goes against the cultural norm
- So is God dead today?
- Or is he the same sovereign, majestic Lord that Ezekiel witnessed by the rivers of Babylon
 - What confidence do we have this is a truth about God we can trust in and believe in and be sure Ezekiel wasn't just tripping on drugs?
- It comes to us in the pages of the New Testament where we see God continuing to reveal his glory in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ
 - The one who left the glory of his heavenly throne and came to reveal himself ... not in a vision ... but in person ... as a man ... in the flesh
- Apostle John wrote in John 1:14

- *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his **glory, the glory** of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*
- As God did in Ezekiel ... Christ came near to us
- And he assures us of his presence
- And he assures us of his glory and that he is the Lord

- Just as it looked like to the exiles that God had been defeated
 - So too, the death of Jesus on the cross looked like Christ had been defeated
 - But in actual fact it was the moment his greatest glory
 - For it is through the cross God's glory is truly revealed as he restores and reconciles rebellious people back to himself

- God is not dead
 - Jesus Christ is alive and well > he's risen from the grave > ascended to heaven > ruling from his heavenly throne over all people and all nations
 - He continues to see all and he continues to know all

- As we grasp the glory of the Lord
 - Not just his power and sovereignty
 - But also his love and mercy in coming to us and going to the cross for us
 - Then like Ezekiel ... the only right response is to fall before him in reverent awe and wonder and worship him as Lord of lords

3. The word of God revealed

- After appearing to Ezekiel in a vision ... God then speaks
 - He makes known his purpose in coming to Ezekiel

- What becomes clear in 2:1-7 is that God is calling Ezekiel to be a prophet
 - God wants Ezekiel to speak his words to his people in exile
 - To speak the truth
- But it's not going to be an easy task

- At 'Basecamp Men' last weekend, John Woodbridge told us about the life of Chuck Colson who was the special counsel to President Nixon
 - Before he became a Christian, Colson was known as Nixon's hatchet man
 - The man he would call upon to get the tough jobs done > some of which were quite underhanded

- But they weren't popular, glorious or easy
- Here Ezekiel is called upon by God to do one seriously tough job
- Two reasons why it's so tough...
- First ... the people he's to take God's word to are
 - A rebellious nation (v3)
 - Obstinate and stubborn (v4)
 - Being amongst them is like being surrounded by briars, thorns and scorpions (v6)
- But God's commission to him is for him to speak the words of God to them, whether they choose to listen or not

- Secondly ... to make matters worse ... the words he has to speak aren't go to go down too well
 - It won't be something they want to hear
 - Bit like a politician telling people he's planning to raise taxes > this will not be a popular message
- For the message Ezekiel has to take to the Israelites in exile is a message of lament, mourning and woe (2:10)

- We'll see why it's a message of judgment the more we go through the book of Ezekiel ... but in essence it's because the people of God have rebelled against God
 - They have turned their backs on God
 - They have falsely assumed that God would protect them and Jerusalem and the temple irrespective of the way they lived
 - They have ignored the covenant > ignored his word
 - They have ignored the prophets whom God sent to warn them and call them to tum back to him

- And in the end God had enough
 - Ezekiel's message will be to tell Israel that they're bearing the consequences of being habitually disloyal, stubbornly defiant and deliberately deaf
 - And God's patience has run out

- Like an unfaithful spouse ... who
 - regularly goes out boozing with his mates
 - has extra-marital affairs
 - fails to respect and love his wife

- Eventually the wife will say ...
 - "Enough, you've completely disregarded our wedding vows, it's time for us to go our own way"
 - Israel have been that unfaithful spouse and God is saying "Enough ... now you must bear the consequences of your rejection of me"
- I want you to remember that judgement is part of God's warning to a needy world
 - And if God warns the world, it's because God cares about the world
 - If God disciplines His own people for despising his grace
 - If He disciplines His people .. . it's a part of His kindness
- It's to bring a people to their senses
 - It's to bring a rebellious nation to their senses and return to their God
 - It's part of God's kindness to also be a warning God, a judging God
- And God says to Ezekiel ... "You must speak my words, whether they listen or fail to listen"
 - And God doesn't promise revival either!
 - He leaves it open ended ... whether they listen or not God says in v5
- He just calls Ezekiel to faithfully declare the words that God will give him to say
- **Application**
- Easy to speak words that are popular > It's easy to say
 - "God is love" or "God forgives"
- Much harder to speak the words of Jesus that aren't popular
 - "Take up your cross and follow me"
 - "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me"
 - "Repent and believe"
 - "God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed – Jesus Christ"
- And it's not easy to speak the words of God that goes against the culture we live in
 - The best marriage is between one man and one woman
 - That is not right to terminate a pregnancy for convenience
- It's easy to be afraid when the message isn't popular
 - "What will ppl think?"

- "How will they react?"
- "What will they do or say to me?"
- Now we're not Ezekiel and we're not in Babylon and the message God has given us for our time is different to the message God gave Ezekiel for his time
 - But God has given us a message to speak that will be the means by which he will do his work
 - It's the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ
 - And it's a message that desperately needs to be spoken into this world because it's a world under judgment for turning its back on God
- Our world and people around us need to know that the God of glory and majesty to rules over all ppl, all nations, all the heavens and all the earth ... will judge
- But it also needs to hear that God has come not just to judge but also to save ... and that salvation comes through his Son, Jesus Christ
- And like Ezekiel ... the message God has given us ... is an unpopular message
- But like Ezekiel, it's important to speak the truth of word of God into the culture we live in because it's the means by which God does his work
 - We don't know what will happen when we speak God's words
 - He doesn't promise revival
 - Some will listen and many will not
 - But we know what **won't** happen if we don't speak God's words – nothing!
- The only way we can fail from God's point of view is by remaining silent
 - Success is not by numbers converted
 - Failure in God's eyes is failing to speak God's words of the gospel to those who desperately need to hear it
- For God wants all people to know that he is not dead
 - He's the Lord of lords who is alive and well
 - And he's seated at the right hand of the Father ... in all his glory and majesty

- Having left behind his glory he came ... and after he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven

- As we see afresh the glory and majesty of the King of kings and Lord of lords ...
 - Not only are we moved to bow down in reverent worship
 - We're also moved to speak the gospel to a world that desperately needs to hear the word that God has given us

PRAY