

Ezekiel 1A

- In July 2015, *Psychology Today* published a list of 5 ways to deliver bad news successfully
 - The five steps were:
 - Tell (at least) part of the truth if you think the person needs to hear it
 - Sugarcoat the news if you think the person can't handle hearing it
 - If the bad news involves a potential threat to their self-esteem, help the recipient save face (develop a cover story to preserve the person's reputation)
 - Take your time to prepare your message (choose your words carefully to avoid offense)
 - Rely on others to help you (deliver the message as a team)
 - The article says that if you follow these steps, you are far more likely to deliver the bad news successfully
 - Now at this point, some of you are wondering if I'm about to deliver bad news
 - Well, rest easy...I have no bad news to deliver
 - But there was a man, a priest of Judah, who lived long ago in the nation of Israel
 - And the Lord called this man to deliver some very bad news to the nation
 - But this man never read *Psychology Today*
 - So he violated every single one of these rules
- He delivered the bad news according to the wisdom of God, not the so-called wisdom of men
 - As God required, this man delivered the whole truth to Israel
 - He held back none of the terrible details of the judgment God was preparing to deliver

- He sugarcoated nothing, explaining in graphic detail the sins of Israel and the consequences that would follow
- He cared nothing for Israel's self-esteem
 - On the contrary, this prophet targeted Israel's pride
 - He called them out for their apostasy and refused to let them hide behind their excuses
- While he did choose his words carefully, he chose them to ensure maximum impact
 - He spoke in graphic and even vulgar terms intending to awaken the nation to its depravity
 - The man sought to offend Israel, just as they had offended their God
- Finally, this prophet stood virtually alone in his declarations
 - Though he lived at a time when multiple prophets operated, he worked alone
 - Moreover, he was rejected by his own people, who responded to his declarations in cynicism
 - History does not record his birth or death or even if he had children
 - In fact, there are no records of his life outside the book he wrote
- This prophet was a man named Ezekiel
 - His name means strengthen by God, and so he was because he had a very difficult mission
 - Ezekiel was a major prophet called to speak to Judah in the days of the Babylonian captivity
 - He is a unique – even enigmatic – character in scripture
 - God asked things of him that God asked of no other prophet
 - But he received rare and marvelous visions that no other prophet received
 - He was told to explain to Judah the reason for God's harsh judgment, and Ezekiel delivered that message just as God required

- He didn't mince words, he didn't soften the blow, and he didn't worry about hurting feelings
- God told Ezekiel to arrest a disobedient Israel with dramatic words of judgment so they would be without excuse
- But in the midst of the bad news, God also gave Israel a glimmer of hope
 - Ezekiel provided Israel with a stunning preview of the glory God has prepared for the nation in the Kingdom
 - He assured the captive nation they would one day return from their scattering
 - They would see a renewed temple filled with the Glory of God
 - Then even as Israel was unfaithful to the covenant, nevertheless God would remain faithful to His promises
- As we study this book together, we're going to learn some history, we're going to learn about covenants, and we're going to learn about sin and judgment
 - Above all, we're going to learn about the glory of God and the power of God's promises found in His word
 - Ezekiel more than any OT work emphasized the glory of God
 - The phrase "Then they will know that I am the Lord" appears over 60 times in the book
 - Reminding us that the Lord chooses to reveal Himself to us for the purpose of receiving the glory He deserves
 - But when God's people turn from Him into idolatry and other sin, we spurn His revelation and break fellowship
 - As Thomas Constable observed:

God used the events of Ezekiel's life to teach His people – and all people – that He is the only true God. In the future, He will bring things to pass that will teach people that only He is God. We can learn that even now, as we gain God's viewpoint on life from this great book. Then we can help others make sense out of what is happening, because we understand the One who is creating history.

- Ezekiel is the classic Old Testament text recording God's faithfulness to His word concerning Israel

- He fulfills His promise to judge Israel's disobedience
- He reiterates His promise to bring blessings and glory to that same nation in a day to come
- And He promises a better covenant to put an end to Israel's cycle of sin and disobedience and the judgment that followed
- For us the Church, this book offers a lot to be excited about too
 - The prophecies have existed for over 2,500 years but today the things Ezekiel promised are coming to pass before our eyes
 - We are living in the days of Ezekiel's prophecy
 - Some of Ezekiel's prophecies have already been
 - And even the most dramatic and mysterious visions in this book are soon to become reality
- So let's dive in to the opening chapters, which offer the most dramatic and mysterious start of any book of scripture

Ezek. 1:1 Now it came about in the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, while I was by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

Ezek. 1:2 (On the fifth of the month in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's exile, **Ezek. 1:3** the word of the Lord came expressly to Ezekiel the priest, son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and there the hand of the Lord came upon him.)

- Ezekiel begins his book with geography and chronology
 - That's one of Ezekiel's distinctive characteristics
 - His book is known for its precise time and historical references
 - His book is a collection of prophecies which he received over 20 years while in exile with the rest of Judah in Babylon
 - And Ezekiel dated each prophecy as he received them, so we have exact dates down to the very day God spoke
 - Altogether, Ezekiel recorded 14 prophecies during those 20 years, and the first prophecy runs from Chapter 1 through the middle of Chapter 3
 - The prophecy came on July 31, 593 BC on the modern calendar

- This was during the reign of King Jehoiachin, who was also living in captivity
- The king was taken into Babylon in the same year as Ezekiel, during the second deportation in 597 BC
- This year is the base year Ezekiel uses to date all 14 of his prophecies in this book
- Ezekiel says he received this first vision while living on the river Chebar in the midst of the exiles of Judah
 - The Jews taken into slavery by Nebuchadnezzar when Babylon conquered Jerusalem and Judah, were settled along this river
 - They lived in a community called Tel-Aviv, which means “old spring” which is a euphemism for “something old and something new”
 - The Chebar was a great canal that brought water out of the Euphrates River to serve the population east of Babylon
- The Jews living here had a surprisingly comfortable existence despite being held in captivity
 - They opened homes and businesses
 - They could travel within Babylon
 - They were free to worship
 - And so when the nation was permitted to return to Jerusalem 70 years later, many chose not to leave Babylon
- Ezekiel was not one of the apostate Jews responsible for the judgment, yet he was caught up in it
 - Though some in the nation were faithful to God, all were subjected to the judgment
 - This happened because the Old Covenant, which required this judgment was a national covenant
 - It bound the whole nation to whatever circumstances came as a result of its terms
 - Ezekiel was a faithful participant in the covenant, but still he maintained his association with God’s people while under judgment

- He says he lived among these exiles, in their midst
- And while there he began receiving visions
- The prophecy came in the thirtieth year, meaning Ezekiel was thirty years old
 - In v.3 Ezekiel says he was a priest, and priests began their service in the temple at the age of 30
 - Since Ezekiel turned thirty while in captivity in Babylon, we know he never had a chance to serve as a priest in the temple
 - And now the Lord has called him into a different form of service as a prophet to Israel in exile
- Ezekiel spent his early adult life preparing to serve God in sacrificial rituals performed in the temple
 - Priestly preparation was demanding, and no doubt Ezekiel dedicated himself to the hard work expected of him
 - But just as his time for service approached, suddenly Ezekiel finds himself dragged off to a foreign land and the temple destroyed
 - His opportunity for service as priest seemingly stolen from him
 - In reality, the Lord was preparing Him for an even greater service as a prophet to the exiles
- Ezekiel's predicament is a reminder that God may set us on a course of preparation which suggests to us a certain role in serving Him
 - And yet when the day comes, the Lord may direct us into a completely new and better way of service, something we didn't expect
 - If we are to fulfill our call properly, we need to be open to these detours in our life
 - Likewise we must be ready to receive those called to serve us even if their background doesn't match our expectations
- Jesus calls unqualified people to serve Him, but He won't leave us untrained
 - But the Lord's training can be very unorthodox

- He uses all our experiences to prepare us to serve Him and then He puts that training to work in surprising ways
- A servant may be trained in farming or business or in a trade of one kind or another
- And then in a day to come, God takes that training and puts it into service in a ministry no one saw coming
- History confirms this pattern
 - Many good servants of God gained their start in ministry in unorthodox ways
 - The church has known good shepherds who were never trained as pastors
 - And good Bible teachers who never attended seminary
 - Remember, even the apostles themselves never trained to be religious leaders, yet they were called to found the Church
- Ezekiel's time preparing to be a priest might have seemed wasted for a man who would spend his life in exile absent a temple
 - But as it turned out, his priestly training became critically important for his role as a prophet
 - Because many of his visions concerned priestly matters, namely the construction and operation of the Kingdom temple
 - God's ways make no sense to us...until we come to understand God's purposes, and then they make perfect sense
- So remember Ezekiel's career shift as you consider your own call to serve God
 - You may be trained as an accountant, a soldier, a teacher, a nurse, an athlete...or even a pastor
 - But God may take that preparation and call you to use it serving Him in new and surprising ways
 - A farmer trained to work the land may be called by God to pastor a church meeting in his barns
 - And a seminary-trained pastor may be called out of the pulpit to plant fields to feed believers in a poor village

- God may use our preparation in unexpected ways, but the common requirement for every servant of God is to serve faithfully
 - Remain open to the Spirit's leading and obey His call
 - Don't rely on stereotypes and don't be afraid to change your 5-year plan
 - Be ready to accept any servant of God regardless of whether his or her preparation fits with your preconceived expectations
- Now we turn to the opening description of Ezekiel's first vision

Ezek. 1:4 As I looked, behold, a storm wind was coming from the north, a great cloud with fire flashing forth continually and a bright light around it, and in its midst something like glowing metal in the midst of the fire.

- The prophecy that begins here runs until the middle of Chapter 3
 - Ezekiel's description of what he saw is found within Chapter 1
 - Then in Chapters 2 & 3, Ezekiel tells us what the the Lord says as He called Ezekiel to prophesy to Israel
 - The entire scene is reminiscent of Isaiah's call to prophesy in Isaiah 6
 - But Ezekiel's vision is far more detailed and mysterious
 - Ezekiel's visions are filled with mysterious – even disturbing – images, making interpretation of this vision difficult
 - Interpreting the vision in these chapters requires a careful adherence to the fundamental rules of interpretation (called hermeneutics)
 - In particular, distinguishing between literal and symbolic details and applying other scripture appropriately
- So we'll begin with observations of the details of just one verse; v.4
 - A storm comes blowing from the north bringing a great cloud filled with lightning
 - Such a vision would be dramatic but not entirely unknown to a resident of Babylon

- The Middle East desert commonly produces dust storms that fit the general description of this vision
- The storm rises up suddenly, moving across the land like a great shadow of dust, like a freight train obliterating everything in its path
- Sandstorms can generate spectacular lightning displays
- So the Lord gives Ezekiel familiar imagery, but quickly the details depart from the normal
 - For example, natural sandstorms are shrouded in darkness, but this storm had a bright light surrounding it
 - Furthermore, dust storms are monolithic, nothing but sand
 - But in the center of the storm was something like glowing metal
- Already, we can begin to understand the meaning of some of these symbols
 - First, we have a cloud or storm of lightning
 - The Bible use the symbols of lightning and clouds or storms in a particular way
 - These details are commonly associated with the appearance of the glory of God
 - For example, the camp of Israel witnessed the glory of God in a cloud filled with lightning and fire while on top of the mountain at Sinai
 - And Elijah was carried by God in a similar whirlwind
 - And John saw burning fire and lightning in the throne room in Revelation
 - Secondly, this cloud has glowing metal inside it
 - Glowing metal, as in a furnace, is a picture of God's judgment
 - In particular, glowing bronze in a furnace is a common picture of God's judgment fire
 - Finally, the storm approached from the north, which would have been a particularly significant detail to the exiles in Babylon
 - The Babylonian army came from the north to invade Judah

- Just as Assyria had done centuries earlier in defeating Israel
- So God is reminding the captives that God has brought judgment to Judah by way of Babylon
- Babylon was an instrument in God's hands executing His judgment
- I say God is reminding Israel because in earlier centuries, the prophets, most notably Isaiah, told Israel God would act in this way
 - Isaiah told Israel that God would use Babylon to judge them for their sin

Is. 13:1 The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw.

Is. 13:2 Lift up a standard on the bare hill,

Raise your voice to them,

Wave the hand that they may enter the doors of the nobles.

Is. 13:3 I have commanded My consecrated ones,

I have even called My mighty warriors,

My proudly exulting ones,

To execute My anger.

- So Israel was on notice this would happen
 - And yet they did not repent nor did they seek obedience
 - They continued in sin and apostasy
 - And so now as they sit in exile, perhaps they wondered why...
 - The answers they sought should have been obvious
- The exiles had been in captivity for several years by this time
 - The temple, the house of the glory of the Lord, had been robbed and the priesthood decimated
 - The people of Israel were scattered and in slavery
 - The kingdom of Israel had ceased to exist
 - The people of Judah were imprisoned and with no hope to return

- And in a few short years, Nebuchadnezzar would return to Jerusalem a third time to destroy the city and temple completely
- So they must have been asking questions of God?
 - Did the God of Israel only dwell in Judah?
 - Where were they now without a God?
 - And even if they could return to God, how could they pursue Him without a temple or a priesthood to make sacrifices?
 - Did their captivity mean an end of all that God promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?
 - Had the Lord forsaken His people?
- To answer those questions, the Lord brings Ezekiel this vision as an explanation for his personal circumstances and those of all exiles
 - But the Lord has much more to say
 - And His message centers on Himself
 - On His omniscience, His sovereignty and ultimately His glory
 - God's glory is always the first priority of Creation
 - The Lord proclaimed by His word in the covenant given to Israel that He would judge them for their sin under the covenant

Deut. 28:15 “But it shall come about, if you do not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:

Deut. 28:25 “The Lord shall cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you will go out one way against them, but you will flee seven ways before them, and you will be an example of terror to all the kingdoms of the earth.

Deut. 28:30 “You shall betroth a wife, but another man will violate her; you shall build a house, but you will not live in it; you shall plant a vineyard, but you will not use its fruit.

Deut. 28:31 “Your ox shall be slaughtered before your eyes, but you will not eat of it; your donkey shall be torn away from you, and will not be restored to you; your sheep shall be given to your enemies, and you will have none to save you.

[Deut. 28:32](#) “Your sons and your daughters shall be given to another people, while your eyes look on and yearn for them continually; but there will be nothing you can do.

[Deut. 28:33](#) “A people whom you do not know shall eat up the produce of your ground and all your labors, and you will never be anything but oppressed and crushed continually.

[Deut. 28:34](#) “You shall be driven mad by the sight of what you see.

- These were hard words, but God issued these warnings to give Israel incentive to obey the covenant they freely entered
 - But Israel forgot their commitment to the covenant
 - And so now what should the Lord do?
 - His glory was on the line
 - God could no more ignore His own promises for judgment than He could lie
 - So for His glory sake, He was obligated to fulfill the terms of this covenant in judgment
- Israel couldn't begin to understand their circumstances unless they understood the importance of the glory of God
 - They were in exile because they entered into a covenant with a covenant-keeping God
 - We too are in covenant with the Lord by His blood
- And unless and until we gain a high view of God's sovereignty and glory, we too may struggle to experience strength and joy and peace in our relationship with Him
 - Like Israel, we must appreciate how life circumstances are moving under His hand to accomplish His will
 - According to His glory, not to our desires
 - When circumstances require, the Lord may bring difficulties into our lives too, by one means or another
 - But when He does, it's only because His glory requires it
 - To grow us, to prepare us, to discipline us according to His word

- But even if He does, he won't leave us in the dark about why
- By His Spirit in His word He'll explain Himself, just as He did to Israel through Ezekiel
- And usually He will be reminding us of things we already know
 - That we serve a holy God Who calls us to be like Him
 - That He asks us to bring glory to His name among the nations
 - And that He remains faithful to His word even when we aren't faithful to ours