

What do you say to people whose God has abandoned them?

Responding to the Loss of God's Glory

Ezekiel 1:1–3

Grace Church of DuPage

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Preface to the Sermon Series on Ezekiel

What do you say to people whose God has abandoned them? Many of us are familiar with Elie Wiesel, probably the most famous Jewish survivor of the holocaust, and author of the book *Night*, which is mandatory reading in courses on the Holocaust around the world.¹ According to reviewer Ron Rosenbaum, through this book, other publications, and his lectures,

[Elie Wiesel] had become a living icon—a Symbol of Suffering, of Survivorhood, of piety under pressure. . . . who seemed to have come to comfortable terms with the cause of rage. Who has long been a model of deportment. Sad, sad—but quietly sad. Not a troublemaker. Not one to make the world look in the mirror and see the face of a murderer. How angry should one get, how long, how much should one care? . . . He made it possible to think we could make peace with such a God, to still say the prayers, to not think too deeply about what that meant; he symbolically saved us the trouble, erased the angst, allowed us to pretend we had forgotten the quarrel, to go back to worshipping the nebbish.² [a timid

¹ Published in Yiddish as *Un di Velt Hot Geshvign* (Buenos Aires: Central Union of Polish Jews in Argentina, 1956; first published in English as *Night*, translated by Stella Rodway (New York: Hill & Wang; London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1960).

² “Elie Wiesel’s Secret: A little-known Yiddish manuscript upends our idea of the secular saint of human suffering,” accessible at <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/245896/elie-wiesels-secret>.

unfortunate simpleton]

This version of *Night* has been translated into 35 languages and sold more than 10,000,000 copies. However, it gives a sanitized vision of the author that differs significantly from an earlier version, that portrays Wiesel as angry with everyone, including God. On May 1, 2016, the world was shocked to learn that there was another side to Elie Wiesel. While scouring through 330 boxes of Wiesel's documents archived at Boston University, Professor Yoel Rappel discovered a Hebrew first draft of *Night* that paints a different picture of the man. In this version he writes,

“We believed in miracles and in God! And not in fate and we [fared] very badly not believing in fate. If we had, we could have prevented many catastrophes. . . .
“There is no longer a god in the heavens; he whispered with every step we put on the ground. There is no longer God in heaven, and there is no longer man on the earth below. The universe is divided in two: angels of death and the dead. [So] I stopped praying and didn't speak about God. I was angry at him. I told myself, 'He does not deserve us praying to him.' And, really, does he hear prayers? Why sanctify him? For what? For the suffering he rains on our heads? For Auschwitz and Birkenau? This time we will not stand as the accused in court before the divine judge. This time we are the judges and he the accused. We are ready. There are a huge number of documents in our indictment file. They are living documents that will shake the foundations of justice.”³

Really? Is this really Elie Wiesel? We know this is how many Jewish people feel in the

³ Cited by Ofer Aderet at <https://forward.com/culture/344169/elie-wiesels-wrenching-lost-version-of-night-was-scathing-indictment-of-god/>.

wake of the Holocaust, but not Elie Wiesel, surely. But if you visit Holocaust memorials like the Yad Vashem museum in Jerusalem, you can understand why.

Elie Wiesel's words remind me of how the people of Judah felt in the aftermath of the events that Ezekiel addressed in the book we know by his name—in the face of horrendous tragedies and expressions of evil like the Holocaust of the fourth and fifth decades of the twentieth century, the Holocaust of AD 70 when the Romans sacked Jerusalem and slaughtered its Jewish inhabitants, and the Holocaust of 586 BC, when the Babylonians ransacked the city. Then as now, the question is, “Where is the glorious God of Israel when these atrocities happen?” Even more pointedly, “Where is the God of the Jews, whose identity is so tied to him, and who had promised to be their patron and protector forever? Where is he when we need him? Why has he abandoned us again and again and again?” How do you answer these questions?

These are the issues Ezekiel and his people faced in the early decades of the sixth century BC. And these may in fact be issues that we face in our own personal lives. While as a community we may not be going through hell (Wiesel's word), in some parts of the world people are; In Israel in the wake of the October 7th many feel they have entered this hell again. And they have no confidence in the world, that anyone outside their circles will understand them .

And individually, some of us are going through dark valleys, and we may well be asking, “Where is God in this picture? Why has he abandoned me?” Why can't I

see his glory? By the time we have worked our way through this book, we will have learned Ezekiel's answers to these questions. Actually, we will have learned God's answers, for the whole book of Ezekiel is cast as God's speech, not the prophet's. We may not always like what we hear. There will be times when the prophet challenges our trite theological responses—God always does what is right! Relax, all things work together for good. It will all turn out all right in the end.” Or worst of all, “Praise the Lord anyhow.” But I pray that there will also be times when we here echoes of the very last words in the book, *yhwh šāmmâ*, “YHWH is there!”

Where is God when you need him? What do you say to a people whose God represents their security, but who apparently does not see your desperate need? What do you say to a people whose God has died? Who, in your hour of greatest need does not show up? These questions set the agenda the coming series of sermons.

In terms of text, my agenda this morning is minimalist—we have only three verses to consider, but these verses set the stage for the book, and for Ezekiel's ministry:

¹ In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, while I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the heavens opened up and I saw a divine vision. ² On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's exile), ³ the word of YHWH came directly to Ezekiel, the son of Buzi, the priest, in the land of the Chaldeans by the Chebar canal. There the hand of YHWH came upon him.

The Principal Characters in the Drama Underlying the Book of Ezekiel

This introduction to the book may be short, but it gives us a lot of information that will be important for interpreting the book. Most importantly, these verses introduce us to the main actors who will appear repeatedly on the stage in the drama that follows, and in so doing introduce us to the context of the events portrayed in the book.

YHWH, the LORD God of Israel

First, these verses introduce us to YHWH, the God of Israel, who operates as the divine Director and Script Writer for everything that follows. The principal clause of verse 1 appears at the end: “The heavens opened, and I saw visions of God.” Since Ezekiel used the generic term for God here, rather than his personal name, YHWH, we should probably interpret the last phrase as “divine visions” (as in 8:3 and 40:2). Ezekiel rarely uses “Elohim,” that is Hebrew for “God,” as proper noun when referring to the only true and living God. Exceptions involve expressions like “the garden of God” in chapter 28, and the covenant formula, “I will be your God, and you shall be my people” (11:20; 14:11; 34:24; 36:28; 37:23; 37:27). Remarkably, the latter all involve a future reality for Israel; Ezekiel never applies this formula to the present. The use of Elohim “visions of God” or “divine visions” here reinforces the notion that what Ezekiel saw was otherworldly. This was not what we normally see on earth. For Ezekiel to see it, the heavens must open—not to transport him to the place where God is, but to open the doors for God to come down.

But herein we discover the first and vital lesson about God that distinguishes him from all others who claim that title—**he takes the initiative in revealing himself to humankind**. As we shall see in the rest of chapter 1, it is doubtful Ezekiel was looking for God on the banks of the Chebar Canal. And this is the way it has always been. In Eden, the Lord God appeared in the cool of the day to look for Adam and Eve. When Abram arrived in Shechem in the promised land, the Lord appeared to him and like your GPS voice announced, “You’re there,” or rather “I’m here” (Gen 12:7). At Mount Sinai, the Lord appeared to Moses, declaring “YHWH! YHWH! Gracious and compassionate El, slow to anger, abounding in unfailing love (*hesed*) and fidelity, who guarantees *hesed* for thousands, and forgives every kind of sin, but will by no means leave the guilty unpunished” (Exod 34:6–7). In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw the Lord, high and lifted up (Isa 6:1–7). And climactically, in the New Testament, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, abounding in grace and trustworthiness.” (John 1:14). God could have remained in his comfortable confines in the heavens, but he shows up on earth, even when we are not looking for him. And in this case, he could have remained boxed in the Holy of Holies in the temple in Jerusalem, but no! He appeared to Ezekiel in Babylon! On pagan soil! In the heartland of Marduk’s world.

But in verse 3 we learn more about the God whom Ezekiel encountered. In addition to showing up, **we learn that God communicates verbally with human**

beings: “The word of YHWH came expressly (הַיְהוָה הִיָּה) to Ezekiel in the land of the Chaldeans.”

But yes, it is true. Ezekiel may have said to himself, “I am not dreaming! YHWH has appeared to me in all his glory.” But it was not only what he saw that would make an indelible impression on him. There, in the land of the Chaldeans (Babylonians), by the Chebar Canal, the word of YHWH came expressly to Ezekiel. Here the Hebrew expression portrays the word of YHWH, not merely as sounds that come from his lips, but like a concrete object that hits him; literally, “The word of YHWH happened to Ezekiel.” Actually, we will not hear YHWH’s voice speaking to Ezekiel in chapter 1, but in chapters 2 and 3 it will hit him like a ton of bricks. In fact, the book of Ezekiel is largely a transcript of divine speech. This is remarkable. The pagans designed their statues of the gods with huge lips and mouths, but they never talked. The God of Israel has no mouth, but he speaks audibly, clearly, and not in some heavenly or other worldly language, but in Hebrew, so that his addressees can get the points he is trying to make.

But there is more. In the land of the Chaldeans, by the Chebar Canal, “there the hand of YHWH came upon him.” This is a different idiom, which we should obviously not interpret literally. Again, unlike the images of pagan gods that Ezekiel and his countrymen will have seen everywhere in Babylon, the true God has no hands. In this book the idiom will take on graphic forms.

In 8:1 we read, “He [that is, Adonai YHWH] stretched out what seemed to be

the form of a hand and grabbed me by a lock [of hair] of my head. Then the spirit lifted me up into the air and wafted me away in divine visions to Jerusalem.”

Or 33:21–22, “Now in the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, a certain survivor from Jerusalem came to me and announced, “The city has fallen!”²² Now the hand of YHWH had come upon me the previous evening, before the survivor had arrived, and he had opened my mouth prior to his coming to me in the morning. Thus my mouth was opened, and I was no longer dumb.”

Or 37:1, “The hand of YHWH came upon me. He carried me away by the spirit of YHWH and set me down in the middle of the valley.”

These expressions all reflect the radical theocentricity that characterizes this book. God is at the center of and behind everything that transpires. If you want to use theological labels, Ezekiel was the most Calvinist of all the prophets. Two decades ago I was teaching a Doctor of Ministry class on the book of Ezekiel, my older brother came down from Canada to take the course. I will never forget the exasperation he expressed one day when we had him and his wife at our house for supper. “But Dan, you are such a Calvinist!” Now you need to understand that we grew up in a Mennonite household, and if there is one label true Mennonites reject, it is the label “Calvinist.” It hurts too much. During the Reformation in western Europe, in the lowlands of what is now Holland and Belgium in particular, more of our Anabaptist forebears died at the hands of Dutch Calvinists than at the hands of

Roman Catholics. Now I am not much concerned about theological labels. I just want to be biblical. And when I read the book of Ezekiel I have to go where the book leads me, and if it leads me to feel at home with John Calvin, so be it. It's not because I am a Calvinist. It's because at this point Calvin was biblical.

Speaking of John Calvin, here is one interesting side note. Calvin's expositions of Ezekiel are of special interest because they represent his last written work. Wracked by pain, finally on May 27, 1564 in Geneva, at the tender age of 54, his emaciated body gave out at the end of chapter 20. To the end, his commentary reflects the vigor of his mind and his high view of Scripture. But John Calvin's demise is sobering for anyone who dares to preach through this book. But I have digressed.

Without doubt, YHWH is the most important character in the drama that is the book of Ezekiel. We recognize his overwhelming significance by the 211 occurrences of his compound name, *ʾādōnāy yhwh*. As had become conventional by the third century BC, the Jewish translators of the Septuagint consistently replaced the personal divine name *YHWH* with a formal title *kurios*, meaning "master, lord, suzerain." Adonay YHWH appears in the Greek in the duplicated form *kurios kurios* fifty-three times in chapters 12–39, but elsewhere *kurios* is singular, suggesting either the personal name or the divine name has been dropped. English translations typically render *ʾādōnāy yhwh* as "the Lord GOD," which is misleading to those who do not read the prefaces to the translations. To most readers this suggests the

equivalent of *ʾădōnāy ʿĕlōhîm*, which means the loss of YHWH's personal covenant name. The differences in nuance between titles and personal names is monumental. YHWH was not just Israel's divine overlord; he had personally redeemed them from the tyrannical Egyptian overlords, brought them to himself, entered into covenant relationship with them, and through direct speech communicated with them—as he would do throughout the book of Ezekiel.

Ezekiel

The first three verses of Ezekiel also introduce us to the second principal character in sixth-century BC drama. Ezekiel is his protagonist, who, as we will see in the first three chapters of the book, will be grabbed by the scruff of his neck, and forced on to the stage to be God's voice. But the introduction is odd. The first verse is cast in the first person—as if Ezekiel was writing this himself—but then in verse 2 it shifts into third person. Actually, verses 2–3 are disruptive, breaking up a thought that moves directly from verse 1 to verse 4:

¹ In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, while *I* was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the skies opened up and I saw visions of God. ⁴ Suddenly *I* saw a stormy wind blowing in from the north—an enormous cloud, with fire flashing back and forth (f) and a radiance surrounding it (m). And the sparkle of amber issued forth from it (f)—from the heart of the fire.

But this is no way to start a book? Who's talking? Who is this "I" who saw the skies break open exposing the sight of blinding brilliance? On the surface it looks like the person who had the vision was trying desperately to write down what he

saw. But in the record of the vision he never gave us his name. In fact, if we remove verses 2–3 we do not find out who this person is until chapter 24. There, in relaying the interpretation of one of the prophecies the Lord had just given to the prophet, God addresses Ezekiel’s audience: “Ezekiel will be a portent for you. Just as he has done, so you will do when it comes. Then you will know that I am the Lord YHWH.”

It looks like the final inspired author of the book has added verses 2–3 to clarify a couple of questions regarding verse 1: Who is this “I” that’s talking? And what does he mean by “in the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month”? Thirtieth year of what? Both questions are answered in verses 2–3. The fifth day of the fourth month of the thirtieth year corresponds to “the fifth day of the [fourth] month in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin’s exile.” Thanks to texts and other evidence that archaeologists have found in the sands of Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), we can date this moment precisely: July 31, 593 BC. One of the distinctive features of the book of Ezekiel is the prophet’s habit of dating his prophecies (1:1, 2; 3:22–27; 8:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1; 29:17; 30:30; 31:1; 32:1; 32:17; 33:21; 40:1). But what do we learn about the prophet in verses 1–3?

First, we learn the identity of the “I” in verse 1. His name is Ezekiel, which means “May God strengthen/toughen.” As we work through this book, we will see that God certainly answers the prayer of this man’s parents. He is the son of a certain Buzi, about whom we know nothing, except that he was of the priestly lineage. In this context, it is not clear whether the expression “the priest” applies to Buzi or to

Ezekiel. It probably applies to both, for the priesthood was a hereditary office. In any case, as we proceed we see a priestly stamp to the book on nearly every page.

Second, these verses introduce us to the timing of Ezekiel's first vision, "the fifth day of the fourth month of the thirtieth year." But thirtieth year of what? Generally, in ancient times significant dates were fixed according to the accession year of a king. We know from verse 3 that this is July 31, 593 BC, and if we count backward thirty years that gets us to 523 BC. This was Josiah's 26th year, but as far as we know, nothing that significant happened that year. It was certainly too late to be linked to the discovery of the Torah in the temple and Josiah's renewal of the covenant (2 Kgs 22–23:3), which happened in the good king's eighteenth year (2 Kgs 22:3). The most likely suggestion connects this thirtieth year with Numbers 4:30, which states that priests were formally ordained and inducted into their sacred office in their thirtieth year.

It seems that in Ezekiel's thirtieth year, the exiled prophet was brooding on the banks of the Chebar canal and lamenting the fact that he could not be home in Jerusalem for his ordination. Far removed from the temple, the privilege of priestly service must have seemed like a hopeless dream. But YHWH had not forgotten him! Suddenly, on the fifth day of the fourth month of his thirtieth year, at a time when he would normally have been commissioned for temple service, God broke into his life and called him to an alternative, indeed even higher service. As we will see in chapters 1–3 this more than a call to prophetic service; this was the moment of

Ezekiel's ordination to the priesthood, and YHWH's authorization of him to function as priest to the exiles in Babylon.

Third, this introduction informs us that Ezekiel was the divinely chosen recipient of supernatural revelation, that came in three forms: in visions, in words, and in God's strong hand upon him. We already noted what this last expression says about God, but we also need to comment on what it will mean for Ezekiel. Many scholars have thought that Ezekiel was nuts. Indeed, no Israelite prophet has been the subject of so much psychoanalytical and psychiatric study as Ezekiel. Prophets were known often to act and speak erratically for rhetorical purposes, but the concentration of so many bizarre features in one individual leaves Ezekiel in a class of his own: his muteness, lying bound and naked, digging holes in the walls of houses, emotional paralysis in the face of his wife's death, "spiritual" travels, images of strange creatures, of eyes, and creeping things, hearing voices and the sounds of water, his withdrawal symptoms, fascination with feces and blood, wild literary imagination, pornographic imagery, his unreal if not surreal understanding of Israel's past, and the list goes on.

There is no denying the uniqueness of Ezekiel's style of ministry. But his prophetic experiences, symbolic actions, and oracular pronouncements derive from encounters with God that have affected his entire being. Here was a man totally possessed by the spirit of YHWH, called, equipped, and gripped by the hand of God. Ezekiel was a "a sign, portent" (*mōpēt*, 12:6, 11; 24:24, 27), who in his body carried

the oracles he proclaimed. Here “The medium was the message.” But as we will see, Ezekiel also proved to be a profound theologian, exposing the delusions of his audience, and reintroducing them to the God of Israel.

Ezekiel’s Audience

If YHWH was the divine Director and Script writer of this drama, and Ezekiel was the protagonist, then who was the **antagonist**? We learn the answer to this question from verse 1 as well: “In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, while I was among the *exiles* by the Chebar canal, the skies opened up and I saw a divine vision.” Who were these exiles, among whom Ezekiel was living? For the answer to this question we turn to 2 Kings 24:8–17:

⁸ Jehoiachin [son of Jehoiakim] was eighteen years old when he became king, and he reigned three months in Jerusalem. His mother’s name was Nehushta the daughter of Elnathan of Jerusalem. ⁹ And he did the evil in the sight of YHWH, according to all that his father had done.

¹⁰ At that time the servants of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up to Jerusalem, and the city was besieged. ¹¹ And Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to the city while his servants were besieging it, ¹² and Jehoiachin the king of Judah gave himself up to the king of Babylon, himself and his mother and his servants and his officials and his palace officials. The king of Babylon took him prisoner in the eighth year of his reign ¹³ and carried off all the treasures of the house of YHWH and the treasures of the king’s house and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold in the temple of YHWH, which Solomon king of Israel had made, as YHWH had predicted. ¹⁴ He deported all Jerusalem, that is, all the officials and all the mighty men of valor, 10,000 captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths. None remained, except the poorest people of the land. ¹⁵ And he deported carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon. The king’s mother, the king’s wives, his officials, and

the chief men of the land he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. ¹⁶ And the king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valor, 7,000, and the craftsmen and the metal workers, 1,000, all of them strong and fit for war.

¹⁷ And the king of Babylon made Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, king in his place, and changed his name to Zedekiah.

Ezekiel was one of these 10,000 whom Nebuchadnezzar settled near the city of Nippur by the Chebar Canal in Babylon. Obviously neither Jehoiachin nor Ezekiel nor the rest of the Judean exiles chose to be here. On the contrary, they wished desperately that they were back home in Jerusalem. In the drama, these exiles will be Ezekiel's primary audience, but to us, who hear the book and who watch the drama, they are also on the stage as active participants in the plot.

Whoever added the third-person note of verses 2–3 recognized the significance of the exile as a major turning point in the history of the nation generally, and in the history of the Davidic dynasty particularly. We know from this comment that the point of reference for the date of Ezekiel's call to ministry is the exile of Jehoiachin—which was also the date of the prophet's own exile. The form of marking this date is extraordinary. As I noted earlier, dates were normally fixed according to the year of a king's accession, which means that the reference should have been to Zedekiah, the king who succeeded him—that is, “in the fifth year of Zedekiah's reign.”

But the note is remarkable for a second reason: Jehoiachin was a minor figure in Judah's history. Nebuchadnezzar installed him as a vassal king in Jerusalem, but

three months later he proved a disloyal vassal, not only to YHWH (he did evil in his eyes, 2 Kgs 24:9), but also to the Babylonian overlord. After Jehoiakim's insubordination in 609–598 BC, Nebuchadnezzar's fuse was short. In the fall, Nebuchadnezzar was back in Jerusalem. He seized Jehoiachin, along with his mother, all his courtiers, and seven thousand craftsmen and warriors and dragged them to Babylon as captives.

However, unlike the Assyrians, who preceded the Babylonians, Nebuchadnezzar's policy regarding the populations of captured kingdoms did not involve scattering these Judean exiles all over his empire. For some undeclared reason, he settled them in one location, near the ancient city of Nippur on the Chebar canal. Although these Judeans had been humiliated as Babylonian captives, they did not fare badly in Babylon. Jehoiachin was held in prison for a while, but eventually he was promoted and ended his life eating at the king's table in the palace (2 Kgs 25:28–30). As for the rest of the exiles, they were taken to the river Chebar and allotted property as a community. From the book of Ezekiel, we learn that the community was led by a group of elders, and they were free to come and go, and to practice their faith—such as it was—with great freedom. And by the time Cyrus issued the decree saying the Judean exiles could return to Jerusalem sixty years later, they were doing so well that only a minority returned (Ezra 1–2).

In the end, for the exiles, Ezekiel's audience, the theological crisis created by this event in 598 BC was much more serious than the economic or social stress. And

the crisis would intensify, reaching a climax in 586, when Nebuchadnezzar's forces entered the city one last time, killed the last king (Zedekiah), slaughtered the population, and burned the temple and royal palace complexes.

According to the official theology of the nation this was never supposed to happen. In fact, the closer Nebuchadnezzar's armies came the more the people clung to the promises of YHWH that were associated with the covenant that he had established with them. Indeed, the Judeans as a nation had developed a doctrine of their own eternal security that was rooted in four eternal and irrevocable (עֲדָ עוֹלָם) promises of God, which became the four pillars of Israel's Theological Orthodoxy:

1. With Abraham first, and later with his descendants at Mount Sinai, YHWH had entered into a covenant relationship with his people from which there was never to be a divorce.
2. To Abraham, and later to his descendants YHWH had promised eternal and irrevocable title to the promised land of Canaan.
3. In fulfillment of his promise declared twenty-one times in Deuteronomy, YHWH chose Zion/Jerusalem as his eternal residence, and from here he promised to lavish his blessings and from here he exercised sovereignty over Israel (Ps 132:13–18).
4. In 2 Samuel 7 YHWH had promised David and his descendants eternal and irrevocable title to the throne of Israel.

Since these promises were all characterized as eternal, the people assumed they were

also unconditional. Even as their devotion to YHWH and their personal ethics were spiraling downward, they claimed that these covenant promises guaranteed them eternal protection. The God of Israel would never allow Nebuchadnezzar to take over the land. YHWH would never allow them to deport the population. YHWH would never allow these pagans to enter his sanctuary. And YHWH would never allow anyone to remove a descendant of David from the throne. And the closer Nebuchadnezzar came, the louder they sang,

Ev'ry promise in the book is mine;
Ev'ry chapter, ev'ry verse, ev'ry line;
all the blessings of his love divine;
Ev'ry promise in the book is mine! Mine! Mine!

However, in their minds at the critical moment in 598–597 BC YHWH had betrayed his people. He had not protected them from these evil barbarians. He had let Nebuchadnezzar's armies march into the city and drag these ten thousand people off into exile. We cannot understand Ezekiel, or the book, or the picture of God that the book paints without grasping the theology to which the Judeans were committed.

This was the world that YHWH invaded on July 31, in the fifth year of Jehoiachin's exile. And this was the world to which he would call Ezekiel to minister. Surely these notions about YHWH's concern for his people—or lack thereof—were swirling around in Ezekiel's head out there on the banks of the Chebar Canal on the day that he, mesmerized by the sights and sounds of the storm cloud in the north, saw the heavens open and reveal to him YHWH, the God of Israel, enthroned in all

his glory. I can just imagine his reaction: “What are you doing here, in Babylon? Should you not be at home in Jerusalem? And where were you five years ago when we needed you?”

Theological Significance and Practical Implications

On the surface, the language of the first three verses of Ezekiel is not very impressive theologically, but when we scratch beneath the technical surface we discover a text profound in its theology and demanding in its claims.

First, with the sketchiest of brushstrokes it paints a picture of a people for whom the world as they knew it—and the world as their theology told them it must be—was about to unravel completely. These people were not in Babylon for a vacation. They had been dragged there against their will, and now had to figure out how and why this could happen. Perhaps that describes your situation, or the situation of someone dear to you. The world you used to live in was governed by certain immutable laws, but somehow those laws do not seem to be operative. Chaos and bewilderment have taken over. Then where do you turn for aid? The psalmist knew something about this. In Psalm 22 we hear the cry of a saint of ancient Israel:

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,
from the words of my groaning?

² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.

³ Yet you are holy,

enthroned on the praises of Israel.

⁴ In you our fathers trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.

⁵ To you they cried and were rescued;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

⁶ But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by mankind and despised by the people.

⁷ All who see me mock me;
they make mouths at me;
they wag their heads;

⁸ “He trusts in the LORD;
let him deliver him;
let him rescue him,
for he delights in him!”

⁹ Yet you are he who took me from the womb;
you made me trust you at my mother's breasts.

¹⁰ On you was I cast from my birth,
and from my mother's womb you have been my God.

¹¹ Be not far from me,
for trouble is near, and there is none to help.

¹² Many bulls encompass me;
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;

¹³ they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.

¹⁴ I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;

¹⁵ my strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

¹⁶ For dogs encompass me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet—
¹⁷ I can count all my bones—
they stare and gloat over me;
¹⁸ they divide my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.
¹⁹ But you, O LORD, do not be far off!
O you my help, come quickly to my aid!
²⁰ Deliver my soul from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dog!
²¹ Save me from the mouth of the lion!
You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen. (ESV)

Daniel, Ezekiel's fellow exile along with his three colleagues in the Babylonian court, had been the first to be carried off into exile by Nebuchadnezzar, but he knew what this meant. Unfortunately, within Ezekiel's own lifetime we find no hint that anyone in his audience ever came to the brilliantly confident note of the psalmist, who, in the rest of the psalm, praises God for the deliverance he provided, and declared that even against all appearance, the kingship belongs to YHWH! (v. 28). And then, when we turn the page to Psalm 23, we discover the basis of the psalmist's confidence:

The Lord is my shepherd;
I have what I need.
² He lets me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside quiet waters.
³ He renews my life;
he leads me along the right paths for his name's sake.

⁴ Even when I go through the darkest valley,
I fear no danger,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

This does not mean that God always answers the “Why me?” questions, but to those who look to him, he will answer the “Who” question. YHWH, not the gods of Canaan or the gods of Babylon is my shepherd. Is he yours?

In 1974 my brother lost his wife in a tragic automobile accident, leaving him a widower with three little children. After the accident, my parents went to live with what remained of this family for several months to help them through their grief. Some years later, I asked my brother what Dad had said when he and Mom got off the plane in Kitimat, British Columbia. I shall never forget his answer: “Dad didn’t really say much except, ‘I am here to be with you. I have conducted dozens of funerals (Our father was a minister), but I have never lost my wife. I don’t know what to say, except that I am here to be with you.’”

Is that not what pastoral ministry involves? Walking with the flock through the darkest of valleys. This is the kind of shepherd the Lord will be to Ezekiel, and this is the kind of shepherd he is to us.

Second, God sometimes abandons human beings, even those who claim to be his people. You will hear much more about this in the coming weeks. Sometimes the explanations we hear from God will be comforting; sometimes they will be brutally painful. It depends on which side of the covenant equation we are.

Third, in contrast to the gods of wood and stone and precious metals that the pagans worshiped, YHWH, the God of Israel, is indeed present, and he speaks to his people. He was present in the pillar of fire and cloud to the generation that came out of Egypt; Isaiah saw him in the temple, and his hand was present throughout Israel's history, but no manifestation of his presence surpasses "Immanuel," God is with us!" Or in John's brilliant version:

"The word became flesh and dwelt among us and we observed his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . And of his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the Torah was given through Moses, but grace and truth happened in Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God who is at his Father's side has made him known." (John 1:14, 16–18).

Earlier John had said, "He came to his own, but his own people refused to receive him, but to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to claim the title, "children of God."

This is the God Ezekiel would be called to serve. This is the God we serve. We do not know what this week will hold for us, but we know who holds the week, and who holds us strongly in his hand.