

## WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS! EZEKIEL 1

“Wheels within wheels” – the phrase is used to describe something complicated, convoluted; the situation where there is more going on behind the scenes than we see on the surface; politicians, businessmen, others who are trying to describe that there is more to the situation than meets the eye will tap the side of their nose knowingly and say “ah, wheels within wheels!” and there is no more left to say. Here’s the original wheels within wheels: it comes in this extraordinary vision of God that Ezekiel sees and there is certainly more to this than meets the eye. It begins as a storm thundering across the plain of Babylon and end with the picture of a glorious throne on which God is sitting. It is a fascinating, exciting picture; I have deliberately put no picture on the screen for these wheels within wheels because I want to leave it to your imagination as to what this must look like; read it again and see it in your mind’s eye and imagine what it must have looked like and imagine how Ezekiel must have felt seeing this.

He is sitting beside the Kebar canal, part of great Euphrates river in Babylon (Iraq). It was his 30th birthday but he wasn’t celebrating. 5 years before, he had been dragged away from Jerusalem to come to Babylon to live in exile, dragged away by the armies of king Nebuchadnezzar. 5 long years living in exile, away from home and living in a foreign country, away from the temple as the place to worship and feeling that God had been defeated; full of questions, doubts, despair. He was born to be a priest in the Jerusalem temple; his 30th birthday would have been the day when he would be allowed to take up his priesthood, but here he is, sitting beside the canal in Babylon, light years away from the temple, his ambitions thwarted. Little wonder that, with the other exile, they feel this way: *“By the...” (Ps 137:1,4)*

Then he sees what looks like a great windstorm sweeping across the plain, with cloud and lightning, but he very quickly realises that this is no ordinary windstorm, but there is more going on here that he realises. He sees what becomes an extraordinary vision of the glory and majesty and power of God. It begins with 4 living creatures that look human, but each has 4 faces: a human face, a face of a lion, an ox, an eagle. Ezekiel has seen these creatures before: in Babylon these are the attendants of the local gods, but in Babylon they are stone statues; here they are living, moving creatures, attending the living God. Then there are the wheels, with other wheels inside and cutting across, wheels of a great, glorious chariot and because of the wheels within wheels this chariot can move in any direction, pulled, pushed and moved by the living creatures. Finally he sees a throne of sapphire and on the throne *“was a...” (1:26)* In the end, he says *“This was...” (1:28)* The vision was far more convoluted than that short summary, but we take it apart at our peril; it was not meant to be analysed in detail; we are meant to take in the whole big picture that Ezekiel paints, take it all in, imagine it in your mind’s eye.

This vision of God did 2 things to Ezekiel: 1) he was awestruck: *“I fell...” (1:28)* He couldn’t speak for a week; he was so overwhelmed by this vision that he was struck dumb, even scared witless by what he saw. Such was the glory of this vision of God, His power, majesty, awesomeness that he simply couldn’t speak; he was completely overwhelmed. 2) this was part of God’s call to turn him into a prophet: he’d been training all his life to be priest and on the day when that was denied him, God called Ezekiel to a different work, to be prophet, to tell people what he saw: *“I saw... the word...” (1:1,3)* He had to tell others and we’ll see later how painful that became for Ezekiel as he took word of Lord to people he’d grown up with, suffered with, despaired with, questioned with.

**God is awesomely big** – the picture of God that Ezekiel paints, this is not a God you want to hug! This is not a cuddly, indulgent God. This is a huge, magnificent, glorious God, a cosmic God who is far greater than we know. All the imagery suggests that: the 4 creatures that attend God are greatest of their kind: the lion, the eagle, the bull, the human being are all top of the heap as far as the world's creatures are concerned in all kinds of different ways and the fact that these great creatures are God's attendants suggests that this God is great. The vision is full of fire: fire so often stands for judgement, this is a God who is not to be trifled with, who is not to be mocked, but God who strikes a sense of awe and reverence in the hearts of people who see Him and know Him. There was a feeling amongst the Jews that because Nebuchadnezzar had beaten them in battle and they were now his prisoners, that gods of Babylon must be greater than the living God, that the gods of Babylon had defeated the living God, that somehow the living God was weaker, smaller, defeated, beaten; this vision is given to remind the Jews just how big, great, and awesome God is. The throne tells us that God is still King, that God is still in charge of events and He is not beaten.

I wonder how we react to this notion of God. We read this kind of passage and then we have questions – 'what does this mean? What does that mean? But surely you can't believe...?' and we tear it apart and dissect it in order to try to understand every last detail. It's as if we always want to have the last word on a passage like this. What we really should do, is sit and drink in its picture of God, be amazed by it, be awestruck, be silent before God and not question and not argue, but for the rest of the day let the picture persuade us of the greatness, the bigness, the hugeness of God. Have we lost that? I read something the other day that compared church buildings that are being built now with the great cathedrals of the past and how these new buildings are low, that we now build low-roofed churches compared to the huge high cathedrals that reached to sky; the writer suggested that we have brought the sky down and his whole point was that we have lost the imagination to see the bigness, the hugeness of God, the 'transcendence' of God.

**God is relentless** – The 4 creatures and the chariot of wheels within wheels is always on the move. "*When the...*" (1:19f) It is a picture of constant movement, as if God is saying to His people "do you think there is nothing happening for you? Look at the movement, look at the wheels, look at the ceaseless activity of God on your behalf." (James Philip) Perhaps Ezekiel had complained that everything was dreadful for Israel and that God was doing nothing to rescue His people! What Ezekiel had to come to terms with and the message he had to pass on to his people was this: God is relentless in the work He is doing, but that work is not yet rescue; first of all it is judgement; so that Israel is in exile, not because God was defeated, but because God is working out His purpose of judgment on His people through Nebuchadnezzar.

If God is relentlessly at work, then why is the Church in the doldrums? Some people have done some thinking and writing about parallels between the Church of today and Israel in exile and suggest that the Church has to face up to its loss of influence and prestige and standing in society in the same way as Israel had to face up to its loss of the land and its independence. Is the Church in decline because God has gone away? Is the Church in decline because God has been defeated by other powers, by the gods of our society? No! God is still at work in His Church; God is still building His Church, God is still drawing people to faith in Jesus Christ; He has not gone away, He is not defeated; He is relentlessly working out His plan and purpose for His Church. We may not know what end-result will be, but God is still at work in his Church. We can share Paul's confidence "*That he...*" (Phil 1:6) This is true of you and me, it is true of the Church here and across world. Our God is a relentless God.

**God is there!** – In exile, prisoners in foreign land, not free to go home, having to live in a strange culture, eat strange food, be surrounded by a language they didn't understand, by customs they didn't like, by a religion that was anathema to them, away from the temple and worship, and all the reassuring, familiar things of Israel. Ezekiel was born to be a priest, but that is not going to happen, he is disappointed, his hopes and ambitions are dashed. Every other Jew in Babylon would feel the same sense of abandonment; God is very, very distant! It is not hard to share some of that sense: we see the Church in the doldrums and we wonder where God is; we face hard things in life, disappointments, our hopes are dashed, and God seems very far away. We look at the society in which we live and we live in a culture that we don't really understand, people around us don't share the same set of values and we wonder where God is; He seems very, very distant!

*"While I..." (1:1)* This overwhelming vision of the windstorm that becomes a chariot that becomes a throne tells Ezekiel that God is there! God is on the plains of Babylon; God is beside the canals of the Euphrates; God is amongst people who are mourning, questioning, and wondering; God is with His people as they sit and weep; God is there! He has not abandoned His people to their fate; He is there with them, in midst of the exile. In a strange land, in hard circumstances, in all their emotions – God is there. Jesus took that a stage further: for 33 years God was in the world in human flesh and blood. What do you think Jesus experienced? Some kind of sanitised life suitable for the Son of God? No, He experienced every human emotion, He was completely human; in a very real sense, when Jesus came, the living God of the universe was here!

Because of Jesus, God is still here with us. We say that easily about Church and worship, but we can say that about every part of our experience of life: He is there when we cry because a loved one has died; he is there when we're frustrated because Church not what we want it to be; He is there when we struggle because life is hard, a loved one is ill and we have to help them and that is demanding; he is there when we're bullied at school and frightened to go to school in the morning; He is there when we tell a friend about Jesus and our Christian faith and they laugh at us; and so on and so on. God is there in every part of our life experience, watching over us, helping us, bringing grace and peace to our hearts and minds, challenging us to be people He wants us to be.

God is awesomely big; God is relentless; God is there! Ezekiel was struck dumb for a week! There is a time to be silent before such a God is this, when we can do nothing but admire, and be awestruck; when was the last time you were awestruck by the sheer bigness of God? – perhaps today is the first time! Don't rush away! There is a time to believe: this is our God, trust Him; He is about His business and knows what he's doing – trust Him. There is a time to be reassured that God is there – we may not want to hug this God, but nonetheless God is for us, He is there in all the times of our lives, there to bring grace and peace, strength and help, there to challenge us to be best we can be! Here is your God; at the very least, before you leave say thank you to God that He is awesomely big, that He is relentless and that He is there.