

(Men Who Met God): Ezekiel - You Must Meet God

by A.W. Tozer

God meets men in their despondency and dejection, stripping them of their earthly dependencies and making them look to Him.

Duration: 41:06

Scripture: Ezekiel 1:1

Topics: "Ezekiel"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of meeting God through Jesus Christ. He highlights that the Lamb of God, Jesus, has taken away the sins of the world and died for the unjust, bringing us closer to God. The preacher also emphasizes the missionary imperative of sharing this message with others. He encourages the congregation to reject self-help and rely on the grace of God for salvation. The sermon references the book of Ezekiel and emphasizes the clarity and significance of encounters with God.

Transcript

This will be the last in the series which I've been giving on the lives of great Christians or great believers. Now I'd like to have you offer, let me offer a word. Dear Lord Jesus, we're gathered to thee.

We're not gathered to man, no matter how good man may be. We're gathered to thee. We minister unto thee.

We trust in thee, O Christ, risen from the dead, alive at the Father's right hand forevermore. Death hath no more dominion over thee. God hath put all power in thy hands and has made thee head over all things.

Exercise thy great power tonight. Take the words which thou didst thyself inspire, for thou art the word, and thou didst inspire the word. And make the word to live tonight, the ancient word that has outlasted empires and kingdoms and nations and peoples, and is still shining in its glory tonight.

We pray that thou would make us worthy to hear thee speak, and help me to speak as from thee. Amen. I'm to speak tonight on the prophet Ezekiel, the first three verses of his book.

Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the river of Kebar, that the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. In the fifth day of the month, which was the fifth year of King Jehoiakim's captivity, the word of the Lord came expressly unto Ezekiel the priest, son of Juzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river of Kebar. And the hand of the Lord was there upon him.

He speaks in the first person in verse one, and in the second or third person in verses two and three. And he says, the heavens were opened, that's one. I saw visions of God, that's two.

The word of the Lord came expressly unto me, that's three. And the hand of the Lord was there upon me, and that's four. Now, I want you to notice about this man Ezekiel something that is true here, and it's also true throughout the entire Bible.

And that is the explicit clarity of the encounter that the man had with God. He didn't forget either the year, nor the month, nor the day. And I think if you'd oppressed him, he could have told you what time of the day.

For it was the thirtieth year, the fourth month, and the fifth day. And so this encounter with God was clear to the point of being sharply photographically clear. And there are three things that are always the same with men who meet God.

Now, testimonies are a wonderful thing, and I like them, but I'm cautious about testifying very much about my own personal experiences for the reason that I do not want people to copy or try to copy anything that God has done for or given to me. For the reason that there are details in Christian experience that vary with the personalities. Some people, when they are deeply moved upon, break into laughter.

Others, when they're deeply moved, break into tears. We had an elder, he's still there in our church in Chicago where I was so long, and he would stand up to testify and promptly begin to cry, and that's about all there was to it. He just cried.

He wasn't a weakling at all. He was a good, strong man and worked. He had to be strong to work where he did in the stockyards.

But he was nevertheless that kind of man, and he just wept. And everybody got help. It wasn't what he said, but it was the fact that he couldn't say it that helped people.

And other people, I've heard some people break out in happy laughter, and others are quiet. So let us not try to make cookie-cutter Christians. I don't believe in that.

I think that it is always a tragic thing when we try to be exactly like each other. But there are certain major elements in Christian experience that are always the same. I ask you to notice the three here, and they go back to all of those men about whom I've spoken, being six or eight of them.

The first thing is that they all have a sense of God. There's always a sense of God in the man who meets God. That would be logical to think it, and it is true.

And a sense of what I've called the holy, that overshadowing, overarching mystery which fills the universe, and which is here but which not many people in these busy days stop to think about. But these great souls always had a sense of God. This was what they wanted to talk about.

I'm always suspicious when we talk too much about ourselves. Somebody pointed out that hymnody took a downward trend when we left the great objective hymns that talked about God and began to sing the gospel songs that talk about us. There was a day when men sang, holy, holy, holy, and oh, worship the King, and they talked objectively about the greatness of God.

Then we backslid into that gutter where we still are, where everything is about I. I'm so happy, I'm so blessed, I'm so nice, I'm so good, I'm I, I always I. Well, the difference between heaven and hell is the difference between God and I. Keep that in mind always. Jesus Christ, by canceling out his I, was the Christ of God, not as I will, but as thou wilt. The devil, by magnifying his I, became the devil.

When he said, I will arise, I will raise my throne above the throne of God, I will, he became the devil. When Jesus said, not I will, but thy will, he became the Christ of God, or at least worthy to be under God, the one who finally redeemed the world. So keep that in mind, that when real Christian experience gives us a great sense of God being there, and we live and move and have our being in God consciously so.

The second thing is that the details of the experience are always sharp and clear to the individual. They might differ between you and me, or you and somebody else, or me and somebody else, but they're always clear to the person who experiences it. I am always worried a little when I talk to people that can't give me any details, they can't tell me anything clear.

They hope and they think and they believe and it's possible and all that, but there's nothing clear. But where a man meets God through the gospel, there is a sharpness of clarity of detail. And the third thing is that though brief, its effects are life lasting.

They're as long as a man lives, like the flash of a photograph, a flash of light on a photographic plate or film. It doesn't take very long, only a split part of a second for the light to do its work. But if you fix that film properly, or that plate, it will last for perhaps centuries, or at least for hundreds, for tens of decades, or scores of years, because what the light did in that sudden, instantaneous, brief flash lasts for a long time.

And so when an apostle meets God on Damascus Road, he never meets him like that again, but it so changed a man's life that it printed the face of Christ on the plate that was inside the heart of the man, Paul. And forever and ever after, he had the picture of Jesus inside of his heart. But it didn't take long, it was never repeated.

And I say that these are the three things then that characterize anybody, anywhere, that meets God. All of them have had a strong sense of God and the Holy, and all of them have had detailed experience, it was very clear to them, and all of them have had a brief experience that lasted for a lifetime. Now, that was true of Jonathan Edwards' encounter in the woods, you'll remember, and I might mention many others, but I shan't tonight.

But in our time, the textualism, I want you to get that word, I think I invented it, I don't know, or borrowed it from somewhere and forgot. The textualism, do you know what it is? Textualism is the magnification of the text and the forgetting of the God who wrote the text. It is putting the Bible before God.

It's holding the Bible up so you can't see the light. You only see the book, but you don't see the God of the book. And we got so much of that textualism, I find it almost everywhere I go, it's deplorable.

The nature of the Bible is misunderstood. This morning I preached about the Bible, you know my love for the Bible and my utter and complete confidence in the Bible. But the Bible was given for a reason, and

when we use it for something that it wasn't given for, it becomes blindness to us.

And this misunderstanding of the nature of the Bible, instead of leading us to God, then the Bible simply becomes a substitute for God, and that isn't good. And there's no explicit clarity of encounter. The Bible should lead us to meet God through the gospel, through Jesus Christ, in a clear, sharp encounter that burns itself on our hearts forever and ever and ever.

Now he says here, I was among the captives by the river of Kebar. As for Ezekiel, all hope was gone. You see, this was the captivity.

They had just been taken captive and carried down into Babylon, and this man Ezekiel was one of the displaced persons. That's the word we'd use now. They'd literally been uprooted as a nation and had been taken into Babylon, and they're dumped down where they stayed for 70 years.

And here was a man, a young priest, and he should have been back in Jerusalem ministering in the temple there, and his people should have been back there, for that was the land where they belonged. But they were taken out as though the population of Canada were suddenly to be uprooted and put in ships and sent down in the middle of Siberia. Well, that's exactly how they felt about it.

The whole population of Israel was picked up and plumped down in Babylon, the foreign people. And they mourned and they said, why would you demand of us a song in a strange land? They hung their harp on the willow and they could not sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land. They were a depressed people.

Old men and old ladies and young mothers carrying their babes in their arms, and little half-grown children trudging along, and strong men in bonds, all carried down into Babylon and put to work down there. And Ezekiel was one of them. And somehow he got over by the river Tebar and was sitting there by the river.

I don't suppose that you could have found anywhere in human history a more dejected man than this priestish young Ezekiel was. Human hope was about all gone. There he sat in complete despondency, an expatriate, someone uprooted from his own land, his job, his work, his calling gone out from under him.

No temple, no altar, no sacrifice, no taunting of the hymns, no slinging of the censer, but only surrounded by his enemies and men whose language he did not understand. And the book of Ezekiel came out of such an experience as this, such an experience of being stripped down and uprooted and everything he loved taken away from him. And thus the book of Ezekiel was quite literally squeezed out of the blood of the man.

He did not write it in an upstairs room overlooking a beautiful scene. Somewhere he wrote it in the depths of despondency and gloom. Now this is the way of God with men.

Always this is the way of God with men. This, this cheap religion that passes for Christianity in our day, that makes Christianity to consist of a bit of poetry and a note, a bit of a few flowers and a kindly smile and a deed done for your brother. That's the Christianity of the day.

And I don't know, I'd like to turn loose sometime on it, re-let myself go, but I'd probably have to repent for some of the things I said, because while they'd be true, I shouldn't have been saying them. Because there are some things you ought not even to say about the devil, you know. Not even Michael the archangel dared say anything nasty about the devil.

He had to say, let God handle you, the Lord rebuke you, and he dismissed him. So this Christianity that we have in nowadays, that passes for the Christianity of the Bible, the faith of our fathers is living still in spite of dungeon, fire, and sword. I don't know anything, I don't know how it's possible to use language strong enough for its condemnation, because it isn't of the truth.

Here's the truth. Here's the way God meets men. Here was a man sitting in utter dejection by the King Bar, all his hope was gone, the light had gone out in his heart, and there wasn't anything left.

But now we don't want that. We don't want the plow, we want the harvest. We don't want the night, we want the morning.

We don't want the cross, we want the crown. The Lord says, Thomas Acampus hath many lovers of his crown, but few lovers of his cross. We don't want the betaine, but we want the baby.

We don't want to have to do the work of plowing, but we want to reap the harvest. And we are getting every kind of cross cut in order to get something for nothing in the kingdom of God. You can't do it, brother.

Now don't anybody flare up and say, isn't grace something for nothing? Oh yes, but some have used grace and have made a god out of their belly and turned the grace of God into lasciviousness. They don't know what the word grace means. Grace doesn't mean that salvation is not a costly thing.

It simply means that God, out of God's full goodness, he gives it to us, though we are unworthy of it. But he said, take your cross and follow me, and it always costs to carry a cross. There is a difference between cheap grace and tough, hard, costly grace.

A great man of God by the name of Bonhoeffer wrote a book called The Cost of Discipleship. It's getting quite popular now, and I'm glad, because he was hanged by Hitler. He wouldn't let Hitler push him around, and he preached the gospel and went back to Germany to take care of his flock, even knowing that he would die.

And the time came, he was still in his thirties, and they took him out, put a rope around his neck and hanged the man of God. But before he went, he wrote some books, and one of them was this one, and in it he makes a distinction between cheap and costly grace. And he says it's costly grace because it costs us everything, but it's free grace because it's given freely by God to a people that don't deserve it.

There's a distinction. Our fathers knew the distinction, but their poor, degenerate sons don't seem to know it. And as soon as you talk about the grace of salvation being a costly way to live, Christian life being a costly way to live, and salvation being costly, people say, oh, you're preaching legalism, you're a legalist, and they dismiss you with a wave of their hand.

But I'm hard to dismiss, I'm telling you that. I've been at it now too long, and the fellow can dismiss me, but I don't stay dismissed. I'll be back the next week saying something on the same order.

Now, incidentally, I've never been thrown out of very many places. I've not been invited back some places. But that's the greatest compliment you can pay a man, it's certain people not to invite him back.

Well, now, I notice here that this man of God, he was despondent and down, and it was then, it was then, in that place of dejection and being stripped down and everything taken from him, and he had nowhere to

look and nowhere to lean. Oh, we're a tricky crowd, we humans. We're a tricky crowd, and if we can find anything human to lean on it, we'll lean on it.

And if we can find anything earthly to lean on, we'll lean on it. And if we can find anybody to help us short of God, we'll hunt everywhere, and God is usually the last one that's asked. Once in a while when I get an invitation, I'm suspicious that I was the last one asked.

I remember one time a fellow called me long distance, and he said, he said, we'd like to have you come up to such and such a conference, and he named the date. It wasn't too far in the future at the time, and I said, I don't think I can come. No, I can't come, I'm sorry.

Well, he said, could you recommend anybody? And he said, yes. I said, yes, I'd recommend Vance Hefner. He said, we've asked him.

And he said, could you recommend anybody else? And I said, yes, Dr. Alan Redpath. He said, we've asked him. So I knew that I was at least number three.

I didn't know, but I might have been number six or eight or ten. But I don't mind that, because you can get away with that easily enough. But there's one thing we can't get away with easily, and that is putting God last on the list.

God stands under the everlasting shadow of usually being the last one consulted. When we've tried everything else, then we turn to God. And sometimes without any sense of humor at all showing through, people will get up and testify, I've done everything, and all I can do now is trust God.

It's not funny, and yet it sounds funny, and they don't know how funny it sounds, that God Almighty is the first one we should go to, and he's the last one we go to. So we're a pretty tricky crowd, and that's why God sometimes has to take everything away from us to make us see that he ought to be first. We ought to go to him first, not last.

Now, just when he was in the dumps and doldrums here, I don't worry too much when people come to me and be dejected, and claim to be bothered a little when they're too self-confident, but I'm never bothered when they get too humble. You can't get too humble, brother. I remember hearing a man, he preached this in a church, as I recall, where I shouldn't have heard it, you know, that church didn't have any such truth, but he got in, he leaped into a crack somewhere and was preaching, and he did pretty well, and he said, he said, the church is to be without fault and without wrinkle, and he preached on how to take the wrinkles out of your soul, and he said that there were two ways of getting wrinkles out of things.

He said the way to get a wrinkle out of a sack is to fill it, and so he preached a while on that. He said the way to get a wrinkle out of a rug is to lay it down and walk on it. He said God uses both methods.

He said sometimes he just fills it and takes the wrinkles out, and sometimes he just puts it down and has everybody walk on it. Now, if we could pick the people that walk, it would be different. All these cute little boys and girls around here, I wouldn't mind lying down letting them walk on me.

My daughter, he was up to visit his last, our daughter, I forget if there's anybody else when I talk about her, you know my daughter. She was up, I'd let her walk on me. In fact, I used to when she was smaller.

It all depends on who does the walking, and if I could choose the walkers, I wouldn't feel so bad, but also the wrinkles wouldn't go out. The Lord sends people that you don't want to walk on you, lets them walk on you, people that aren't worthy to untie your shoes, but they don't try to untie your shoes, they walk on you. David said, they've plowed long furrows up my back.

That was an old countryside expression, but it hurts to have furrows plowed up your back, walking around on you with their hobnailed boots. This poor man had it, this man is equal. And it was just then that the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.

So if you're despondent about your spiritual life, and you're inclined to be down a bit about it, don't let the joy boy cheer you up, don't do it. Don't let these tin tuckers that come around and tuck you under the chin and say, all is well, all is well. These tin tuckers with their New Testament, they've done the kingdom of God more harm than communism, by their trying to make people that God had stripped, unstrip them again.

God strips them, waits for them to look up and receive the light. And some tin tucker, enjoyed bell boy, comes around, wants to put a garment on them again, leave them in their nakedness before the great God almighty. And when he clothes them, they'll be clothed with golden garments.

But we try the easy way out, easy way. We write books on how easy it is to be a Christian, and they're all lies. And we preach sermons about how easy it is to be a Christian.

Nobody was ever a Christian for one year, was ready to get up and say, boy, I found it a snap. It's just a snap. It's never a snap to carry across.

And it's never easy to follow the man who was opposed and rejected of men. But there's joy in it. Paul said there was joy even in sorrow.

And Peter said there was joy unspeakable and full of glory. And there are tears, but there's sun that shines on the tears, and as the orator said, it makes the rainbow. But there are tears nevertheless.

And a tearless Christianity is no Christianity at all. Now undoubtedly the world's greatest calamity is not communism, not secularism. The world's greatest calamity is the heaven's closed, the closed heaven.

There are many causes for the closed heaven, many causes. But there's one ominous consequence, and that is men are left to themselves. God meant us to have him, and the heavens are closed, and now we're alone, we're without him.

The world is by itself, and yet men without God nurse a groundless hope, a hope that somehow things will come out all right. But it won't. The promotion cometh neither from the east nor west nor from the north, but it's the Lord that sets up one and pushes down another.

And my help cometh from the Lord that made heaven and earth. Always remember that anything worth having you'll get from God, my friend. Always remember that.

Then he said the heavens are open, and these open heavens are how we need it, and now how we need the open heavens. Take the veil away, take the clouds away. And I saw visions of God.

Men have reasoned God out of his world. What used to be God has now become the laws of nature, hence the universe is empty. And there is an old friend, I think I told you in a previous talk, about how in

India the missionary said they would go to the trees and to the rocks, and would catch them gently in reverency and whisper, are you there, are you there? Hoping that a God might be present in the tree or in the rock.

No man taps anything much in our time. We're too well satisfied with what we have, satisfied with our superior standard of living, satisfied with our advanced technological knowledge. It enables us to put a spy in the sky, satisfied with our ability to get in a big machine and go 500 miles an hour.

And I did it. The other day out on the west coast, back when I drove a horse and buggy, if anybody told me that I'd ever ride 525 miles an hour, I'd have thought that he needed to be caged up somewhere until he cooled off. But I did it.

We're satisfied with that kind of thing. Making advances, always we're making advances. We have antibiotics now and geriatric pills for older people so they'll get older.

And then when they get older we don't know what to do with them. Throw them out of work when they're 60. And then they go to Florida.

Sit around down there and die. Or they go to some old folks home. There's no place anymore in our cute, neat little houses for old people.

They have to be turned out to pasture somewhere. And here are these poor old folks that 100 years ago they'd all been sleeping peacefully under the oak tree. But now they're running around with nobody to love them, nobody to appreciate them, nothing to do and nowhere to go.

And we call that advance. If we were as smart as we think we are, we'd not only make them live longer but we'd make them happy until they've died and give them something to do and respect them and love them and ask them questions occasionally. But you don't ask anybody questions after he's 65 anymore.

He's supposed to be indulged. And I haven't reached that so don't look at me, it isn't sour grapes. But it's a lonely world we're in, a lonely world.

Somebody's written a book called The Lonely Crowd. You know the loneliest place in the world? Staten Madison in Chicago or Times Square in New York. Men to the right of you, men to the left of you, men to the back of you, men and women in front of you.

And yet you can stand there a complete loneliness. It's not the presence of others that cures loneliness, it's the presence of God. I think it was, yes it was, Ferdinand, he said after he'd become an older man, he said, I can testify that never for 15 minutes since my conversion have I been without a sense of the presence of God.

Never 15 minutes since I was converted, said the great man, have I been without a sense of the presence of God. And when you have God with you, consciously with you, now that he's in you is another matter and we'll deal with that some other time, but I'm thinking tonight about his being with us. And when you have God with you and you're conscious of God being with you, you're conscious of it out on the thruway when you're driving.

You're conscious of it by a kind of reflex when you're working. You're conscious of it all the time, whatever you may be doing. Now these men who met God, Jacob and Moses, that I talked about in Elijah and

Isaiah and now Ezekiel, the world was filled with God.

It was for them a rising of a sun. Now I want to give you four facts, four or five facts. I want you to take them down if you haven't before, I want you to take them down.

This series on men who met God or the whole Bible itself, I think we can convince it into these five. You meet God, that's religion. You meet God, that's religion.

You have an encounter with God. You know God and God knows you. And Paul said, I know God, or rather I'm known of God.

He backed out a little on that one when he said, I know God. And then he backed out and said, I'm known of God. But they were both true.

God knows you and you know God. There's an interchange of personality with personality. And it's both true.

You know him, he knows you. That's religion. But you must meet God.

That's the imperative of religion. You must meet God. It isn't simply that you can, it isn't simply that it's a good thing, but you must.

There's an imperative there. And you can meet God and that's the Christian message. You can meet God.

You do not have to travel the world around looking for God and tap on a tree or a rock, seeing if God is there. Don't climb up into heaven to pull God down, to go into depth to bring him up. But the word is right, even in thy mouth, even the word of faith which we preach.

If you believe in Jesus Christ, you can witness to the fact you shall be saved. So you can meet God. And how to meet God, that's the gospel.

The gospel tells us how to meet God. If I were to stop here, that is, if I were to stop two minutes ago, and point out a closed heaven and an orphaned human race and a secularized world and a world without heaven being open, and the fact that a prophet saw God, it might be, it might inspire you a little, but it wouldn't be enough. It's never enough to tell people they ought to meet God.

They must be told they must meet God and how to meet God. And the gospel tells us how to meet God. The gospel tells us that there is a door and only one, and Jesus Christ is that door, and through that door we meet God.

It tells us that God takes, that Christ takes God in one hand and man in the other and brings them together, introduces them, and man is reinstated in the favor and grace of God. It tells us that. It tells us that the Lamb of God taketh away the sins of the world.

It tells us that he died that just for the unjust that he might bring us to God. It tells us that we are saved by faith through grace and that not of works lest any man should boast. And it's at the cross of Jesus and at the open tomb of Jesus and at the throne of Jesus that the people meet God.

We can meet God. I say there might be a fifth and that is the missionary imperative that when we found out all this that we should tell others. Now I close.

I just ask you to do two things. Repudiate self-help. Self-help.

Somebody wrote a book called self-help. All these little books on how to help yourself. They ought all these, I wouldn't burn them, I'd give them to Salvation Army for waste paper and reclaim them and turn them into something worthwhile.

Self-help. Now any doctors here, you know, one thing you have to worry about these patients is they always want to prescribe for themselves. They want to determine what this does.

I've diagnosed my diseases. I've had everything there is. Everything.

Except cervix. Down to the present time, you know. I get something and then I hear about it and read it in a digester somewhere.

I got it. But I never had it. You know, I just think I had it.

And I want to go medicating, you know. Stop by a drugstore and look tensely in as a woman looks. Stop in a hat store and look tense.

Go in and buy a bottle or something. Hope maybe that if I got it, what I'm buying will cure it. But since I don't have it, why I can't cure it.

For years I said I had an ulcer. And I complained to my wife about my ulcer. So finally after years and years of that, I went to a doctor and he sent me to an X-ray.

Stood me up, you know, and fed me a lot of stuff. Stood me up, lay me down, pushed me around. Photographed me from various angles and announced there is absolutely nothing wrong with your stomach.

And I haven't had a pain since. Said there isn't a crack in the wall anywhere. It's a perfectly sound stomach.

And my ulcer left when I hear that I had one left. But I'd been medicating myself. I'd swallowed enough carbonated what? Well, ordinary cow brand soda.

I'd swallowed enough of that, you know, to float a battleship with bubbles and all the rest. But I didn't need it and I was making myself worse. And if my stomach hadn't had more sense than I had, I'd have got an ulcer.

Self-medication isn't good, my brother. It's never good. And when you try to help yourself, I'll fix myself up.

I'll make myself holy. I'll do it. No, you won't, brothers and sisters.

You just won't. For it won't work. You're too dead all self-help.

And when you lift your eyes, you will see a smiling father. And he upraised the hands with nail prints. And God will meet you all the way.

And the Christian life that you can have is so much more wonderful than the Christian life that you do have. That it will be like, as Milton said, a new sun risen on noonday. Father, we pray.

God bless you. These words, thou didst put that in the Bible, Lord. It's written there by thee for our help, upon whom the end of the ages has come.

And we've looked at Ezekiel. And we've looked up and we've seen heaven open. And we thank thee that there are little visions of thee.

And thy word came expressly to Ezekiel. We pray that thy word may come expressly, for faith cometh by hearing the word. May we hear thee speak to us expressly, so that we're nobody else.

May we believe it, obey it, and rise out of our despondency, out of our emptiness and despair, into fullness of joy and brilliance and rich and fruitful Christ. We pray thee for the sinner outside the fold. We pray thee for the doubter standing looking in, but not in.

We pray thee for the backslider who wants no better days. We pray thee for the stubborn who comes to a place now where to see the surrender go back, and they can't decide what to do. Oh God, may they not emulate demons in going back to this place.

May they not turn away from following thee as the rich young ruler did. May they come and surrender and say yes to Jesus. Yes, Lord, forever yes.

We welcome all thy holy will and sweetly answer yes. Yes, Lord, in his holy name, amen.

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