

The Message of Ezekiel

by G. Campbell Morgan

Ezekiel's vision of God revealed the essential facts of the nature of God, filling his heart with hope and making him able to sing the song of coming victory on the darkest day.

Scripture: Psalm 46:1, Isaiah 40:31, Jeremiah 29:11, Ezekiel 1, Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 17:3, Romans 5:1-5, Philippians 3:10, Hebrews 11:1, Revelation 4:6-8

Topics: "Hope in Despair", "Vision of God"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan explores 'The Message of Ezekiel,' emphasizing the profound vision of God that Ezekiel experienced, which reveals God's supremacy, service, manifestation, and mystery. He highlights how Ezekiel's prophetic ministry, influenced by Jeremiah, was marked by a clear vision of hope amidst despair, showcasing the certainty of restoration despite the people's reprobation. Morgan asserts that true understanding of God transcends mere principles and practices, leading to a personal relationship that fosters hope and joy. The sermon concludes with the assertion that knowing God is the source of joy and the foundation for proclaiming judgment and sin. Ultimately, Ezekiel's vision serves as a reminder of God's presence and the promise of victory.

Transcript

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

I. The Vision of God

The embodied Attributes.

The Face of a Lion. Supremacy.

The Face of an Ox. Service.

The Face of a Man. Manifestation.

The Face of an Eagle. Mystery.

The Wheels of Procedure.

The Spirit of Life.

The Atmosphere of flashing Light and Fire.

II. The Bearing on Circumstances

i. These all present in Reprobation and Restoration.

a. Supremacy. The Authority claimed.

b. Service. The Actual Working through Pain.

c. Manifestation; The Ceaseless Purpose. "That I may know Him . . . "

d. Mystery. The Reticence.

Of the first Vision.

Of the last Statement.

"The Lord is there."

ii. Progressively revealed.

a. Supremacy. Judgment.

b. Service.

The Valley of Bones.

The Shepherd.

c. Manifestation. The new Order.

d. Mystery. The last Word.

III. Such a Vision of God the Reason of Hope

In its Light.

Sin was most sinful.

Judgment was most sure.

Victory was most certain.

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. For a comprehensive Outlook It Is necessary to pass beyond Principles and Practice, to the Person.

The Incarnation God's Answer to that Need.

II. Having that Answer we must know the Person

"Acquaint now thyself with Him, and be at peace."

"That ye may know."

III. That Knowledge will produce the Song of Hope

- i. We shall see the Sin.
- ii. We shall proclaim the Judgment.
- iii. We shall rejoice in Hope.

Of the prophet Ezekiel it has been said that "he was the prolongation of the voice of Jeremiah" ; and it is certainly true that no one can study carefully the prophecies of these two men without discovering the influence of Jeremiah upon Ezekiel. It is evident throughout that in his life, in his outlook and in his conceptions Ezekiel had been affected by the prophetic message of Jeremiah. This is perfectly natural when we remember the circumstances in which Ezekiel exercised his ministry. He commenced that ministry in the fifth year of the captivity, and in the verse which chronicles this fact for us in the opening of the book, a reference is made to 'I the thirtieth year.'" It is almost certain that the reference is to his age. He was a priest, and in harmony with the Mosaic economy, at that age he should have entered upon his priestly work ; but there was no temple, and therefore no official work for the priest; and he was called to exercise a prophetic ministry. If, then, that ministry was commenced in the thirtieth year of his age, and the fifth year of the captivity, it is at once evident that during the first twenty-five years of his life, Jeremiah was prophesying. From his earliest childhood, and through the formative and impressionable years of youth and young manhood, he was familiar with the ministry of this lonely man. Familiarity with his prophecy shows that his outlook on the corruption of his people, on the judgments of God, and his vision of light upon the Eastern sky which predicted the dawn of a brighter day, was practically identical with those of Jeremiah. His dealing with prevalent corruption was as severe as was that of Jeremiah, and his messages of judgment were equally stern. He never melted to tears as did Jeremiah, but his vision of the ultimate deliverance of the people by the triumph of Jehovah was even clearer. His vision was characterized by penetration, and perhaps the word through best describes the quality of the prophecy. His messages were addressed, in the first place, to the exiles on the banks of the River Chebar; and yet it is evident that through them he spoke to all Israel. Moreover, he distinctly affirms, in the course of his prophecy, that the application of the truths he enunciated is to all men, so that he not only spoke through the exiles to Israel, but through Israel to men of all nationalities and of all times. He saw the prevailing conditions, the ruin of his people, the obstinacy and rebellion even among the exiles in the midst of whom he lived, but through all these he saw the eternal verities as to their foundations and as to their principles.

It was George Herbert who sang:

"A man that looks on glass,

On it may stay his eye;

Or if he pleaseth through it pass,

And thus the heaven espy."

Ezekiel saw the glass, but he saw through it. Accurately observing the temporal, he as surely perceived beyond it the eternal. He was sensitively conscious of the material, but supremely conscious of the spiritual. In all probability Jeremiah's prophecies of hope were the inspiration of Ezekiel's, but it may be

that the absence of tears and lamentation in the messages of Ezekiel was due to the fact that his vision of God, and His processes, and His ultimate victory was clearer than that of Jeremiah. His recognition of the reprobation of his people was acute, and yet he foretold the certainty of their restoration with a note of profoundest assurance, and an outlook of more spacious sweep than any other prophet of the illustrious line.

The permanent value of the prophecy is that of its revelation of the reason of this man's hope. Jeremiah was not without hope. Moreover, the messages in which he gave expression to his hope were uttered in days when he himself was in prison. Therein is a proof of the strength of his hope. Nevertheless, at other times his messages seem altogether devoid of that element. In the prophecy of Ezekiel the note of hope rings clear and jubilant throughout. We would fain discover the secret of this superabounding and jubilant confidence. The present outlook in some senses is dark enough, and we would fain discover the secret of rejoicing in hope even on the darkest day. It is an arresting fact that a man in more hopeless condition, in some senses, than that in which Jeremiah lived, being himself a captive by the River Chebar, among a band of exiles the most obstinate and rebellious, seeing that his people were reprobate, cast away, was nevertheless full of hope, and of the certainty of ultimate restoration.

The secret is revealed at the beginning of his book. That which filled his heart with hope, and made him able to sing the song of coming victory on the darkest day, was his vision of Jehovah. The peculiar quality of that vision was that of manifestation. At first sight that statement hardly seems as though it could possibly be correct. The first impression made by the account which he gives of the vision he beheld is that of mystery rather than of manifestation. While recognizing the mystery, a quite simple examination of the prophet's description must inevitably leave upon the mind the sense of manifestation. The key-word to the vision is the word likeness. Likeness means that which reveals something else. The root idea of the Hebrew word is comparison. Its suggestion is exactly that of the Greek word which we translate parable. I do not say the root significance is the same, but the suggestion is identical. A parable is something placed by the side of, in order to explanation. It is a picture intended to interpret something, which apart from it might not be clearly understood. That is the key-note to the vision. It was a likeness: a similitude, a parable, a picture. He did not see what no man has seen, but he saw visions of Jehovah in the form of a likeness. It is not necessary for us to describe the visions save in the broadest outline. What Ezekiel saw began on the earth but it did not end there. If for the sake of contemplation we may temporarily forget the stately and wonderful language of Ezekiel and see the vision in barest, almost rudest, outline, we shall be helped to discover the truth it suggested. On the earth the central vision was that of four living ones, surrounded by wheels moving in every direction, the whole existing in an atmosphere, and actuated by an energy which the prophet described as spirit. The vision did not end there. Above the firmament he saw a throne, and on the throne a Man. The things on the earth were the manifestations of that which was above the firmament, and beyond the possibility of comprehension apart from such manifestation. The supreme and central verity upon which Ezekiel looked is to be discovered by examination, not of the wheels which suggest procedure, not of the Spirit which suggests energy, but of the living ones. I do not say that the other things are unnecessary, but it is not our business now to deal with them, and their wonderful and infinite suggestiveness. At the centre were the four living ones, and they constituted a revelation or manifestation of the infinite mystery of the Being Who occupied the throne above the firmament. This vision, and its bearing on the circumstances in the midst of which Ezekiel lived, constituted the reason of his hope. This vision therefore creates the permanent value of the book and its living message.

Let us retrace our steps in order that we may see the relation of this book to those which have preceded it, so far as their permanent values are concerned. The permanent values of Isaiah are its revelation of the throne, and the fundamental principles of government and grace. The permanent values of Jeremiah are its revelation of the activities of Jehovah, His judgment on sin, His suffering for sin, and His victory over sin. The permanent value of Ezekiel is its unveiling of the essential facts in the nature of God.

The central symbolism on the earth was that of the four living creatures, each one of which faced in four directions, each face suggesting a different idea by the differing symbolism of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. Moreover, these four were so placed at the four corners of a square that the face of a man looked every way, the face of a lion looked every way, the face of an ox looked every way, and the face of an eagle looked every way. Thus in the unity of the four the same truths were suggested as in the unity of each. Each had four faces, and the whole square had the same fourfold revelation.

Now we may enquire as to the suggestiveness of this ancient symbolism. It has been affirmed that it was borrowed from Babylon or Nineveh, or from both. Personally I have no quarrel with that contention. The making of an idol on the part of man originated in an attempt, however crude, however base, however mean, to embody thought about Deity. The very highest results of this process were reached in those pagan civilizations outside the economy of Israel ; the highest result, that is, of man's attempt to understand, apart from the light of direct revelation. Here is the difference between all such religions, and that of Israel. The religion of Israel was not the result of man's attempt to understand, but of God's direct revelation. His method of revelation was constantly that of seizing upon an element of truth in a false system, redeeming it, purifying it, and making it a medium of revelation. As another illustration of the principle, the ark of the covenant may be cited. It has been affirmed that Moses was influenced by things he had seen in Egypt, and it is perfectly true that in certain systems of religion in Egypt at the centre of a ritual was an ark ; and thus it is seen that there was an element of truth in the thinking of men. The final difference, however, between the sacred arks of Egypt, and the ark of the covenant, consisted first in what they contained, and secondly and preeminently, in what men were taught concerning them.

This symbolism of Ezekiel's vision may have been Babylonish or Assyrian. Admitting that, let us enquire of what these visions were symbols. For the moment I am perfectly content to enquire of Babylon, or to ask Nineveh, and I shall attempt to state the answer in terms of the abstract. The lion was the symbol of supremacy. The ox was the symbol of service. The man was the symbol of manifestation. The eagle was the symbol of mystery. Supremacy suggested kingship, and the lion was the symbol of the king. Service suggested sacrifice, and the ox was the symbol of the servant. Manifestation suggested the unveiling of life at its best, and man was the symbol of man. Mystery suggested the unfathomable, and the eagle was the symbol of Deity.

It has often been affirmed that Ezekiel was a man saturated with pagan ideas, and that by the River Chebar he passed through a certain psychological experience as the result of which he came to imagine that the familiar symbols he saw engraven on heathen temples were visions of God. There is an element of truth in the statement; the fact being that God took hold of the symbolism in the midst of which His captive people lived, and made use of it for revealing to the prophet the comprehensive truth that in His Being, supremacy and service, manifestation and mystery, are merged in awe-inspiring unity. If in the prophecies of Isaiah we saw the Throne and its fundamental principles, and in those of Jeremiah we discovered the activities of the One Who occupies the throne ; in those of Ezekiel we have the unveiling of the nature of God.

Ezekiel was also conscious of the Throne and the principles of the Divine government; he distinguished clearly the activities of God; but his supreme vision was that of God Himself. He saw Him manifest in the midst of the strange revolving wheels of procedure, and the resistless energy which he spoke of as the spirit. There was revealed to him the embodiment of the essential attributes of Deity, unqualified supremacy and sacrificial service ; manifestation in the highest form of life, and infinite, unfathomable, and finally indefinable mystery. The deep secret of Ezekiel's hope was more than a consciousness of the Throne and the principles of government, more than the conviction of the actual activities of Jehovah, it was acquaintance with God Himself.

I know that at this point I join issue with a great many expositors who declare that the vision of Isaiah was greater than that of Ezekiel. I am compelled to say I cannot accept that view. If it is necessary to speak of degrees, and measurements, then here is the greatest vision of all, for in it there is unveiled the very nature of God. The issue of this is described in the last book of the Divine library, for the very same symbolism is used in describing the figures surrounding the throne. The seer of Patmos observed the four living creatures, and his description of them exactly coincides with the vision of Ezekiel.

This finally compels our recollection of the inspired presentation of the Son of God in the Gospels. In Matthew He is presented in His supremacy as King; in Mark in His sacrificial service as Servant ; in Luke in His perfect manifestation as Man; in John in His infinite and fathomless mystery as God. When we have seen the four we have seen the One. Finally, as Ezekiel in the older vision looked above the firmament and saw the Throne, and on the Throne the likeness of a Man; we look to-day beyond the firmament, and exactly the same vision meets the eye of faith. Thus this man in the distant past, without knowing perfectly how in the economy of God the manifestation would be wrought out in the mystery of the Incarnation, did nevertheless see the essential, vital, eternal facts concerning God; that He is supreme ; that He bends in service to the point of sacrifice ; that He in Himself is all that man is, for man is in His likeness ; and that He in Himself is more than man is, in the infinite mystery of Deity. In view of this vision I no longer wonder that Ezekiel was the prophet of hope.

Mark the bearing of this vision of God upon all the circumstances in the midst of which he found himself. In the great body of his prophecy he described the results of reprobation in the devastation of the people, declaring the reason of reprobation to be the sin of the people, and affirming the righteousness of reprobation. Looking through all this he saw restoration proceeding through judgment, until there broke upon his vision the glory of that last temple, which has never yet been built; and the final word of his prophecy is the declaration which sets forth the ultimate glory thereof, "The Lord is there." Throughout the whole of that prophetic movement the facts of the Divine nature are seen as he describes the processes of God. The supremacy of Jehovah is manifest whether in reprobation or in restoration. The service of Jehovah is the one story, as God is described as dealing with His people in order to remake them. The manifestation of Jehovah is perpetually revealed as to His purpose in the almost monotonous repetition of the refrain, "That ye may know Jehovah." The mystery of God is the supreme truth. Mark the fine reticence of the first vision. There is no description of essential Deity. When we have gazed upon the living creatures, watched the whirling wheels, been conscious of the all-pervasive spirit, lifted our eyes above the firmament and seen the Throne and on the Throne a Man, we are made supremely conscious of the fact that the ultimate truth is undiscovered, and the essential Being is invisible. Again, when we come to the last sentence of the prophecy, so simple that any child can remember it, "The Lord is there," mark the reverent reticence of it. We have looked upon the temple. We have been conscious of things missing which were found in the temple of Solomon. We have observed the presence of things not found in that

temple. We have been made conscious of mystic movement; and have seen the glorious outflowing of a gracious river which brings life wherever it comes, but we have never seen God. The only reference he makes to the actual presence of God in the temple is in that simple word already twice quoted, "The Lord is there."

It is not only true that these essential facts of the nature of God are all recognized throughout the processes of reprobation and restoration; it is also true that there is a progressive revelation. In the early part of the prophecy which deals with judgment, the overwhelming sense of God is that of His supremacy. In the movement in which the false shepherds are denounced, and the true shepherd character portrayed, Jehovah is revealed as Himself the Shepherd of His people, Who thus fulfills the true function of kingship.

Later in the course of the prophecy we have that weird and amazing spectacle of the valley of dry bones. We hear the moving of the wind over the bones, and then watch them as they come together and are clothed with sinew and flesh and skin, until presently they stand a living army ; and as we watch, we learn how God stoops, King though He be, to serve in order to save. Still further, in the new order, the new law of life, and in the new consciousness of God, we see the full manifestation of life at its highest and best, not in an individual merely, but in a remade race, gathered around the central fact of worship. Until finally, we come to the last word, and all the great unveiling enfolds itself and announces that which cannot finally be known, but in the presence of which the exercise of worship is the only fitting activity of the soul.

In the light of this vision, sin was even more sinful, judgment was even more sure, but the victory was absolutely certain. So that in the midst of a handful of exiles, stubborn and rebellious, Ezekiel saw through to the ultimate because he knew God, not only as to the principles of His government, not merely as to the activities thereof, but as to Himself.

If these be the permanent values of the book, its living message may be briefly stated.

In order to a true and comprehensive outlook we need to pass beyond the principles of the Divine government, beyond the practice thereof, to the very presence of God. If we think simply of the principles we shall see them violated on every hand. If we simply contemplate the activities of Jehovah, though we worship in the presence of them, admitting the righteousness of His judgments on sin, being overwhelmed by the fact of His sorrow on account of sin, believing that at last He will gain the victory; the postponement of that victory is so terrible an experience as to be almost unbearable ; but if we can be brought into actual consciousness of His nature we shall sing on the darkest day, because over all the gloom of the present we shall detect the glory of the coming victory. In order to abiding hope and abounding joy, we must pass beyond the principles and the practice, to the Person.

In order that we may do so, God is manifest in flesh. This is life eternal that we may know Him, and Jesus Christ Whom He has sent. Eliphaz said to Job, "Acquaint now thyself with Him, and be at peace." Paul expressed the deepest desire of his heart in the words, "That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings." It is a great thing to watch the goings of God in the world; it is a beneficent thing to know the principles of His government; but if the heart would find refuge and perpetual song, it must become familiar with God Himself.

Finally, then, the book declares that the knowledge of God is the perennial well-spring of joy and the inspiration of hope. To know Him is to see sin and hate it, to proclaim judgment fearlessly; but it is also to "rejoice in the hope of the glory of God."

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