

The Companion of the Way

by

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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SANCTUARY OF THE EXILE (Ezekiel 1) - Ezekiel

I. THE SETTING -- THE DIVINE COMPENSATION

Nowhere in the records of the divine presence is the kindness and faithfulness of GOD more evident than in those that relate the story of the exile of the people of Judah and of Jerusalem. On account of the evils wrought by King Manasseh wherewith he polluted the house of the Lord in Jerusalem and filled the city from end to end with innocent blood, GOD delivered the king and later the nation into captivity in Babylon. There in his affliction Manasseh humbled himself before GOD, who brought him again to his kingdom in Judah (II Chronicles 33:13). The nation entered in its turn into captivity in three stages in the reigns of Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah, all of whom came under the power of Nebuchadnezzar.

Among the captives taken with Jehoiachin was Ezekiel the priest, whose narrative begins with his place among his fellow-exiles by the river Chebar in the land of the Chaldeans. In the providence of GOD, he was raised up to minister to the people of the captivity in order that they might understand the justice of GOD in removing them from their homeland and from the temple around which their national life had centered, and that even amid the sorrows that had befallen them they might be stirred to seek GOD anew and be sustained and cheered in their witness for Him among the nations. Some there were who clung to the promises of GOD and sought still to honor Him and to keep His law. To all these, even as to the apathetic, the embittered, and the rebellious, Ezekiel bore the message of the future regathering of Israel to their land. Two views were blended in his prophecies, the near and the far. The one took place when the kings of Babylon had been replaced by the kings of Persia, and the other shall be when Israel's Lord and King returns in power and glory to earthy and to His ancient city.

GOD did not forget His people. Away from their land and from their sanctuary, they seemed *remote from all the blessings* of their fathers, but the great Blessor Himself drew near and revealed His glory to Ezekiel the priest, the representative of the godly. In Jerusalem, GOD's dwelling place had been in the Holy of Holies, between the Cherubim, and thither in days of care and of stress those who loved His name directed their thoughts, and thence they sought His

favor. When the threatening letter from Sennacherib was received by Hezekiah he **"prayed before the LORD, and said, O LORD God of Israel, which dwellest between the cherubim, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth . . . Save thou us out of his hand"** (II Kings 19:15, 19). In the people's distress the psalmist besought GOD's intervention, and prayed, **"Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; thou that dwellest between the cherubims, shine forth"** (Psalm 80:1). Another psalm tells exultingly the glory of His kingdom: **"The LORD reigneth; let the people tremble: he sitteth between the cherubims; let the earth be moved"** (Psalm 99:1).

What then should His people do in the land of captivity, and whither should they turn when the temple should be no more? The answer of GOD to their need was to manifest Himself, enthroned, not amid the cherubim of gold or of olivewood, but above the living creatures, the cherubim of Heaven. In the vision of Isaiah (Isaiah 6), GOD had displayed His majesty and the service of the seraphim in the temple, but in Ezekiel's lifetime the temple would be destroyed, and the prophet would abide an exile in a strange country. It was in such circumstances that Ezekiel was given the visions of GOD described in the chapters that open and close his book. Though earthly symbols passed away, the heavenly realities were unchanged, and *the heavens were opened* that glories which no king of Babylon could ever defile should be set before the exile's gaze. Ere the earlier visions ceased, and ere the tidings came that Jerusalem was smitten (Ezekiel 33:21), GOD gave the promise which was the very meaning of the visions. **"Therefore say, Thus saith the LORD God; Although I have cast them far off among the heathen, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come"** (Ezekiel 11:16). From the guilty city of Jerusalem and from the doomed temple on Mount Moriah the presence of the Lord would be withdrawn, but He would be with His people, a sanctuary for a little time (i.e., till the captivity should be over), a temple to which they might constantly repair to give thanks to Him, to inquire of His will and to receive His blessing. So true is His perpetual presence.

II. THE BLESSING -- THE DIVINE EMPOWERING

The visions of glory were vouchsafed to Ezekiel at four separate times, in four distinct settings, and with four different messages.

1. In the fifth day of the fourth month in the fifth year of Jehoiachin's captivity. By the river Chebar. Giving him a commission to be a watchman to the people. Chapters 1:1 to 3:21.
2. Seven days later, in the plain. Making him a sign, and his actions signs, of the certainty and the details of the judgments about to fall upon Jerusalem. Chapters 3:22 to 7:27.
3. In the fifth day of the sixth month of the following year. In his house. Showing the departure of the glory of GOD from the temple and the city. Chapters 8:1 to 11:25.
4. In the tenth day of the first month in the twenty-fifth year of captivity. Location in Chaldea unnamed. Showing the future dignity of the city, and the coming of the glory of GOD to the house of GOD, never to depart. Chapters 40:1 to 48:35.

In each case the narrative begins with like words.

1. **"The hand of the LORD was there upon him" (1:3).**
2. **"The hand of the LORD was there upon me" (3:22).**
3. **"The hand of the LORD God fell there upon me" (8:1).**
4. **"The hand of the LORD was upon me" (40:1).**

Three more times in Ezekiel we read of the hand of the Lord in relation to the prophet. In his first experience of *the controlling power* of GOD in the visions, he said, **"The Spirit lifted me up, and look me away, and I went in bitterness, in the heat (Heb., hot anger) of my spirit; but the hand of the LORD was strong upon me"** (3:14). Writing concerning the eve of the coming of the tidings that Jerusalem was smitten, he said, **"Now the hand of the LORD was upon me in the evening, afore he that was escaped came; and had opened my mouth"** (33:22). Then, when he was shown the final regathering of Israel, under the figure of a national resurrection, he said, **"The hand of the LORD was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones"** (37:1). In these seven references to the hand of the Lord there is seen the putting forth of the divine power by which Ezekiel was enabled to behold the visions. That power cast its shelter around him, strengthened him for the revelations and for the service they claimed, and impelled him to carry out his ministry in spite of its burden of judgment and the resentment of his hearers. Truly **"the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the HOLY GHOST"** (II Peter 1:21).

Another expression recurring in these passages is that which tells of his prostration in the Lord's presence.

1. **"And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake" (1:28).**
2. **"And I fell on my face" (3:23).**
3. **"And I fell upon my face" (43:3).**

Remarkably, in the third vision there is no mention of his falling upon his face before such glory, but twice Ezekiel is seen in like attitude, pleading for the sinful nation, **"I fell upon my face, and cried, and said, Ah Lord GOD! wilt thou destroy all the residue of Israel?"** (9:8). **"Then fell I down upon my face, and cried with a loud voice, and said, Ah Lord GOD! wilt thou make a full end of the remnant of Israel?"** (11:13). In answer to the first petition GOD gave reply that He would not spare those guilty of the crimes that defiled Jerusalem, but to the second He gave promise that to those scattered among the heathen. He would be a sanctuary. In this way we are shown two things that should ever bow us low before GOD, worship and intercession. The heart that knows most of prostration in reverent awe in the secret of that wondrous presence is that which will be most active in beseeching His mercy upon the sons of men.

III. THE REVELATION -- THE DIVINE MAJESTY

"And I looked, and beheld, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the colour of amber, out of the midst of the fire " (Ezekiel 1:4). In connection with an earlier theophany, there is mentioned a whirlwind from which GOD spoke, which likewise came out of the north. In the latter part of Job 36, and chapter 37, there is given a most graphic picture of the

approaching storm. At the beginning of chapter 37 Elihu speaks, "**At this also my heart trembleth, and is moved out of his place**" and toward its end, he says, "**Fair weather cometh out of the north: with God is terrible majesty**" (Job 37:1, 22). It is this majesty which is more fully described in Ezekiel. "**The Lord hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet**" (Nahum 1:3). The stormy wind (whirlwind) fulfills His word (Psalm 148:8). By a whirlwind He was pleased to take up Elijah into Heaven (II Kings 2:1), and in the splendor that flamed out of a whirlwind to manifest Himself to Ezekiel.

The cloud and the fire were inseparably associated with Israel's history, especially with their deliverance from Egypt and journey through the desert to the promised land. Carried captive from that land because their sins had exceeded those of the nations driven out before them, they could little expect to see again those manifestations of power and glory with which GOD had blessed them in those brighter days. Yet, being GOD and not man, He acted toward them with such faithfulness that even in the land of captivity He displayed the tokens of His majesty.

"Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man" (1:5).

"As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle" (1:10)

"And their whole body, and their backs, and their hands, and their wings, and the wheels, were full of eyes round about, even the wheels that they four had" (10:12).

"I knew that they were the cherubims" (10:20).

The profound themes portrayed in *the living creatures*, the cherubim, call not for speculation or curiosity, but for awe and praise. The cherubim are found always in association with the throne of GOD and have a threefold function in relation to its government. First, they "cover" the throne, i.e., to them is committed the guarding of the divine honor. Secondly, they share the administration of the throne in that they are its close attendants and execute its decrees. Thirdly, they manifest the character of GOD in His government of all that He has made.

"Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life" (Genesis 3:23-24).

"And thou shalt make two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, in the two ends of the mercy seat. And make one cherub on the one end, and the other cherub on the other end: even of the mercy seat shall ye make the cherubims on the two ends thereof. And the cherubims shall stretch forth their wings on high, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and their faces shall look one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubims be. And thou shalt put the mercy seat above upon the ark; and in the ark thou shalt put the testimony that I shall give thee. And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which

are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel . . . And thou shalt make a vail of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen of cunning work: with cherubims shall it be made" (Exodus 25:18-22; 26:31).

"And within the oracle he made two Cherubims of olive tree, each ten cubits high. And five cubits was the one wing of the cherub, and five cubits the other wing of the cherub: from the uttermost part of the one wing unto the uttermost part of the other were ten cubits. And the other cherub was ten cubits: both the Cherubims were of one measure and one size. The height of the one cherub was ten cubits, and so was it of the other cherub. And he set the Cherubims within the inner house: and they stretched forth the wings of the Cherubims, so that wing of the one touched the one wall, and the wing of the other cherub touched the other wall; and their wings touched one another in the midst of the house. And he overlaid the Cherubims with gold . . . And the priests brought in the ark of the covenant of the Lord unto his place, into the oracle of the house, to the most holy place, even under the wings of the Cherubims" (I Kings 6:23-28; 8:6).

"And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind. And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle. And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come . . . And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth" (Revelation 4:6-8; 5:8-10).

This character is fourfold.

- 1) The Ruler of the universe is always majestic; nought that is petty or base is ever known among His ways.
- 2) He is a ministering GOD, who ceaselessly attends to the needs of His own creation. Apart from His care it could not be maintained.
- 3) "His understanding is infinite." He appreciates all the requirements and all the frailty of His creatures, and seeks to bestow on them His fellowship, according to their measure of capacity for it.
- 4) He possesses boundless adequacy for the carrying out of His purposes and the supplying of every need of His creation. He Himself knows no limitation.

These four traits are exquisitely expressed in the four faces of the cherubim. The lion speaks of majesty, the ox of ministry, the man of understanding, and the eagle of that which is far above the limits of earth. The appearance under which the living creatures are presented, with variation of detail from book to book of Scripture, and yet with an underlying harmony throughout, may be compared with the livery worn by the attendants of an earthly throne. The livery may be worn

by different persons in different circumstances, yet is it still the same in style and meaning. Whether those who are concerned with the administration of the throne of GOD be always the same beings or not, yet the cherubic likeness is consistent throughout.

In the Old Testament the cherubim are sometimes figurative, as in the structure and the holy vessels of the tabernacle of Moses and the temple of Solomon. Sometimes the cherubim are living beings, as at the gate of Eden and in the visions of Ezekiel. The living creatures of the Old Testament thus appear to be of the angelic order. Ezekiel himself speaks of the downfall of one who is called "**the anointed cherub that covereth**" (Ezekiel 28:14), whose greatness far exceeded that of the literal king of Tyre. Created to high service in relation to the throne of GOD, he coveted that which he should have covered.

" How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High" (Isaiah 14:12-14).

When that cherub, so great and high, failed in his trust, GOD revealed One "**who was made a little lower than the angels,**" and who ever-vindicated the character and maintained the honor of the throne. In His lowly manhood the beloved Son manifested the fourfold nature of GOD's ways, as is seen in the distinctive portraits of Him in the four Gospels. Matthew displays His kingly majesty; Mark, His perfect service; Luke, His holy manhood; John, His eternal deity.

In His glorified manhood, exalted "**far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named,**" the Son will ever administer *every function of the throne*, but associated with Him in that sphere of honor will be His redeemed ones from earth, all of them partakers of the heavenly calling, destined to share His glory. Brought nearer to Him than angels have ever been, and enjoying therefore a greater nearness to the throne, they will be linked with Him in functions hitherto entrusted to the angels. Accordingly, in Revelation 5 angels are "**round about the throne and the beasts and the elders.**" The living creatures themselves are "**in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne**" and are joined with the elders in one song of praise. Therefore it would seem that the living creatures and the elders set forth the redeemed in two capacities different in themselves, but borne by the same persons. As elders, they have complete maturity and priestly access; as living creatures they are associated with the LAMB in His government. This is confirmed by the undoubted fact that the functions of the cherubim are all attributed, in statements not symbolic but express, to the glorified saints. They will judge the world, and judge angels; they will serve for ever and ever; they will be marked by wisdom and spiritual understanding; they will have spiritual bodies conditioned to the environment and life of Heaven, and thus free from earthly limitations. It is fitting, therefore, in view of their character and occupation, that they should be pictured wearing the livery of the throne, i.e., the cherubic likeness.

"And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the thrones was the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it. And I saw as the colour of amber, as the appearance of fire round about within it, from the appearance of his loins even upward, and from the

appearance of his loins even downward, I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and it had brightness round about. As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (Ezekiel 1:26-28).

The climax of the vision was the revelation of the throne and of its occupant, One who appeared as a man, and yet with a splendor not of earth. He who covers Himself with light as with a garment (Psalm 104:2) deigned to appear to Ezekiel in form which he could comprehend (the appearance of a man), and yet with such *incomprehensible majesty* that Ezekiel bowed to the earth upon his face. As in the scene which the Apostle John beheld in Heaven, there was a rainbow round about the throne (Revelation 4:3), so the brightness about the Man whom Ezekiel saw was likewise as the appearance of the bow . As the rainbow was given to Noah as the token of GOD's covenant, as the pledge of His abiding promise, so the very brightness which invested this Man witnessed by its appearance to the faithfulness of the covenant-keeping GOD of Israel.

It was the glory of Jehovah which Ezekiel beheld. Though the location and other circumstances of its manifestation had changed, the glory itself endured forever (Psalm 104:3). It was not so with the gods of the heathen, the vain deities whose fame ceased with the destruction of their worshipers. These gods were powerless to protect those whose downfall they wrought. The eyes of the prophet and of those who heeded his words were lifted from the helplessness of the nation to their abiding resources in GOD. In the third vision, Ezekiel witnessed the departure of the glory from the temple and the city, yet earlier than that, in the first vision, he saw the glory in the land of exile. Thus did the goodness of GOD strengthen him for the sadness of the ruin which should befall Jerusalem. The sins of the temple brought desolation to their country, and the judgments of GOD stripped from them their national independence, but He Himself was still the refuge of all who trusted Him. In all His glory, in all His power, in all His *sovereign overruling* in the affairs of men, He was with His saints. It has ever been so in the annals of our poor race. From age to age GOD has remained the same. Nothing could more suitably have shown this to Ezekiel than the vision of the Lord enthroned above the living creatures, the Lord whose will is supreme throughout the universe!

In his final vision, Ezekiel saw the return of the glory to the royal city. The day of the vision's fulfilment has not yet dawned, and night's darkest hour must yet cast its pall of anguish upon the nation of Israel. Nevertheless, when the prophet had long since passed from the scenes of his labors, the glory of the Lord appeared in the land which Ezekiel loved and shone round about the shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night, as to them were given the glad tidings of the birth of "**a Saviour, . . . Christ the Lord.**" He will yet come as the King of glory, and His city shall be known as *Jehovah-shammah* (the Lord is there) (Ezekiel 48:35). Then all the prophet's longings for his people will be satisfied. The presence that cheered him in exile will be the constant joy of restored Israel. This is his last word, the consummation of all his hopes and the fulfillment of all his visions -- THE LORD IS THERE.

~ end of chapter 7 ~