Day 227 - August 15

Judah After Israel's Fall (725-585 BCE)
Ezekiel, Prophet in Exile

Readings: ***Ezekiel 1:1-28; 2:1-9; 3:1-27; 4:1-17; 5:1-17; 6:1-14; 7:1-27***

Reflections:

- The prophecy of Ezekiel closely aligns with visions within Daniel as well as John's Revelation. They are rich in imagery and symbolism. It is important to note that when God speaks prophetically, he at times is very practical and direct and yet at other times he uses images as in a dream or a vision that are highly symbolic. Ezekiel's visions fall in the later category and therefore must be handled carefully as we are over 2,500 years removed from the cultural context.
- Ezekiel was a part of the priestly leadership that was taken into captivity in 597 BCE. He lived in Tel Abib by the Kebar River in Babylon. As a priest, he knew the temple inside and out and so it makes sense that many of the ways God would speak to him will use the temple as a primary symbol. Again the themes of severe judgment and ultimate restoration are carried through his prophecies. Ezekiel is thirty-years-old when he begins his prophetic ministry like many other great Biblical leaders.
- The windstorm is at times associated with the revelation of God's presence (Nahum 1:3; Psalm 18:12). Sometimes it is called a whirlwind (Job 38:1; 2 Kings 2:1).
- The living creatures here are virtually identical to statutes found in Babylon in this period. They were a combination of animal, human and bird forms in a single body or creature. It is interesting that the vision from God would use creatures that would in Ezekiel's context fit the description of idols. Does that mean that it is purely coincidental? I doubt it. One interpretation would suggest that the images of the four living creatures are symbolic of the spirits of life. God is comfortable using the symbols from the other religions to communicate the truths about his power and reign over all of creation. We see this modeled in Acts 17 where Paul uses poetry written about Zeus to communicate truth about God, the creator.
- The four faces represent the highest creatures within the created orders. The eagle was the highest of the bird. The ox was the highest of the domesticated animals. The lion was the highest of the undomesticated. The man was the highest of all orders. These creatures represented the supreme expressions of life.

- The images used in these chapters have caused some to wonder if Ezekiel was seeing some form of alien spaceship. The description is pretty wild and so it is easy to see why people would wonder that. One of the fascinating statements was “the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.” The word “spirit” may also be translated as “wind.” And so this may mean that that the beings and their thrones were somehow animated and brought to life by the living wind, breath or spirit of God. Although it is hard to get our heads around, Ezekiel is obviously being confronted with God as the ultimate sources of life, creation, power and beauty. Phrases like “sparkling like ice” and “roar of rushing waters” underscore this sense.
- There is another interpretation though that seems to be even more fitting. Let’s take a look again at what this section describes: There was a major storm coming toward Ezekiel. At the centre of the storm were four living creatures. These are compound creatures – part man, part animal, part bird with faces of a man, ox, eagle and lion. These things floated and had this fire blazing out of them as God’s spirit was moving through them. Then Ezekiel describes how they were riding along with these wild looking wheels that had eyes all around the rims. When these heavenly vehicles moved he said it sounded like rushing waters or the voice of the Almighty. Above these creatures was a throne or more literally a “throne-chariot” with someone who looked like a man but was glowing and brilliant. This vision was a symbolic picture of God riding into battle like a king on his throne-chariot. What are pictured in this vision are four compound creatures riding into battle with him on their own divine chariots. The eyes on the wheels were symbolic of divine insight or wisdom guiding these four creatures.
- God was giving Ezekiel a very clear picture to open up his message to Israel. This nation that Israel considered their worst enemy was actually being used by God to send them a major wake up call. Israel’s oppression by Babylon wasn’t just an unfortunate event. It was a God-orchestrated disaster that was meant to bring them to their senses.
- This makes sense in that Ezekiel is going to prophecy great judgments and the hope of restoration to a people who no doubt have given up all hope. God is using Babylon to judge Israel but he is also the God of all life that can make dead things come alive. The rich imagery here speaks both of judgment and life. This same vision will one day be given again to a Christ-follower named John who would write it down in a book called “Revelations.” John will write to the first Christian church who would be suffering in their own captivity as they were persecuted by the Roman Empire.
- Ezekiel is then called by God to speak his words. God commands him over and over to not be afraid. Ezekiel was not to be concerned about whether the people listened to him or not. He was simply to hear God and to say exactly what God had told him to say. Ezekiel is then given a scroll, a symbol of God’s message, to eat. It tastes sweet like honey as he ate it. Again, the image is that he delights in the words God was giving him even though they were words of lament and woe. The picture of eating the scroll is a great image for digesting and fully absorbing/embracing the words of God into your heart and life.

- Ezekiel may have been a bit softer as a man. He was only turning thirty and so he was still a relatively young man. God said to him that he would make him harder than flint and unyielding. Sometimes God's leadership must be unbending and strong and durable. Stubborn, strong willed rejection of God must be confronted with equally strong, spiritually mature leadership.
- Ezekiel is finally released into his calling. He is given the vision once again of the chariots of God going with him into battle as he hears the rumbling of their wheels behind him. "I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the Lord upon me…I sat among them for seven days…overwhelmed!" What a picture of incredible spiritual burden and frustration.
- Now Ezekiel after seven days is told of his accountability before God. God may have said this because he was simply sitting there for seven days and not doing anything. He is to speak God's word without fail. He will be held accountable for the lives of the people he is meant to confront with God's truth if he fails to speak what God has given him. This leaves Ezekiel completely wiped out and laying on his face. "Then the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet." Like many other Old Testament leaders they are only able to do what God has asked them to do because his Spirit enters their lives. After Jesus' death, God poured out his Spirit on all people so that we could be empowered to live the life God intended.
- Ezekiel is lead to a plain where he again falls face down before the Spirit of the Lord raises him to his feet and begins to give to Israel through Ezekiel an number of prophetic signs or mime pictures regarding the judgment that is coming. The signs include ones for complete bondage, the siege of their city, complete discomfort, eating defiled food (Ezekiel is asked to eat food cooked over human excrement but asks to have it upgraded to cow manure so it is not as defiling. Talk about a lousy job!), and finally the people dying either by famine inside the city, the sword outside the city or being scattered to the wind as they are driven away. These judgments are horrible and reveal how angry God is against the people's constant rebellion and sin.
- In Ezekiel 6 we see God's judgment against the mountains as these were places of idol worship, sexual cult worship and human sacrifice. Following this Ezekiel declares that now is the time for God's judgment. God's declaration is that as the people see the judgment of God, then they will know that he is the Lord. In that day God declares, the people will come and want a vision from the prophet, or a teaching from the priest, or counsel from the Elder. But they will receive nothing. The final judgment against the people is God not speaking to and through the leadership of his people. This passage reveals that God can speak many ways and through different types of leadership roles. This will be carried on in church as we read in Ephesians 4 about "apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors and teachers." God's silence is ultimately the final sign of judgment for the nation because he had spoken so many times and they refused to listen to what he had said through his leaders. In time, the nation will face 400 years of silence before the Messiah finally appears to welcome in the new kingdom!