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Ezekiel, Witness to God's Glory

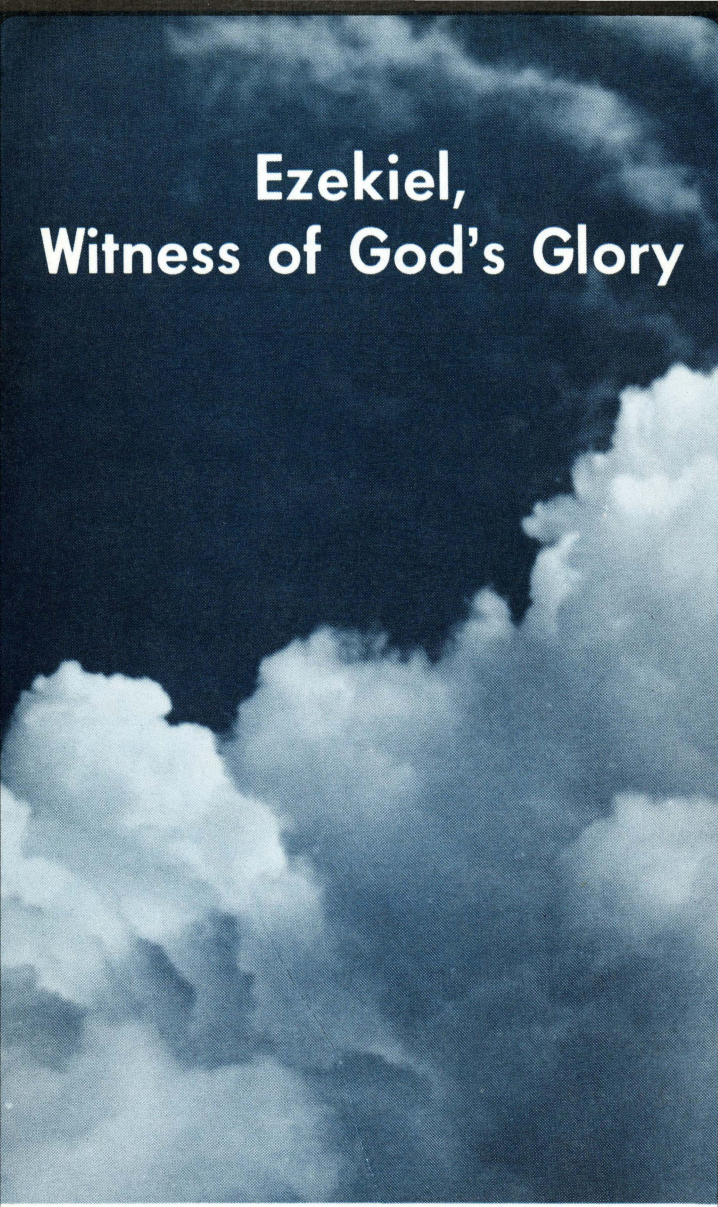
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Ezekiel, Witness of God's Glory

HIGHLAND CHURCH OF CHRIST
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Ezekiel, Witness of God's Glory

As a prophet of Judah, a priest of the Old Testament order, and an exile in Babylon, Ezekiel represents one of the most interesting characters in the Bible. His major contribution to our lives and thoughts occurs in his prophetic ministry that began five years after his exile. Judah, the southern remnant of David's once United Kingdom of Israel, was gradually losing all her sovereignty to the forces of Nebuchadnezzar. The deportation of Jews from their homeland first took place under the Chaldeans in 597 B.C., but the holy city Jerusalem did not completely fall for approximately ten more years. During these critical times Jeremiah prophesied Judah's fall in Jerusalem and Ezekiel analyzed Judah's ills in exile.

Ezekiel witnessed the glory of God as the prelude to receiving God's commission as spokesman to His people. The Old Testament book that bears this prophet's name, and contains his experiences and teachings, offers us insight into Ezekiel's prophetic challenge. I am asking you now to get your Bibles, if at all possible, and turn with me to the first chapter of *Ezekiel*. We study this chapter today with the hope of coming to an appreciation of the glory of God.

First, notice with me the God who makes Himself known to men. After identifying his location, explaining

his plight, and giving the exact day from the beginning date of the exile, Ezekiel introduces his prophecy with the words, "... the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God" (Ezekiel 1:1). Two verses later he further explains that "the word of Jehovah came expressly unto Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of Jehovah was there upon him" (Ezekiel 1:3). That these "visions" specifically revealed God's glory, we learn at the conclusion of this chapter, verse twenty-eight. After giving a detailed description of the heavenly creatures, suggesting several divine attributes, and painting a word picture of God and His throne, we read: "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Jehovah" (Ezekiel 1:28). Ezekiel had witnessed the glory of God Himself.

What this entire first chapter of *Ezekiel* says is that God, the glorious being, desires men to know Him. God so appeared to the children of Israel as He used Moses to lead them out of Egypt. "And Jehovah said unto Moses, Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with thee, and may also believe thee for ever" (Exodus 19:9). Later in that same chapter of *Exodus*, at Mt. Sinai "there were thunders and lightnings, (just as in Ezekiel's vision) and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of a trumpet exceeding loud; and all the people that were in the camp trembled" (Exodus 19:16). With Mount Sinai quaking and smoking we read that "Jehovah descended upon it in fire" (Exodus 19:18). The people of Israel had seen the glory of the Lord!

Later when Israel's portable worship center had been constructed exactly according to God's instructions, we read: "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of Jehovah filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:34). Visibly God came to occupy the tabernacle, to make it His place of meeting the High Priest and the people during their trip to Canaan.

Later, after the promised land had been occupied and settled, Solomon was permitted to build a permanent center of worship in Jerusalem. Upon completion of the temple, we read, "it came to pass, when the priests were come out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of Jehovah, so that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud; for the glory of Jehovah filled the house of Jehovah" (I Kings 8:10, 11). During this entire period of adjustment and, for that matter, throughout the history of the Jewish theocracy, wherever the Ark of the Covenant was located there the glory of the Lord was to be seen (I Samuel 4:21, 22; Psalm 24:7-10). God's glory and God's law were inseparable, even as it is impossible in our day

to know the glory of God without respecting and obeying the Word of God.

But God's glory did not always remain with Israel. In fact, this is the burden Ezekiel is given: to tell the people that their idol worship (Ezekiel 8:3, 16, 17), despair and unbelief (Ezekiel 8:12), and violence (Ezekiel 8:17) have caused the withdrawal of God's glory from the nation.

First convincing us that he has witnessed God's glory, Ezekiel proceeds in chapters eight through eleven to detail the departure of that glory from the temple and from the holy city. Listen to these verses from *Ezekiel*, chapter eleven. "Then did the cherubim lift up their wings, and the wheels were beside them; and the glory of the God of Israel was over them above. And the glory of Jehovah went up from the midst of the city, and stood upon the mountain which is on the east side of the city" (Ezekiel 11:22, 23). And Jehovah wastes no time in explaining to Ezekiel why this tragedy has occurred. "Son of man, seest thou what they do? Even the great abominations that the house of Israel do commit here, that I should go far off from my sanctuary?" (Ezekiel 8:6). God's glory did not return to Judah, Jerusalem, and the temple until long after the overthrow of the city (Ezekiel 43:1-5).

By now we can begin to see that the "glory of God" or the "Shekinah," as His presence is often called, is intended for communion with or witness by man. In other words, to talk about the God's glory is to talk about a God who lives with His people and makes Himself known to them. This is exactly what God says to Israel in *Exodus* 29:43-46. "And there I will meet with the children of Israel; and the Tent shall be sanctified by my glory. And I will sanctify the tent of meeting, and the altar: . . . And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I might dwell among them: I am Jehovah their God."

How significant and beautiful are these truths regarding God's glory in view of Isaiah's prediction that "the glory of Jehovah shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." This statement occurs in the context of prophecy, about the coming Messiah. When Christ appeared on the earth God's glory would have free and full expression among all men. Thus when we read the following statement from John's *Gospel*, in the New Testament, we begin to appreciate such a prediction. "And the Word (or Christ) became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Repeatedly during Christ's earthly life His contemporaries witnessed God's

glory, in His life and ministry (Luke 2:9; 9:31). In the words of one excellent student, to speak of God's glory is to describe "that which makes God impressive to man, the force of His self-manifestation" (p. 238, Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. III).

We do not begin to appreciate the glory of God until we look carefully at other aspects of His character and work associated with His glory. As an example, we have already emphasized how the presence of God among men relates to His glory. Ezekiel saw "visions of God," he tells us in the opening verse of his prophecy. But at the close of that first chapter he informs us that what these visions actually revealed was "the glory of Jehovah" (Ezekiel 1:1, 28). In other words, God's presence and God's glory are inseparable (Leviticus 9:4, 6; Psalm 113:4).

It is also interesting to observe that God's glory and God's holiness are often linked together. When Isaiah heard "the seraphim" sing "Holy, holy, holy, is Jehovah of hosts," he also heard them say, "the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3). God told Moses that the new tent or tabernacle would be "sanctified" or "made holy" by His glory (Exodus 29:43).

Probably the most prominent Old Testament aspect of God's person and work associated with His glory was the direction of His people's lives. That glory expressed to infant Israel in the cloud by day and the fire by night, was the signal when to move and when to stay in camp. "And when the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the children of Israel went onward, throughout all their journeys: but if the cloud was not taken up, then they journeyed not till the day that it was taken up" (Exodus 40:36, 37). This observation is especially true in Ezekiel's personal life. The prophet not only saw the glory of Jehovah but at the same time we hear him say: "Then the Spirit lifted me up, and took me away," or again, "And the hand of Jehovah was there upon me: and he said unto me, Arise, go forth into the plain, and I will there talk with thee" (Ezekiel 3:12, 14, 22). Repeatedly, throughout his prophecy, Ezekiel talks of God's Spirit and God's hand directing and leading him to perform the work God gave him (Ezekiel 8:1; 33:22; 37:1; 40:1).

The glory of God also strongly suggests His transcendence. He is wholly distinguishable from man, from what He created. This transcendent quality of God is reflected in an interesting incident in Moses' life. Moses requested of Jehovah, "Show me, I pray thee, thy glory" (Exodus 33:18). God then promised to "make all my (His) goodness pass before thee (Moses), and will proclaim the name of

Jehovah before thee (Moses); and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (Exodus 33:19). But, He said to Moses, "Thou canst not see my face; for man shall not see me and live" (Exodus 33:20). Notice how Moses' request to see God's glory becomes an inquiry regarding God Himself. But God's totally different nature and being would not permit an open confrontation between Himself and Moses.

Isaiah grappled with this difficult question of God's nature and glory, and asked "To whom then will ye liken God? Or what likeness will ye compare unto him?" (Isaiah 40:18). The answer was that there is nothing to which God can be compared. Rather those asking such a question are urged, "Lift up your eyes on high, and see who hath created these, that bringeth out their host by number . . ." (Isaiah 40:26).

The glory of God that Ezekiel saw also suggested God's power. In that vision described in *Ezekiel*, chapter one, strong winds, thunders, lightning, clouds, moving wheels, and fires are used by the prophet to picture what he saw. These figures are often used in the Bible to capture for man's finite mind something of God's infinite power (Job 38:1; Exodus 19:16; 24:15; Isaiah 19:1; Revelation 1:14, 15; 4:8). All these figures of speech say that our God is a powerful being.

This vision of God's glory was an important part of Ezekiel's appointment as a prophet. Now, as *Ezekiel* 1:3 says, he had a word from and the support of God (Ezekiel 1:3). Immediately following the vision of God's glory, Ezekiel received explicit instructions: "Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to nations that are rebellious, which have rebelled against me: they and their fathers have transgressed against me even this day. . . . I do send thee unto them, and thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord Jehovah" (Ezekiel 2:3, 4). When Ezekiel so follows God's directions, the people of Israel "shall know that there hath been a prophet among them" (Ezekiel 2:5). In the next chapter the seriousness of this charge is explored with God calling Ezekiel a "watchman" who bears responsibility for the welfare of all His people, as the watchman on the wall of the city prevents any surprise attacks and sudden defeats (Ezekiel 3:17-21). God's glory, as Ezekiel was permitted to witness it, created a new purpose for the prophet's life, gave him the message of God to be shared with his fellow exiles in Babylon and his brethren in the homeland.

Most importantly for us, however, is the characteristic manner in which men, in every age and in varying situa-

tions, have responded to the glory of God. Listen to Ezekiel tell his reaction, "And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake" (Ezekiel 1:28b). God had spoken to him! God had touched him! (Ezekiel 1:3). Ezekiel could only listen reverently and obediently to His divine message.

Ezekiel's reaction is almost exactly paralleled in Isaiah's personal vision of God. Upon seeing "the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up," and after hearing the angelic chorus sing, "Holy, holy, holy, is Jehovah of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory," Isaiah says: "Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone: because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, Jehovah of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5). An overwhelming sense of his own inadequacy gripped Isaiah. If not literally, certainly within his heart, Isaiah fell on his face at the vision of God and His glory.

Similar reactions are recorded throughout the Bible. In the New Testament Peter, James, and John witnessing Jesus' transfiguration hear the voice of God say, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him" (Matthew 17:5). Upon hearing God's voice, "they fell on their face, and were sore afraid" (Matthew 17:6). Only after Jesus reassured them telling them to arise did they move (Matthew 17:7, 8). The Apostle John experienced the same awe upon seeing Jesus Christ in the vision of *Revelation*, chapter one. Listen: "And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as one dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying, Fear not; I am the first and the last, and the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades" (Revelation 1:17, 18). Whenever and wherever man has had the incomparable privilege of witnessing the glory of God, he has experienced overwhelmingly his creatureliness, his weakness, his inferiority to God his Creator!

This much is certain: man in rebellion and sin knows neither God nor His glory. If we learn nothing else from the experiences of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we discover that God does not dwell where conscious, deliberate sin abounds (Genesis 3:8, 9). Judah, in Ezekiel's day, rediscovered this timeless principle.

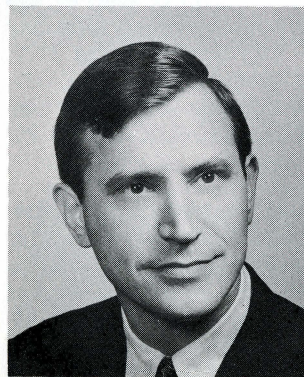
Furthermore, men who do not subject themselves to God, who do not honor God with their minds, bodies, and lives, will not acknowledge the glory of God. The pagan world's greatest tragedy, the Apostle Paul wrote, occurred "because that, knowing God, they glorified him not as God, neither gave thanks; but became vain in their reasonings,

and their senseless heart was darkened" (Romans 1:21). Today, when men rebel at God's way for them, choosing the perverted ways of the flesh "they exchange the truth of God for a lie, and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator," even as sensual, selfish men did in Paul's day (Romans 1:25).

Sin has always and will always separate you and me from the glory of God. This is the way Paul says it: "for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). But Christ came to make a permanent and satisfying sacrifice for sin, "to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself," as one New Testament writer describes it (Hebrews 9:26b). Thus the key to God's glory for us today is Jesus Christ. "Seeing it is God, that said, Light shall shine out of darkness, who shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (II Corinthians 4:6).

When you and I willingly hear the call of Jesus and readily accept His invitation on His terms of obedient faith (John 3:36); decisive repentance (Luke 13:3); public declaration of our faith in Him (Romans 10:9, 10); and baptism (Mark 16:16), we receive, as God has promised, remission of our sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the hope of the glory of God (Acts 2:38; Colossians 1:27).

As God's children, because of our obedient surrender to Christ, "we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit" (II Corinthians 3:18).



John Allen Chalk, dynamic evangelist and long-time radio speaker, is the first full-time speaker on the Herald of Truth radio program.

He began his work with the Herald of Truth on January 1, 1966. Previously, Chalk was the featured personality in a 13 week Herald of Truth television series.

A native of Lexington, Tennessee, he began preaching at 15. Chalk and his wife and two children now live in Abilene, Texas where he spends full time working with the Herald of Truth.

He is a graduate of Tennessee Tech and has written a book, "The Praying Christ and Other Sermons" and two tracts. Chalk was nominated for the Outstanding Young Man of Tennessee in 1964 and was named Cookeville's Young Man of the Year in 1963.