

# Ezekiel 40

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[ 0 : 00 ] I would ask you to turn back to the prophecy of Ezekiel, the 40th chapter, on page 871 of the Bibles.

And we read the second verse. In the visions of God, he took me to the land of Israel and set me in a very high mountain, on whose south side were some buildings that looked like a city.

All of us are aware that every time we switch on the news and television or open our newspapers, the word Iraq is either heard or read.

Now this is a book which was written in Iraq. It was written by the prophet Ezekiel, who spent at least 25 years, probably significantly longer of his life, in Iraq.

It was Babylon in these days. This message, the message of Ezekiel, is a message which has a great deal to say to us today.

[ 1 : 16 ] Ezekiel is a word which comes to us from the center of one of the most powerful civilizations of antiquity. It came from the most powerful nation on earth at that time.

Ezekiel was an exile. He was one of the captives taken in the first wave of deportation from Jerusalem to Babylon in the year 597 BC.

He was training to be a priest. But on the very year of his ordination to the priesthood, he was deported to Babylon. He could not be a priest of the Lord in Babylon.

While he was there, he was called to be a prophet. And so Ezekiel experiences a dramatic career change. Not only a dramatic change of scenery, a dramatic change of circumstances, but one who had trained for 30 years to be a priest was suddenly called to be a prophet of the banks of the Kiba River, or canal of the Euphrates, near to the city of Nippur, south of Babylon.

This place where he was called may well have been a place of prayer for the exiles. We know that in Psalm 31 we read that by the rivers of Babylon they sat and wept before the Lord.

[ 2 : 55 ] And it was there that Ezekiel had this dramatic call, an extraordinary vision of the majesty and power of God, which we have recorded for us in detail in the first chapter of this prophecy.

Now Ezekiel obeyed this call. Although he was trained to be a priest, he obeyed this sudden, unexpected call to be a prophet.

And his messages as a prophet are vivid. They present to us dramatic word pictures, often accompanied by dramatic actions on his part. He warned his fellow exiles that Jerusalem would be destroyed.

They had hoped that they would quickly return. They had hoped that the Babylonians would spare the city. But he warns them that the city would be finally destroyed, which was indeed fulfilled a few years later.

While he was there, he received a second great vision, not the vision of his call, but the vision, a part of which we read in chapters 8 and 11.

[ 4 : 08 ] A vision of the glory of the Lord leaving the temple in Jerusalem. He was transported in the Spirit back to his homeland.

And he had this extraordinary vision of the Shekinah cloud, of the glory of the Lord lifting and moving away from the temple of the Lord.

And so he prophesied to his people that the glory of the Lord had departed, that the temple would be destroyed, that the city would be destroyed.

Now after Jerusalem was destroyed, he prophesied that Israel would be restored. He told the people that they would return. He told the people that the exile would come to an end.

But he wasn't listened to. He prophesied for 20 years. But he was treated as an entertainer. He was treated as a songster. There's a verse in chapter 33, verse 32, which tells us that they thought he was a singer of love songs.

[ 5 : 19 ] They treated him as an entertainer. They listened to him for entertainment. But they didn't take seriously what he had to say. And so for 20 years, Ezekiel appeared to be a failed prophet.

Because although he prophesied vividly, and he ratified his prophecies with dramatic actions on his part, like building a wall, then knocking it down, and so on.

No one paid any attention to him. They regarded him as an entertainer. They regarded him as a singer of love songs. And so he appeared to be a failed prophet.

He was not a success in terms of the world's measurement of success. And then, what appears to have been that the end of his ministry, after having been in Babylon for 25 years, he received this great vision, which is recorded in chapters 40 to 48 of his prophecy.

And he places this vision as a kind of epilogue to a written collection of his prophetic messages, which he delivered over the previous 20 years. Some of these are dated, and so we're able to trace them over the 20-year period.

[ 6 : 40 ] And so Ezekiel, having apparently failed as a preacher, becomes a writer. This vision is a vision that he writes down, and that he shares with the people in writing.

His hope is that his writings might convince the second generation of exiles to overcome the lack of success that attended his preaching with the first generation. And so Ezekiel has not given up.

He has failed with the one generation, but he approaches the second generation, and God gives him a new vision to do this. And it's this vision of the temple, the restoration of the temple, which includes the Lord's glory returning to the temple.

And just as he was transported in the Spirit to Jerusalem for that vision, that first earlier vision of the Lord's glory departing from the temple, so Ezekiel tells us that he was transported in the Spirit back to Jerusalem to see the glory of the Lord returning, the Shekinah glory of the Lord returning and resting on the temple of the Lord.

And this temple is a new temple. This temple is a different temple from the temple that had been destroyed. It has different dimensions. It's got a similar pattern in terms of its basic architecture, but its dimensions are distinct.

[ 8 : 01 ] Now whether Ezekiel had greater success as a writer than as a speaker, we're not told. But we do know that Ezekiel, that this vision that Ezekiel was given towards the end of his ministry, at the end of what appeared to be a failed ministry, that this vision has had an enormous impact upon the life of the people of God down through the centuries, because it provided the seedbed from which John received his vision of the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation.

A vision which inspires the church down and continues to inspire the church today. This is a vision which goes back to Ezekiel's vision here of the Lord returning to his temple.

And so the great vision of John of the New Jerusalem in the final two chapters of the book of Revelation in many ways is a mirror image but a development of the vision that God gave to Ezekiel.

And so although Ezekiel apparently was a failure in his own generation, yet his vision inspired the Apostle John. And through the Apostle John has given the church a vision for the future, a vision of its destiny for which it has given, always has given God thanks.

Now the literature of Ezekiel and the literature of the book of Revelation is very vivid. It's apocalyptic literature. It is metaphorical literature in many ways.

[ 9 : 44 ] It's picture language. If you try to make all the pieces fit together, it doesn't work. It's very difficult at least to make it work because what we have is one figure, one metaphor, one symbol piling upon the other.

And that's just part of the kind of literature that it is. It is not the kind of literature you would write or I would write if we were writing an essay or a composition. It is something unique to the Bible and to some Jewish books written during the intertestamental period.

And so this final vision was what gave Ezekiel's ministry its greatest impact. His greatest work was done at the very end of his ministry.

A vision of a new temple which is characterized first of all by perfect symmetry and secondly by the return of the glory of the Lord to it as we read in chapter 43.

And so the vision of chapters 40 to 48 is a vision of the temple and of the land. And in his vision Ezekiel visits the temple accompanied by an angelic surveyor complete with measuring rod and tape.

[ 10 : 57 ] And this angelic surveyor guides him, leads him through the temple measuring as he goes while Ezekiel writes down its measurements. And in the course of this we are given a very detailed description of this new temple.

Now it's significant that this temple was in fact never built. Ezekiel may have expected to be built we don't know to have been built one day but we don't know but it was not rebuilt.

When the exiles did eventually return to Jerusalem in the year 530 or thereabouts Zerubbabel began to rebuild the temple and that temple was completed in the year 516.

It was very different from the temple that Ezekiel saw in his vision. Similarly when Herod built a much greater temple in 9 BC again it was different. And so the vision that was given to Ezekiel was never enacted literally in the building of subsequent temples.

and this suggests to me that probably Ezekiel's vision is a symbolic vision. It was meant to be a symbol. It is a religious icon if you like rather than an architect's brief.

[ 12 : 14 ] It was a template. It was if you like a virtual temple. We speak today of virtual things things that exist in our mind and in our imagination. And that's what we have here.

It's a virtual temple. It's been given to us as an aid to our devotion. It's been given to us as a help to help us in our worship of God.

And I would like to approach what Ezekiel says particularly in the 40th chapter with this in view. To see this as a vision which was given to Ezekiel not only for his own generation but for every generation.

We live in the Christian era where the temple has been superseded. Nevertheless this template that was given to Ezekiel is relevant to us because it illustrates the principles of worship.

It illustrates the key components of devotion as we worship the Lord. And so this is a vision which is relevant to us tonight.

[ 13 : 23 ] There were two courts the outer court and the inner court. There were two sanctuaries the outer sanctuary and the inner sanctuary the holy place and the holy of holies.

And so we've got two courts we've got two sanctuaries and each one inside the other. And it means it's a square it's and you've got this distinction first of all the outer court then the inner court then the outer sanctuary or the holy place then the inner sanctuary or the holy of holies.

Now I would like us to notice particularly tonight three aspects of the design that was given to Ezekiel. First of all that this temple had massive gates.

The gates were absolutely massive. If you have got time to just work out the measurements in the light of a study Bible or a commentary to discover the equivalent in our measurement.

The outer and the inner temple courts had six gate houses in total. Each court had three gates and each gate had a large gate house.

[ 14 : 41 ] Each gate and gate house had identical dimensions. They were massive structures and they were composed of an internal 75 feet long corridor passing through three alcoves.

This is a very similar pattern to the massive building of gates that Solomon engaged in the sites of the ancient fortresses of Megiddo of Giza and of Hazor.

Now these were strong cities. These were military cities. These were cities that were meant to be citadels. And it's that kind of gate that Ezekiel envisages here in the temple, in the new temple of the Lord.

And so these gates were, it wasn't just like passing through a door, you had to actually go through a passage and you were conscious that you were entering into a new area.

It was like going into a nuclear plant where you go through, or perhaps leaving a nuclear plant, you go through a decontamination process. Because there's an element of danger, there's an element of life risk.

[ 15 : 59 ] And I think that is what is emphasized here. It's not that there's danger of decontamination leaving, but rather of entering.

because Ezekiel is reminding us here that the temple of God is a holy place and that the holiness of God is dangerous. The holiness of God is not to be taken lightly.

The holiness of God is dangerous for us to enter in without protection. And so we need to be decontaminated. We need to be protected.

And I think this is the message that Ezekiel is giving us here. Such forbidding gates suggest that approaching a holy God is always awesome and never to be done lightly.

We sang in Psalm 24 how important it is that when we approach the hill of the Lord, when we come into the presence of the Lord, that we search our hearts and that we have clean hands and clean hearts and that we confess our sins and seek the protection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 17 : 08 ] Ezekiel is challenging us here as we worship God to use our imagination and to realize that when we come into a church building or come into a prayer meeting or come into a Bible study, we are not entering a physical building only.

We are entering into the presence of God. And the presence of God is holy. And the holiness of God is dangerous. But we praise God that we are invited to draw near through the Lord Jesus Christ, who has made the holiness of God safe, if you like, for us to follow, for us to enter and us to experience, because we are clothed in his righteousness, we are sheltered by his death on the cross for us.

He has made atonement for our sins and therefore we may enter in with confidence. The King of Glory has gone through these gates ahead of us.

He is our forerunner, as the writer to the Hebrews says. He has gone through the gates, they have lifted up their heads to him, and so we also can enter his courts with thanksgiving as we sing in the hundred psalm.

And so these gates remind us that when we enter the presence of God, we enter through the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the gate, I am the way, he said.

[ 18 : 32 ] Or if you like, I am the gate, he said, I am the door. It is through him that we enter into the presence of God. If we try to enter in any other way, then we simply cannot.

Or if we do, we would be judged immediately and condemned. We cannot enter the presence of God except through the Lord Jesus Christ, whose life and death was rendered to God on our behalf in order to make us, to clothe us with his righteousness and with his goodness and to enable us to stand in the presence of God and to live in the holiness of God.

And so the gates of the temple, these massive gates at both courts, the outer court and the inner court, remind us and point to that Jesus being the way, the truth and the life, it is through him that we come to the Father.

It is through him that we enter into the presence of God. There is no other way. It is only as our sins are dealt with, it is only as we are decontaminated if you like, from our sins and from their influence that we can enter into the presence of God.

That's the first point I'd like to emphasize, the massive gates which are symbolical or a virtual representation of Jesus as the way into the presence of God.

[ 19 : 55 ] The second point I would like to emphasize is that this plan that Ezekiel has revealed to him involves successive elevations. As we follow Ezekiel in his guide into the sanctuary, we notice that they mount ever higher.

The temple is like a three-tiered wedding cake with three successive elevations marking first the outer court, then the inner court and finally the temple proper.

And so each time you go up seven steps into the outer court, eight steps more into the inner court and then ten steps into the porch of the temple proper.

All the time you're going up. You're going up as you enter into the house of the Lord. And when we worship the Lord, we are reminded that we go up into his presence.

It's just a helpful way of looking. I know that God's presence is not special, but nevertheless it's helpful to us to realize that God is higher than us.

[ 21 : 06 ] His ways are higher than our ways. He is higher than we are, much higher than we are. He lives in a different level, he lives in a different plane. And so when we enter into his presence we not only go through the gates, but we rise up.

We are lifted up into the presence of God. He is high and exalted. He is a high and a holy God. He is one before whom the whole earth bows down.

He is the one who is seated. He is the most high God, as one of his names in the Old Testament. He is the most high. And Paul reminds us that we are to praise God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, because he has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

And so we have this second dimension here of going up, of ascending, of entering into the presence of God and rising up, recognizing that God is great, God is high.

God is not only holy, but he's high and he's exalted. he's in a different level. He is a different essence from the rest of us.

[ 22 : 21 ] We may be in his image, but we are his creatures and he is our creator and our sustainer. He is someone who is totally different from us. He is someone who is totally other than us.

He is high and he is holy. And so when we enter into the presence of God, we are invited to rise up. In Psalm 122, with which we will close our service, we read of the ancient tribes going up to Jerusalem.

And that is a reminder to us that when we enter into the presence of God, we're going up. He's lifting us up. He's bringing us up. He's lifting us, as one of the Psalms says, I think, Psalm 113, from the downhill, lifting us into his presence.

He's rescuing us. He's taking us from the ditch. He's taking us from the mighty clay. He's taking us from the slough of despond. He's lifting us up.

He's bringing us into his presence. And this is virtually represented in Ezekiel's temple. A temple in which there are these three tiers, each successive tier higher than the previous one.

[ 23 : 36 ] A reminder that God is high as well as holy. The third lesson that I think we can learn here is that the doorways of this building, the successive doorways, get narrower.

The further you go into the temple, the narrower the doors become. On reaching the temple proper, we discover that the entrances get progressively narrower.

We go to the porch. Now this is the temple proper, this is the holy place, the porch for the holy place. The door of the porch is 20 cubits or 10 meters, verse 49, about 10 meters.

Then you go to the entrance to the holy place, it is 10 cubits, it is narrower, it is 5 meters, half the breadth. And the entrance to the inner sanctuary, the most holy place, is only 3 meters, it is 6 cubits.

And so each of these three doorways is progressively narrower. Reminding us, or pointing forward to that day when Jesus would say, speak about two ways, a broad way and a narrow way.

[ 24 : 56 ] Reminding us that when we enter into the presence of God, we have to go through a narrow way. And a narrow way is a narrow way. And it means that we cannot bring with us a lot of the paraphernalia of life that we like to take.

We need to come into the presence of God as we are. We need to become unburdened.

Remember how Jesus said, a rich man cannot enter into the kingdom of God, a disease of a camel, through the eye of a needle.

It is the same idea. When we enter the presence of God, we enter the presence of God as we are. And it's not what we wear or what we possess.

It's not our jewelry. It is not our gizmos. It is not the latest technology that we may have acquired. When we enter the presence of God, we are what we are.

Simply what we are. Now, often our status in society is in terms of what we do or what we possess. And people think of us in these terms. They think of us in terms of our work or in terms of our possessions, in terms of the symbols that we have that give us status in life.

[ 26 : 11 ] But our possessions and our status and our symbols will all be left behind. When we enter into the presence of God, we are what we are. And that was why in the early church you found slaves, poor slaves, worshipping together with people who were wealthy, Christians who were wealthy.

In fact, there is some evidence from archaeology that one of the pastors of one of the early churches in Rome was a slave. And there he was teaching, feeding, a church of people who were much wealthier and freer than he was.

But in the presence of God, the free and the slave were one. They were brothers, sisters in the Lord. And so when we enter the presence of God, we come as we are.

And we leave behind all the paraphernalia that gives us status and position and standing in the world in which we live. And so when we enter the presence of God, we not only go through the gate, we not only go up the steps, but we go in to the very presence of God.

The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus is our great high priest who entered into the Holy of Holies in order to make the Holy of Holies safe for all of his people.

[ 27 : 38 ] And so that the innermost sanctuary of the presence of God, the innermost shrine of the presence of God, which under the old covenant the high priest could enter into only once a year, the humblest believer may now enter because Jesus has gone before him.

Jesus has opened up the way, and Jesus has enabled him to go. But Ezekiel is reminding us that we need to come as we are, and not as other people see us, not in terms of the social standing that we may enjoy, but to come as we are, to come as sinners, to come as God's creatures, to become as the servants of God, and to stand and to live in his presence as we are.

And so we are invited to enter into the very heart of the presence of God. And tonight we can give God thanks that we have someone to lead us into his presence.

Ezekiel had a surveyor who was an angel. God has given us a saviour in the Lord Jesus Christ. And it is he who will lead us, take us by the hand and lead us through the forbidding gates.

It is he who will tell the guards that we are under his protection. It is he who will enable us to go where only the priests are allowed, because he is our great high priest.

[ 29 : 04 ] He offers to lead us, he offers to guide us into the very presence of God. And when we come to these steps, which are high and difficult, he will help you as you climb up these steps.

These steps may be high, they may be steep, but he will help you, he will lift you, he will bring you into the presence of God. The strength that you need to climb these steps is not your own strength, he provides it.

Your own strength will not get you there, he provides it, he provides that strength, he in fact becomes a kind of elevator, a lift that will lift you up into the presence of God.

before taking you into the temple proper, he will lead you to the altar in the inner court where the daily sacrifices were offered. Remind you that he himself died once for all for your sins, so that there is no need for any more sacrifices to be offered.

He will invite you to confess your sins afresh to him with a promise that as you do, he will remove your guilt and enable you to follow him into the holy place and yes, even into the holy of holies.

[ 30 : 22 ] So he is our forerunner who has gone before us. He has gone before us into the presence of God. He has gone before us to prepare the way for us and he invites us to follow him and he takes us by the hand, he is willing to take us by the hand and to lead us in to the presence of God.

And so Ezekiel's temple is, I believe, a virtual temple. It's a religious temple, it's an aid to devotion to help us use our imagination as we worship God.

We need to use our imaginations. Imagination is very important. It must be imagination and fantasy are not the same thing. And apocalyptic literature like Ezekiel invites us to use our imagination. salvation. And here, in this plan of the temple, he is inviting us to see this plan as a means of helping us each time we come in, or we seek to come into the presence of God.

And he invites us not only to come, but he invites us to share his vision with others, to tell others of the great privilege that we have discovered in serving the Lord, the wonder, the marvel, the power of the salvation of God.

[ 31 : 43 ] He invites us to have a vision. Have a vision tonight of seeing men and women redeemed, of seeing men and women born again, of seeing men and women coming to Jesus as their great high priest and asking him to lead them into the presence of God.

May God grant that we may have that vision. Helen Keller, the famous blind writer, with us once, what is worse than being blind?

Her reply was to have sight without vision. It's so easy for us in the church to have sight, to know our doctrine, to know our Bibles, and yet to lack vision.

Now, Ezekiel is helping us to have a vision, a vision of the presence of God, a vision of the purposes of God, because his vision is taken up by John and developed there and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to give us a whole new picture, a whole new worldview of what life is about, where history is going.

that's the kind of vision that God wants us to have. May God grant that we may have that vision tonight, and that we may share that vision with those who are blind, or with those who of sight, and of vision.