

Called to be God's Prophet

SCOTT HOEZEE

Back in the 1970's, when I was a boy, there was a huge UFO craze. Alleged UFO sightings were often on the news, and there were a few TV series devoted to the subject of extraterrestrials visiting the earth in flying saucers and such. In the midst of all that, a Bible scholar published a book in which he claimed that maybe the strange visions in the first part of the book of Ezekiel were Ezekiel's encounter with a UFO and with aliens from another world. It was an odd theory to advance, but when you look at what Ezekiel describes, you have to admit that it is itself downright odd and bizarre. Today on *Groundwork*, we begin a series on this strange and sometimes difficult book. Stay tuned.

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, we are starting a new series with this program today. It is going to look at the book of Ezekiel; a five-part series. A book, Darrell, that is one part narrative, and then there are also a lot of what the genre of apocalyptic is in this book as well.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, in the apocalyptic literature, you see there are these fantastical visions and powerful signs. It is really interesting, when people try to interpret those, that they come up with a variety of different conclusions; but the good news is, when we dig into scripture and we allow it to speak to us, we can learn something about what God has to say to his people; and he is going to use Ezekiel as the visual reminder in a very literal way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we think of prophets using a visual reminder, that is true in Ezekiel's case, because what he acts out...what he is going to do physically sometimes is just as important as the *words* he speaks. We usually think of a prophet preaching, but as we are going to see, Ezekiel does a lot of acting out as well. But as we get going, let's set the stage just briefly in the first program of this series. As near as we can tell, Ezekiel was born in the kingdom of Judah. That is the southern kingdom of Israel. We often kind of use Judah and Israel synonymously, but technically, he was in the southern kingdom of Judah. We think he was born around 627 BC, and that, in the ancient Near East, Darrell, was a time of a lot of unrest.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, we have in the southern kingdom, Babylon is coming through to take over and exile the people of Judah—the people of Israel. We are going to interchange them, so don't be nervous about that...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

When we say "Israel" we are talking about God's children en masse, and then Judah is a specific place where Ezekiel was called to prophesy; but not only do they have this political unrest, Scott, we have spiritual unrest

as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is exactly right. So, King Nebuchadnezzar comes in and he sets his sights on Israel. He is like most kings in that time, interested in conquest. He wants to make his territory bigger. So, he conquers Israel, but as you just said, the reason for that happening is the spiritual mess in Israel; and anybody who knows the history of Israel's kings, both in the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, after the time of Solomon when the kingdom split, it didn't matter, really, if you were in the northern kingdom or the southern kingdom, king after king after king dumped God's laws, broke God's covenant, let people engage in idolatry and Baal worship, mistreated the poor; and yet, Darrell, despite all of that really obvious, gross disobedience of God, Israel thought God was on their side and they couldn't be touched. The people of Judah thought God is our chum. It is what commentator Daniel Block called Israel's house of pride. They were just sure God was on their side, and nothing could hurt them.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, what we know about that history is that Israel came into what is a vicious cycle of disobedience to God and trying to run back to God and have God clean up the mess they made; and then they go back and forth and back and forth to the point where they literally rebel against God and they don't come back. And so, they had really forgotten the law that they had promised that they would follow that was given to them by Moses in Deuteronomy...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, right.

DARRELL DELANEY

And he literally says if you obey me you will be blessed, if you disobey me you will be cursed and you will be driven into other nations; and they had forgotten that, and that is what Ezekiel is trying to show them, that they cannot keep God as a lucky charm or a rabbit's foot or a lucky number or whatnot, to keep their relationship with him just as a proximity thing: We are close to him, he is ours, and nothing is going to happen to us. How wrong they were, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is Ezekiel's job to tell them that, but lets now go to Chapter 1, and here is how it all begins: ²On the fifth of the month—it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin—³the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the Lord was on him. (And Ezekiel says:) ⁴I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, ⁵and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was human, ⁶but each of them had four faces and four wings. ⁷Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. ⁸Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. All four of them had faces and wings, ⁹and the wings of one touched the wings of another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved. ¹⁰Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a human being, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left side the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle. ¹⁵As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four faces. ¹⁶This was the appearance and structure of the wheels: They sparkled like topaz, and all four looked alike. Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel. ¹⁷As they moved, they would go in any one of the four directions the creatures faced; the wheels did not change direction as the creatures went. ¹⁸Their rims were high and awesome, and all four rims were full of eyes all around.

DARRELL DELANEY

Now, as you can see, Scott, Ezekiel is having a very hard time trying to describe what his vision is...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

He says there is an appearance of this...it kind of looks like that...and he is literally struggling to try to put into words what this vision means, and he is really having a hard time, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The original Hebrew scholars who know Hebrew better than me say it is a little bit of a hot mess, because, indeed, I think it blew his mind; but when you step back, most commentators say what Ezekiel is seeing is the throne chariot of God, and it is absolutely astonishing to see.

DARRELL DELANEY

And the fact that it has a wheel intersecting a wheel means that it can go anyplace. It is an allusion to what I think is the omnipresence of God, and the power and the glory and the splendor of who he is. This is the creator of the universe who is literally displaying himself to his creation; and it is a picture of a God who is not tame or safe.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; and so, the function of this wild vision isn't just to be wild for wildness' sake. It is to tell Israel: Look, you think you've got Yahweh in your back pocket; huh-uh; *this* is who God is. The power and the splendor and the transcendence is mind-blowing indeed; and this, I think, Darrell, was meant to shake Israel up to say boy, we were wrong. If *that* is who God is, yes, he is not our lucky charm; he is not under our control; this is the awesome God.

DARRELL DELANEY

This is where the book begins. He has this wonderful vision of God, and shows how mighty God is; but we also are going to see in the next segment where God is getting Ezekiel ready for the message, so stay tuned.
Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork* and this first episode in a five-part series on the prophetic book, and the apocalyptic book, of Ezekiel. Darrell, we just looked at Chapter 1, and it's literally mind-blowing...mind-numbing vision of the throne chariot of God, which was so spectacular, Ezekiel could hardly describe it; and we just said that the reason that is the way this book begins was to shake Israel up to say: Look, you think you have had God in your back pocket, you think God has been under *your* control; look at who God *really* is. He is awesome, and not your pet.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is beautiful to be reminded, and sometimes it is humbling to be reminded that God is transcendent...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

And that he is not just going to be eminently in our little world and doing the things that we think he should do. In our finitude, we think we can control God and limit God, but we realize God is much bigger; and Ezekiel gets this vision to be reminded, and Israel should be reminded as well, that he is big and he is huge; but then, you know, when you think about how people get their calls to ministry, we often ask that question a lot: How did you get called into the ministry? We are expecting to hear something that will be encouraging, reassuring, but this is not what Ezekiel is feeling at this point in the chapter.

Scott Hoezee:

Now, in fact, we are going to jump ahead a little bit, and then we will backfill. So, we were just looking in Chapter 1, we will get to Chapter 2, but Darrell, let's jump ahead a little bit to the middle of Chapter 3 to find out how Ezekiel is feeling after God calls him.

DARRELL DELANEY

Okay; picking up at verse 12, it says: Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me a loud rumbling sound as the glory of the Lord rose from the place where it was standing. ¹³It was the sound of the wings of the living creatures brushing against each other and the sound of the wheels beside them, a loud rumbling sound. ¹⁴The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the Lord on me. ¹⁵I came to the exiles who lived at Tel Aviv near the Kebar River. And there, where they were living, I sat among them for seven days—deeply distressed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, here is a call story that doesn't end happily, or with someone saying: Yeah, you know, ever since the Lord called me, I have just been blessed and blessed upon blessed to serve the Lord. No; he is bitter, he is in distress; and when it is all finished, he just sits silent for a week because of what God said to him. So, the nature of Ezekiel's call is what made him end up like this.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is really powerful that God would give him this overwhelming call. I think the call of any ministry is overwhelming, whether you are going into the pulpit or you are going into the office, it can be overwhelming; and Ezekiel is angry because of what God says to him in Chapter 2. ¹He said to me, "Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you." ²As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. ³He said, "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day. ⁴The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says.' ⁵And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a prophet has been among them. ⁶And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or be terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people. ⁷You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious."

SCOTT HOEZEE

I always figure that if God has to tell you that often not to be afraid, there is probably a really good reason to actually be afraid...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But two main themes are coming into focus here, Darrell. One is that Israel is...Judah, the southern kingdom of Judah...Israel is rebellious. It is like a proverbial broken record. Israel...the people of Judah...Ezekiel's people...are a rebellious house. They have drifted so far from God that they are not going to understand a word Ezekiel says to them. In fact, just a little bit earlier in Chapter 3, God says that they are so far from the truth that now hearing the truth is going to be like hearing a different language. God says this in verse 4: He then said to me, "Son of man, go now to the people of Israel and speak my words to them. ⁵You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and strange language, but to the people of Israel—⁶not to many peoples of obscure speech and strange language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely if I had sent you to them, they would have listened to you. ⁷But the people of Israel are not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for all the Israelites are hardened and obstinate." So, God is basically saying: You know what? If I sent you to the Phoenicians, and gave you a translator, they would have a better shot at understanding my word than Israel because it is not a language barrier. You speak the same language, Ezekiel; it is a barrier of hearts and minds.

DARRELL DELANEY

You know what is crazy, Scott, is that when rebellion sets in, it dumbs down your senses. It makes you deaf, it makes your heart hard, it makes you not want to feel, it makes you want to do the things that are opposite of what God wants you to do. This isn't oops, I did it again. This is a literal, premeditated, we are going to do this whether God loves it or not; which is why God continues to point out the fact that they are rebellious and obstinate.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is why bitterness and not joy, anger and not happiness is what floods Ezekiel's soul at the conclusion of his call. God isn't calling Ezekiel to success but to faithfulness; but the faithfulness...again, God has to keep telling him: Don't be afraid; but I think he probably is a little bit anyway. Before we close out this episode, we will ponder a little bit more what all this means today; but just for now, Darrell, I think we can note that we maybe cannot identify with Ezekiel, most of us, but we can maybe identify with the people to whom Ezekiel preached and prophesied; and I think we can all admit that none of us is happy if we sense that there is a challenging word from God and it is being directed to us, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, if that happens in a sermon, in my experience...maybe yours too, I don't know...but in my experience, if somebody senses in a sermon that they are being challenged, that is the sermon they are probably going to criticize the minister for.

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They are not going to say: Wow! That really cut me to the heart. I have to change. They are going to say: Now, Pastor. I think you were too political today; or, you were expressing your own opinion. Don't do that in the pulpit. Being led to repentance doesn't happen real fast for any of us.

DARRELL DELANEY

Well, in west Michigan people will lightly push back by sending you an e-mail or having a coffee with you to try and explain where you went wrong in your sermon, but it really takes great humility and a walk of discipleship to receive a word and say: Maybe I need to change something. In any event, as we close out this program of Ezekiel, we will see a memorable image as to how God gets his word across. So, stay tuned.
Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Darrell, let's dig right back into scripture and read these opening words from Ezekiel 3. We have been bebopping around a little bit in Ezekiel 2 and 3, but now let's go to the beginning of 3: And he said to me, (God said to me), "Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel." ²So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. ³Then he said to me, "Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it." So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is really an interesting contrast based on what we were talking about in the last segment, Scott, where he has this bitterness and he has this anger, but this scroll, which is filled with God's Word, is sweet to the taste, which refers, to me, to how good God's Word is, even though it may make you feel bitter; even though it may make you feel upset; the Word is still a good word, and it is from a good God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and this way of getting God's Word inside you is used elsewhere in scripture, too; in fact, there is another passage with another prophet somewhere, where he eats the scroll and says: Oh, that takes good; and then a few minutes later it is like: Oh, no; it didn't land in my stomach right at all...

DARRELL DELANEY

I think it's in Revelation...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, this is churning in my stomach now. But this is a vivid way to get across the idea that a prophet is literally filled with the Word of God, and that is what God wants for Ezekiel, but even though...as you just said, Darrell...even though it was sweet in his mouth, at the end of the call, as we just saw, Ezekiel himself is bitter and he is angry, and he sits silent for seven whole days, right? Now, at the end of that week, what happens?

²⁴Then the Spirit came to me and raised me into my feet. He spoke to me and said: "Go, shut yourself inside your house. ²⁵And you, son of man, they will tie with ropes; you will be bound so that you cannot go out among the people. ²⁶I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be silent and unable to rebuke them, for they are a rebellious people. ²⁷But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says.' Whoever will listen let them listen, and whoever will refuse let them refuse; for they are a rebellious people."

Kind of like a broken record. They are rebellious...they are rebellious... It is all rather strange. He sits silent for a week, then God gets him up on his feet and says: Now go in your house and be silent there for a while. They are going to tie you up. Your tongue is going to stick to the roof of your mouth. But then eventually I am going to speak. So, there is a lot of back and forth here and it can be a little bit confusing if you are just kind of reading it; but the point being, when Ezekiel speaks, God has all but telegraphed: this is not going to go well.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They are not going to listen.

DARRELL DELANEY

The prophet Ezekiel is not judged by whether the people respond well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

He is judged by the obedience of the call...saying what God needs to say...and even if they listen or fail to listen, and that comes up as a refrain as well, it is the challenge of obedience for the messenger of God's Word. Whether that person gets a lot of converts or whether people hear it or not, I don't think Ezekiel had one convert in his ministry...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

In his entire ministry; but the point is that he was obedient to what God called him to do, and that was the main goal.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He was faithful, even though it is going to cost him a lot in the end. So, that is what the beginning of the set up of the book of Ezekiel is: this grand, grand vision, and then this call, even though God says they are not going to...they are rebellious; and then eating the scroll, and then getting ready to speak. He really hasn't spoken yet. I mean, we are three chapters in, and he really hasn't said anything yet; but we are getting ready; and as we will see in the next program, there will be a series of sort of acted out skits almost once he gets moving. So, that is Ezekiel, but a lot of us maybe don't identify with the prophet; but as we said at the end of the last segment in this program, we maybe can identify with the receivers of a prophetic word; and then the question is: Are we today able to receive the truth?

DARRELL DELANEY

The truth has become a subjective opinion, and whoever has the loudest opinion then that means they are the most truthful. So, if I don't believe what you are saying, and you don't believe what I am saying, I might not have a conversation with you. I might get adamant and go online and post something, or I might get it from my favorite media stream or whatever. It is interesting how truth has degenerated into whoever has the loudest or most passionate opinion, when there really is a standard of truth that we should be following; it comes from God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, when I was in seminary in the 1980s, and we studied what is called postmodernism, one of the main things we looked at was this theory going, relativism: Everything is up in the air; everything is up for grabs; what is true for me doesn't have to be true for you. The Church was pretty good at criticizing that, right? That was kind of obvious. Like, oh, there is no such thing as objective truth. Well, most Christians didn't fall for that; but there has been this almost politicization of truth; and this has crept into the Church, and we have seen it with the Covid-19 pandemic. In recent years, people have had different ideas and different truths by which they operated; and it has divided congregations; it has crushed a lot of pastors; it has broken apart even families. So, the question is, Darrell, the people of Israel, God said over and over, cannot hear the truth anymore. I think it is a little scary to ask, but again, the question comes: Can we?

DARRELL DELANEY

I think it is a very important point for us to have a heart examined by God, so that we can know: Hey, listen; this truth needs to penetrate into my heart; this truth I need to humbly accept; and even if it is not what I want to hear, it is what I *need* to hear; but it takes a degree of spiritual maturity to accept criticism in a way that is constructive, and to learn from the conviction that the Holy Spirit is trying to bring. That is literally his job, to convict us; and God is convicting us because he loves us, but it takes humility to do that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Humility...yes, that is the key thing. We mentioned earlier a commentator named Daniel Block, who has written a good, two-volume commentary on Ezekiel, and he said that Israel was deluded because they had, you know, a house of pride, and it had different pillars that held up the house; but they were proud. They thought they had God and spirituality all sewn up; and a proud heart is a heart that cannot receive the truth of God. As you just said, Darrell, humility...having a tender heart...praying for humility...for openness. I think that is something that we all need to do.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is a very beautiful thing for us if we are counted among the people who will listen, because he is sent to people who will and will not listen...whether they listen or not. We want to be the people who do listen because God has given us hope in his Word; thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Darrell Delaney, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue our study of this prophetic book of Ezekiel with the messages and signs that God gives Ezekiel to perform for his people in Chapters 4-6 and 12.

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DARRELL DELANEY

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