

During my university years, I once had a summer job working at a fertilizer plant. I didn't really know anything about how it worked. I just got the job through a family friend. And it paid decent money.

I had grown up on a Christian family and was fairly serious about my faith. So on the first day, I arrived and entered into a strange new world. I moved from the university lecture hall to a manufacturing facility with trains, heavy equipment, had physical labor and workers who knew nothing of God. Some had an amazing ability to pile on curse words in their sentences. Some were able to use four letter words as nouns, verbs, adjectives, conjunctions, instructions and exclamations. Sometimes they would do that in the same sentence.

I worked out by the trains where they unloaded phosphate for the fertilizer. They had a little shack there for us to sit in while we waited for the train especially on cold days. The shack was wall papered with sunshine girls. The lunch room calendar had pictures of girls barely wearing anything.

Then they started to notice I didn't swear like they did. I tried not to laugh or even smile at questionable jokes. I didn't have amazing stories of wild parties from the weekend. So each day was an endurance test. You were tested physically by the labor. But there were non-stop and sudden spiritual tests to my loyalty to Christ. That environment was one of the most godless I've ever encountered. God or Jesus' name got profaned every day multiple times. You might even classify it as a "God-forsaken place."

The phrase "god-forsaken" is usually used to describe a place that is dreary or dismal. It means the place or situation lacks attraction. The phrase must have some roots connected to God. God is associated with life, joy, beauty and hope. So maybe places or situations without life, joy or hope got named God-forsaken.

We can live, work or go to school in so called god-forsaken environments. You might be the only Christian in your class or program. You might be the only Christian in your family or in your marriage. You might be the only Christian at work. So you might see these as God forsaken environments.

Or we might feel forsaken by the Lord because of some difficult situation. You sit by the hospital bed of a loved one and wonder about God's concern. You process the news of a difficult diagnosis. You're having a tough day dealing with a long term care situation or we are going through a rough time with our kids or parents. Someone in your family doubts God or steps further away from God. You're grieving the loss of a loved one. You wonder when this pain might go away.

The prophet Ezekiel may have had similar thoughts. The Babylonians had forcibly relocated thousands of Jerusalem's residents, including Ezekiel to Babylon. Israelites might call it the most god-forsaken place in the world. They saw idols everywhere and worshipped multiple gods. The Babylonians taunted the Israelites claiming Babylon's god Marduk defeated Israel's God, Yahweh. This had gone on for 5 years. They may have wondered about their future and what God was doing.

But what if there is no such thing as a god forsaken place? Despite the fact that God was not honored or glorified at that fertilizer plant, what if God was still there? What if He still cared about the people? What if He is with us even when we feel forsaken? We will explore this today as we walk through the first vision Ezekiel shares with us. I pray that the Lord will speak to you about His presence and Lordship over any situation that you might think is God forsaken in your life. (Please find Ezekiel 1 - Page 588 in the Bibles).

### **Ezekiel 1 (ESV)**

**1 In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. 2 On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin), 3 the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the Chebar canal, and the hand of the Lord was upon him there.**

**4 As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal. 5 And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, 6 but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. 7 Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot. And they sparkled like burnished bronze. 8 Under their wings on their four sides they had human**

hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: 9 their wings touched one another. Each one of them went straight forward, without turning as they went. 10 As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle. 11 Such were their faces. And their wings were spread out above. Each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. 12 And each went straight forward. Wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went. 13 As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. And the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. 14 And the living creatures darted to and fro, like the appearance of a flash of lightning.

15 Now as I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them. 16 As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction: their appearance was like the gleaming of beryl. And the four had the same likeness, their appearance and construction being as it were a wheel within a wheel. 17 When they went, they went in any of their four directions without turning as they went. 18 And their rims were tall and awesome, and the rims of all four were full of eyes all around. 19 And when the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them; and when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose. 20 Wherever the spirit wanted to go, they went, and the wheels rose along with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. 21 When those went, these went; and when those stood, these stood; and when those rose from the earth, the wheels rose along with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

22 Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads. 23 And under the expanse their wings were stretched out straight, one toward another. And each creature had two wings covering its body. 24 And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army. When they stood still, they let down their wings. 25 And there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads. When they stood still, they let down their wings.

26 And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. 27 And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. 28 Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around.

Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

This passage is quite strange to us modern readers. It has stirred up many articles and books that attempt to explain its meaning. It's even appeared on a TV show called Ancient Aliens. The show claims Ezekiel saw some sort of UFO that he struggled to describe.

But closer examination of this passage will reveal something more familiar especially to an ancient Israelite like Ezekiel. So I'm going to unpack the different sections of this vision following a simple pattern.

We'll look at what Ezekiel saw. Then we'll search for similarities in other Bible passages. Then we'll consider the meaning or symbolism behind each section that Ezekiel sees. You can follow along on the picture from the Bible Project that we've included as an insert. If you have the full poster of Ezekiel, we're looking at the top left corner.

**What does Ezekiel see?** He first sees **a storm cloud with something like gleaming metal in the middle.** In verse 4. It shines with brilliance. Fire or lightning bolts dart back and forth. Glorious radiance surrounds the cloud. Something like molten metal shone out from the center.

Now we might conclude, that's nothing more than a thunder storm. Yet thunderstorms usually have very dark clouds. They don't have a gleaming metal like appearance in the middle. For the ancient Israelite this description would remind them of another significant cloud moment in their people's history. Back when they had just escaped slavery in Egypt and gathered at a Mountain called Sinai. Listen to what they experienced. Exodus 19:16-18 - "On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly." So you've got a cloud, thunders, lightnings and fire in the cloud somehow. Here in Ezekiel you've got a cloud with lightning darting back and forth and the look of gleaming fire in the middle.

What might this all mean? Well it portrays the power of the Lord. It also portrays the transcendent glory of God. He is not like the gods of other nations that you could paint on a wall or carve in an idol. He does not need constant polishing to stay shiny and bright. The Lord's glory radiates out from Himself. When the Lord appeared in a storm, it often symbolized a day of reckoning.

But this is only the initial piece of the vision. In the next section, things get really interesting. **Ezekiel sees four fiery creatures with four faces and four wings.** They take up verses 5-14 of the vision. You can see an artist's depiction of them on the drawing. Ezekiel says they have a human likeness but then they seem quite unhuman. They have 4 faces, 4 wings and though they have straight legs, their

feet look like a calf's foot. The creatures sparkle according to verse 7. Under their wings they have human hands which are not shown on this drawing. That's because two of their four wings are stretched out in the flying position and the other two wings cover their bodies. Somehow they can go change directions without turning.

Then Ezekiel describes the four faces. One is human. Then they have a lion's face on the right side and an ox's face on the left. They also had an eagle's face. You can see the artist's depiction of the ox, lion and eagle's face along with the human one. He concludes the description by emphasizing their fiery nature. Verse 13 – "They appeared like burning coals of fire or like the appearance of torches darting to and fro. The fire was bright. Out of it came lightning bolts." These creatures were part of the gleaming metal appearance Ezekiel saw at the center of the cloud.

Now these creatures are weird. We can't put all the pieces together to make them look like something recognizable. That is the point. These are, what one commentator calls, "category breaking creatures." They bring together pieces of creation that are not supposed to be together. Yet they somehow are.

We find similar creatures in Isaiah 6. This is another vision of God. There, the creatures are called seraphim. Here, Ezekiel will name them cherubim in chapter 10. They show up in different key moments in Scripture. One example is Genesis 3:24. Adam and Eve have sinned by eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. So the Lord pronounces the curse on Adam, Eve and the serpent. Then he drives them from the Garden of Eden to protect them. Genesis 3:24 describes this moment. "He drove out the man, and at the east of the Garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life." So there you have cherubim and flames. They show up again in the design for the temple. Solomon will have cherubim carved and covered with gold to stand in the Holy of Holies with the Ark of the Covenant.

But what do the descriptions of the cherubim point to? Why the face of a man, lion, ox and eagle? These may seem like a random list. Yet to the ancient reader they were familiar symbols. The lion symbolized strength, ferocity and courage. It also served as a symbol of royalty. The eagle was the fastest and most stately bird. The ox was the most valuable domestic animal and a symbol of fertility.

Humans had abilities in reason and intelligence. One commentator says that merged together, these four faced cherubim “declare that the Lord has the strength and majesty of a lion, the swiftness and mobility of an eagle, the procreative power of the bull and the wisdom and reason of humankind.”

Yet we must also pay attention to the number four – four living creatures; four faces; four wings. This number appears to represent the four directions. It points to the universal reign of the Lord. There is no place, no corner, no classroom, no home and no region where the Lord cannot go or rule over. He demonstrates this reality by showing up in the heartland of Babylon to deliver this vision to Ezekiel.

So we see God appear as the powerful storm cloud with transcendent glory. Category-breaking creatures called cherubim remind us of His rule over all creation in all places.

Next, **Ezekiel sees four wheels beside the creatures that move by the spirit.** This is in verses 15-21. You see the four wheels at the bottom of the drawing. To us, those wheels don’t serve any practical purpose. There are no axles that connect them. The cherubim’s feet don’t rest on some platform held up by the wheels. In fact, verse 15 says “I saw a wheel on the earth BESIDE the living creatures.” Well what good is a wheel beside something it’s supposed to carry? It has to be underneath and connected somehow.

Yet these wheels fulfill their role. They also gleam or shine. Somehow there is a wheel within a wheel. So that could mean the center part where the spokes attach. Or it could be another wheel at a 90 degree angle which would indicate an ability to go any direction. They also move in four directions without turning. Verse 18 tells us they were awesome rims with eyes all around them. Then Ezekiel reveals what drives the wheels. It’s not a combustion engine. It’s a spirit according to verse 20. The spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. So that’s why there’s no physical connections. The spirit of the living creatures enters the wheels and causes them to move. Ezekiel tells us these wheels can land on the earth. But they can also rise from the earth.

Now this seems very strange to us. Yet we find similar images in other parts of Scripture. In 1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles 28, the writer reviews King David’s plan for the temple in Jerusalem that his son Solomon will build. So he gives instruction for all the furnishings of the temple. Then listen to 1 Chronicles 28:18. So

this is the plan David had in mind, “for the golden chariot of the cherubim that spread their wings and cover the ark of the covenant of the Lord.” So cherubim would ride a chariot in the Holy of Holies. Or listen to a vision from the prophet Daniel 7:9. “As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days (that’s another name for God), took his seat. His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire.” Well that puts some context onto Ezekiel’s vision. He sees some sort of chariot throne. What do these wheels in Ezekiel mean? Filled with divine energy, they display God’s ability to go anywhere at any speed necessary.

Ezekiel then sees **A platform with a throne held up by the four living creatures wings.** Verse 22 to the first half of verse 26. “Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal spread out above their heads.” So this is not a dirty piece of plywood. It is like an awe-inspiring crystal floor. The ancient Israelite who knew their Scriptures would immediately recognize this from another significant incident in their people’s history. In Exodus 24, Israel is at Mount Sinai. Remember God came as the storm cloud in Exodus 19 and 20. Well now they make a covenant with God. The Lord provides an awesome moment for Moses and the 70 elders of Israel. This is Exodus 24:9-10. Then Moses went up [Mt. Sinai] with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the skies themselves.” That sounds a lot like an expanse, shining like an awe inspiring crystal in Ezekiel’s vision.

Then for the first time, Ezekiel describes what he heard. The sound of the cherubim’s wings sounded like many waters, or the voice of the Lord, or a massive army approaching. So not only was this an awe inspiring sight. It was an awe-inspiring sound. Then above the expanse he sees a throne, verse 26 like sapphire or lapis lazuli. That is a brilliant blue color.

Then Ezekiel sees the culmination of this vision - **A human like figure that blazes with glory and fire.** Middle of verse 26 to the end. “And seated above the likeness of the throne was a likeness with human appearance. And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the

appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness all around him. Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around.”

Now did you notice the recurrence of two phrases over and over? They are “was a likeness” and “had the appearance of.” (“was a likeness” – 4 times, “appearance” 10 times). Ezekiel sees someone beyond description. He struggles to describe them. He’s not seen anyone like this in his life. So he does his best. He sees a human like figure but it’s no ordinary human. From his waist up, he gleams like glowing metal with fire all around. From his waist down, it looks like fire all around.

Notice that this blazing-with-glory figure is seated on a throne above everything; above the cherubim and the wheels and the earth and Babylon. He reigns over it all.

Ezekiel finally realizes who he sees in the second half of verse 28. “Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.” The glory is the physical manifestation of God’s presence.

All of this adds up to a glorious piece of good news for Ezekiel. **Ezekiel sees that the glorious God rules over all creation even when His people experience exile.** In this vision, God redefines Ezekiel’s categories for relationship with Him. The Israelites, including Ezekiel, thought they could meet with God only in the temple in Jerusalem. So even when they were away from Jerusalem, they would pray towards it because that’s where the Lord was. But here the Lord shows that all of creation is his temple. He lives on a moving throne that goes everywhere. There is no place that is beyond His presence, sight or reign.

Though this is the worst of times for the Jews, this vision reveals that God is still on His throne. God still reigns as sovereign over history and Babylon. God will accomplish His purposes and judge evil. That includes the sins of his own people. We will soon see that the Israelites are in Babylon because of their own sin. Yet God has not forsaken His people. Though there is judgment, He will also restore. This exile will not last forever.

Not only is God sovereign. He is loving. God demonstrated His love by sending His Son in to the ultimate exile so that we might have life. Jesus left the familiar and glorious realm of God’s presence. In

obedience to His Father, he became human. He became a servant and was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. He actually did experience God forsakenness so that we wouldn't have to. Now, those who know Christ have this glorious Lord on their side.

So when it feels like God has forsaken our corner of the universe, our classroom, our workplace, our family or our loved one's hospital room, we need to revisit Ezekiel's vision.

It reveals the all-powerful and all-seeing God. He rapidly and effortlessly travels to any part of the earth. He is beyond human description and comprehension. He is lord over every creature earthly and heavenly. He comes in righteousness to bring judgment upon evil.

**Since the glorious God rules over all creation even when His people experience exile, we must run to Him to experience safety.** Proverbs 18:10 – The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous man runs to it and is safe. How do you run to the Lord's name as a strong tower? You rehearse who the Lord is. Ezekiel gives us multiple images and descriptions to fuel our thinking. So let's practice this now.

Think of some situation in your life where it feels kind of God forsaken? It's hard and you don't understand what God is doing or where He is. I'd invite you to ask the Lord to point you to one piece of this vision He wants you to focus on that addresses this situation. Maybe it's his glory, or power, or sovereignty, or all seeing, or all knowing, or ability to go anywhere and be anywhere, or His beauty or His willingness to reveal Himself. Let's spend a few moments pondering that one attribute of the Lord. . . . Now imagine you are entering the tower of the Lord who has that attribute where you will be safe. "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous person runs to it and is safe." Such is the appearance of the glory of the Lord. And as we've seen it today, we fall on our faces in worship.