THE NAMES OF GOD

“Jehovah-shammah: The Lord is THERE” – Part Eight

“And the name of the city from that time on will be: THE LORD is THERE.”
Ezekiel 48:35

We don’t come to know God intellectually or academically, but experientially. It is through the stories of people in Scripture that the Hebrew names of God are revealed and express their experience of Him. Ezekiel’s story may be unfamiliar to many of us, but in this last of an eight part series, Author and Bible teacher, Charles Price, takes us through Ezekiel’s visions, leading to a climax in which he discovers, “Jehovah-shammah”, meaning “The Lord is there.”

Ezekiel prophesized during the period of the exile of Judah in Babylon, which was enforced by King Nebuchadnezzar. In Babylon, Ezekiel’s big message was not about getting the people back to God, but getting God back to the people. The book opens with a strange vision. He saw something that appeared to be made of metal with glowing lights and fire underneath. There were wheels and wheels within the wheels that could move in any direction. It had four faces, wings and flashes of lightning that came from under the vision.

Theologians call what Ezekiel saw a ‘theophany’, which is a physical manifestation of God prior to His incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ. This is an unusual theophany; a big, powerful and noisy image, whereas most theophanies in the Old Testament are of God appearing in human or angelic form. The image Ezekiel sees portrays the transcendence of God, but Israel’s tendency was to reduce God to being a tribal God; that is, He was the God of Israel – period. God lived in the temple in Jerusalem where His presence was known to be. Now the exiles are in Babylon, and Ezekiel discovers that God didn’t just live in the temple, but He lived in Babylon as well.

Ezekiel begins with visions of God while sitting with the exiles by the Kebar River in Babylon. He sees God in an alien place in oppressive territory. There is a myth that there are some ‘out of bound’ places for God. Many people say that “God cannot look on sin”, but the reality is that we often meet God in our sin. Is God to be found in the brothels of Calcutta? The answer is “yes”. In the boardrooms of corporations corrupted by greed? “Yes”. In fact, Romans 5:20 says, “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more.”

God is in all places at all times, but the people also needed to know the imminence of God. That is, the immediate presence of God, that He is actually there, involved and accessible. At various times in his visions, Ezekiel comes back to the temple in Jerusalem. When Solomon had built it and consecrated it, 2 Chronicles 5:13 says, “Then the temple of the LORD was filled with a cloud, and the priests could not perform their duties because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the temple.” God called it a “dwelling for my name”.

The people had the privilege of approaching God in the holy of holies through a priest, but they had to bring five different offerings that represented the whole spectrum of their relationship with God. The guilt offering acknowledged their need for their sin to be cleansed. The sin offering recognized that the cause of their sin was themselves, and the fellowship offering indicated their need for communion with God. The grain offering combined the spiritual and secular, making no distinction between them, and the burnt offering symbolized everything they were being offered up to God. Fast track into the New Testament and the temple in Jerusalem is no longer significant, but God still
has His temple. It isn’t made of brick and mortar, but dwells in the bodies of His people. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6:16, “For we are the temple of the living God.”

The temple in the Old Testament foreshadows the dwelling of God in His people. Just as there were conditions in which the people of the Old Testament could approach God, so there are conditions we need to meet. Hebrews 10:19 says, “We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body…” It is through the blood of Jesus that we may enjoy the presence and fellowship of God.

The tragedy that takes place in the temple in Jerusalem is that God departs from it. Ezekiel sees this in a vision. “Then the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim. While I watched, the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground, and as they went, the wheels went with them” (Ezekiel 10:18-19). The Jews boasted that they would always be safe under the protection of God, and would always have His presence. Psalm 132:13 says, “The LORD has chosen Zion, he has desired it for his dwelling: This is my resting place for ever and ever.” Because of this, they didn’t think it was possible that God would leave them, and they felt at liberty to sin without restraint while still presuming the presence of God.

When it comes to the New Testament, the Bible teaches that, as Christians, we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption. But we cannot let that blind us to the fact we may quench, grieve, limit and resist the Holy Spirit to where we effectively drive Him from His active working in our lives. We can harbour things in our hearts that become contrary to the Holy Spirit. This was the message Ezekiel is bringing to the people. The temple became unfit for the presence of God. It had been profaned by the sin, arrogance, rebellion and indifference of the people.

There are two main reasons why God left the temple: idolatry, which provokes God to jealousy, and secrecy, where they are not open and honest with God. Idols usually start as our servants in areas we think will benefit us, but they usually end up becoming our masters, and will eventually destroy us. “Son of man,” God said to Ezekiel, “these men have set up idols in their hearts” (Ezekiel 14:3). John Calvin wrote, “The human mind is a perpetual factory of idols.” Idolatry can come in many forms: money, materialism, sex, power, self-image, ambition, reputation.

“Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, ‘The LORD does not see us,’” (Ezekiel 8:12) There is a darkness of unknowing that is good. Isaiah 45:3 says that God gives us the treasures of darkness. But there is also a darkness of corruption and deceit. Jesus said, “Men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). Hidden things usually become destructive. Unacknowledged sin intensifies, grows in power and usually becomes addictive.

The good news is that at the end of the book, Ezekiel has a vision of God coming back to the temple. He enters through the east gate, His voice like the roar of rushing waters, and the land radiant with His glory. “Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner courts and the glory of the LORD filled the temple” (Ezekiel 43:5). Then Ezekiel sees them block the east gate entrance so that nothing more could enter, which depicts nothing more can be added to God.

God said to Ezekiel, “Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet” (Ezekiel 43:7). The throne speaks of kingship, and is the place where the relationship with God is one of submission to Him. This is fundamental to the Christian life. If we are to enjoy the presence and working of God, He has to occupy the throne in our hearts where we submit entirely to His agenda and not our own. The ‘soles of my feet’ is a familiar picture in the Old Testament, and represents occupied territory. God said to Moses, “Every place where you set your feet will be yours” (Deuteronomy 11:24). The soles of His feet speaks of God as conqueror.
From the heart of the temple, Ezekiel sees a river flowing that becomes increasingly deeper and deeper. It is benefitting the entire city, bringing restoration and life. At the end of the book, God tells Ezekiel how He is dividing the land and states the boundaries for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Then in a climactic conclusion, God said to Ezekiel, “And the name of the city from that time on will be: Jehovah-shammah, ‘THE LORD IS THERE’.”

Does that describe our lives? Are we living in perpetual awareness of the presence of Christ within us, knowing He is always there, active and accessible? Does He occupy the throne of our hearts?