

Why Ezekiel?

I know Ezekiel has been pretty tough going, either because of the confronting language or what seems to be a pretty relentless focus on sin and judgement, and some of you might be wondering why when the children are listening to the livestream with you or you are already feeling a little low we are preaching on Ezekiel.

It is because Ezekiel was sent to bring the word of God to a people who, like many of us, were sad, very sad for the great and real loss they had suffered. You see that sadness in Psalm 137 – ‘By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion’. The exiles had lost their former life completely, all that was familiar, all that gave them joy, all that they looked to to give them security – King, city, temple, land, and had had their faith in the LORD shaken by their loss. At least at the beginning of Ezekiel’s prophecy all they wanted, all they were hoping for, was for things to go back to normal, to be able to go back to Jerusalem, go back to having their own king, being in their own place.

And they were wanting people to tell them everything would be alright, to comfort them and reassure them. We read in Ezekiel and particularly in Jeremiah of false prophets who were reassuring them, saying to them ‘Peace, peace’, saying to them the Babylonians would soon be defeated.

But in their sadness and loss the LORD did not send them that message. He sent them Ezekiel with his talk of sin and judgment. That wasn’t because He wanted to deepen the exiles’ depression. We will hear in today’s reading that He wants to give them life, He wants to give them hope. In fact at the end of Ezekiel, from chapter 34 onwards, He outlines an extraordinary hope, a rich hope of restoration of relationship, of resurrection life, of a renewed creation, a hope God Himself will bring to fulfillment.

But the Israelites could only come to that hope through recognising their sin and the rightness of God’s judgment on it, and repenting, turning away from sin and turning back to the LORD. There was no comfort without repentance.

Like the Israelites but in a lesser way we have suffered loss. And We are sad now. I feel it. As part, not the whole, but as part of our response to our circumstances as believing people it is good to consider the book in the Bible which of all the books in the bible was directed to people saddened by their loss, to let Ezekiel give us a context for working through the why question, why

has our God who rules all things let this hardship come upon us. Ezekiel prompts us to consider our sin so that we can turn away from it and find the extraordinary comfort in loss God gives His repentant people.

But we cannot come to that comfort prematurely and waste this disturbance of our comfortable lives. I think we have forgotten just how sinful the society we share in is.

Sexual sin is so rampant we don't notice it. Sexual immorality - heterosexual and homosexual - is publicly supported and approved.

Economic sin – withholding entitlements, underpaying workers, using the courts to avoid accountability, trust in wealth – is rampant

There is violence -Domestic violence, the lawlessness of the drug trade, abortion

Truth as an expectation of public speech has perished. When were you last surprised that a politician or an advertiser was caught out massaging the facts?

Pride – that will not honour God or give Him thanks

Are we free from these sins and the attitudes that lie behind them?

For all these sins there is forgiveness, but we should register these things as abhorrent to our Creator and Judge

And if we were to survey what is called Christian in our society over the last fifty years and today what would we find.

The public shame of child abuse in church institutions, by office holders of churches

The encouragement of sin by the endorsement of sexual immorality by some Christian leaders

In many, at least in the history of protestant denominations, people who have departed from the gospel – denying the resurrection and atoning death of our Lord, repudiating the authority of Scripture

And in some quarters there is Pre-occupation with wealth and health, and a toleration of lying prophecy

And what about us?

Do we share that loss of confidence in God's word so that we hesitate to believe and obey

Have we lost conviction of the truth of the gospel – that there is a judgment and Jesus is Lord, the one who alone can forgive us, rescue us from that judgment, and that life, rich and full, is found in repentance and faith in Him

Do we live knowing ourselves to be servants of our Lord Jesus Christ and longing to hear from Him well done good and faithful servant at the last day?

I guess, uncomfortable as it is, Ezekiel is asking us to consider our lives

And I am not sure that the answer is we are free of those sins, and others.

To prompt your reflection Let me ask you three questions – kind of diagnostic
Which grieves you the most?

Your loss of your ability to go wherever you like, that freedom of movement

Or that the Lord Jesus is daily dishonoured either by being ignored or openly rejected in our society, dismissed as irrelevant

What are you most hoping for, praying for?

That things would go back to normal, that life of prosperous ease which I suspect many of us saw as the real sign of God's blessing

Or that through this time the Lord would bring you to a much deeper reliance on Him and that you would set your hope fully on what HE has promised and not on 'wealth, which is so uncertain'?

Third question

Are you willing to pay a cost like Ezekiel of speaking of sin and judgment so that people can repent and find life

Or do you want comfort for yourself without engaging in those realities which embrace your neighbours as well?

I think this is a good a time to hear Ezekiel

A good time to review our lives and ask if we are the holy people the Lord wants us to be

A good time to find a real and abiding hope that will sustain us in living as we ought, as pilgrims and exiles on earth journeying to the heavenly city

A good time to Renew our evangelistic urgency as we are reminded of both the seriousness of sin, certainty of judgment, and the lengths God goes to to call people rebels to repentance and life – humbling Himself to speak to us in language that will cut through, to persuade and appeal to a people who sought shelter in lies, and to finally commit Himself to personally gather His people and give them new life, in giving them a new heart and new spirit.

So Ezekiel, tough as it is up to chapter 33 – though we are over the hardest chapters, is a timely book, written for us, the word of God we should engage with as we feel a little of the sorrow of loss, the uncertainty of this world's future, and the passion of God for His Holy Name, that people would know He is the Lord who alone is the judge and Saviour of the world.