

Assurance of Final Victory Ezekiel 38-39.

Christmas is coming

Christmas is now only 19 days away and we will be celebrating the birth of our Saviour, rejoicing that Jesus born in a stable is God with us, Lord of all. We will sing of peace,

rejoice with Zechariah of God's presence with His people to deliver them from all their enemies

Luke 1:⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear,

Wonder with Mary at God through this act scattering the proud in the imagination, the thoughts, of their hearts

*Luke 1:⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;*

And we see and we don't see what we rejoice in –

We see it - now we have peace with God through Jesus' death for our sins, now Jesus has authority to give the life of God

And we don't see it.

There is no peace in the world, and God's people are harassed and oppressed by their enemies.

That was true from the beginning of the church. In revelation we read of the church in Smyrna enduring imprisonment and poverty for the faith, of the death of Antipas for the faith in Pergamum

true throughout history – think of the massacre of the Huguenots, French protestants, on St Bartholomew's day in 1572, or the imprisonment and death of Christians in Russia under Stalin

true today. Read the Barnabas Fund newsletter and you will hear of Christians oppressed in Pakistan and Iran, being killed in Nigeria, under pressure in parts of China. Even here there is concern about pressure on Christian teaching on sexuality and gender.

God's people still know trial, distress, persecution, danger and death for faithfulness to Jesus. As Paul says "all day long we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered" Romans 8:36

The rule of God's king Jesus is ignored by many

And you wonder what's going on?

If Jesus has won the victory, why do His people still suffer?

Why is this a world in which the proud and contemptuous still assert their will?

Who is really in charge?

Will this go on forever?

While it is not the whole answer Ezekiel 38-39, the story of Gog and his hordes, has a lot to say to our hearts as we ponder those questions in the lead up to Christmas, things we need to hear.

A lot has been made of this passage and the passages in Revelation 19 and 20 that look back to it as people try and identify contemporary events and characters with those spoken of here

But Ezekiel is written in language and with images that made sense to Ezekiel's hearers – those exiles in Babylon, and so we have to make sure that we read it with care and respect for its context, and the issues Ezekiel is addressing, and not our modern pre-occupations

So what is the context, and what issues does that raise for Ezekiel's hearers?

Context

Ezekiel 38-39 come after God's promises to His people in Ezekiel 34-37 – in fact they assume the fulfilment of those promises

The people we are told are dwelling at peace, enjoying prosperity, in the land identified in verse 18 as Israel

*Ezekiel 38:⁸ After many days you will be mustered. In the latter years you will go against the land that is restored from war, **the land whose people were gathered from many peoples upon the mountains of Israel**, which had been a continual waste. Its people were brought out from the peoples and **now dwell securely, all of them.***

¹¹ and say, 'I will go up against the land of unwalled villages. I will fall upon **the quiet people who dwell securely**, all of them dwelling without walls, and having no bars or gates,' ¹² to seize spoil and carry off plunder, to turn your hand against the waste places that are now inhabited, and the people who were gathered from the nations, **who have acquired livestock and goods, who dwell at the center of the earth.**

They have been gathered from all the nations v. 8, 12 and are now living without fear enjoying that prosperity promised in 36:33-35

So this is a cleansed people, a people with hearts to do God's will, a people in covenant relationship with the LORD, over whom the LORD rules, marked out as His own by the gift of His Spirit [39:29]

And this encounter with God comes before Ezekiel 40-48. Those chapters, which we will look at next week, present Ezekiel's glorious vision of the end, when the LORD dwells among His people for ever in a new creation.

IN this context these chapters address three issues.

Firstly they continue to tell us what the LORD will do to make His holy name known to his people and the nations.

Remember this issue became front and central in chapter 36.

Ezekiel 36:²⁰ But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, 'These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land.' ²¹ But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. ²² "Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.

There we learnt that 36:20 – Israel going into exile as a result of God's judgment on their sin profaned God's holy name, 36:22 – that is tarnished God's reputation, caused and supported dangerous lies about God, made the nations think that He was a weak or uncaring God, not as powerful as their idols

The question was 'What will God do about it?'

What would God do to ensure the nations know the truth about Him. God gave the first part of the answer in chapter 36

36 – gather, cleanse, give a new heart – a whole new life – to His people.

He would make it possible for them to live as His covenant people and enjoy all the blessing of that relationship – the peace and prosperity that came with living in His land as His people.

Through His saving His people all would see God’s goodness, might and faithfulness.

But would the nations all know and confess the truth about God because of that?

Would that saving action alone restore the LORD’s reputation amongst the nations?

What if some kept thinking that Israel was beaten and dispossessed just because they and their gods were stronger than the LORD and they kept on believing lies about the LORD – that at best He was just some local god, a national god like their gods

What if some were saying to the LORD “You said you were punishing your people by sending them into exile,

But we don’t believe it. It wasn’t you. We were just stronger

Yes, they have been gathered again – You may have a little power, may have chosen the moment well. But you don’t have enough power to stop us from doing what we want in the world, stop us doing what we want with your people. We still think you are just one god among many, and not as strong as us.”

Despite God’s saving work they would just keep on slandering God, believing the lies about God that suited them and their claim to power and rule in the world

What is the LORD, for the sake of His holy name, for the sake of being known as HE is and as He has revealed Himself to be – the only true God, the Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, the just judge of all - going to do about that, going to do with their persisting in believing lies about Him?

Remember it is good and right that the LORD be known as HE is, honoured in truth

Our hope and life, creation's hope and life, is the LORD being the LORD

There is only darkness and death in denying Him, believing lies about Him.

And it is not just an issue in the pages of Ezekiel

That kind of misunderstanding and misrepresentation continues. We still encounter it.

Think of the work of Jesus.

In the life and death of Jesus God is judging and saving His people, doing what He said He would do in Ezekiel 36, cleansing them, giving them new hearts, giving them His Spirit.

It is a work of extraordinary power and wisdom, revealing God – as the One with the power of life and death and who can give life to the dead, the God who keeps His word always, who is merciful and kind

He has made that work known throughout the world

But has it stopped people believing lies about God?

No.

Some just say we have got it wrong about Jesus. He was a failure getting Himself killed like that. The real power and truth belongs to those who put Him to death, with human rulers and governments

Others just ignore it, reckon it irrelevant. Good for believers maybe.

But not something we have to pay attention to, and not something that means Jesus is Lord of all, their Lord

Many believe and live as if our will rules and human power is stronger and we can keep on living however we want to.

The Lord has saved, has kept His word, but still His name is slandered, His revelation of Himself rejected.

The LORD is the God of the whole earth. What will He do to vindicate His name in the face of this unbelief, this continuing rejection of His rule?

Ezekiel 38-39 will tell us what the LORD will do to make His holy name known, to vindicate His holiness before the nations who proudly ignore Him, and there is a warning there for those who want to persevere in being their own rulers

For you, if you want to live ignoring God and ruling your own life your own way.

What's the second issue?

Coming before Ezekiel's vision of the end in chapters 40-48 chapters 38-39 also tell us what else has to happen besides the Lord giving new life to His people before the end, before the full and complete and eternal enjoyment of His presence with His people, and they tell us a little of the character of that time.

Now that is something believers in Jesus are waiting for and looking forward to the establishment of God's eternal kingdom, when we are in God's presence by sight, and not just by faith. So this is something we have an interest in

What has to happen before that takes place?

And finally Ezekiel 38-39 addresses the fears by answering a very practical question of the exiles, the people Ezekiel was preaching to.

Remember what they experienced. Violent conquest, destruction of their land, dispossession as judgment on their sin.

In the future God is promising them in these chapters in Ezekiel, where they had come to know His grace, where with new hearts they lived new lives of repentance and faith in Him – would that ever happen again.

Would they always have to live with that anxiety, that fear hanging over their heads.

Will this [exile] happen again? Even when we are at peace with God
Again, that is something for us

If we are at peace with God, do we have to fear anything else?

Is it possible that human might and power could overturn God's intention, take away from us what God has promised to give us, for human power is very real in our world, and often opposed to the rule of our Lord Jesus?

Three issues, three questions the context raises.

What will God, who is rightly concerned for His reputation, His name, do in the face of persistent unbelief and misrepresentation?

What has to happen before the longed for end?

Can God's people be secure in a world of opposition to the LORD?

So, let's get into the story.

It is taking place some time in the future, the indefinite future, after the fulfilment of the promises of 36-37

38:8 – 'after many days', 'in the latter years

*Ezekiel 38:⁸ **After many days you will be mustered. In the latter years you will go against the land that is restored from war, the land whose people were gathered from many peoples upon the mountains of Israel, which had been a continual waste. Its people were brought out from the peoples and now dwell securely, all of them.***

¹⁶ *You will come up against my people Israel, like a cloud covering the land. **In the latter days** I will bring you against my land, that the nations may know me, when through you, O Gog, I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.*

38:16 – 'the latter days'

And at the beginning we meet Gog

Who is Gog?

There is a lot of speculation, especially amongst dispensational Christians, about the identity of Gog, and throughout the years Christians have sought to identify Gog with various figures in their own day.

But Gog is portrayed with an aura of mystery that enhances the ominous threat of his might.

The name Gog is thought to be a corruption of the name of a famous, and already dead, King of Lydia. Lydia – Magog, the land of Gog, along with Meshech and Tubal, were realms in Anatolia, in modern Turkey.

Ezekiel is talking of powerful and warlike peoples on the edge of the world Israelites knew, nations Israel had had not direct contact with. In fact the nations that Ezekiel mentions here and in vv. 5-6 were all famed warlike nations at the boundaries of Israel's world, known for their ferocity and brutality

Meshech and Tubal to the North, along with Beth Togarmah and Gomer, with Paras, Cush and Put, military allies of Egypt to the South

So Gog is seen as heading up a military confederacy that surrounds Israel, that has both military prowess and hordes of people, vast manpower resources, with the seven nations representing the totality of opposition to the LORD's people. He is the complete enemy, with overwhelming force.

38:⁹ You will advance, coming on like a storm. You will be like a cloud covering the land, you and all your hordes, and many peoples with you.

And the character of this archetypal enemy, this representation of all those opposed to the LORD, is revealed in vv. 10-13 where the LORD gives insight into Gog's thoughts.

Ezekiel 38:¹⁰ "Thus says the Lord God: On that day, thoughts will come into your mind, and you will devise an evil scheme¹¹ and say, 'I will go up against the land of unwalled villages. I will fall upon the quiet people who dwell securely, all of them dwelling without walls, and having no bars or gates,'¹² to seize spoil and carry off plunder, to turn your hand against the waste places that are now inhabited, and the people who were gathered from the nations, who have acquired livestock and goods, who dwell at the center of the earth.¹³ Sheba and Dedan and the merchants of Tarshish and all its leaders will say to you, 'Have you come to seize spoil? Have you assembled your hosts to carry off plunder, to carry away silver and gold, to take away livestock and goods, to seize great spoil?'

His intention is to visit destruction and misery on an innocent and peaceable people for his own enrichment and enhancement of his reputation.

In this world Gog does whatever pleases him, without any restraint on his power. He is answerable only to himself.

This peaceful people might be the LORD's people, precious to Him, gathered by Him, but that makes no difference. Gog's attitude is like Pharaoh's who said "Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice. ... I do not know the LORD" [Ex.

5:2] Gog and his hordes don't know, don't recognise the LORD, and they will do whatever they want without regard to Him

Gog is, in a sense, the embodiment of human pride, ignoring, dismissive of, the LORD.

Who is in control?

But we know what Gog does not.

It is the LORD who is in charge, the LORD who is conscripting Gog in his pride and greed to reveal His own glory.

38:³ and say, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal. ⁴ And I will turn you about and put hooks into your jaws, and I will bring you out, and all your army, horses and horsemen, all of them clothed in full armor, a great host, all of them with buckler and shield, wielding swords.

39:² And I will turn you about and drive you forward, and bring you up from the uttermost parts of the north, and lead you against the mountains of Israel.

It is the LORD who is bringing Gog against his land

38:¹⁶ You will come up against my people Israel, like a cloud covering the land. In the latter days I will bring you against my land, that the nations may know me, when through you, O Gog, I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.

For His purpose – that the nations may know me

But this time the LORD will not be vindicating His holiness by bringing Gog to judge his sinful people Israel.

He makes that plain in v. 17

Ezekiel 38:¹⁷ “Thus says the Lord GOD: Are you he of whom I spoke in former days by my servants the prophets of Israel, who in those days prophesied for years that I would bring you against them?”

Remember the situation of Ezekiel's hearers.

They had just experienced judgement through the LORD bringing Nebuchednezzar against Jerusalem. That judgment had been prophesied for years – in Isaiah, and in Jeremiah and others.

And Gog's approaching armies could have looked very much like a repeat of that experience.

But the LORD makes it clear that Gog comes for a very different purpose, and with a very different outcome.

The outcome

The LORD says vv. 19-20 that now His just anger and His passion will be aroused to protect His people and reveals that at the moment when Gog's triumph seemed inevitable – when he covers the land like a cloud with his hordes to conquer a defenceless people – he will suffer a stunning and comprehensive defeat.

It is a defeat of cosmic proportions – the whole earth and all people will know the Lord's presence to defeat the enemies of His people v. 19-20, all tremble at Gog's overthrow. And every means possible will be employed against Gog, overwhelming force he cannot resist

Internal division, disease, floods and hail, fire and sulphur

Gog will be powerless – his weapons useless 39:3

The comprehensiveness of the defeat and the humiliation of Gog's pride is brought home in chapter 39

v. 4-5 at first there will be no burial and the birds will feast in the open on their corpses

when they are buried it will be by their enemies in mass graves

Their home bases v. 6, thought to be so far away and so secure, will be destroyed

They will be completely despoiled of their weapons which will become fuel for Israelite fires for seven years 39:9

those they thought to plunder will plunder them v. 10

What is pictured in chapters 38-39 is a defeat that is final, from which they will never recover. The LORD's people will never need to fear them again.

And this is a victory that is entirely the LORD's

God's people, living in peace without defence, are entirely passive in chapter 38. They offer no resistance, they enter into no alliances, they are not portrayed as doing anything.

They only come into the story in chapter 39 – to mop up after the victory the LORD has worked for them

To gather the spoil and then to bury the dead 39:11-16, to cleanse the land by ensuring all the remains of Gog's hordes find burial

39: ¹² For seven months the house of Israel will be burying them, in order to cleanse the land.

That may seem a strange feature of the story, but cleansing by burying ensures that Gog's hostility cannot disrupt their relationship with the LORD, with them being able to live in the LORD's presence. There will be no lasting effect of Gog's malice.

Sometimes we can feel shamed by the sin of others against us, wonder if we will ever be freed from it – this is a picture that there will be no legacy of shame or uncleanness from Gog's proud abuse of a defenceless people, God makes provision to ensure that our future will not be marred by the sins of others against us.

But while the people enjoy the victory, they do nothing to achieve it.

It is all the LORD's doing

And the LORD works this victory for His Holy names sake. That is repeatedly stated [38:16, 23]

Ezekiel 38: ²³ So I will show my greatness and my holiness and make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they will know that I am the LORD.

Ezekiel 39: ⁷ "And my holy name I will make known in the midst of my people Israel, and I will not let my holy name be profaned anymore. And the nations shall know that I am the LORD, the Holy One in Israel. ⁸ Behold, it is coming and it will be brought about, declares the Lord GOD. That is the day of which I have spoken.

The LORD is determined that all people will know the truth of His revelation of Himself as the only God, the Lord of heaven and earth, the LORD who has chosen and called Abraham and his descendants to be His people.

He will not let them keep believing lies about Him forever

That He is a fiction, or a lesser God, or irrelevant.

One day He will establish the truth by judging all the proud despisers of His rule and people.

Remember the first of our three questions?

What will God, who is rightly concerned for His reputation, His name, do in the face of persistent unbelief and misrepresentation?

God has told us that He will vindicate His truth by humbling human pride that resists His rule.

He has already shown the foolishness and weakness of human power by saving His people through the death of Jesus.

Doing what human wisdom and power can never do – deal with our sin and death and bring forgiveness and eternal life, reconciliation with the just and holy God – by doing what human wisdom and power could never imagine doing – giving His Son to be crucified.

Yet not all acknowledge Him as Lord now

But one day every knee will bow to the crucified and risen Jesus. That is what we look forward to at Christmas, the time when the Lord Jesus works by His appearing the final victory for His people.

Then all will confess the truth of God, that Jesus is Lord, and no one will be able to hold on to their lies any more.

So there is a warning here in Ezekiel, in the defeat of the pride of Gog, for every one.

If you want to think you can live in God's world ignoring God's King Jesus, living, making decisions, as if He does not exist and you can do whatever you think will please you, enrich you – God will bring you into judgment, and everything you have put your trust in will be worthless to protect you on that day

Gog in his pride and greed wasn't successful in defying God, He only served God's purpose

Isn't that humbling

If you persist you will only serve to demonstrate, like Gog, not your independence and might, but God's justice and power Romans 9:22/ Ezekiel 39:27

So heed the warning

And turn back from trusting in yourself, living to please only yourself, and acknowledge that God rules, rules now through His Son Jesus, the Lord. While we wait for that day you can for the LORD has made Himself known in His Son Jesus – who came to save sinners

And these chapters also tell us

What has to happen before the end?

Before the establishment of God's Kingdom, when God dwells with His people in the new heaven and earth there will be the removal of all rebellion and proud wickedness from God's world

Revelation uses the images and language of Ezekiel 38-39 to make that same point

The Lord Jesus is pictured as defeating the oppressors of His people in Revelation 19 with images drawn from the defeat of Gog in Ezekiel 39:17-20 [19:17-21] and in Revelation 20:7-10 those who are deceived by the lies of Satan are characterised by an allusion to Gog and Magog – threatening but unable to harm the Lord's people, and defeated by the LORD in an instant, a defeat that ushers in the final judgment and the end of all wickedness and evil in the lake of fire.

We are assured of that end and we wait for it, rejoicing in knowing that evil will not persist, rebellion, defiance of God, will finally be finished and His will alone be done in the new heaven and earth. There will be no threat to the peace and security of the Lord's people when they dwell in the new Jerusalem

And Ezk 38-39 gives us hope even in the darkest times. Imagine how that defenceless people felt as they saw Gog's hordes assembling and then rolling over their land. But they did not achieve their goal. When things look most

threatening, then our deliverance is nearest; and it won't depend on our strength, but the LORD's.

But we do wait, for just as now the lies of the evil one are at work to dishonour God and bolster people in their rejection of the Lord, so the gospel is at work saving the Lord's people, and it is not until the full number of God's people are saved that the end will come.

Our waiting, even under gathering storm clouds, is for God's saving purpose.

But can that gathering hostility harm us?

Can God's people be secure in a world of opposition to the LORD?

Yes. Like the restored people of Israel in Ezekiel 38, the people who have been cleansed, who have received God's Spirit, are secure no matter how bad things look.

For them and us judgement has passed. God brings Gog against His people, to judge Gog not them.

In Christ, forgiven, justified by the death of Jesus, believers need not fear judgment ever again

The LORD is for us, and it is a wonderful thing to have the living God committed to you

That verse from Romans 8 continues famously

Romans 8: ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Those who are His are eternally protected

But what the LORD calls for as we look for the coming of Jesus is trust, not calculation or finding security in secret knowledge

Those living in Israel in Ezekiel 38 weren't saved and kept because they had deciphered Gog's communications, learnt his secrets, or built themselves survival bunkers

They weren't saved because they had entered into alliances with other powers to secure themselves, as sinful Israel did before the destruction of Jerusalem

They were saved by trust seen in keeping on living as the LORD's people no matter what threatening forces we see gathering around us, people on whose hearts God had written His Lord,

In the testing of this age, testing by hostile powers, Revelation describes the endurance of the faithful in these terms

Revelation 14:¹² Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.

Keeping the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.

As perhaps we think the forces of Gog are gathering again, this is what is called for from us – godly living as the holy people of the holy God, marked out by His holy Spirit, people who are commanded to love each other, love their neighbour, and even love their enemies; and abiding trust in and confession of Jesus as Lord, the One who will come again to save all those who are eagerly waiting for him. [Heb. 10:28]

Ezekiel 38-39 tells us Our God reigns

All things and people serve Him

Praise Him who reveals His glory, makes Himself known, in saving and judging, in mercy and wrath

He has revealed His glory in His Son, born in a manger; in His cross and resurrection to all whose eyes have been opened to the truth of the gospel now; and one day it will be revealed in the LORD Jesus returning to rescue His people and judge those who refuse to obey the gospel