Hope after great loss

Text: Ezekiel 24

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**Scriptures:** Ezekiel 24; Hebrews 10:19-31

Songs Chosen: [SttL] 211, 50, 136, 279, 213, 290, 432, 461, 529

Series: Ezekiel (sermon #6)

Theme: On the day that Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem, having told a parable about a useless corroded cooking pot which is destroyed along with its contents, Ezekiel is informed by the Lord that his wife, ‘the delight of his eyes’ is about to die and that he is not to mourn for her publicly. This is a sign that the exiles are to cease putting their hope and trust in Jerusalem so that they can listen to the word of the Lord when Ezekiel brings messages of consolation after the city falls.

Proposition: Brother and sisters, God the Father’s wrath came upon His beloved Son for our sins with the result that we are able to speak the gospel.

**Introduction**

When we had our export cut flower tulip business our main production period was only 6 weeks long and in the midst of that there was an especially intense period of 2-3 weeks. The bulbs were temperature programmed to flower during this time. For a few weeks we worked very long hours under great pressure. Once the planting was completed, the timeframe was set. Approaching the harvest time was always a bit scary. The stress of the upcoming workload was daunting, but there was no going back – the only way was to go through it. You might have felt similarly about an upcoming exam, or test – there’s only one way and that’s forward and through it.

In an infinitely greater way, that’s how it was for the Lord Jesus as His life on this earth inevitably led to the pains of the cross. Luke records a key event in His life in this way: “*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem*” (Luke 9:51). Jerusalem, the city which had been where the LORD had chosen to make his name dwell (Deut 12:11), was the place where God’s judgement would come against His Son who, for our sakes brothers and sisters, He made to be sin who knew no sin (2 Cor 5:21).

Jerusalem was the city which in Ezekiel’s day had dropped so low as to be so wicked that she was worse than the pagan nations around her. Now, God’s judgement was coming, we’ve seen it approaching through the prophet’s ‘ministry of condemnation’ beginning in chapter 4 and now coming to a climax in chapter 24.

Last week we focused on the ugliness of the Lord’s ‘bride’ Israel and how faithful God was to her, both in his justice and mercy. In chapter 17, using a parable of two Eagles, Ezekiel prophesies the lack of hope for Israel in looking for help from either Babylon or Egypt. In chapter 19 Ezekiel brings a funeral lament for the princes of Israel who are under the Lord’s judgement. In chapter 21 Babylon is identified as the Lord’s own sword wielded against Judah and Jerusalem. In chapter 23 the wickedness of two sisters, Oholah and Oholibah represent the sin of Samaria and of Jerusalem,

This morning we focus on Ezekiel 24, we read of a very significant day in history of the nation of Israel. “*In the ninth year, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month*”. This was most probably January 588BC. It was at this time that Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem. Later, after many months of anxiety, fear and increasing shortages of food and water, the city final fell to the Babylonians in 587BC. As we’ve seen, Jerusalem and Israel as a whole had become ‘rotten to the core’ or to use the imagery of chapter 24, a useless pot which needed to be destroyed.

1. **A useless pot is destroyed (v3-14)**

I remember coming home one day and seeing a blackened pot on the lawn just outside the kitchen door. A closer look revealed that the grass was singed and that this discarded vessel had a hard, inedible, burnt substance inside. Yes, this was the aftermath of a cooking disaster. Probably most of us have been there and done that ☺. Stove technology and cooking pot construction has changed over the course of history, but cooking disasters are nothing new.

People in Bible times most likely burnt more meals in their kitchens than we do today as a result of the variability of heat from an open fire and the poorer quality of material used to make pots. Today, copper for cooking pots is highly refined, making it very resistant to corrosion, even if the pot is not well cared for and regularly cleaned. However, in Bible times, copper was of a much lower standard of purity so that a pot, which was not well looked after, would often corrode; making it a source of contamination for any food placed inside.

This is the background to the cooking parable which Ezekiel delivers at the start of chapter 24. Here are the Chef’s instructions:

* Take one pot, add water and pieces of prime cut meat and bones.
* Start a hot fire and boil the contents in the pot.

So far, so good, but now hear the Word of the Lord God: (v6-7) “*Woe to the bloody city, to the pot whose corrosion is in it, and whose corrosion has not gone out of it! Take out of it piece after piece, without making any choice.For the blood she has shed is in her midst; she put it on the bare rock; she did not pour it out on the ground to cover it with dust*”. Now the meaning of this ominous parable is clear. The pot represents the city of Jerusalem and the flesh and bones the citizens. The fire is like the ‘heat’ coming on the city as the Babylonian enemy has now laid siege to her. Like a rusty, corroded pot, Jerusalem is not ‘fit for purpose’. Not only is the city ‘useless’, she is also a source of contamination.

It’s helpful to know that there were very careful procedures for the treatment of blood in Old Testament Israel. The blood of a clean animal, slaughtered as a sacrifice, was poured out beside the altar (Deut 12:27) whereas that of an unclean animal was poured on the ground (12:16,24) and covered with earth (Lev 17:13). Jerusalem, the holy city had ‘shed blood in her midst’. This may refer to the sacrificial slaughter of children on the high places or to murders by city leaders. Like the blood of Abel (Gen 4:10), the blood of innocent victims slain by the violent city cried out for justice.

As a result, this is what the Lord says: (v8) “*To rouse my wrath, to take vengeance, I have set on the bare rock the blood she has shed, that it may not be covered*”. Like blood stains which advertise the site of a murder, so Jerusalem’s unjust bloodshed will be exposed. Her guilt will be widely known because the Lord will visit the city in judgement.

Now the ‘cooking instructions’ become an image of God’s wrath: He will intensify the heat of the fire and boil the contents of the pot. The liquid will evaporate, and the bones will be burned up. The burning of bones in the Old Testament is always associated with the desecration of a human body (e.g. 1 Kings 13:2; 2 Kings 23:20; 2 Chron 34:5; Amos 2:1). This is the Biblical background to the practice of burying a body in a grave, rather than cremating the body. (It is not that the Lord cannot, or will not, resurrect the bodies of these who have been burned at the end of this age).

Not only will the bones be burned up (that is the inhabitants of the city will suffer a dishonourable death fitting for those who have rebelled against the Lord), but also, the pot itself will become so hot that the copper from which it is made will melt, finally removing the contaminating corrosion. The city of Jerusalem had become so rusty, so decayed, so unclean, that the only way to purify her was to burn her up completely.

This parable is **not** a warning message to be delivered so that wicked Israel might turn back to the Lord in repentance and be spared. No, it’s too late for that, as God confirms through His prophet: “*I am the LORD. I have spoken; it shall come to pass; I will do it. I will not go back; I will not spare; I will not relent; according to your ways and your deeds you will be judged, declares the Lord GOD*". Ezekiel’s ’ministry of condemnation’ has been relentlessly building to this climax for 20 chapters. Now the Babylonian army is at the gates of Jerusalem and the siege has begun. The destruction of the city has not yet happened, but this outcome is inevitable. There is no reprieve to be had.

A well maintained, rust-free, pot benefits from the fire under it, usefully cooking food which is good to eat, whereas a corroded pot contaminates the meat and poisons the gravy. Similarly, a strong city can flourish under adversity and stress as pressures from outside result in her inhabitants being able to ‘rise to the challenge’. But Jerusalem had forgotten the reason for her existence and had become utterly useless to her Founder. She had been the place where the LORD had chosen to make his name dwell (Deut 12:11), but He had left her because of all her abominable idolatry. She had lost the resilience which comes from the Lord’s presence. Likewise, when people like you and I replace the Lord in our lives with idols of our own making, we lose strength and resilience and are no longer able to withstand the attacks of the enemy.

In Ezekiel’s parable, the cooking pot had become a refiner’s furnace (v11) and would be burned up to remove all the impurities – both contents of the pot and the pot itself. The key message of this dark parable is the same as that of chapter 15 where Israel, like a useless vine which produces no fruit, is to be destroyed.

You and I are like corroded cooking pots, only fit to be thrown away. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, sent His son to be ‘burned up’ in our place so that we could be refined, purified, cleansed. Christ was left, not as a charred pot on a singed lawn, but as a broken bloodied dead body in a grave.

We remember His death today in the sacrament of Lord’s Supper. The beloved Son of God, the delight of God the Father, died. Which brings us to our 2nd point.

1. **A dearly loved one is lost (v15-27)**

Perhaps, the most painful experience we can have in this life is the death of someone we love dearly. Many here today know of this personal grief. Brothers and sisters in Christ, do we not all yearn for the New Heavens and New Earth? - where there will no longer be any death, mourning, nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things will have passed away (Rev 21:4)

As if the repeated messages of judgement from God against Israel and the news of the siege of Jerusalem were not enough for Ezekiel to bear, the Lord now brings Him bitter personal news: "*Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke; yet you shall not mourn or weep, nor shall your tears run down*” (Eze 24:16). Ezekiel’s wife is about to die suddenly. The Lord who has given is about to take away (ref. Job 1:21). It is evident that Ezekiel’s marriage was a close one from the description of his beloved one ‘the delight of your eyes’. Ezekiel was clearly a man who loved deeply and would therefore also grieve deeply as the object of his love was taken away from him.

Having brought this grievous news to his prophet"*Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke*” (24:16), this is what the Lord says: “*yet you shall not mourn or weep, nor shall your tears run down. Sigh, but not aloud; make no mourning for the dead. Bind on your turban and put your shoes on your feet; do not cover your lips, nor eat the bread of men*." (24:16b-17). The Lord was not commanding his prophet just to pretend that nothing has happened and to be completely unfeeling. He is able to mourn and grieve privately, but not in public.

In Old Testament Israel public mourning was very visible and obvious, being accompanied by loud weeping, sackcloth and ashes, covering of the mouth and eating special food. All Ezekiel can do is to mourn in privacy and isolation without the benefits of ‘social solidarity and sympathy’. Outwardly he is to behave as if nothing had happened. He must bear his grief privately in silence. Ezekiel was able to bear up under a heavy combination of very difficult public ministry and great personal loss because the LORD had strengthened him so that he had the resilience which the city of Jerusalem lacked.

What is God saying through this painful providence and his command to his prophet?

When refugees who have been forced away into exile in a foreign country they often think with great fondness of their homeland. For the Dutch it might be picturing traditional windmills; For the English it might be the Tower bridge over the Thames. For the Israelite exiles in Babylon it was the temple in Jerusalem. The ‘delight of their eyes’ would die as the city and temple were destroyed. They were not to publicly mourn this devastating event because the city of Jerusalem was not to be the focus of their hope. The Lord wanted them to fix their eyes on the Source of true delight. They were to look to Him, and Him alone.

On the day when the news of Jerusalem’s fall is confirmed by a fugitive, Ezekiel is no longer dumb (24:27), as he was from the start of his ministry, (3:26) – apart from when he received revelations from God. Now the time was approaching when the exiles would receive words of comfort from the prophet. The first part of this is an extended set of prophesies against Israel’s enemies in chapters 25-32.

Ezekiel’s exiled audience in Babylon were to take their focus off the physical temple in Jerusalem and look with hope to the Lord and His Word. They were to trust in the abiding promises which God had spoken to His people Israel. The fall of Jerusalem was a great loss of hope for the exiles who expected to be able to return there to the ‘delight of their eyes’. In the same way, the death of Jesus Christ at Calvary was a great loss of hope for his disciples.

Yet for the exiles, the unleashing of God’s wrath on Jerusalem also marked the end of His judgement at that time. Likewise, when Christ died under the fearsome judgement of His Heavenly Father, God’s judgement on His people was complete. As we remember Christ’s death today in the sacrament of Lord’s Supper, we remember also the hope that arises from God’s taking away of the life of His only begotten Son, the ‘delight of His eyes’.

For Ezekiel, on the day when the fugitive came from Jerusalem to report that the city had fallen, His mouth was freed so that He could speak a message of hope. Likewise for you and me, brothers and sisters, on the day when the news of God’s judgement against our sin comes to us and we believe that Christ suffered the loss of all things for us, then our mouths are freed to be able to proclaim the gospel of hope. The gospel tells people of their terrible corruption through sin, but also of the refining fire which Christ bore to purify them so that they would be a delight to the ‘holy eyes’ of God Almighty.

For Ezekiel and the exiles there was hope after great loss. This is also true for you and me in Christ. We need not fear the coming Judgement. “*Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*” (Hebrews 10:19-25)

Amen.