The Last War

Text: Ezekiel 28-39

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**Scriptures:** Ezekiel 38-39; Revelation 20:7-15

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 3, 46, 418, 439

Series: Ezekiel (sermon #12)

Theme: Ezekiel prophesies an attack by Gog and his army on God’s people living without physical defences, the defeat of these enemy forces by the Lord and the subsequent cleansing of the promised land of all the remains of Gog and his army so that God’s greatness, holiness, his glory in judgement, and his restoration of his people will be made known to all peoples.

Proposition: Be encouraged; no matter what evil forces attack God’s people, His purposes and victory remain secure in Christ.

**Introduction**

This whole Creation groans: widespread fires in the Amazon, melting polar regions, escalating trade wars, and attacks on those who call Jesus Christ their Lord and Saviour. Over 245 million Christians live in places where they experience high levels of persecution. Last year there were 4,305 documented killings of Christians who died for their faith, 1847 churches and other Christian buildings were attacked. 3,150 believers in Christ were detained without trial: arrested, sentenced or imprisoned (source: opendoorsusa.org).

This raises questions like: Where is the future of the church in all of this turmoil?Will Christians be able to live in peace and security in this world? The answer from our text in Ezekiel 38-39 is a clear ‘no’, and yet this is an immensely encouraging part of Scripture because it describes the last war that will ever be fought and clearly identifies the Victor.

Over 2,500 years ago, the exiles from war-torn Israel had received revelation from God via the prophet Ezekiel. He had prophesied that Jerusalem would be besieged and then fall to the Babylonian forces as part of God’s judgement against His rebel people Israel. The Lord also promised to bring judgement against the surrounding nations who relished in Israel’s downfall and who planned to profit from her demise. In chapter 37 with a vision of dry bones being supernaturally brought back to life and two sticks being joined together, the Lord promises new life for his afflicted people, a renewed land and unity together under a new shepherd-king. This prophesy had a partial fulfilment when some of the Israelites returned to their homeland with Ezra and Nehemiah after 70 years of captivity in Babylon.

The question answered by Ezekiel 38-39 is ‘what then?’ Would the future from then on be a ‘walk in the park’, a life of complete security and peace or to put it in Old Testament terms would everyone be at rest ‘*under his vine and fig tree*’ (1 Ki 4.25; Mic 4:4; Zech 3:10)? The sobering answer from the Lord is a resounding ‘no’. Why? Because Gog and his army are going to come against them. Which brings us to our first point:

1. **The Lord brings Gog’s army to attack Israel**

Ezekiel is commanded by the Lord to set his ‘face towards Gog of the land of Magog’ (Eze 38:1). Gog is the commander-in-chief of a coalition of forces gathered from the ends of the earth. His is a truly global army. It is massive. Whilst he himself is from the land of Magog, and rules over Meshech-Tubal, his allies include Persia, Cush and Put (38.5) along with Gomer and Beth Torgarmah (38.6). Nobody knows where Magog was (if it existed as a literal place at all).

So who is Gog? There have been many different answers given, including: A 7th century BC king of Lydia who appears in ancient writings under the name ‘Gugu’; The leader of the army of the Goths (Ambrose), the Roman Emperor, or the Roman Catholic Pope. Gog’s forces have been identified as: the Arabs that threatened the ‘Holy Land’ in 7th cent. AD; the Mongols, the Turks, the Russians, the Chinese. It has been argued that Gomer is a code word for Germany. As you can see, there is huge scope for endless speculation here. As history continues to unfold, new candidates for the figure of Gog appear on the world stage.

It’s helpful to know that in the Bible there are sections which reveal details of the ‘end times’. There’s a type of literature which we find here in Ezekiel as well as in parts of books like Zechariah, Daniel and Revelation. This ‘apocalyptic’ type of writing often expresses truth by using symbolic images and numbers, rather than literal people and places. Understanding this is essential to grasping the significance of Gog and his army.

Unlike the Babylonians who were (painfully) well-known to the exiles to whom these words were first spoken, Gog appears nowhere before in the history of Israel. It’s significant that his army is gathered from seven nations from the outermost parts of the known world at that time. **Gog is not a specific historical figure and his army is not a particular partnership of forces, rather he is representative of an unholy alliance that will come against God’s people.**

They will come like a storm – advancing with might against all those in their path. They will come with power and violence – pictured in the military hardware of the ancient world – horses and horsemen, in full armour, with buckler and shield, wielding swords (38:4). You might be wondering: What is a buckler? - A small round shield used in hand-to-hand combat.

Gog and his hordes will come, not against an opposing army with well-trained and well-equipped soldiers, but they will ‘*fall upon the quiet people who dwell securely, all of them dwelling without walls, and having no bars or gates*’ (Eze 38:10). Their prey will be defenceless, unable to resist the onslaught of Gog and his hordes. The result will be that these vulnerable people will have their possessions plundered from them: silver and gold, livestock and goods (38:13).

In this regard, Gog and his army are like many evil forces coming against the weak and unprotected. They are indeed like the Goths, the Romans, the Mongols, the Turks, the military forces of the Russians and the Chinese. Notice though that this evil attack is specifically against God’s people Israel. In New Testament terms, this is an attack upon Christians, the spiritual descendants of Abraham, the ‘New Israel’. It is violent aggression against the church. It is an attack upon the covenant people of God.

Is it true then that God unable to stop this onslaught against those He call His own? No, not at all! He is almighty and could prevent this evil hostility, but He is the One who brings Gog and his army out to attack His own people! Look at 38:16 “*You will come up against my people Israel…****I will bring you*** *against my land*’. Look at verse 4: “***I will turn you about*** *and put hooks into your jaws, and* ***I will bring you*** *out*”. Like a beast on a leash, firmly tethered by its jaw, Gog is completely under the sovereign control of the Lord.

Imagine a hungry lion on a chain. He has some freedom of movement and a degree of free will, even though ultimately he is captive. Give him a choice of what to eat for lunch. Put a large bowl of green salad on one side and a large chuck of raw meat on the other and give him enough slack in his chain to reach either meal. What is he going to do? He will act according to his will. He will always go for the non-vegetarian menu option. That is his nature. This outcome is 100% predictable. So, it is with evil Gog and his army. They are unholy and if the Lord allows, they will devour His holy people. It is their nature. They will act according to their will. As with the hungry lion, this outcome is 100% predictable.

Yet in all of this, God is guilty of no evil (ref. WCF5.4) “*God is light, and in him is no darkness at all*” (1 John 1:5). God is not the author or approver of sin (James 1:13).

Why then does God allow Gog the freedom to afflict those upon whom He has put His love? In His words “*That the nations may know me, when through you, O Gog, I vindicate my holiness before their eyes*” (38:16b). Gog’s evil forces are going to be instruments in the hands of the Lord who will demonstrate His holiness to all of humanity. The remaining parts of our text will help us to understand this more fully. Which brings us to our second point:

1. **The Lord alone defeats Gog’s army**

In August 1914 the British writer H.G. Wells wrote an article titled “The War That Will End War”, about the global conflict which would come to be known as the First World War of 1914-1918. He declared “*This is already the vastest war in history. It is a war not of nations, but of mankind. It is a war to exorcise a world-madness and end an age… For this is now a war for peace. It aims straight at disarmament. It aims at a settlement that shall stop this sort of thing for ever. Every soldier who fights against Germany now is a crusader against war. This, the greatest of all wars, is not just another war—it is the last war!”.* As the 2nd World War and other military conflicts over the last century sadly confirm, H.G. Wells was too optimistic about the future. His prophesy about the 1st World War was wrong.

Whereas the conflict described in our text is the Last War because it will end in the complete defeat of Gog’s army; a hostile force utterly opposed to God’s people. This prophesy comes from the Lord’s reliable prophet Ezekiel. As we have seen in our first point, Gog is to be used by the Lord for His perfect purposes, but that does not mean the Lord is for Gog, in fact quite the opposite as we see in 38:18: “*But on that day, the day that Gog shall come against the land of Israel, declares the Lord GOD, my wrath will be roused in my anger*”. Gog and his army will come upon God’s defenceless people, but they will be defeated, not by these weak people themselves, but by the Lord their God as He powerfully intervenes. God will bring the natural forces of His creation against the enemy of His covenant people to destroy them. He will bring a great earthquake causing mountains to fall (cf. Acts 16.26). He will thereby bring great confusion to Gog’s army so that they will turn upon one another (38:21). God’s judgement against Gog and his forces will be seen in disease, bloodshed, torrential rains, hailstones, fire and sulfur (38.22).

He promises to remove the weapons of conflict from Gog (39.3), sending fire on Magog (39:6). The bodies of the slain enemies of the Lord’s people will become food for birds of prey and for wild animals (39:4-5). The Lord will offer up a ‘sacrificial feast’ of the flesh and blood of ‘*horses and charioteers, mighty men and all kinds of warriors*’ (39:20). The book of Revelation describes this Last War identifying the forces of evil through which Satan’s power is unleashed against the people of God.

Behind the army of Gog is the ultimate enemy of God’s people; the Devil, the Great Deceiver. Revelation 20:8-9 describes the great battle when the forces of Satan “*will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city*” (Rev 20:8-9). This imagery both in Ezekiel 38-39 and in Revelation 20:7-15 depicts the onslaught of Satan’s forces; ‘*the cosmic powers over this present darkness… the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*’ (Eph 6:12).

Remember when Satan was given permission by the Lord to afflict God’s servant Job, a ‘blameless and upright man’ (Job 2:3,6). Like a beast on a chain Satan had a limited scope to bring suffering upon Job. Similarly, Gog and his army (Rev 20:8) are also held on the Lord’s limiting ‘leash’ as agents of Satan. They will afflict the Lord’s people, they will assail the church, Christians will suffer, but only in so far as the Lord allows. Gog and his army are the ultimate expression of the continual struggle in which Satan seeks to destroy God’s people (ref. Rev 12:17).

The Word of God clearly identifies the ongoing suffering of those who follow Christ – which is a consequence of Satan’s spiritual forces of evil e.g. 2 Cor 1:5a “*For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings*”; 2 Tim 3:12 “*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*”. {Also Rom 5:3; 2 Cor 1:5; Phil 3:10; Col 1:24; 1 Pet 4:13}.

This prophesy of the Lord’s defeat of the cosmic powers represented by Gog and his army would have been deeply comforting and encouraging:

* For the exiles in Babylon who first heard these words.
* For our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world (more than 245 million) who continue to suffer for their public profession of faith in Christ Saviour.
* For all of us who may be called upon to shed our own blood in the service of Christ in the future.

There is further encouragement here in the promise of the peace which God establishes through this victory. This brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **The Lord ensures enduring peace for His people**

Sometimes when we have a family gathering with food and drink which ends late in the evening we go to bed and deal with the tidy-up the next morning. There might be dirty plates and glasses and furniture out of place. If it’s been a birthday celebration, there may be wrapping paper too. In summary it’s a mess and a major clean-up operation is necessary!

In a much more serious and distressing way, that is how it is on a battlefield after the conflict has ceased. There is lots of mess to be cleaned up; bloodied weapons and dead bodies. This is what we see in epic proportions in 39:9-16. The weapons of God and his army – the shields, bucklers (small round shields), bows, arrows, clubs and spears will be burned as heating fuel. There will be no need to go into the fields or forests to gather firewood, the discarded weapons will supply enough for seven years of fires. Being apocalyptic literature, the number seven here representing completeness – the message being that all the myriads of weapons will be utterly destroyed.

This will indeed be the Last War to end all wars. The remaining parts of bodies of the slain army of Gog which have been food for ‘birds of every sort’ and ‘beasts of the field’ will be removed from the land. Stray human bones on the battlefields will be tagged so that they can be buried in the Valley of Hamon-gog (39:15). This is a complete removal of all traces of the Last War. It’s helpful to know that in Old Testament ceremonial law, the touching of a dead person would result in defilement (e.g. Lev 21:11; Num 19:11). So, this clean-up operation not only removes all evidence of the great war, it also removes all the ceremonial uncleanness from the land.

In chapter 37 God promises that He will restore His people to the land of promise where they themselves will be utterly clean; without spot or blemish. We heard about this in chapter 37 where God says: “*They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. But I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God*” (Eze 37:23).

Not only is persecution of God’s people from their external enemies going to cease and all evidence of warfare removed, all memory of His people’s own wickedness will also be gone forever. “*They shall forget their shame and all the treachery they have practiced against me, when they dwell securely in their land with none to make them afraid*” (Eze 39:16). The Lord will ensure enduring peace for all His people in a clean land where they will have no reason to fear anybody or anything; not even a return to their former sins.

Perhaps you are troubled by the ongoing threat of persecution of Christians in so many places in this 21st century. Perhaps, in light of our text, you are troubled by the revelation that a good God allows evil forces to fall upon His own people. The early church father Tertullian from Cartage famously said: “*The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church*”. It has also been said that “*It is not merely by our love that the world will know that we are Christians, but by our blood*”. Why is it necessary that so much blood be shed by those God choses to love and to save?

The answer is given in our text: In the great and comprehensive defeat of the evil forces arrayed against His people, the Lord will show his glory (39:13). He says, “*All the nations will see my judgement that I have executed, and my hand that I have laid on them*” (39:21). The glory, the ‘weightiness’ and honour of the Lord is seen in the judgement which God the Father executed on His own Son Jesus whose blood was spilled unto death. Brothers and sisters, it is this shed blood of Christ which frees us from our sins (Rev 1:5), washing us clean (Rev 7:14).

If God chose to allow Satan to ‘strike the heel’ of the seed of the woman (Gen 3.15) He can, and He has, chosen that Gog and his forces of evil will be unleashed for a time against His own people. All of this so that His glory would be revealed. We know that Satan ‘struck the heel’ of Christ at the cross. What would ordinarily have been an enduring death was not, because Christ rose from the dead. We know that Christ is ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father. We know that He is returning at the time when this Last War will come to an end. Gog and his army will be no more. Then “*The devil will be thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur*” (Rev 20:9).

We know that before this day comes, the blood of God’s own beloved adopted children will continue to be shed. All of this will take place so that His glory would be revealed.

The inescapable conclusion from Ezekiel 38-39 and the rest of Scripture is that God is the Master of human history and that His mastery is always executed in righteousness; even when He holds evil ‘on a leash’, giving Satan limited reign for a time in order that God’s incomparable glory will be seen. All this so that people like you might know the Lord. Let me humbly ask you: Do you?

* He is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable (Ps 145:3).
* He is the One who brings desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire” (Ps 46:8b-9).
* He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Ps 145:8).
* He is revealed most fully in His Son Jesus Christ who calls everyone to come to Him in repentance and faith and so be spared from the wrath to come (e.g. 1 Thess 1:10).

If you have not already done so, will you come today?

Children of God, whatever your situation in life this morning, be encouraged that no matter what evil forces attack God’s people, His purposes and victory remain secure in Christ who has already defeated Satan.

“*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 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*” (Rom 8.35-39).

AMEN.