God deals with prickly neighbours

Text: Ezekiel 25-28

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Genesis 12:1-3; Romans 12:9-21; Ezekiel 25; 26:1-6; 28:16-26

Songs Chosen: [SttL] 164, 94, 137, 206, 169

Series: Ezekiel sermon (#7)

Theme: Ezekiel prophesies God’s coming judgement against the malice, vengeance and pride of Israel’s hostile neighbours who opposed her– Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre and Sidon.

Proposition: Brothers and sisters in Christ, be comforted that God’s vengeance will come down on all the wicked who have not been gathered through Christ to dwell securely with Him.

**Introduction**

How many neighbours do you have surrounding your home? For us here in Christchurch, we live at the end of a 30m driveway with 6 neighbours bordering our back section. Our property is surrounded by high fences, tall trees and bushes and is protected by an elaborate security system and a set of electric gates. Even the garden shed has a motion sensor connected to the central alarm! There is a sad reason behind all these elaborate defence systems. Apparently, the previous owner got ‘off-side’ with most of their neighbours. From what I understand, over the years there had been various conflicts.

In this respect the situation was a bit like that of Old Testament Israel through much of her history leading up to the exile of Ezekiel and his fellow countrymen in Babylon. To use the language of Eze 28:24, these neighbours had been like briers who had pricked Israel or thorns that had hurt God’s people.

As with our section, Israel also had six adjacent neighbours, listing them in the order of our text, in a clockwise direction from the east they were: Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre and Sidon. At our home, we also have a neighbour with whom we have contact, with whose property we do not share a boundary. Israel also had a more distant neighbour with whom she had a long, and often difficult history: Egypt.

Chapters 26-32 form a unit in the book of Ezekiel between news that the siege of Jerusalem had begun (in January 588BC) and the fall of the city (33:21) in December 589BC. This is one of the more difficult sections of Scripture to expound, apply and from which to identify the person and work of Christ. You may ask ‘why?’.

**Firstly**, because as an island nation we don’t have land borders with any neighbours. It can be much harder for us to grasp the vulnerability of Israel than someone from a land-locked country in Europe, Africa, Asia, or the Middle East.

**Secondly**, because we are so distant from these nations both in time and geography. Our text deals with a geopolitical situation which existed over 2500 years ago on the other side of the world.

**Thirdly**, because there is no evidence that these prophesies against Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon and Egypt were ever heard by the people against whom they were pronounced by God’s prophet Ezekiel.

**Fourthly**, because there is much repetition in the judgements pronounced against these ‘prickly’ neighbours. (This is the main reason why we have not read all of chapters 25-28 about Tyre).

We are going to focus today on Israel’s closest neighbours: Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre and Sidon and, by God’s grace, look at Egypt in the next sermon in this series.

1. **God’s people are surrounded by enemies**

We have found our neighbours at home to be easy to get along with – not that we see them so often over the high fences. 😊 Each year I trim the trees and bushes on our boundary and get the opportunity to go and meet our neighbours when I clean up cut branches which have fallen on their sections. I aim to start up a conversation at each house and find out a bit more about the people who live next door. We meet Israel’s neighbours in our text. Let’s get to know them a little now:

**Firstly Ammon**: The Ammonites were descendants of Ben-ammi, Lot’s younger son by his daughter (Gen 19:38). They were regarded as relatives of the Israelites, who were commanded to treat them kindly (Deut 2:19) and not to possess their land. The Ammonites joined with the Moabites in hiring Balaam to curse Israel. As a result both people groups were forbidden to enter the congregation of Israel until 10 generations had passed (Deut 23:3-6). The Ammonites frequently battled with the Israelites for possession of the fertile plain of Gilead – lands which were occupied by the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half-Manasseh.

Here is the Lord’s charge against the Ammonites: (25:3) “*Because you said, 'Aha!' over my sanctuary when it was profaned, and over the land of Israel when it was made desolate, and over the house of Judah when they went into exile*”. The Hebrew word ‘Aha’ was an ancient form of nasty cheering/glee. An expression of delight at the misfortune of another. Like a person observing another’s adversity or affliction and saying something like ‘Na, na na, na. na’ with amusement.

Ammon had no compassion for Israel; whose land had been made desolate by her enemies. Ammon thought it funny that the dwelling place of God in Jerusalem (1 Kings 5:5) had been profaned. To profane means to treat something sacred with contempt not honour. To profane God’s character or anything or anybody associated with Him is to treat Him as common, not holy. Ammon was maliciously, spitefully, pleased when the exiles were carried off to Babylon. Ammon rejoiced over the demise of God’s chosen people Israel.

**Secondly Moab:** The Moabites were descended from the older son of Lot by his daughter (Gen 19:37)[[1]](#endnote-1). There were periods of peace between Moab and Israel (as in the time of Ruth) but also times of conflict; for example between Eglon, King of Moab and Ehud, a Benjamite. Remember when Ehud stabbed the overweight Eglon in his ‘cool roof chamber’? (Judges 3:12-30)

Here is the Lord’s charge against the Moabites Eze 25:8): They had said “'*Behold, the house of Judah is like all the other nations*”. This statement is both sadly true and fundamentally false.

* **Sadly true** because Judah (southern Israel) had become like the nations around her in her idolatry – in many ways worse than them. More abominable than Samaria and Sodom Eze 16:51).
* **Fundamentally false** because Israel was God’s chosen people. To say that they were just like other nations was effectively blasphemy because it denied the reality of the Lord’s promises to, and work for, His own people.

**Thirdly Edom:** Edom means ‘red’ – the colour of the stew that Esau received from his brother Jacob in exchange for his birth right which Esau despised (Gen 25:34). The Edomites were descendants from Esau (Gen 25:30). The hostility which had existed between Jacob and Esau continued through to their descendants.

The Lord’s charge against the Edomites was that they had ‘*acted revengefully against the house of Judah*’: (25:12). We find more detail in the book of Obadiah (11-14) where Edom is accused of helping the Babylonians to seize Judah’s wealth, killing Israelites fugitives and handing over survivors to her enemies.

**Fourthly Philistia:** Whilst Gen 21.34 mentions that Abraham stayed for many days in the land of the Philistines, we mainly read of this coastal people group as being the principle enemy of Israel. This was during the period of the Judges and through to the time of David, who defeated their champion Goliath. When he was anointed king, David and won a decisive victory over the Philistine army (2 Sam 5.17-25).

Like Edom, Philistia acted revengefully against Israel the Cherethites were a group of Philistines). Taking revenge vengeance) is the prerogative/privilege/role of the Lord God alone, as His Word makes clear: Lev 19:18 “*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD*”. Deut 32:35 “*Vengeance is mine*”. Heb 10:30 "*Vengeance is mine; I will repay*”.

**Fifthly Tyre:** Tyre was a city along the Phoenician coastline to the North West of northern Israel. She was the hub of a nation of traders who transported goods by sea in their fleet of ships. She was like an ancient Hong Kong or Singapore, very small in size, yet exerting great economic power far beyond her borders. As a maritime power her reach extended far and wide, like that of European nations like Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Holland, France, and Great Britain in times past. This is likely why so much attention is given to the judgement of Tyre chapters (25-28) in comparison to the larger territories of Ammon, Moab, Edom and Philistia who had less global reach. The strength of Tyre was not in a large army, but in her wealth.

Her crime was in looking forward to benefiting from her prime position as a central hub for trade. When Israel was gone, Tyre planned to fill the vacuum and thereby gain even more wealth. She would profit when Judah lost control of lucrative trade routes which used to pass through her territory. Tyre thought to substitute herself for God’s own city Jerusalem and thereby to take her place. She saw an opportunity to be the ‘gate of the nations’ (26:2).

Tyre had no compassion for Israel, only an eye for her own profit. She said ‘*Aha, the gate of the peoples is broken; it has swung open to me. I shall be replenished, now that she is laid waste*'. Tyre’s sin was pride, as Ezekiel laments, she said: “*I am perfect in beauty*” (27:3). To her ruling prince, God says through his prophet "*Because your heart is proud, and you have said, 'I am a god, I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas,' yet you are but a man, and no god’* (Eze 28:2).

**Sixthly, Sidon:** Sidon was on the Phoenician coast north of Tyre. No specific charge is laid against her (28:20-23), likely she is a partner in Tyre’s crimes.

So now we’ve ‘met Israel’s ‘prickly’ neighbours. They were nations guilty of malice, spite, vengefulness, and pride. Although Israel’s neighbours are very distant from us in space and time, God’s awareness of their crimes is a comfort to us as it would have been to the exiles with Ezekiel in Babylon. We too can have difficulties with our neighbours: Those who live next door to us, those we work alongside, those we come into contact with as we live our lives. Neighbours can be very ‘prickly’ - with the result that we can get hurt by them, they can be vindictive, vengeful, malicious and proud. Be sure of this though, that God knows about our enemies and He will act in just judgement…which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **God will act against all wickedness**

You don’t have to look far to see the injustices which abound in this fallen world. God has built into all human beings made in His image a sense of justice (Rom 2:15). The ‘moral compass’ within each man, woman and child does get distorted by the effects of sin, both individual and within families and societies, however, deep down we all want justice. Those who know God, know that He alone can bring perfect justice in this unjust world.

When Abraham was interceding for any righteous people who might have been in doomed Sodom, he said “*shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?*” (Gen 18:25) It’s a question to which the answer is a resounding YES. God is just and always acts justly.

We have read from chapters 4 to 24 of God’s judgement against His own people. Before we go back to Israel’s neighbours, let’s briefly think about our own attitudes and actions towards our wicked/unregenerate neighbours? Do we secretly rejoice over the downfall of others? e.g. the fall from grace of greedy tele-evangelists, the plight of homosexuals suffering from AIDS, or other churches and denominations which do not have all their ‘doctrinal ducks in a row’ and whose membership is decreasing. Do we rejoice when noisy, troublesome neighbours who live across the fence from us suffer in some way?

Let us all examine our own hearts in light of Christ’s words: “*For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?*” (1 Pet 4:17) Have you or I been spiteful, vengeful or proud towards our neighbours?

Knowing the love of Christ surely we are called and compelled to convey the gospel of grace to our neighbours, not to stand in judgement over them. As Paul writes to the Corinthians: “*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord,* ***we persuade others****. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience*” (2 Cor 5:10).

We are all called to seek to persuade others, both of the coming wrath of God against all wickedness, and of the only way to live through this day of judgement: by repentance and faith in Christ. This calling is expressed by Peter in these words “*always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame*”. (1 Pet 3:15-16)

We can be confident that God will deal justly with all our ‘prickly’, ungodly, neighbours because of the covenant promise He made to Abraham: “*I will bless those who bless you, and* ***him who dishonours you I will curse****, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*." (Gen 12:3). God fights for His people against their enemies, as He promised that He would, just as we see in our text from Ezekiel.

**Ammon** would be “*handed over to the people of the East for a possession*” (Eze 25:4) who would enjoy her produce and lay waste her capital city of Rabbah. Ammon would ‘*perish out of the countries’ (*Eze 25:7). Check out Google maps and you’ll see that Ammon is no more. (Amman is the capital city of Jordan, but Ammon has ceased to exist). As the Lord had already spoken through Ezekiel in chap 21.28-32 Ammon would be ‘*no more remembered*’.

**Moab** would be defenceless against attack and her fate would be the same as that of Ammon. **Edom** would experience desolation, death, ‘*vengeance by the hand of my people’* (v14). **Philistia** would be destroyed. **Tyre** would have her defences destroyed 26:4); she would be plundered (26:12) and laid waste. Her people would die (26:11). There would be no more joy (26:13). She would be brought to a dreadful (27:36) and shameful end (26:21). **Sidon** would experience pestilence, bloodshed in her streets and death of her people.

These judgements of God sound severe and they were. These judgements also reflect and point towards the greater suffering of Christ under the fearsome wrath of God. He was unjustly treated by his malicious, spiteful, vengeful, proud neighbours. Conflict came from his own people John 1.11). The Gentiles mocked Him (Matt 27:29; 27:41-42) just as He had predicted (Matt 20:19). He was delivered over to the chief priests and scribes and condemned to death (Matt 20:18). He was ‘laid waste’ on the cross. Abandoned there by all. His death was a dreadful, shameful end to His life. He was ‘plundered’, the little that he had was taken from Him; his clothes being divided amongst His executioners (Matt 27:35).

Did Christ display malice and revenge against His enemies? Not at all. He left their fate in the hands of His Father, pleading: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*” (Luke 23:34). Christ suffered under the wrath of God for all people groups so that by His blood He ransomed people from every tribe and language and people and nation.

This truth must guide us in how we deal with our enemies, our prickly neighbours - those who may treat us with vengeance, malice, and pride - desiring our downfall. In light of God’s grace, Brother and sister, are you fully committed to “*if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all*” (Rom 12:18)? As much as you can, don’t get ‘off-side’ with your neighbours at home, work, church in society at large. To live peacefully with everyone as much as it depends on you is to glorify God, which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **God will be glorified before all the nations**

In English we have an expression “*it is like looking for a needle in a haystack*’. This expresses the difficulty in locating a very small object in the midst of something very large. Finding comfort and encouragement in the first 32 chapters of Ezekiel can seem a bit like that😊. But look and you will find! At the end of chapter 28 (24-26) there is good news for God’s suffering people: There will be no more persecution from ‘prickly’ neighbours who have treated Israel with contempt (28:24).

* They will be gathered together from the nations into which they have been scattered 28:25).
* They will experience lasting security in a land of their own (28:25).
* They will again be able to build houses and plant vineyards (28:26). These are long term projects which require lasting stability and peace.
* They will manifest God’s holiness before the nations (28:25).

Brothers and sisters, these promises of blessing are **already** ours in part now in Christ Jesus, but **not yet** fulling realized as they one day will be in the New Heavens and New Earth to come. At times it can seem that God is unable or unwilling to act against injustice, but the truth is that his judgement has only been delayed. Peter warns against misunderstanding God’s perfect timing The *Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance*” (2 Peter 3:9).

Notice finally, the promise which resounds throughout the book of Ezekiel (72 verses): “*Then you/they will know that I am the Lord*”. The Lord will be glorified as the God of His people 28:26) who is faithful to His promises and acts in history both to judge justly and to rescue mercifully. At the end of this age, this promise of universal recognition by every single human being from every single nation will be finally fulfilled when Christ returns and: “*at the name of Jesus every knee …will… bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue ...will...confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*” (Phil 2:10-11)

Some people’s ‘knees’ would have been, in this life, willingly bowed in submission before their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Others will bend their knee on that day in fearful expectation of judgment from Christ the King from whose mouth will ‘*come a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations*’ (Rev 19:15).

Friend, willingly bend your knee to Christ now, while there is yet time for you. Turn in repentance for the malice in your heart, the desire for revenge, the pride which makes you think you are better than others. Turn in repentance to Christ for being such a ‘prickly’ neighbour to others instead of loving them as yourself (Lev 19:18). Turn to Christ for forgiveness and resolve in your heart to:

* *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them*
* *Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all.*
* *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*
* *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."*
* *To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."*
* *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:14,17,18,19,20,21)*

Jenny and I and our children still at home live with the high fences and gates which separate us from our neighbours where we live in Northcote. This is a constant reminder to me that I should not be a ‘prickly neighbour’ who acts and speaks in such a way as to get unnecessarily ‘offside’ with others.

It is certainly true that the gospel is offensive to those who do not know Christ. As the bearers of the gospel we may be treated with malice, contempt and vengeance by our unbelieving neighbours, but these are not reasons to build fences and huddle inside compounds as individuals or as a church community. We can have ‘open borders’ with those around us, knowing that God is the Lord: full of justice and mercy. We can experience in part the peace, security, and holiness of the Lord in this life as we trust in our Lord to deal with our enemies, including our ‘prickly neighbours’ in His good time.

To God be the glory.

AMEN.

1. Seir is an area in Edom, not Moab – this may be a marginal note in the original which found its way into the main text – Allen commentary, p65). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)