God’s sharp sword falls on many

Text: Ezekiel 5-7

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**Scriptures:** Romans 2:1-11; Ezekiel 5-7

Songs Chosen: [SttL] 352, 38, 92, 338, 180

Series: Ezekiel (sermon #3)

Theme: The coming fearful judgement of the LORD on the people of Jerusalem and all the land of Israel for their covenant breaking sins (pride, idolatry and lack of trust in their God) with the aim that everyone will know that God is the LORD.

Proposition: Be warned - the Lord’s fearful judgement has come and is coming, but He has promised to preserve a remnant who will see themselves as they truly are and turn to Him.

**Introduction**

 If you were one of the Jewish exiles living in Babylon in 593BC and you were looking for some entertainment, you could go out and see that crazy guy, the ‘God freak’, who was called Ezekiel. He was the person who was tied up in his own house (Eze 3:25) and then lay down every day for over a year (390 days), eating small rations of food and water and looking at an engraved brick! (Eze 4). Then you see him, most likely out in public, shaving himself, not with a razor – they were generally made from hard materials like flint, obsidian, or iron back in then in the Ancient Near East – but with a sword! A weapon of war not a barber’s blade.

As if all that wasn’t weird enough, it gets even more bizarre! Having shaved both his head and his beard, he then weighs the hair and divides it into thee equal portions. He burns one lot in the fire, waves his sword at the next third, and takes the remainder and throws it into the wind. He then picks up a few of these scattered hairs, hides them in the folds of his robe for a time and then pulls them out again to throw them on the fire.

You’d want to stand at a safe distance from this seemingly deranged prophet and perhaps hold your nostrils closed because of the acrid sharp smell of burning hair. You might consider having this man committed to a lunatic asylum and ask yourself, all this shaved hair, the sword and the fire – what’s with all that?

God answers that question firstly to Ezekiel saying, “*This is Jerusalem*” (Eze 5:5). Ezekiel had been tasked by the LORD, as His spokesman, to pass His word of warning onto the other exiles (3:17). The ‘entertainment’ provided by the peculiar prophet was not for amusement at all, but was God graphically showing what would take place to the people of the great city of Israel’s beloved homeland.

This message was, and still is, deadly serious. Ezekiel had been acting out God’s fearful judgement on his people, which brings us to our first point:

1. **The fearfulness of God’s judgement**

New Zealand has experienced some very damaging storms over the past year, and in her recent past. For example: in 1968, the winds and waves arising from ex-tropical cyclone Giselle caused the inter-island ferry Wahine to sink in Wellington Harbour with the loss of 51 lives and 2 more later from the incident. On land another 5 people died with winds reaching a maximum of 269km/hr. Very big storms are dangerous, damaging and frequently result in multiple deaths.

Similarly, God’s judgement is an outpouring of His wrath which levels everything and almost everybody in its path – like a raging storm. Just as Ezekiel’s hair was removed so God would remove his people from the land of promise which He had given to them as their possession. For the Israelites, shaving the head was a sign both of mourning and of humiliation (ref. 7:18 and cf. 2 Sam 10:4).

In his shaving, Ezekiel represents the people of Israel. Jerusalem was to become a city of shame. The whole of Israel would be in mourning and terror. This holy nation (Ex 19:6) had been called by God to be a ‘light for the nations’ (e.g. Isa 42:6), but now she would become an ‘object of reproach’, a ‘taunt, a warning and a horror’ to the nations around her (5:14-15). God’s judgement on her would come fast and furious.

Ezekiel’s public shaving was not for entertainment, nor was the prophet mad, He was depicting thedifferent fates for those back in Jerusalem who were about to feel the force of God’s fury:

1. Those who would **die in the city** – symbolized by the hair which is burned.
2. Those who would **die outside the city** by the sword of the enemy – symbolized by the hair which was cut
3. Those who would **be scattered** – symbolized by the hair thrown into the wind. The survivors who were not picked off as they fled, would go into exile (note here 2 and 3rd waves of deportees)

In the coming siege there would be no place of refuge. There would be nowhere to find safety from the fury of God’s judgement. This lack of anywhere to hide is symbolized by the small amount of hair which Ezekiel stores up for a time in a fold in his garment before it too is burned in the fire.

Terrible things would happen, which are described in chapters 5-7: In the siege there would be cannibalism because of the acute shortage of food available to the entrapped inhabitants of Jerusalem “*fathers shall eat their sons in your midst, and sons shall eat their fathers*” (5:10; covenant curse 28.53). Famine (5:16), warfare (6:11) and disease (6:11) would result in death. There would no longer be walls to protect people from attack by wild animals (5:17). The Jerusalem Temple ‘*the house for God’s name*’ (1 Kings 5:5) would be looted by gentile robbers (7:22) – it would no longer be a safe place, a sanctuary.

Not only Jerusalem, but all the cities of Israel would be laid waste (6:6). The whole land would be engulfed by the ‘tide’ of God’s wrath. Israel’s idols would be broken and destroyed, and her pagan incense altars cut down (6:6). There would be widespread economic collapse, as chaos prevented trade between buyers and sellers (7:12-13). Personal material wealth would be lost to foreigners (7:21-24). There would be no peace in the land (7.25), only disaster which would follow disaster (7:26).

All the people, including their state leaders, would be disabled by fear: “*The king mourns, the prince is wrapped in despair, and the hands of the people of the land are paralyzed by terror*” (7:27). Not only would there be no effective national leadership, spiritual guidance would also be absent: “*They seek a vision from the prophet, while the lawperishes from the priest and counsel from the elders*” (7:26).

In summary, God would turn His face away from His people (7:22). He would abandon those upon whom He had set his love. Israel was about to experience Hell – full separation from God.

Brothers and sisters, friends, this prophesy and history were written down in Scripture for our instruction (cf. Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11). There is a ‘day of reckoning’ coming for all people (Heb 9:27) including you and me. Like a fierce storm it will descend just as Ezekiel’s sword came upon all the hair of his head and face.

Our second point addresses the question: why?

1. **The reasons for God’s judgement**

The Haka is a [ceremonial dance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ceremonial_dance) or challenge in [Māori culture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C4%81ori_culture). In the Haka there are vigorous movements and stamping of the feet. These were intended to be intimidating to the enemies of the indigenous people of New Zealand.

God calls Ezekiel to perform a haka-like dance. "*Clap your hands and stamp your foot and say, Alas, because of all the evil abominations of the house of Israel, for they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence*”. (6:11) These hostile gestures are accompanied by the **reasons** for God’s judgement: “*all the evil abominations of the house of Israel*”. An abomination is a disgusting, detestable, loathsome practice.

The people had committed idolatry and had defiled the sanctuary of their Lord (5:9; 11 cf. Lev 26:1-2). Before the building of the temple in Jerusalem, the Israelites were permitted to offer sacrifices to the Lord from the ‘high places’ (1 Ki 3:2) –which were located on the hilltops. Once the temple was completed, the worship of Israel was centralized in Jerusalem (Deut 12).

The high places then became focal points for the Canaanite religious images and practices which included Baal and Asherah (ref. 2 Ki 23:4-7). Baal was the storm god, the god of power and fertility, who, it was thought, if appeased could ensure victory in battle and rain which was vital for agricultural production. Asherah was his consort/partner, the goddess of fertility, known in her Greek form as Aphrodite. It has been said that in modern terms, Baal and Asherah were the “*patron saints of sex and drugs and rock’n’roll*” – promising to deliver a potent mixture of satisfaction for the desire for power, success and pleasure.

The ‘evil abominations’ of Israel included the false worship of idols. The people’s trust was not in the Lord, but their pride had swelled.

1. They had confidence in human strength. Although the trumpet would be blown in the coming battle there would be nobody to fight for them (Eze 6:14).
2. They had confidence in their wealth, not realizing that financial security can collapse like a ‘house of cards’ (6:12-19). Gold and silver could not buy the refuge they needed any more than it can do for us today.

Israel had rebelled against their Lord and had rejected His law (5:6; Lev 26:14-15).

In the Ancient Near East sometimes a great king (the Suzerain) would enter into an agreement with a lesser king (the Vassal). In return for the protection of the great king and the benefits of a relationship with him, the lesser king would submit to him, serve him and pay tribute to him. This agreement had both bonuses attached for upholding the treaty and penalties for breaking the treaty.

In a similar way, God established a treaty with His people Israel called a ‘covenant’. There were blessings attached for upholding this covenant and curses for breaking the covenant. You can read about these in Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26 and see how the curses match the sad situation of Israel in our text.

The reason why God was coming in judgement upon His people was because they had broken their covenant with the LORD. Therefore, she would receive the curses which the LORD had carefully and clearly warned her about, including:

1. A break in their relationship with God (7:22; cf. Lev 26:17)
2. Plagues of wild animals (Lev 26:22; 5:17)
3. Death by sword and pestilence (Lev 26:26; 5:16)
4. Eating their own children (Lev 26:29; 5:10)
5. Being scattered and pursued by the sword (Lev 26:33; 5:12)

Have you ever ‘lost the plot’ and burst out at others in childlike rage and frustration? Sadly, many of us, both as children and adults have, to our own shame, behaved this way when we have lost our self-control. We often do this to the people who are closest to us. Would you agree?

The terrifying judgements of God are **not** like this. They are not random afflictions. As we have seen they are precisely what God had carefully laid out for His people in His Word so that they would know not only His rules to live by, but also the consequences of breaking them. Good parents do the same thing. They carefully describe not only the rules for their children, but also identify the consequences of disobedience before consistently enforcing their regulations.

These judgements of God upon His child Israel whom He had loved (ref. Hos 11:1) are His holy and carefully considered response to Israel’s repeated failure. God’s justice in His furious judgement is entirely fair and morally right. His punishment perfectly fits Israel’s crimes. This is what the Lord explains in 7:27b “*According to their way I will do to them, and according to their judgments I will judge them*”. When children misbehave badly, they bring shame and sadness on their parents as the proverb wisely states. **“***A foolish son is a grief to his father and bitterness to her who bore him*” (Prov 17:25). Israel had brought shame upon the reputation of her God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, when you and I misbehave by breaking the terms of God’s treaty with us – summarized in the ten commandments and expanded upon throughout Scripture we damage God’s reputation amongst the nations of the world. When we ‘misbehave’, that is sin, we show ourselves to be like the people of Old Testament Israel – rebellious covenant-breakers who deserve the fury of God’s wrath.

Where it not for the content of our third point, we would all be without hope

1. **The kindness in God’s judgement**

Violent storms which ravish our nation do not last forever, the winds abate, and clouds clear and again there is stillness and sunshine. So likewise it is with the LORD’s coming judgement. God’s fury is not of infinite strength and duration. He expresses this kindness in his judgement in these words: "*Thus shall my anger* ***spend*** *itself, and I will vent my fury upon them and satisfy myself” (*Eze 5:13); “*Thus will I* ***spend*** *my fury upon them*”. (Eze 6:12) The Hebrew word translated ‘spend’ means to be finished, accomplished, to come to an end.

Well, you might say, it’s all very well knowing that the storm will pass, but if it leaves no one alive and there is nobody left to enjoy the sunshine afterwards, then where is the kindness of God? Here it is: some will not perish in the fury. As God promises: "*Yet I will leave some of you alive. When you have among the nations some who escape the sword, and when you are scattered through the countries, then those of you who escape will* ***remember me*** *among the nations where they are carried captive, how I have been broken over their whoring heart that has departed from me and over their eyes that go whoring after their idols. And they will* ***be loathsome in their own sight*** *for the evils that they have committed, for all their abominations. And* ***they shall know that I am the LORD****. I have not said in vain that I would do this evil to them*" (Eze 6:8-10).

Here God is committing to leave a remnant alive. A remnant is a small part that is left after the greater part has been removed or destroyed. God’s kindness is seen in His preservation of a few from the judgement to come. Some of the exiles in Babylon who witnessed the bizarre actions of Ezekiel shaving off his hair with a sword were part of this remnant. Look closely and you’ll see three steps for them to return to the Lord:

1. **Firstly**,with their memory they will remember God. They will bring to mind not just the past, but also what God is doing in their lives now (Eze 6:9). God was communicating with them through his prophet, just as we trust that God is speaking to you now through the preaching of his Word. ‘Remembering the Lord’ is linked to repentance in Scripture (e.g. Jonah 2:7a).

Can you bring to mind what the Lord has done in your life and is doing now? His faithfulness, goodness and love towards you. So much that He has given you. Yet how have you treated Him? How carefully have you guarded His Holy reputation?

1. **Secondly,** they will return to the Lord with self-awareness. They will see with horror that their plight is due to the consequences of their sin (Eze 6:9). Here is a key difference between the people back then and you and I now. The Old Testament material blessings and curses have been replaced in these New Testament times with spiritual blessings and curses.

How is your spiritual life? Has it been ravaged? Does it lay as a wasteland? Does it seem that God has turned from you? Do you yearn and long for the light of his glorious face on you again? Are you ashamed of your own ‘misbehaviour’, your own sin?

1. **Thirdly**, they will recognize the Lord for who He is and for what He has done (Eze 6:10). ‘*They shall know that I am the Lord*” (6:7, 10, 13, 14; 7:4, 9, 27). Some form of this phrase occurs over 50 times in the book of Ezekiel. True knowledge of God does not come by some mystical experience, but through God’s actions seen in history. This can either be the ‘enforced’ knowledge of God’s rule – as the Egyptians experienced it with plague upon plague and saw their horses and chariots disappear under the waters of the Red Sea (ref. Ex 14:4, 18)… or the knowledge of God which comes to the repentant whose attachment to sin is broken by discipline

As we’ve seen, in painful detail, the coming of God’s judgement on Israel would be bleak and dark. God’s coming judgement through Christ will likewise be fast and furious: Jesus, the Faithful and True Son of God will come like this: “*From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty*” (Rev 19:15).

Just as God had designated Jerusalem as the ‘*dwelling place for his name*’ (Deut 12:11) and His own reputation was at stake when His people misbehaved, when the sinned. So likewise, Christ has designed the church, His Body (Eph 5:23; Col 1:18, 24) and His own reputation is at stake when His people misbehave, when they sin.

Our text from Ezekiel 5-7 serves as a warning for us all not to presume upon the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience (Rom 2:4) but rather to know that God’s kindness is meant to lead us to repentance (Rom 2:4).

So, firstly remember the Lord’s goodness towards you in the past and in the present.

Secondly, be aware of yourself as you truly are. Hate your sin which yet lingers and clings to your heart.

Thirdly, know that God is the Lord. Know that Jesus Christ kept the covenant on your behalf if your trust is in Him. Know that the sharp sword of God’s judgement fell on Christ His Son, so that you could find shelter in the coming storm at the end of this age.

On the cross Jesus cried out “*It is finished*” (John 19:30). God’s fury was spent. The sunshine came again. The hairs which Ezekiel hid in the skirts of his robe ended up in the fire to be destroyed. If you are hidden in the protective blood of Christ, then you are not destined for the fires of Hell. You are not destined to be abandoned by God, you are not destined to have Him turn His face away from you in disgust at the loathsome abominations of your sin, but rather: You are destined for glory, for honour, for acceptance as a fellow heir with Christ (Rom 8:17) of the Kingdom of God which will last forever. This is a secure kingdom of covenant blessings won by Jesus for you so that you can uphold the reputation of Christ in a dying world by your words and actions.

Will you strive to do this for the glory of His name?