

St. Mary's, Eaton Socon – 07/02/21 – Ezekiel 25:1-17 – The God who judges

We continue today with our series of sermons based on the book of the Old Testament prophet, Ezekiel – and Tim has asked me to tackle the subject of the God who Judges, based on Ezekiel 25 where God pronounces judgement on four nations that surrounded the southern kingdom of Judah.

You may sometimes hear someone say, ***If I had a pound for every time I heard someone say...I'd be a rich man.*** Though I don't think it would make me rich, there have been many occasions over the years when I've heard people say, including some Christians, that the Old Testament primarily reveals a God of judgement, and the New Testament primarily reveals a God of love. In response, I've always said that the Old Testament also has a great deal to say about the love of God, and equally the New Testament has a great deal to say about the judgement of God – but can I provide biblical evidence to back up that assertion?

In the light of Tim's request for me to preach today on this subject of God's judgement, I thought I'd better turn to my Bible Concordance to find out how many times both the judgement of God and the love of God are mentioned in both the Old and the New Testament to back up my assertion. You might be surprised by what this Concordance search revealed.

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(First slide please). Does the Old Testament primarily reveal God as a God of judgement, and does the New Testament primarily reveal God as a God of love? – an important question, and some of you might be surprised to discover the answer to that question as provided by a search of a Bible Concordance.

(Next slide please).

It won't come as a surprise to many of you to see that the Old Testament includes a significant number of verses that reveal God as a God of judgement (**116**) – but it may come as a surprise to see that the number of verses in the New Testament is not far behind (**90**) – including a number uttered by Jesus Himself (not just *Gentle Jesus, meek and mild!*). ***(Next slide please).***

What may also come as a surprise to many of you is that there are more than twice as many verses in the Old Testament that refer to God as a God of love (**209**) than there are in the New Testament (**97**) – and even if you chose not to count the oft repeated phrase that *God’s love endures for ever* (26X in Psalm 136 alone). The theme of a God of love is still heavily predominant in the Old Testament.

Over the years, I’ve preached many sermons about the love of God, and over the years you will also have heard many sermons on that vitally important subject – but today I’m going to concentrate on the less palatable subject of the judgement of God. Last Sunday, Tim spoke very powerfully about God’s judgement over the nations of Israel and Judah (God’s chosen people) – and today has asked me to preach about God’s judgement over all nations, particularly illustrated by the four nations referred to in Ezekiel 25.

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Although this chapter refers to God’s judgement over the four nations of **Ammon, Moab, Edom & Philistia**, the next seven chapters (**26-32**) report God’s judgement over a further three nations of **Tyre, Sidon and Egypt**. So why were these nations judged by God in such a serious way? To save time, I’ll limit my answer to that question by what we know about the four nations listed in our reading today. All of the oracles in this chapter deal with the attitude of these four neighbouring nations towards Judah at the time of the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC – but their hostility towards both Israel and Judah goes back much further than that.

The **Ammonites** had frequently been in conflict with the Israelites from the time of the Judges onwards (**Judges 10-11, 1 Samuel 11, 2 Samuel 10**). The hostility between **Moab** and Israel dates back to Balak and Moses (**Numbers 22-24**). Israel and **Edom** also had a longstanding feud, which can be traced back to their twin ancestors, Jacob and Esau (**Genesis 25:23**) – and from time to time this hatred erupted violently, as it did at the fall of Jerusalem when they sided with Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Similarly, the **Philistines** were also entrenched enemies of Israel during her early history. King David finally broke their military ascendancy, but they continued to cause ongoing trouble for many more years.

Despite this long-lasting hostility, however, most biblical commentators seem to agree that the principal reason for God’s judgement against them was the way they sought to take advantage of Judah’s plight when they were at their lowest point while in exile in Babylon – where they had been sent as a result of God’s judgement upon them.

The **Ammonites**, according to Ezekiel, were *rejoicing with all the malice of their heart against the land of Israel* (6). The **Moabites** were judged for mocking Judah for becoming *like all the other nations* (8). The **Edomites** were condemned because they *took revenge on Judah* (12) – and similarly, the **Philistines** were judged because they *acted in vengeance and took revenge with malice in their hearts, and...sought to destroy Judah* (15).

In other words, says Ezekiel, only God has the right to exercise judgement upon the people of God – other people and nations do not. Ezekiel also makes it equally plain that though at different times in history, different nations might be able to exercise political, economic and military power over other nations – they only do so because for that period of time God allows them to do so. Almighty God is not only LORD over Israel and Judah, His chosen people – He is also LORD over all the nations of the world.

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If you have read the whole book of Ezekiel, you may have noticed that a number of phrases appear again and again – phrases like *The word of the LORD came to me* (1), and *Hear the word of the Sovereign LORD* (3), and particularly *This is what the Sovereign LORD says* (3, 6, 8, 12, 13, 15, 16) that appears seven times in this chapter alone – all phrases that emphasise that Ezekiel is not speaking out his own thoughts, but is speaking out the message that God had given him to proclaim. When phrases like these are repeated over again, we have to conclude that they are there for us to take special notice of.

This brings me then to one particular phrase that appears **58 times** in the book of Ezekiel – either *they* or *you will know that I am the LORD*. This is particularly significant because, as far as I can see, this phrase only appears twice more in the writing of the other Old Testament prophets (**Isaiah 45:3 & 49:23**) – so it is clearly a key part of the message that God gave to Ezekiel.

For us as Christians, to **know the LORD**, and to be known by Him, is the most wonderful blessing to experience – but in the book of Ezekiel, out of **58 references to knowing that I am the LORD**, is only seen as a blessing **18 times**. The other **40 references** are seen in the context of judgement – and **22** of those judgement references are applied to the people of Judah.

The question we need to ask, then, is why – why is this such a key part of Ezekiel’s message? It becomes even harder to answer this question when the phrase is then linked to the word **vengeance** in this chapter – **Then they will know that I am the LORD, when I take vengeance on them (14, 17)**. The trouble is that the word **vengeance** is often understood today to mean getting revenge on someone for some perceived wrong – but that doesn’t square easily with the biblical description of the character of God. More helpfully, the **Concise Oxford Dictionary** defines **vengeance** as **punishment inflicted, or retribution exacted, for a wrong to oneself or to a person whose cause one supports** – but that is still an inadequate definition when applied to God.

Whenever the Bible speaks of God taking **vengeance** on someone, it always has to be understood within the context of God’s righteousness and justice. God doesn’t lash out in fits of pique or petulance, like some petty dictator – but He does expect and require His laws to be followed, and when His laws are repeatedly ignored and abused, He sometimes is left with no choice but to take action – but always within the context of His amazing love. Good parents sometimes have to discipline their children when they step out of line, because they love them and want the best for them – and it is just the same with God.

So I finish with this thought. There is some advice in the book of **Proverbs (3:11-12)** that we would be wise to heed: **Do not despise the LORD’s discipline, and do not resent His rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those He loves, as a father the son he delights in** – words echoed by the writer to the Hebrews (**12:5-6, 10-11**) in the New Testament, who goes on to say: **God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in His holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it**. As the risen and ascended Lord Jesus put it when speaking to the church in **Laodicea: Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent (Revelation 3:19)**.