

“When God Brings Gog”
Ezekiel 38-39
March 22, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

One outline I saw on the book of Ezekiel titles chapters 34-48 “The Gospel according to Ezekiel.” “Gospel” means good news, and he was trying to capture this abrupt change that occurs between chapters 33 and 34. The first 33 chapters of the book contain some of the darkest judgment passages in the Bible, focused primarily upon the nation of Judah, in order to explain their exile to Babylon. The first half ends with the report in chapter 33 that a messenger has arrived from Jerusalem with a report of the fall of that city. But from chapter 34 to the end of the book, the grace of God shines through as he promises to restore his people to the Promised Land. The exile has resulted in the cleansing of the land from the defilement brought by the people’s sin. The people too have been transformed, as indicated by the promises in chapter 36. **“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules”** (36:26-27). As a result of the transformation of the people, they live in prosperity and peace in the land.

At first glance, the two chapters before us today don’t seem to belong to this “good news” section of Ezekiel. They describe the rise of a great enemy to Israel, a man named Gog, from the land of Magog. He is called a “prince”, which is simply Ezekiel’s way of referring to a king. This king sees the prosperity of Israel and the lack of any kind of military defense and plans an unprovoked attack upon them in order to seize their wealth. He musters an army not only from his own nation, but from all the nations surrounding Israel. This massive hoard moves in for the attack, confident in an easy victory and abundant spoils. But they failed to account for the fact that Israel had a King about whom they were ignorant. The Sovereign God of the universe had pledged himself to be Israel’s defender, and Gog’s invasion moves him to action. He comes to Israel’s aid, and utterly defeats Gog and his attacking hoard. The entire invading force is eliminated, and the destruction is on such a massive scale that it takes Israel seven months to bury all the bodies (39:12). The weapons of Gog’s army are repurposed, supplying Israel with firewood for seven years (39:9). This passage is in the good news section of Ezekiel because God comes to his people as their defender from the attacks of very powerful enemies. Who are your enemies? The Bible teaches that we all have a satanic enemy, that roaring lion who seeks our destruction. You may also be facing enemies of financial trouble, health issues and relational breakdown. The relevance of this passage can be understood as we grasp four paradoxes that emerge in these two chapters. Let’s look at them now.

I. Opposition is Both Present and Future

Who is the leader of this opposition, the king whose name is Gog? The curious thing about him is his obscurity, both in the Bible and in historical sources outside the Bible. He is hardly mentioned at all, making it very difficult to pin down his identity. This difficulty has led to some pretty wild speculation. There was a very popular teaching back in the 1970's that identified Gog, and the land of Magog, with Russia and the Soviet Empire. The proponents of this view taught with absolute confidence that this passage predicted an invasion of Israel led by the Soviet Union, just before the second coming of Christ. Of course, their confidence has proven to be the same kind of overconfidence as Gog himself exhibited, because the Soviet Union has been long gone, with no invasion of Israel ever coming.

I believe the obscurity of Gog is deliberate, because he is meant to represent many different enemies of God and of his people. There was one historical Gog, but he is not the point. The point of the passage is all the other Gogs who will arise to destroy God's people, and God's determination to defend his people. For two-thousand years now the church has been in the same situation as Israel in this passage. Our sins have been paid for and the Holy Spirit has been given. We are living in peace and prosperity under God's rule, but without walls of defense. The church has not been given the power of the sword in this age, with the result that we are unable to take up arms in our defense. There have been many rulers who, like Gog, see this defenseless state and plan unprovoked attacks upon the church. A few years before my first trip to Uganda, Idi Amin had served as its president. It was his vision to make Uganda an African-Muslim nation. All foreigners were chased from the nation, and many Christians were threatened and some killed. He is a modern day Gog, and there have been many of them through the centuries. This kind of opposition is happening today in southern Sudan and in China.

There is a reference to Gog and Magog in the book of Revelation which portrays a great battle that is still in the future. **“And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and 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, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them”** (20:7-9). Though there have been many Gogs and many attacks upon the church, there will be a great and final battle just before the return of Christ. Satan himself will deceive the nations so that they all turn against God's people. These deceived nations march out to destroy the church, which has no ability to defend itself by force of arms. But God himself will come to their defense, and all the enemies will be destroyed.

II. God is Both in Control of Evil and Not Responsible for It

There is a jaw-dropping surprise in these chapters, repeated more than once. The surprise is that God brings Gog and his army to attack Israel. Notice, for example, the language of 38:4 as it speaks of God's leading of Gog to initiate this attack. **"And I will turn you about and put hooks into your jaws, and I will bring you out, and all your army, horses and horsemen."** The same thing is said in different words in 38:16, as God speaks of Gog, **"In the latter days, I will bring you against my land."** It's as if the people of Israel look up and see this invading force, and upon a careful look notice that the horse at the head of the army is the mount of Jehovah himself. God is leading the attack upon the land. How could this be?

If God is the one leading the attack upon Israel, there are only two possible explanations. First, he has betrayed his people. He has taken back his promises to be Israel's helper and has now become their adversary. But this would require the destruction of the most powerful thing in the universe—the word of God—and is therefore impossible. There is a second possibility for God leading the attack upon his people. It's similar to the old saying, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer." Perhaps God is so in control of all things, including evil, that he is able to turn it to his own purposes. Perhaps he is setting a trap for Gog here, one that will lead to their destruction.

It is, of course, this second possibility that the Bible teaches both in this passage and throughout the Bible. It was taught about the greatest evil ever perpetrated in the long history of evil in this world. The deed of greatest evil was the crucifixion of the innocent Son of God. Here's how Peter said it in his sermon at Pentecost. **"This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men"** (Acts 2:23). In theology, we call this the sovereignty of God. It means simply that God is in charge of all things, including evil things. The sovereignty of God rejects the idea of dualism, that there are two ultimate powers in the universe, good and evil, that are battling it out. It believes instead in what is called "monism", the idea that there is only one ultimate power in the universe.

The question that always comes up at this point is the one about how God escapes responsibility for evil if he is sovereign over all things. If God is sovereign over the death of a child from cancer, over the ending of a marriage from adultery, over the violent murder of an innocent man or woman, how is it that he is not guilty of evil himself? The Bible never completely answers this question, but it does clearly affirm that God's sovereignty does not make him guilty. In this case, the one of whom evil is attributed for this unprovoked attack upon Israel is Gog. **"Thus says the Lord God: On that day, thoughts will come into your mind, and you will devise an evil scheme"** (38:10).

Let's apply this idea of the sovereignty of God over our enemies. We are in the very same situation as Israel in this passage. As we survey the massive enemy gathered against us, whether that enemy is financial trouble, sickness or some

broken relationship, we look up and see God's presence with the enemy. What are we going to do with that? There are only two options open to us. First, we can deny God's sovereignty, saying that he has nothing to do with that. The problem with this answer is that it denies God's sovereignty and brings us to a universe characterized by dualism rather than monism. In such a situation, how can we be sure that God will prevail? The other option, and the one taught in this passage and throughout the Bible, is to trust that God is in control even of our enemies. He will assert his control to bring glory to his own name and to help his people. The problem is that he doesn't fill us in on his plans before it happens. We only come to see his wisdom after the matter is concluded, and there is a sense in which we won't see the final conclusion of these matters until heaven. That calls for us to trust God at this time. He is sovereign even over the evil in our lives, and is so wise and powerful that he will even use evil people and evil events to bring good to us and glory to himself. So the application is to see God leading the army of your enemies, but to trust him as your good and sovereign God.

III. Punishment is Both Self-Inflicted and God-Inflicted

When God steps in to judge Gog and his coalition army, I notice that he does so with a combination of direct and indirect judgment. The direct judgment is in the form we expect. **“With pestilence and bloodshed I will enter into judgment with him, and I will rain upon him and his hordes and the many people who are with him torrential rains and hailstones, fire and sulfur”** (38:22). But there is also a more indirect judgment described in the previous verse. **“Every man's sword will be against his brother.”** That was a common way God took care of invading armies in the Old Testament. For example, when Gideon and his army of one hundred fought the great army of Midianites invading Israel, the rout began with the blowing of trumpets and empty jars with lights. It created a panic that led to the Midianites turning against one another and killing each other. There is something self-destructive about making oneself an enemy of God. One of the ways we can respond when Gog comes into our lives is simply to wait for this natural impulse of self-destruction to take its course within God's enemies.

Think of it this way. This passage features a community of death in Gog and his army and a community of life in Israel. Both communities experience something of an upheaval at this time. Verse 19 says that a great earthquake came upon all the land of Israel, both on Gog and upon the Israelites. The difference between these two communities is the way they respond to calamity. There is a sense in which Gog has come into our land in the form of this economic storm that has blown in. We can do very little to control the storm, but we can control our response. We can avoid turning on others by withholding from those in need when it lies within our power to help. We can avoid the kind of panic and fear that makes us stop caring for others. In short, we can wait it out as a community of life instead of allowing unbelief to lead us to become a community of death.

IV. God Delivers Both Through Trials and From Trials

God always delivers his people when they are afflicted with the trials brought by enemies such as Gog. But his deliverance takes two forms. First, God delivers from trials, as he did in this passage. The only thing Israel suffered at the hands of Gog was the threat he brought as his army invaded their land. God came to their defense and delivered them from this trial.

God's deliverance sometimes comes in a second form—deliverance through our trials. In other words, sometimes there is not healing from the enemy of cancer. Sometimes Gog wins the battle, even though we know he will lose the war. There is a long list of Christian martyrs, and their number continues to increase in our own day. Whenever there's a martyr, it seems that Gog has won. Revelation 6:10 gives us a glimpse of the martyrs in heaven. They call out to the Lord, **“O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”** We would expect that the answer would be something like, “Until the full number of the redeemed is brought in.” Instead, the answer is, **“Until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been”** (6:11).

Whether Gog seems to win in the case of the martyr, or whether he is destroyed as in the case of our passage, God delivers his people. In both cases, God is guided by a principle that is of the highest importance. It is spoken of repeatedly in our passage. Verse 23 says, **“So I will show my greatness and my holiness and make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they will know that I am the Lord.”** In the next chapter, God says simply, **“And I will set my glory among the nations”** (39:21). It is true that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life, but that plan may include torture and death for the faith. It may include a life that, from the world's perspective, looks to be wasted. But when God brings Gog he does so for the greatest reason in the universe—the glory of his great name. That is what will last forever, and we are given the great privilege of being part of that.

CONCLUSION:

Has Gog been brought into your life? Remember that since Jesus has paid for every sin in your life, the trials brought by Gog are no longer an expression of God's wrath. Jesus has taken that wrath in payment for your sins. Instead, our trials show the power of God to the world. Now you can meet your trials with confidence and trust.