

Signs of Trouble

1. Intro

- There's a story of a minister who was heading out to a burial, with only an idea of where he was going
 - Eventually, he saw an open field and some men standing around what looked like an open grave
 - And he got out and gathered them around the hole in the ground
 - and led them in prayers
 - and then preached his heart out for about 15-20 minutes
 - and he finished by throwing some dirt from the pile next to him into the hole in the ground in front of him
 - And as he turned back to his car, he heard one of the men say,
 - "I all my years of installing septic tanks, I've never seen anything like that in my life"
- For those men, they received what is called the bonus sermon
 - It's the sermon you get when
 - you're not expecting it; and
 - you don't deserve it and
 - you do not even want it
- That's a little bit like what is going on the book of Ezekiel
 - The exiles in Babylon are about to get the bonus sermon ... a sermon
 - they're not expecting; and
 - they don't deserve; and
 - they don't really want to hear
- But God has other plans ... and so Ezekiel will speak

2. Context

- You might recall from last week that the Book of Ezekiel is set in a tumultuous time in Israel's history
 - Babylonians just become the latest super power > overpowering Assyrians
 - Made Judah & Jerusalem subject to them
 - 597BC King Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem and carted off the 18yo king Jehoiachin plus 10,000 of the cultural elite, including Ezekiel
- Zedekiah has been appointed the puppet king to rule Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar

- And despite the devastating effect of what Nebuchadnezzar had done, the Israelites were still optimistic of God overcoming the Babylonians and restoring Jerusalem and Israel to its former glory
- Into that context in 593BC (5yrs later) God appeared to Ezekiel in Babylon in a number of visions
 - First in Ch 1 > God gave Ezekiel mind blowing vision of God seated in all glory and majesty on his throne, ruling over all people, all nations and all creation
 - Ch 2-3 God commissions Ezekiel to speak his words to the people of God in exile
- Now ... for the next 30 chapters, Ezekiel is going to bring the word of God to the exiles in Babylon
 - Ch 4-5 is an overview / summary of the message that he has to give to them
 - And it's harsh message > serious warning > a message of impending trouble for God's people
- Rather than just get up and cry out "Hear ye, hear ye ... thus says the Lord" ...
 - Instead God wants Ezekiel to be the Marcel Marceau of Babylon ... by getting him to act out or mime, in silence, God's message for his people
- Can you imagine turning up to church one week and instead of me getting up here and delivering a 25-30 mins sermon, I spend the entire time playing a game of charades with you
 - Book > 3 words > First word > 2 syllables > sounds like
 - Weird right?!
- This is what was happening in Babylon at Ezekiel's house
- But the purpose was to get the people there thinking and self-examining in order to hear God's message with fresh ears and fresh eyes

3. Signs of Trouble

- In 4:1-5:4 Ezekiel mines four scenes / acts
 - Each meant to visually reveal to the exiles what God is going to do to his people
 - What Ezekiel was about to act out and then explain would have been totally shocking to those observing

- Four mimes > the brick > the bed > the bread > the beard
- **Brick (v1-3)**
- God tells Ezekiel to take a clay brick / tablet ... and build a model of Jerusalem > with siege works > army camped around it
 - Clearly showing that Jerusalem is to come under attack from an enemy
- But then Ezekiel was to take an iron pan / griddle and place it between his face and city
 - Point was to show that God is not watching over Jerusalem > not protecting his chosen city
 - He will allow it to be besieged and not protect them
- **Bed (v4-8)**
- Next Ezekiel is to lie down on his side and bear sin of Israel
 - He was to do this for 390 days > more than a year!
 - The number of days representative of the number of years of Israel's sin
- That 390 days corresponds to the number of years from the time of King Solomon until fall of Jerusalem
 - This period of Israel's history had been characterised by ongoing sin, rebellion and idolatry by God's people
 - Yes there had been moments of reform, but on the whole ... it was a time characterised by Israel's sin
- In addition Ezekiel was bound with ropes so that he's unable to move
 - Which is to symbolise that Ezekiel is bound to the message
 - He cannot move / change his position and therefore he cannot change the message from God
- **Bread (v9-17)**
- The third drama involved Ezekiel eating tiny rations of food
 - There was no slow roast lamb with pomegranates, feta and rocket
 - Small bread baked with wheat, barley, beans, millet and spelt
 - And the tiny amount he was to eat was barely enough to survive ... so that over the course of the 390 days ... Ezekiel would become more and more gaunt, more and more skinny and totally emaciated
 - And to add insult to injury he initially had to cook the bread on human excrement > making the food unclean
- And the purpose of the bread was a sign to show how the people in Jerusalem will be forced to ration food and slowly starve through famine

- And how the Israelites would become so desperate for food they would eat unclean, defiled food
- Now these three mimes – Brick, Bed and Bread went on for over a year!
 - Same routine > day in day out > in his house
 - Would have driven his wife crazy!
 - He spent all his day lying around
 - He wouldn't eat her food > instead he ate very dry, insubstantial bread
 - Wouldn't talk to her
 - He would have been a nightmare to have around
- As word got around about his antics ... Ezekiel would have become the local Babylonian tourist attraction
 - It would be a like a West End or Broadway show
 - People be saying to each other
 - "I'm seeing Les Mis tonight, what you seeing?"
 - "Oh, we're going to Phantom of Opera"
 - Others > "I'm going to Wicked"
 - Other's > "I'm going to see Ezekiel, I understand it's a really powerful show"
- Eventually, the exiles in Babylon would have seen Ezekiel's mimes, repeated day after day ... and eventually they would have got the message
 - Jerusalem is going to be conquered
 - She totally deserves it because of her sin and rebellion
 - The Israelites are going to suffer horrendous famine and plagues as a result of being besieged by the Babylonians
- **Beard (5:1-4)**
- But what would come next would be even more shocking
- After the 390 days, Ezekiel is to perform a fourth mime
- This time it involves shaving his head and his beard
 - In this culture, to be shaved is extremely humiliating
 - Be like a woman having her hair hacked off or a man having his hair dyed orange
 - The Israelites were going to be humiliated
- In addition, the shaving of his head and beard is symbolic of judgment
 - Isaiah likened the Assyrians to a razor who cut down the northern tribes and carted them off into exile in 722BC

- Here Ezekiel uses the same metaphor
 - He acts out judgment on himself
 - Cutting and hacking his own beard with a sword / knife
 - He's showing in the same way God is going to cut off the Israelites and this time the Babylonians are the razor
- Then Ezekiel divides the shavings into 3 piles
 - Burns a third of the hair in the city > model he built out of clay
 - Hack a third with sword
 - Throws a third out in the wind
- Because this is what was going to happen to the ppl of Jerusalem
 - Many would die of famine or plague in Jerusalem
 - Others would die by sword
 - Others would be scattered to the wind and pursued with the sword
- And so God uses Ezekiel's four mimes > Brick, Bed, Bread and the Beard, to make it clear to the exiles what was going to happen to Jerusalem and the remaining Israelites living there
- This would have been totally shocking to those taking in Ezekiel's message
- The Exiles would have been hoping that
 - God would overcome the Babylonians
 - Jerusalem would be spared
 - Exiles would be freed and restored
- But much of this thinking was based on a very false theology that had become normalised amongst God's people which was
 - God is sovereign God of heavens and earth
 - He's chosen us as his people
 - He's chosen Jerusalem as his city
 - He's put his temple in the city so he can be present among us
 - Which is true
- However, their false conclusion was
 - God would never let this city fall
 - God would never let his people be defeated
 - God would never allow his Temple to be destroyed
- And just in case the exiles watching Ezekiel's mimes didn't get it or understand why God would do this ... God loosened Ezekiel's tongue and allows him to speak

- In 5:5-17 Ezekiel explains the significance of the trouble that is to come upon God's people

4. Significance of the Trouble

- **God's judgment is just**

- The first is that God's judgment is totally just
 - In v5-7 he reminds them why this is happening to them
 - *This is Jerusalem, which I have set in the centre of the nations, with countries all around her. ⁶ Yet in her wickedness she has rebelled against my laws and decrees more than the nations and countries around her. She has rejected my laws and has not followed my decrees. ⁷ "Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: You have been more unruly than the nations around you and have not followed my decrees or kept my laws. You have not even conformed to the standards of the nations around you.*
- Israel was at the centre of nations geographically
 - Situated between the super powers of the day > Egypt > Assyria > Babylon
- But most significantly, she was at the centre of the nations **missionally**
- That is ... Israel at the centre of God's plans and purposes to reach the nations
 - As Israel lived faithful and obedient lives that honoured God ... she would be a light to the nations around her
 - God's glory was meant to radiate out from her > like hub of a wheel with spokes going out ... so was Israel meant to be to the nations
 - Others nations were meant to look at Israel and see her godliness and ethical standards, and devotion to God ... and be attracted to God ... to want to know the God they worshipped
 - But because of her wickedness and rebellion ... instead she was a reproach and embarrassment to God
 - Instead of being a light on hill she was a sink hole of sin and darkness
- In fact, so badly had the Israelites rejected God and the Law ... they had become more unruly > more unethical > more immoral than the pagan nations around her!
 - Their judgment was deserved
 - God's judgment is just

- **God's judgment is personal**

- Second significance we see about God's judgment is that its personal
- What Ezekiel mimes and speaks makes it crystal clear that this is God acting against Israel
- Not made any clearer that in 5:8 when God says - *I myself am against you – even I*
- As you read through the passage over and over again we see it is God who is against them
 - 16 times he says *I will* do this to them
 - *I will cut off the supply of food (4:16)*
 - *I will pursue them with the sword (5:2)*
 - *I will inflict punishment on them (5:8)*
 - *I will scatter them (5:12)*
- Yes the Babylonians would be the razor that cut Jerusalem down ... but they were the razor in the hand of God that he applied to Israel

- **Aside – God is a monster**
- Some people will hear a passage like this and think "God is a monster"
 - "He can't do that"
 - "He's a maniac"
 - "What type of loving god would do that to people?"

- When we say that ... what we're saying in effect is that justice doesn't matter
 - You say "of course justice matters"
- And you're right ... justice does matter
 - We want our world to be a place of justice
 - We want judges to judge justly
 - We want criminals to be convicted properly
 - We want our kids to be treated fairly
- And if we think justice is an integral part of a good world ... then why would we expect God not to be just
 - How can we expect God to be unjust and allow peoples sin and rebellion and to worship idols and turn their backs on him as their creator, redeemer, loving heavenly father ... and have all that swept under the carpet?
- If we value justice so highly, surely we'd expect God to have an even higher standard of justice than us
 - So to label God a monster for being just ... we're undermining our own value system

- **God's judgment is true**

- The third significance we see about God's judgment is it is true
- The mimes and the speech Ezekiel did there in his home in Babylon was in 592BC
- And in less than five years ... all that Ezekiel told his fellow exiles happened just as he had acted out and prophesied
 - The Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem
 - And in 587BC the city was conquered and was burned to the ground
 - And those who didn't die of famine and plague during the siege, were killed in the invasion or fled to the hills
- What this would have shown the exiles is that the word of the Lord is true
 - When God speaks ... he does not speak in vain
- Means we cannot dismiss the word of God as irrelevant or fanciful
 - His word is true and therefore his judgment is true

5. Solution to our Trouble

- **Warning to the nations**

- What are we to make of this?
- On the one hand we're not to make the mistake of saying Australia is like Israel and that God is going to send an invading army in judgment on us for our nations godlessness and sinfulness
- But on the other hand there are many parallels in the passage that ought to concern us
 - God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow ... and so that means his judgment on human sin continues to remain just, personal and true
- The line of application is there in text it's there in 5:14-15
 - *"I will make you a ruin and a reproach among the nations around you, in the sight of all who pass by. You will be a reproach and a taunt, a warning and an object of horror to the nations around you*
- The nations Ezekiel is referring to here are those pagan nations surrounding Israel in that time
 - And so what happened to Jerusalem in 587BC was to act as a warning to those nations
 - Apart from Israel's judgment being thoroughly deserved, it also served as an object lesson for others on the outside looking in
- And what we and the nations are meant to see

- Was God being patient with Israel for decade after decade after decade > century after century > 390 years he persevered with her
- Patiently holding out his forgiveness
- Patiently sending his prophets to warn them and call them back to him
- And yet when that offer of forgiveness and grace is rejected, over and over and over again ... God's judgment has to fall
- He will blow the whistle on our proud rebellion
- And it's a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God

- And so what this clearly states to us and the nations is ..
 - If this is what God does even to his own people who reject and disobey him ... then he will surely do the same to others
 - Therefore, he is not to be messed with or trivialised
 - He plays no favourites
 - He will not turn a blind eye to **anyone**
 - **No-one** will escape > **no-one** can hide
- So it's a warning to us

- **Application**
- And it's a warning to those today continue reject God and his offer of forgiveness that comes in Christ
 - Jesus said *"If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."* - Mark 8:38
 - If you're here this morning and you're keeping God at arms length and because you want to run life your own way
 - I pray you see afresh the warning scripture is giving you today
 - As patient as God is ... there will come a day when you will face his just judgment and it won't be pleasant

- There's a warning here too for those who call themselves a Christian, who call on God's name ... tick the box on the census
 - But who ignore God, ignore his word, ignore his church, run life their own way ...
 - Just want to fit God into your preferences and your lifestyle
 - If that is you ... be warned

- Like the Israelites in Jerusalem who were confident that
 - God was going to rescue them ... that the temple and the city would stand forever ...

- They thought they had nothing to worry about because they were God's ppl in God's place
- But little did they know their days would soon come to an abrupt end

- Friends, Jesus makes the same warning to us today ...
 - He says many will cry out "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name" and he will tell them "get away from me, I never knew you"¹

- This is a serious warning not to domesticate God into a god that suits you and your preferences and your lifestyle and your ideas of what is right or wrong
 - We're not think that God is a cuddly genie like Aladdin who is always smiling and will give us anything and everything we wish for
 - We must avoid that domesticated, harmless, 'back-pocket god' which so many live with – who believe God's job is just basically to make your life tidy and friendly and happy and easy
 - We have to get rid of that view of Christianity

- So it's a warning to those who
 - Claim to be Christian
 - Think they're going to heaven
 - But they ignore God > they ignore his word > ignore Jesus call to come take up their cross and follow him
 - And in the end Jesus will do exactly what they have done to him

- **God's Grace to Save**
- In the end ... the only solution to our trouble is God's grace to save
- In the midst of God's just and personal judgment on Jerusalem ... God graciously saves some
- I wonder if you saw it > there in 5:3
 - *"But take a few strands of hair and tuck them away in the folds of your garment."*

- Ezekiel gathers up the few hairs that had been spared the burning, hacking and scattering of judgment ... and tucks them in the fold of his cloak
 - Here Ezekiel is portraying God
 - He is putting them somewhere safe > close to himself

¹ Matt 7:21-23

- They represent those Israelites who are spared the judgment of everyone else
- It is entirely God's grace to save

- You see the exiles in Babylon were no better than their fellow countrymen left in Jerusalem
 - They were all part of the same culture and society that had turned its back on God

- God is showing them through Ezekiel's barber shop charade ... that he will graciously save some from that judgment who otherwise deserved the same fate as everyone else

- **Application**
- In the end ... the only way any of us will be spared God's just judgment ... is by the gracious actions of God to us who don't deserve it
 - For if it were not for his grace, none of us would stand

- Like the hairs tucked into Ezekiel's cloak ...
 - So those who trust in Jesus are saved from the judgment to come

- None of it deserved > all of it by grace
 - Through Christ, God gathers to himself a people he will save for eternity

- 6. Conclusion**
- Ezekiel's signs of trouble warn us about the just judgment of God
 - There's no room for complacency
 - No option to domesticate God into something that suits us
 - No future for those who claim to know God but ignore him and his word
- But there is hope and there is a future for those who come to Jesus and put their trust in him

PRAY