A false friend falls

Text: Ezekiel 29-32

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**Scriptures:** 1 Peter 5; Ezekiel 29; Ezekiel 32:1-15

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 185, 52, 510, 445, 121

Series: Ezekiel (sermon #8)

Theme: With seven oracles delivered over a period of 16 years, Ezekiel prophesies the LORD’s judgement against the long established and powerful nation of Egypt, a proud and treacherous pretend saviour for Israel, who would be brought low for her wickedness, never to trouble God’s people again.

Proposition: Christ, the strong, humble, good friend of sinners is the only Saviour, taking upon Himself the full wrath of God against the sin of all God’s people, thereby delivering the ‘New Israel’ from her bondage.

**Introduction**

Have you heard of the ‘Bent Pyramid’? It was re-opened to the public in July 2019 for the first time in 50 years. It has a strange appearance because the angle of the pyramid changes part way up so that it more gently tapers towards the top. You may not have heard about this unusual pyramid, but you probably know the country in which it stands. Egypt. To be more precise, it is located in Dahshur, on the west bank of the Nile river. It was built 4,600 years ago.

So when Ezekiel prophesied the first of seven oracles in chapters 29-32 against the nation of Egypt in 587BC, the Bent Pyramid had already been there for about 2,000 years! Egypt has a very, very, long history as a nation. At the time of Ezekiel she had been a strong force in global politics for over 2,500 years. This has been described by historians as ‘an achievement without parallel in any modern form of civilization’.

In the seven separate oracles (that is direct communications from God), Ezekiel conveys judgement against Egypt. These oracles were delivered to the captive exiles from Israel in Babylon by this prophet over a 16-year period. They convey the truth that Egypt was a proud, treacherous nation who, despite her great power and long history would be a global force no more. We’ll look at these seven oracles in more detail under three headings:

1. A proud nation
2. A treacherous nation
3. A broken nation
4. **A proud nation**

Here’s a bit of summarised history:

* In the 16th century, Spain had a period of world dominance in the with many colonies and much gold.
* In the 17th century, The Netherlands profited hugely from trade and finance.
* In the 18th century, France gained greatly with a large population and a powerful military.
* In the 19th century, The United Kingdom was a force to be reckoned with throughout most of the world as a result of the Industrial Revolution and a strong navy.
* In the 20th century through until today, the USA which has been highly influential in world events with many natural resources and a large land mass. (In recent times expenditure has consistently exceeded income. It now has a national debt of $22 trillion).
* With a vast population and tight government control, China is now increasing in global influence.

All this to say that different human kingdoms gain power by different means. Do you know why, in Ezekiel’s day, Egypt had been so powerful for so long? It wasn’t a large navy, expertise in trade, borrowed money, or population size. It was fundamentally a river. A big, long, flowing mass of water. Without this, Egypt would be a dry and barren land in the North Eastern corner of the Sahara Desert.

The Nile was the ‘powerhouse’ of the nation’s prosperity. This river provided a constant supply of life-giving liquid which enabled the Egyptians to produce a wide variety of crops in large quantities without being dependent on rainfall. Fertile silt was carried downstream and deposited on the fields along the course of the Nile when the river flooded each year. The Nile was also a major transportation route as boats could travel downstream with the current and upstream with the aid of the prevailing wind.

When there was a famine in the land of Canaan, where did Abram go? (Gen 12:10). He went to Egypt. Later in history there was widespread famine ‘in all the lands’ (Gen 41:54). At that time, under the wise and God-inspired leadership of Joseph (Gen 41), 7 years of bumper crops were stored to provide food for 7 years of famine so that his brothers followed in the footsteps of Abram and went to Egypt. These were the words of Jacob when he sent his sons to Egypt ‘buy grain for us there that we may live and not die’ (Gen 42:2).

Egypt had long been the land of plenty. Today we might use the term ‘the fruit bowl’ of the ancient world. We know from history that great wealth, prosperity and influence so often lead to pride in the fallen hearts of men and women. This was certainly the case for the kings of Egypt. Pharaoh thought of himself as ‘*a lion of the nations*’ (32:2). In the first oracle of judgement (29:1-16), Pharaoh is likened to a “*great dragon that lies in the midst of his streams, that says “My Nile is my own, I made it for myself*’ (29:3 – also v9).

Pride distorts perspective so that the proud often become deluded – that is they believe something that is not true. Their own thinking leads them astray. In the words of Romans 1:21-22 ‘*they become futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts are darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools*’. This is the foolishness which results in the downfall of many individuals and nations. As Proverbs 16:18 wisely notes **“***Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall*”.

Ezekiel is called to remind Pharaoh and his people of this truth (31:2) in the 5th oracle (31:1-18) with the example of Assyria; which had once been a great nation. She had been like a tree of ‘towering height’ greater even than the trees in the Garden of Eden (31:8), but ‘its heart was proud of its height’ (31:10). And now – what of Assyria? ‘*foreigners, the most ruthless of nations, have cut it down and left it*’ (31:12). Here’s the lesson: God’s wrath is sure to fall upon the unrepentant proud, as we’ll see shortly in our second point.

Did Pharaoh create the river Nile? What a ridiculous suggestion. Yet this is what the foolish, deluded, King of Egypt believed. If Pharaoh didn’t make the ‘powerhouse’ of Egypt -who did? Surely it was God, the maker of all things visible and invisible who brought everything in heaven and earth into being through and for Jesus Christ His Son (Col 1:16). Here is the truth. Jesus Christ alone is the ‘Lion of the nations’ (Rev 5:5). King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev 19:16). The Nile, together with every other river in the world, big and small, belongs to Him, it always has!

Whilst there was comfort for the exiles in hearing that the Lord’s judgement would fall on proud Egypt, there was also a solemn reminder and a grave warning for them. A reminder that Israel’s own kings had been proud; even the better ones like Uzziah (2 Chron 26:16) and Hezekiah (2 Chron 32:25). The prophet Hosea spoke against the pride of Israel (Hos 5:5; 7:10). Their trust was in themselves or in the alliances they could make with other nations, rather than in the Lord their God. Fundamentally it was the pride of God’s people which had led to their downfall.

The exile in Babylon was a painful providence for those who first heard these words of Ezekiel’s. Pride leads to great sadness when the haughty spirit finally falls. The exiles were a grieving people “*By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion*” (Psalm 137:1).

There is also a reminder and a caution for us today. We can so readily be proud of our race, our achievements, our wealth, our family, our position and a host of other things. Our text today is a reminder that “*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble*" (e.g. James 4:6). The wise person, understanding this truth, takes heed of these words: “*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you*” (James 4:10)

Egypt was a proud nation, she was also treacherous, which brings us to our 2nd point.

1. **A treacherous nation**

There’s a nasty trick which I remember some people used to play at school when I was growing up. Children and young people – do not try this yourself! Stand behind a chair and offer to help someone sit down on it by moving it forward as their knees bend. Then suddenly pull the chair away so that the person falls to the ground, likely getting bruised as they tumble.

The word-picture which Ezekiel presents is similar as he speaks to Egypt (Eze 29:6b-7): "*Because you have been a staff of reed to the house of Israel; when they grasped you with the hand, you broke and tore all their shoulders; and when they leaned on you, you broke and made all their loins to shake*”. Egypt had presented herself as a friend, a would-be saviour, a helpful ally to Israel, only to prove herself to be a false friend - that is an enemy - when God’s people sought to rely on her. She was a treacherous nation. To be treacherous is to be false-hearted, deceitful, unreliable, shifty, untrustworthy and undependable.

When Jacob and his family came to Egypt in the time of Joseph because of the famine in Canaan, they were blest by being able to settle in Goshen ‘in the best of the land’ (Gen 47:6). For 430 years (Ex 12:40) the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived in Egypt, firstly as guests, then when the people of Israel ‘were fruitful and increased greatly’ they were enslaved by shrewd Pharaoh (Ex 1:10). When they were delivered from their bondage by God’s agent Moses (who you recall was raised as an Egyptian prince) they complained about their misfortunes in the wilderness foolishly looking to the land of their former captivity for aid. Hear the words of their grumbling and cravings: “*We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at*" (Num 11:5-6). The Lord said emphatically through Moses about Egypt “*You shall never return that way again”* (Deut 17:16).

Later in Israel’s history, after Solomon had humbly asked the Lord for wisdom, he then disobeyed God’s explicit instruction not to make alliances with foreign nations (Deut 17:14-20). He married many women from other lands to solidify these unholy friendships (1 Kings 11:1-7). When the Assyrians threated Judah in 701BC, Israel again looked to Egypt for help against her enemy (Isa 20:5; 30.2-3), being warned through the Lord’s prophet of their false hope: **“***Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the LORD!*” (Isa 31:1).

One of the persistent problems for Israel was her sin of seeking help through political alliances with nations like powerful Egypt rather than her Lord (e.g. Jer 2:18; 42:15). After Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, the prophet Jeremiah instructed the people of Israel to go willingly into captivity saying: "*Do not be afraid to serve the Chaldeans (Babylonians). Dwell in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it shall be well with you*”. (Jer 40:9) Yet again the people looked to treacherous Egypt for aid and disobeyed the voice of the Lord (Jer 42:19-20), ‘adding sin to sin’ (Isa 30:1).

Ezekiel’s oracles against Egypt were a comfort to the exiles in knowing that Israel’s false friend would be judged by the Lord for her repeated treachery, but they were also a solemn reminder of her lack of trust in her God in her past and a grave warning not to be deceived by would-be saviours/false friends/alliances in the future.

I have a friend who offers to give me support and help if I will only lean on him. I have done so too many times. He always lets me down -like a staff of reed which breaks and sends me crashing to the ground. Actually, he’s no friend at all. He tempts me to trust him by lying to me. He pretends what he can offer me is better than what God is willing to give me. Being proud himself, he deceives me by appealing to my pride. He is treacherous, stay away from him!

His name? He has many. Here are three: Father of lies, the Old Serpent, the Devil. Satan comes disguised as a friend, but know this: he is a treacherous enemy. Be watchful and alert, for this ‘false friend’ is always on the prowl (1 Peter 5:8).

Egypt with her wealth, her chariots and horses was dangerously attractive to Israel who looked to her for protection from other great world powers to her north and east. Yet Egypt was a place of slavery, treachery and oppression. For us, the idols which Satan seeks to convince us are reliable supports in life always end up failing us like broken reeds. We end up being severely ‘underwhelmed’, bruised, broken and damaged. Egypt had proved herself to be a false friend to Israel for over a thousand years of history since she first enslaved Jacob’s descendants who had come to her for aid in time of famine. Again and again she let foolish Israel come crashing down.

In contrast, a true friend is not a treacherous ‘staff of reed’ who lets you collapse when you lean on them, but is trustworthy, reliable and dependable. Jesus is a true friend to sinners like you and me. There is no friend like Him. He is utterly dependable, reliable and when you ‘lean on Him’ He will not let you fall. Ever. He said, “*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends*” (John 15:13). Then He did this because His is the greatest love. A completely reliable, trustworthy loving care for all God’s people. The invitation of the Lord to you today is to form an ‘alliance’ with Jesus, to put your trust in Him, to lean on Him, to believe on Him.

Perhaps you have been betrayed and deceived by individuals, companies or even a church. Be sure that the Lord will judge every treacherous act – nothing escapes his careful attention and just action. Which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **A broken nation**

Large creatures of the deep like great white sharks or big fish can be very damaging and dangerous, but if you hook them and take them out of water onto land where they are helpless, they don’t survive for long. Every fisherman knows this to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the size of your catch!

This is the image of judgement which Ezekiel brings both in his 1st and 6th oracles. Like a great sea dragon who fouls the waters, Pharaoh would be hauled up onto dry ground in a net to become food for birds and beasts as he lay powerless and exposed until he died (Eze 29:4-5; 32:2-6). God’s fearsome judgements against Egypt are the central theme of these seven oracles of chapters 29-32.

* He would use the Babylonians, not only as agents of His wrath against His own rebellious people (as we heard from chapters 4-24), but also against Egypt (29:17-20).
* God would ‘pay’ the King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar for his labour with the plunder of Egypt’s wealth (29:17-20).
* The ‘arm’ of Pharaoh would be broken beyond repair (30:12)
* The Lord would dry up the Nile (30:12).
* The land would be laid waste and desolate from ‘Migdol To Syene as far as the border of Cush’ (29:10) that is the whole area of Egypt right up to her boundaries.
* She would be uninhabited for 40 years.
* The wealth of Egypt would be carried away (30:4,10).
* Her idols would be destroyed (30:13).
* She would be set on fire (30:16).
* The Egyptians would be scattered and dispersed throughout the countries (29:12; 30:23,26).
* The women would be taken captive and the men would die by the sword (30.17).
* Egypt would become a source of horror for the nations when God’s judgements fell on her (32.10).

Egypt never troubled Israel again after the Lord laid her low. Never again would Israel rely on her false friend Egypt. Yet by God’s grace, her fortunes would be restored by the Lord and her people brought back to the land after 40 years away (29:13-14). However, Egypt would no longer be a great nation, but ‘the most lowly of kingdoms…. never again to exalt itself about the nations’ (29:15). This has come to pass. We have members of this congregation who were born in Egypt and grew up there. Check out Google maps and you’ll see that Egypt is still there, but she is no longer a great power. There are no Pharaohs today.

Repeatedly in these oracles, the Lord promises to act against Egypt so that ‘*they will know that I am the LORD*’. This is what God teaches about Himself in our text today - even though His own people are rebellious and deserving of His wrath He also acts against the enemies of His chosen nation.

There is a ray of hope here in the midst of so much destruction as we see at the end of chapter 29. *"On that day I will cause a horn to spring up for the house of Israel”* (v21a). A horn is a common symbol of power in the Bible (e.g. Deut 33.17; Ps 18:2; Ps 132:17; Dan 7:7; Zech 1:18-21; Rev 17:12). The reference to a horn springing up for Israel may not be a direct reference to the coming Messiah, but it certainly points forward to future help for God’s people – a hope which would ultimately be fulfilled in Christ.

Christ Jesus, the trustworthy friend of sinners like you and me who humbly and obediently went to the cross there to submit Himself to the fearsome judgement of God, not upon His sin, for He had none, but for the sins of others. His ‘arm’, His strength, was broken beyond repair at Calvary. He died as He hung helpless, exposed and, in His humanity, powerless – a source of horror for those who looked upon Him. The prophet Isaiah uses these words to describe the effect of God’s fearsome judgement against His own beloved Son: “*He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him*” (Isaiah 53:2); “*And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth*” (Isaiah 53:9).

Through the brokenness of Christ, brothers and sisters we are healed, and Satan is a defeated foe. The day is coming when this ‘false friend’ will no longer trouble us (Rev 20:10). The day is coming when we will see the fullness of the Kingdom of God which will last forever and ever. A land where the great river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev 22:1). A land of plenty, a land of peace and a land where the true friend Jesus, the Rock, will be with all those who have trusted in Him, all who have ‘leant’ on Him and found that He never let them down.

The New Heavens and New Earth will be known, not for pyramids: the tombs of dead Pharaohs, but by the presence of the Living Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Lean on Jesus. He will not let you fall, and He will lead you to this place. You can be sure of that. AMEN.