When your world comes crashing down

Text: Ezekiel 33

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**Scriptures:** Matthew 7:17-29; Luke 13;1-5; Ezekiel 33

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 66, 1b, 455, 176, 487

Series: Ezekiel (sermon #9)

Theme: When Ezekiel, having fulfilled his God-given role as a watchman for Israel, is confirmed as a true prophet by the arrival of news that Jerusalem has fallen, Israel, both in exile and back home, respond this momentous news with a mixture of despair, false hope, and arrogant wickedness, but calls for a response of true repentance.

Proposition: Repent and believe in Christ - this is the only right response to every calamity.

**Introduction**

Those who were part of one of the Christchurch congregations in February 2011 know what it is like when major destructive events occur. A 6.3 magnitude earthquake struck the city resulting in the death of 185 people, the injury of many others and widespread damage across Christchurch. This was our nation’s 5th deadliest disaster (the crash of ANZ flight 901 in 1979 on Mt Erebus was the most deadly with the loss of 257 lives). The Christchurch earthquake was devastating, and the city will never be the same as it once was. For all those who lived through this catastrophic event, their lives have been changed to a greater or lesser degree.

Everyone responds in one way or another when their world comes crashing down. Life changes, never to return to how it once was. This is often true with damaging earthquakes, devastating wars, major injury or sickness and great loss.

There was an event in the history of God’s people which I am convinced was far more dramatic and life-changing even than the earthquake was here. News of this event forms the central focus of our text this morning from Ezekiel 33 which we are going to unpack in three points, firstly:

1. **God’s Word and workman confirmed**

We are familiar with the almost instantaneous supply of news today. For example:

* A tsunami swamps the coast of India and within minutes we may see reports on internet news pages, radio and TV.
* A terrorist sets off a bomb in London and we learn of it even as casualties are still on route to hospital.
* Humanitarian crises resulting from war, disease and deprivation grip nations like Syria, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Congo and Afghanistan.

We may hear about these catastrophes almost immediately as they unfold (although they disappear from our news feeds and are forgotten all too quickly). The delivery of global news has only been this incredibly fast in very recent times. In Old Testament times it took about four months to travel from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:9). The only way for news to spread was with people as they journeyed – slowly!

This was how the news of the fall of Jerusalem came to Ezekiel and the other Israelite exiles who were in Babylon. “*In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, a fugitive from Jerusalem came to me and said, "The city has been struck down*." (Eze 33:21) Someone had survived the siege of Jerusalem, they had escaped from the Babylonian army and had travelled north to bring this devastating news to the exiles. He arrived during the winter months of 587/586BC about 6 months after Jerusalem had fallen.

I think it’s impossible for us to over-estimate the impact of this news on the Israelite refugees in Babylon. They had been longing to return to Zion, especially to the Temple there, which for them symbolized God’s abiding presence amongst them (e.g. Jer 7:4). Their hopes were fixed on Jerusalem. For them the city was very much their anchor which was to hold them fast in a turbulent world. Now this beautiful, glorious city where God’s people had gathered had fallen to a dreaded and fearsome pagan nation (Hab 1:7).

I suggest to you that this was the greatest material loss for Old Testament Israel throughout their history. Their world had come crashing down, their worst fears were realized, their anchor had come adrift, and they were refugees stranded in a foreign land; in Babylon the home of their enemies. There was no promised land flowing with milk and honey for them to hope to reclaim one day; just rubble, desolation and waste places.

Now you might hear one day of the collapse of the New Zealand housing market, of warfare between the USA and China or of the loss of our country’s agricultural production due to swine fever, mycoplasma bovis and varroa mite. You shouldn’t be too surprised if any of these calamities occur, some people have been warning us about the possibilities of such losses for some time now.

Similarly, Ezekiel had been warning the exiles in Babylon about the sure and certain loss of Jerusalem for over six years (since 593BC).

* He’d acted out the siege of Jerusalem (chap 4, 12) and later heard from the Lord that the King of Babylon had begun this military blockade (chap 24).
* He’d prophesied that the city would be destroyed (chap 5).
* He’d spoken out against the idolatry and violence of Israel (chap 6, 8,22), against the false prophets (chap 13) and wicked rulers (chap 14, 19).
* He’d explained that the coming destruction of Jerusalem was part of God’s just judgement on His people (chap 9:9-10; 15-17, 21).
* He’d seen a vision of God’s glory leaving the Temple (chap 10).

The exiles should not have been surprised at the news when it finally came with the fugitive’s report: ‘*The city has been struck down*’. They had already been told, not only that this would happen, but also why it was inevitable.

The arrival of the terrible news of Jerusalem’s fall showed:

**Firstly**, and most importantly, that the Word of God can, and must, be trusted. The Holy Scriptures are the only absolutely completely reliable source of comprehensive information we have on this earth. If God says something is going to happen then you can be absolutely sure that it will. The Bible has many predictions of future events which have already come truth and other prophesies which are yet to occur, but which most certainly will happen.

**Secondly**, Ezekiel was confirmed as a true prophet – what he had predicted has taken place. He has been a faithful watchman for Israel – which was part of his commission back in chapter 3 (3:16-21). This role is re-confirmed at the start of chapter 33, not as a private call to Him from the Lord, but as a public ministry known to the exiles (33:2,7).

News of the fall of Jerusalem confirmed both the truth of God’s Word and the reliability of His workman – ‘watchman’ Ezekiel

Now the people, if they have been watching and listening, would be able to see that Ezekiel has been warning them, challenging them and preparing them for the bad news which had finally arrived. Ezekiel was one of many true prophets who spoke the Word of God throughout Old Testament times.

Jesus Christ is the last of the true prophets (Heb 1:2) bringing new revelation from God. The truth of His words has been already confirmed by many past events, the greatest of which is His own death and resurrection. Just as Ezekiel warned the exiles of the coming destruction of Jerusalem many times in many different ways, so Jesus warned His disciples of the day when their world would come crashing down. For example, Mark (9:31) records his prophesy: "*The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise*."

Another prophesy of Jesus Christ, yet to be fulfilled, is about his return at the end of this age. He said: "*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats*” (Matt 25:31-32). On that day this world will ‘come crashing down’ and everyone will be judged according to how they responded to God’s Son Jesus, The Word, which brings us to our 2nd point

1. **God’s covenant people respond wrongly**

People in the covenant community here and in the city at large responded to the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes in a variety of different ways. It was a set of events of such magnitude that everybody reacted in some way or another.

* Everybody experienced shock and grief, many some degree of despair and depression.
* Some people thought that this was a direct and specific act of God’s judgement on the wickedness of Christchurch.
* Some people who had been part of the Reformed Church of Christchurch congregation for many years left that local church.
* Others stayed and hoped for a recovery of the Reformed Church of Christchurch; a rebuild and a revitalisation of the congregation.
* In the wider community, many experienced great loss and deprivation, waiting for years to have their homes repaired.
* A few profited greatly from the brokenness of the city. (I understand that the number of luxury cars purchased by some building companies increased dramatically).

Chapter 33 reveals 4 different ways in which the Israelites responded to the fall of their great city, let’s look at each one of these in turn.

**Firstly,** there were some who just despaired. They were thoroughly disheartened and lost all hope. They said'*Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?*' (33:10) We’ve got what we deserved. It’s all over.

**Despair is not the right response when your world comes crashing down (or at any other time)**

**Secondly,** there were some who thought that they would be alright because their good deeds were greater in their eyes than their bad ones. They held a view which is very common in the hearts and minds of many people who think ‘*I’m not such a bad person, better than many, I’ve done quite a bit of good in my life, so God should be pleased enough with me, shouldn’t He?*’ This is the accountant’s idea of credits and debits. If the ‘plus’ is greater than the ‘minus’, then you are ‘in the black’. This financial reasoning is then applied to the spiritual realm. God calls Ezekiel to correct this exceedingly dangerous wrong idea.

* "*And you, son of man, say to your people, “The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses, …. the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins (12).*
* *Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die (13).*
* *When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it (18).*

Did you get it? Ezekiel said it three times! It doesn’t matter how many good deeds you’ve done, just one sin will wipe out your whole credit balance! Just one ‘bad debt’. James says the same thing this way: “*For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it*” (James 2:10).

**Trusting in your own righteousness is not the right response when your world comes crashing down (or at any other time)**

**Thirdly**, the remnant remaining in the land of Israel who had survived the Babylonian invasion responded with a ‘land-grab’. They took advantage of the post-conflict chaos to get rich. They justified their greed by their genetic connection to Abraham, saying ‘*Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given us to possess*.' (33:24) The lifestyle of the arrogant ‘land grabbers’ demonstrated that they were not spiritual descendants of believing Abraham, they broke God’s laws, worshipping idols, and taking advantage of the vulnerable wives of other me (Eze 33:25-26). Here’s the faulty logic – if God promised that one man, Abraham, would possess the promised land (Gen 15:7), then surely the multitude of Israel still alive in the land after the war are entitled to take what then can get with the blessing of God!

This is the same arrogance that is displayed by people who believe lies like these:

* Because I am a member of a church, I am entitled to be saved.
* Because my parents are Christians, I am entitled to be saved.
* Because I have been baptized (whether as an infant or an adult), I am entitled to be saved.

**Pride and trust in your heritage** **is not the right response when your world comes crashing down (or at any other time)**

**Fourthly**, having seen Ezekiel’s prophesy come true, the exiles are keen to listen to him. So far, so good, but…Hear what the Lord says to His prophet: "*As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, 'Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD.' And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it*” (Eze 33:30-32).

In today’s vernacular, I could imagine the exiles saying “Check out Ezekiel the preacher. We used to think he was weird, but now he’s really cool. We like sitting under his preaching, it’s well structured, has clear points, gripping illustrations and relevant applications. He’s really soothing to listen to and leaves us feeling quite pious when we’ve been to church. Of course, we’ve no intention of doing what God’s prophet tells us to do, but he’s great entertainment for us every week. If we didn’t listen to him we’d get quite bored”.

**Being hearers, but not doers, of the Word of God when we hear it is not the right response when your world comes crashing down (or at any other time)**

So what, you may ask, is the right way to respond? Exactly how the Lord directs, which brings us to our final point:

1. **God’s gracious call for the life-giving response**

Buildings often collapse in earthquakes or when cities are attacked. This was true in Christchurch in 2010/11AD, as it was in Jerusalem 587BC. Structures also come down for other reasons. For example, the tower of Siloam, which we heard about from our earlier reading in Luke 13. Siloam was an area just outside the walls of Jerusalem on the South-eastern side. You may recall that it was at the pool of Siloam that a man who was born blind was miraculously given sight by Jesus (John 9). We don’t know why the tower of Siloam collapsed during the period of Jesus’ public ministry killing 18 people. However, we do know from the words of Jesus that it was not because these casualties were the 18 worst offenders in the city and that this was therefore not a specific act of God’s judgement against them.

Jesus doesn’t place the blame with anyone in particular for the tower which had come crashing down, but he does teach everyone how to respond rightly to this catastrophe: **“***unless you repent, you will all likewise perish*" (Luke 13:5)

**The right response when your world comes crashing down (or at any other time) is repentance (and faith).**

Not surprisingly, this is also what God calls for through His prophet Ezekiel: **“***Again, though I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he shall surely live*.” (Eze 33:14-16).

Notice carefully **four elements** to this gracious call of God:

* Repentance is a turning from sin. It is stopping doing/saying/thinking what is against God’s law.
* Repentance is turning towards doing/saying/thinking what God commands in His law because you love Him.
* Repentance may also include repaying what has been taken, if this is possible. Remember how remorseful Zacchaeus voluntarily pledged to repay fourfold everyone he had defrauded (Luke 19:8).
* True repentance in response to the Lord’s gracious call is linked to faith in the sure promise of forgiveness. “*None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him*’.

With the arrival of the news of Jerusalem’s fall, the prophet Ezekiel is no longer mute – as he had been since the start of his ministry (3.26-27). That is, apart from the specific oracles of God’s judgement which he was called to deliver.

Now the prophet is free to speak the universal message to all people throughout all time – the gospel, God’s good news of salvation.

The fullness of this message which we are privileged to hear now was not yet available to Ezekiel. Back then, questions remained like: How could God forgive the sins of the truly repentant? How could God promise life to those whose sins deserved death? How could God remain perfectly just in His fearsome judgement but also graciously generous, merciful, compassionate and kind?

2,500 years after Ezekiel, we know so much more than he did then.

* We know that God forgives those who repent and trust Him because Jesus died in their place, suffering under the fearsome wrath of God for others.
* We know that at the cross of Calvary, God dealt justly with the sin of all the spiritual descendants of Abraham – those who believe the Lord and whose faith is credited to them as righteousness.
* We know that God is graciously generous, merciful, compassionate and kind to people like you and me, offering to us the promise of life through repentance and faith in His Son Jesus Christ.

As with any faithful minister of the gospel, as with any disciple of Jesus who speaks about the reason for the hope they have in Christ, the good news of God’s deliverance was preceded by the bad news of the people’s desperate need. Ezekiel had accurately predicted that the Israelites world would ‘come crashing down’. The city of Jerusalem would fall, and it did!

Although I am not a prophet, nor a prophet’s son, I can accurately predict that one day your world will come crashing down – either when you die and loose everything material that you have in this world or when Jesus Christ returns in glory at the end of this age : whichever comes first. Some people will come before Christ’s throne of judgment and hear these chilling words “*I never knew you, depart from me, you workers of lawlessness*” (Matt 7:23).

How will you respond to God’s gracious call for you to repent and trust in Christ today?

* I exhort you not to despair. Though your lawlessness is deserving of death, you shall not surely die if you turn to Jesus.
* I exhort you not to trust in your own ‘goodness’, hoping to gain enough ‘credit’ with God. You cannot be right with Him this way.
* I exhort you not to trust in your family, race, baptism or church membership for your salvation. God’s method of just evaluation is clear from our text “*I will judge each of you according to his ways*” (Eze 33:20).
* I exhort you not to merely just listen to the Word of the Lord, but to act upon that Word.

The wise person is the one who built his house upon the Lord Jesus. “*And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock*” (Matt 7:25) Why did this person’s house, his/her life, not come crashing down? Because he/she had heard the words of Christ **and done them**. That means repenting! Turning from your sin, striving to obey God’s good law because you love Him, compensating those you have sinned against, and believing that your sins are forgiven completely in Christ.

If you have not already done so, will you do this before your world comes crashing down?

AMEN