

Dr. Leslie Allen, Ezekiel, Lecture 20, Israel's Security put to the Test, Ezekiel 38:1-39:29

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This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Ezekiel. This is part 6, session 20, Israel's Security put to the Test. Ezekiel 38:1-39:29.

We come now to what I regard as part 6 of the book of Ezekiel, and this consists of only two chapters, verses 38 and 39. And I think here it's an issue of Israel's future security, and that security is put to the test. Chapter 38 is introduced, and along with 39, they are introduced as a separate message by the usual formula at the beginning: the word of the Lord came to me, which isn't repeated in 39, and so it carries over to the end of the next chapter, does this message.

But it does give the impression of having been incorporated into the book at a late stage. So there's no reason to doubt that, in principle, this section goes back to the prophet Ezekiel himself. There are three reasons why these two chapters read like an interruption.

First, as I was saying last time, the closing verses of chapter 37 appear to be looking forward to chapters 40 to 48 as a sort of theological summary of its main themes. Chapters 38 and 39 keep us waiting for that sequel. And second, the passage leaps ahead, and we're going to be seeing, beyond chapters 40 to 48 a time long after the exiles had returned to their homeland.

We shall see this as we go through it. And then thirdly, the keynote of chapters 38 and 39 is security. We shall see that it wants to pick up this keynote from where it was stressed earlier in the book.

But within 38 and 39 of itself, we get this term, the same term in the Hebrew used in verse 8, 38:8, in the New RSV, it's living in safety. And I would render it living securely. And then, as we go on in verse 11, once again, the people who live in safety or live securely.

Then 14, on that day when my people in Israel are living securely. And it's a pity that the New RSV is oscillating between the two translations and removing English readers from seeing that there's a key word coming up again and again and again. As I've said before, repetition is very important.

It's the key in Hebrew literature to what is mainly to be said, what readers are to take very seriously. And then, as we go on, in 39 and verse 6, we read those who live securely. And then lastly, in the summary, at the end of 39, when they live securely in their land, in verse 26.

So, over and over again, it's a question of security. And this is the main theme. And there's a question mark put against it, which is given a positive answer.

Will security be maintained? And what these chapters do is to create a worst-case scenario, where you say, no, it doesn't look like it. And God says at the end, it'll be okay, you'll be safe, you're going to be secure, and all will be well. This is why I call these chapters a test of Israel's security.

Now, where in the book of Ezekiel was there an emphasis on security? Where, too, was it a keyword that kept on occurring? And the answer is in chapter 34. Chapter 34, earlier on, contains the positive messages that Ezekiel was privileged to give in the second half of his ministry. In 34 verses 25 to 28, we have that word, secure, secure, in safety.

And here again, there's that oscillation in the new RSV, but it's the same Hebrew word, which we need to know. And it occurs three times. We have it in verse 25 of chapter 34: sleep in the woods securely.

And then we have it in verse 27, they shall be secure on their soil. And then we've got it in verse 28, but translated in a different way in the new RSV, they shall live in safety and no one shall make them afraid. So that promise, which is associated with return to the land, we revisit it, but the question is, will it be maintained? And here there's a proof of security.

If the worst happens, don't worry, God will take care of it, and all will be well. And so here is proof of that security, and in spirit, you are harking back to chapter 34. Now, you might think, well, if then chapters 38 and 39 are a sort of a commentary, a dramatic commentary on 34 about the security of life after return to the land, why didn't 38 and 39 follow immediately after 34? It speaks as if it's a sort of continuation, but there's a big gap between them.

Presumably, the desire was not to disturb the smooth continuity of 34 through 37. And I think that's the reason why 38 and 39 were not put after chapter 34, though chapter 34 is very much in mind as you come to these chapters. But the second best place to put them is here in view of 37.25. They shall live there forever.

They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob. And verse 25 of the previous chapter says, goes on to say, they shall live there forever. And so, there's an implication of security there.

And so perhaps it's not so bad that the new section is placed after that statement and justifies that. Aren't they going to be destroyed out of the land by this fresh

invasion and attack? No, in fact, they're not. But you can see from this emphasis that it's a reflection of fear in the exile's minds.

That's the basis, that's the underlying foundation for these chapters and for the emphasis in chapter 34 about security. Because security was the last thing they had, the thing they never had back in the promised land in pre-exilic days. But very much the opposite.

And they'd been driven from their homeland by a powerful national enemy. It could happen again, couldn't it? How do they know it's not going to happen again? And there is this anxiety in the exile's minds. And that's in the background, in the implicit background behind these chapters.

And so, it's all very well for Ezekiel to prophesy a return to the homeland. But how could they be sure it wouldn't happen all over again? Enemy invasion. They proved vulnerable once, and what if... And so, there's this gripping of fear and anxiety among the exiles.

And what would it be like when they did get back? And here the prophet is dealing pastorally with that worry that grips the exile's minds. He envisions a test of the security. And God was going to give this test.

And one could see whether it could be trusted, this promise of security. And Ezekiel is showing that God was well able to protect his people against the worst of threats. In fact, a worst-case scenario.

One thing about these two chapters is that they are concerned with a foe from the north. And that had been a frightening thing for the exiles in an earlier few decades. Jeremiah had prophesied very often there was going to come a foe from the north.

He kept on saying it until the point when history revealed itself sufficiently when he could put a name and a nationality to that foe from the north. The king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar. But before that time, he knows about it in advance.

God has told him there was to be a foe from the north. And in that case, up from Mesopotamia would come along the fertile crescent down into Syria and Palestine, and the Babylonians would come. The Babylonian Empire was to replace the Assyrian Empire in point of fact.

And there's this fear in quite a number of passages. In fact, there are five passages, five times early on, in the book of Isaiah. In chapters one and four, twice in verse six, and then in verse ten.

And what this present scenario is doing is picking up from Jeremiah the same frightening thought of a foe from the north. And if we sample certain verses here in 38 and 39, we shall see that mention. The end of verse six, from the remotest parts of the north, sounds like Jeremiah again.

And then 38, 15, coming out of the remotest parts of the north and many peoples with you. Sounds like the Babylonians with their imperial contingents of their vassal subjects. And then in 39 two, we read again, God will bring you up from the remotest parts of the north and lead you against the mountains of Israel.

And so, we have at first a nightmarish situation. Jeremiah's oracles revisited, which did indeed bring terrible trouble and disaster upon Israel. And so, Ezekiel 38 and 39 is picking up this frightening notion of a foe from the north.

And this section of the book plays out that worst-case scenario all over again. But in this case, we do get a name given to this future enemy. In verse two, Thus says the Lord, I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal.

And we have a mention of Gog. And earlier on, in fact, in verse two, Mortal, set your face, stare fixedly toward Gog of the land of Magog. And Gog seems to be the king's name, and the people's name was to be Magog.

This is very significant. And it's significant too that it's linked with Meshech and Tubal. Meshech and Tubal were in the northeast of Asia Minor.

And they were mentioned back in chapters 32 and 26 as historical has-beens. Once all-powerful, but powerful no longer. But they had been a threat in earlier times to the people of Mesopotamia.

That name Gog, whose people are here called Magog, was actually the name of a king of Lydia in west Asia Minor. He reigned in the first half of the 7th century BC. So here is a figure from the past conjured up by this name.

He's spoken of as a new foe from the north. And it's a bit like speaking of a new Hitler or a new Stalin. And this ruler, he'd been ruler of a large section of Asia Minor, modern Turkey.

This is a frightening thing—this old king who reappears in a new guise as the new enemy. But we have a number of reminiscences of earlier times, even as we begin this glimpse into a new and frightening future.

But there's something reassuring. And that reassurance comes in verse 3. Thus says the Lord God, I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal. It's

reassuring that this group, this king who rules over much of Asia Minor, has God as his enemy.

And the same thing is said in 39 in verse 1. I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal. And so, this is the first hopeful thing we've met that this is the enemy of God.

It looks like he's going to be the enemy of God's people, but fortunately, Yahweh, God, is the ally of Israel. And doesn't side with Gog. There's no mention of Gog being an instrument of wrath against Israel for their sins.

Nothing like that is mentioned here. And so, there's this terrible scene conjured up of a future invasion. But God is on Israel's side.

This is wonderfully reassuring. So, from the start, Israel's potential enemy is declared to be God's enemy. And then, 38, 4 and 5, describes God's powerful armaments and allies or mercenaries.

And oh, this is frightening. All your army and horses and horsemen, all of them clothed in full armor, a great company, all of them with shields and buckler-wielding swords, Persia, Ethiopia, and Put are with them, all of them with buckler and helmet, Gomer and all his troops, Beth Togarmah from the remotest parts of the north with all its troops, many peoples are with you. So, that, again, is frightening.

But there's something again that can be reassuring because all this great contingent of enemy forces, it's the object of a verb with God as the subject. I will lead you out with all your army and all your armaments and all your allies and mercenaries. And so, God is in control.

God is in control. And so, God is the enemy and God is in control in the coming of this terribly, immensely strong army. And so, God is the dominant subject.

He's in control. Well, we move on. One hardly knows what to make of this mixture of frightening and reassuring things.

But we move on. In verse 7, God gives the order for Gog and his army to hold themselves in readiness for an attack on Israel. Oh my! Be ready and keep ready, you and all the companies that are assembled around you, and hold yourselves in reserve for them.

But God is still in control. we've been told so often in these chapters, these positive chapters, that God is on Israel's side. And so, there's some reassurance there.

But, in verse 8, we're told who it is that Gog and his army are going to attack. After many days, you shall be mustered. In the latter years, you shall go against a land restored from war, a land where people were gathered from many nations on the mountains of Israel, which it long lay in waste.

Its people were brought out from the nations and are now living in safety and security. And so, a mention of present security. And a hint that after many days, the people go back and live in the land, and years and years go by.

And then this attack comes. Then, this attack comes. And so, it follows on from all those promises being fulfilled in 36 and in 37.

It follows after the layout of those promises in chapters 40 to 48 when the people go back to the land. And then, in the end, after a long time, there is this invasion to take place. So, in temporal terms, 38 and 39 belong after 40 to 48, even as they belong after chapters 36 and 37 in chronological terms of those promises being fulfilled.

And so, we move on. And there's an obvious tension here between the settled security of the people of God and the prospect of invasion. As I say, here is a test.

Will they be able to remain secure or not? It doesn't look like it. It doesn't look like it. And so, this is scary again.

The exiles must have been holding their breath at this point as they listened to Ezekiel. But there's some consolation. God's giving the orders.

And the second thing is, there's no mention of God judging or punishing Israel. There's no mention of Israel's sins. It wouldn't be like last time when the prophets, including Ezekiel, spoke of foreign invasion as God's providential weapon for punishing Israel.

This is a new sort of thing. It is difficult to make out, but there are reassuring things that are said, and that are not said. But yet, in one respect, there was a similarity.

There's a vital passage that I've mentioned before, perhaps a number of times, in Isaiah chapter 10. And there, we have a very important principle that relates to all the books of the classical prophets. And we have two phases in the outworking of God's will.

First of all, in Isaiah 10, in verse 5, Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger, against a godless nation I send him, against the people of my wrath I command him. And it was terribly true that that was a reference to Judah. And what was God's purpose? To spoil and seize plunder, to tread them down like the mire of the streets.

But this is not what he intends. Assyria, personified, he doesn't have this in mind. It is in his heart to destroy and to cut off nations, not a few.

And so, here there's this distinction as to what God required of Assyria, and Assyria going too far. And this leads to the second part of Isaiah's message in chapter 10, verse 12. When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion, and on Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride, who says, by the strength of my own hand, I've done it.

So, yes, Assyria is the rod of God's anger, but Assyria goes too far. And in various respects, Assyria incurs God's anger. And so, when Assyria is done its terrible work on Judah, it will be Assyria's turn to be punished in turn.

So, there are two phases. The punishment of Israel, first of all, and then the punishment of Assyria. And there's hope in that.

There's hope in that, because that could bring with it salvation for Israel, in fact. And the classical prophets are playing with these two phases throughout all their work, in point of fact. A fundamental passage is in Isaiah chapter 10.

Chapter 38 picks up something from just one thing from chapter 10 that was mentioned in verse 10, in fact. Thus says the Lord God, on that day, thoughts will come into your mind, and you will devise an evil scheme. And so, Gog and his army they're going to be marked by a new strategy, which will come into Gog's mind, and it will be an evil scheme.

And this is very similar to the initial mandate of Assyria as the rod of God's wrath. But over against that, Assyria had something else. And he thought of destruction, absolute destruction.

And he was going beyond the mandate that God gave. And here, too, there's a going beyond the mandate where Gog is concerned. And so, one has Gog's idea as to what's to happen in this campaign, but it's going to be checked from the start, because it's judged by God to be an evil scheme.

And so, in the light of that, in the light of that reminiscence of a second stage in Isaiah 10, where Assyria incurs the anger of God in turn, this evil scheme is a bad omen, where Gog himself is concerned. And so, we've got this one reminiscence of Isaiah 10, but nothing is said about Gog being the rod of God's anger. And so, we're playing with older ideas, but within a certain limit, in fact.

There is a similarity there in verse 10, but a lot of it doesn't apply. And so, in the case of Gog, God's agent, yes, but there's an accusation of this evil scheme. And so, one

can think back to that parallel of sorts with Assyria and the expectation that there will be punishment for Gog.

And Gog is incurring, going to incur God's hostility for going beyond the divine mandate. So, readers are being prepared for judgment to fall upon Gog and his great army as he invades, just as doom was promised for Assyria in Isaiah chapter 10. And then look at verse 14.

Therefore, mortal, prophesy and say to Gog, Thus says the Lord God, on that day when my people are living securely, you will rouse yourself and come from your place out of the remotest parts of the north. And notice that first word, therefore. Therefore, this is how verse 14 begins, and we've read enough of Ezekiel and perhaps the other prophets to know that we're moving into a message of judgment against Gog now.

And that what's gone before has played the part of an accusation. And it's that evil scheme that we had in verse 10. Thoughts of your own that come into your mind.

And God says no. And so, we're beginning to talk of judgment. But it's still frightening.

You shall come out of your place, out of the remotest parts of the north, you and many peoples with you, all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army. Can God carry it off? Can Israel's God carry it off when there's so much opposition? Can he stand up against his foe and protect his people? Well, Gog is going to come up against my people, Israel, like a cloud covering the earth. But there's a consolation in the fact it's my people, Israel.

And God is the ally. And you have this expression of the part of that covenant formula, my people Israel. And then too, there's a little consolation also as verse 16 goes on.

In the latter days, I will bring you against my land. My land. It's God's land.

And foreigners have no right to be there. And so, there's a little assurance there. And so, tension, tension, tension, but we're getting more of the positive material, more of reassurance.

But it's still mixed with a great sort of experiment, the thought of an experiment that could go wrong. There's a facility there, so much there that could go wrong. But the prospect is, the prospect is that God is going to win.

This is expressed at the end of verse 16. So that the nations, this is the purpose, so that the nations may know me when through God I display my holiness before their

eyes. And we come back to that thought of holiness, and it links up with what had been said earlier about God's holy name, and God's holy name being profaned, and God being disrespected.

And so, the idea occurs again that this future Gog invasion would mean that God was disrespected, and the feeling was that he couldn't protect his land, fancy, invaded by this vast army. He's not a very powerful God, is he? Well, the implication is, the hint is being given here, that God is going to defeat Gog. And then the other nations will be made to see that, the reality of myself, they will know me, when through you, oh Gog, I display my holiness before their eyes.

And so, in this half-verse, we're given a vital clue as to how it's all going to end. And Israel isn't going to be on the losing side. God is going to be on the winning side, in his land, on behalf of his people, Israel.

But all this is going to be played out as we go along. Verse 17 says something important. It's a sort of aside in the overall depiction that's being played out.

Thus says the Lord God, Are you he of whom I spoke in former days by my servants, the prophets of Israel, who in those days prophesied for years that I would bring you against them? Now, this is saying something fascinating that we need to think through. Remember that we've had that reminiscence of earlier invasion, with a reminder of the foe from the north coming once more. Jeremiah had in mind the Babylonians.

But what the text wants to say here is in speaking of the foe from the north, there was a residue of meaning that you could apply to the future in point of fact. And there's another text in Isaiah chapter 14 that is relevant here. And there's a thinking back here to Jeremiah's prophecies of a foe from the north.

But there is also linked with it. I will break the Assyrian in my land and on my mountains trample him underfoot. Isaiah 14 and 25.

And so, although the Assyrians invaded, he invaded my land, my land, and he got his comeuppance for it. And the point is that those texts which in their historical context have one meaning, but this is prophecy and you can take from them a further meaning in point of fact. And so, looking back at that Isaiah text, we can move on to, also wanted to look at verse 31.

Wail, O gate! Cry, O city! Melt in fear! For smoke comes out of the north, and there's no straggler in its ranks. A foe from the north in Isaiah's time was Assyria. In Jeremiah's time was Babylonia.

But the text wants to say prophecies are not necessarily exhausted in these historical fulfillments. And they can have a meaning which can be picked up and related to future times. And so are you he of whom I spoke in former days by my servants the prophets who in those days prophesied for years that I would bring you against them.

And so, here's another fulfillment. Here's another fulfillment, an unexpected fulfillment of those old prophecies of the foe from the north in 1431, but the Assyrians, the God, invaded God's land and were going to be broken in the land. And so, one needs to think of this term, these invasions that had God behind them, but in Assyria's case, there was that breaking.

But the foe from the north, here he is again in the person of Gog. Verses 18 through 23 speak at the beginning and end of God's judgment against Gog. Verse 18, on that day when God comes against the land of Israel, says the Lord God, my wrath shall be aroused.

And then at the end in verse 23, so I will display my greatness and my holiness and make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they shall know that I am the Lord. And so already there's this decisive, we come to the point where there's this decisive conquest of Gog to take place.

And what was a terrible fear comes now with a reassurance that God is the enemy who's going to intervene on Israel's side. And Gog, powerful though he was, was going to be conquered. Along with that, you have verse 19, which is an important thing to note.

For in my jealousy or in my passion, my passion for Israel, and in my blazing wrath, I declare on that day there will be a great shaking in the land of Israel and so on. But God has this wrath against Gog, and he has this jealousy or passion for his people, Israel. And so, these are indications, strong emotional indications that all is going to be well, terrible though this news seems to be of invasion.

And then as we read on, there's going to be an earthquake, there's going to be self-destruction among Gog's army, there's going to be a plague, and there's going to be a storm, all to defeat God's foes, God's forces rather, as the foes of God. And there's a word that crops up again and again that we've got to notice, great is a key term. In verse 15, it's Gog's great army; back in verse 15, a great horde, a mighty army.

But then over against that in verse 19 you come to a great earthquake. And then in verse 23 you will have mention, I will display, says God, my greatness. And so we're playing with this great, great over against great, but God is greater, God is greater.

So, there is that key term in this overall context that is pointing the way forward. God would prove himself greater than Israel's great foes, and Israel itself would not be harmed at all in point of fact. We come on to chapter 39, and verses 1 to 5 are a sort of a recap of 38:2 to 3, and then carry on in a message of judgment.

I will strike your bow from your left hand, in verse 3. I will make your arrows drop out of your right hand. You shall fall upon the mountains of Israel, you and all your troops and the peoples that are with you. And then I will give you to birds of prey of every kind and to the wild animals to be devoured.

You shall fall in the open field. And so, as we move on, in verse 6, I will send fire on Magog, the people back home that God rules over, and on those who live securely in the coastlands, the west coast of Asia Minor, and they shall know that I am the Lord. Notice that expression for those who live securely in the coastlands.

The tables were to be turned, and Gog, who tried to invade a people living securely, will find that the war is carried back into his own country and his own people. Living securely will find that so no more, but will be the fire of the victims of fire and destruction themselves. And so, Gog is going to fight against... God, get mixed up with these two terms. They're so similar.

God would fight not only against Gog, but also the people back in the homeland against Magog, and the tables would be turned, and secure communities in Asia Minor would suffer instead. In verse 7, it comes back to this notion of holiness, which has been cropping up already in 38, more than once. My holy name I will make known among my people Israel.

I will not let my holy name be profaned anymore. And the nation shall know that I am the Lord, the Holy One in Israel. And we're picking up this notion. It was so where the exile was concerned; there was a profaning of God's name. Remember that, in an earlier chapter, God had to bring the people back from exile.

He had to give a great demonstration of power on his people's behalf, for his name's sake, for the sake of his holy name, to re-establish a sense of that great holiness and power that belonged to his name. And this thought is picked up again, that in this invasion of Gog, I will let my holy name not be profaned anymore. And then verse 8, verse 8 is rather interesting, because it links up with verse 17 of chapter 38, and it too is a sort of an aside, a sort of theological aside, talking about prophecy on a big scale.

It has come, it has happened, says the Lord God, this is the day of which I have spoken. And what's being said is that canonically, historically, all those prophets spoke of disasters coming through the Assyrians and through the Babylonians, and we thought of the Assyrians being defeated, and eventually God would vanquish the

Babylonians and bringing the people back from exile. But in all this, there's an element of future contingency, and these texts are not necessarily fulfilled absolutely in their own historical circumstances, but they can point forward to other fulfillments.

And so, it has come, it has happened, says the Lord God, this is the day of which I have spoken. And just as in verse 17 of chapter 38, Gog's attack was hailed as a prophecy newly fulfilled, so here, Gog's defeat is hailed as a fulfillment of an earlier prophecy. And there's this canonical looking forward in the prophets, which wants to push forward to further interpretations, and there's a claim of such interpretation here in 39.8, which is matching 38:17. But what was to be the role of God's people in all this? Were they to fight Gog? Well, that is never said.

God never mobilizes his own troops. We're not back in the judges' period now. That's never mentioned.

But what they are to do is to engage in mopping up operations after the victory that God himself had brought about. Nothing more. And in verses 9 and 10, they're to collect wooden weapons.

Then, those who live in the towns of Israel will go out and make fires of the weapons and burn them. Bucklers and shields, bows and arrows, handspikes and spears, they all had wooden components as well as metal, and they shall make fires of them, the wooden parts, for seven years. And they will not need to take wood out of the field or cut down any trees in the forest, for they will make their fires of the weapons.

They will despoil those who despoiled them and plunder those who plundered them, says the Lord God. And so, they go out collecting firewood. That's what Israel is to do.

They're to collect these weapons, break off those wooden parts, and store them back in their towns. They'll have firewood for seven years. And so, this is the ironic treatment of all the great armaments that God had brought with him, so frightening.

But it's okay. They're going to end up as firewood on your hearths as you cook your dinner. All will be well.

And so, this is part of the mopping up operations. But there's more to it than that. There's more to it than that.

Because often in the prophets, there are echoes of other scriptures. And so, it is here. Because burning weapons, where does that come? There's one place where it comes from in the Old Testament, in the Psalms.

And it's in Psalm 46. And this is one of those Psalms that we call the Songs of Zion. They embody a tradition that will be good for Zion.

God is our refuge and our strength and a very present help in trouble. It's the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city, it shall not be moved.

We've seen before that Ezekiel had reason to say no to that Zion tradition and to what the Songs of Zion had to say. I imagine that the preachers among the exiles would be very keen to preach those Songs of Zion, say, It's all right, it's all right, very soon we're going to go back home. Yes, God, it's all going to be all right.

This is just a hiccup in our future history, this exile. We're going to go home very soon. That was what prophets and preachers of peace could say.

But now, now, eventually, but after the judgment of exile, after a long judgment of exile, as it turned out, there's a reclaiming of this Zion tradition. A reclaiming of what it said in one of the Songs of Zion. What does it say in Isaiah, sorry, Psalm 46 and verse 9, He makes wars cease to the end of the earth, He breaks the bow, He shatters the spear, He burns the shields with fire?

He burns the shields with fire. And so there was a metal covering on the front of these shields, but essentially, they would be wood. And so could be burned.

That message from the Song of Zion is hailed as pertinent and applicable to this Gog situation. So there's this reminiscence and reclaiming of that old Zion tradition. But it's very late in the day.

So, burning weapons is supposed to ring a bell for its readers. And I've helped it to ring a bell for you in harking back to Psalm 46 and 49, which celebrates God's defeat of Israel's enemies who attack Jerusalem. And so, there's a co-opting of the message of victory.

It's applied to this new situation. We remember how Psalm 46 begins: God is our refuge and our strength, the very present help in trouble. So, this would be coming true again in this terrible, yes, truly terrible experience of Gog's invasion.

But all would be well. Therefore, we will not fear, said Psalm 46. And so, this was also true in the prospect of the coming of Gog.

And so, we find that the old Zion theology would come true again eventually. In these two chapters, we've noticed that 38 and 39 they find various ways to calm the anxiety of the exiles. And then, in verses 11 through 16, there are more mopping up operations for God's people to do.

There are all these corpses lying about, and they've got to be buried because corpses are defiling, in fact. And so, they have to be buried in order to cleanse the land. And there's an emphasis on that.

Three times we get the need to cleanse the land. The end of verse 12. Seven months the house of Israel shall spend burying them, these soldiers from the armies of Gog and his allies.

Seven months the house of Israel shall spend burying them in order to cleanse the land. And then in verse 14, So as to cleanse it, cleanse the land. And then in verse 16, Thus shall they cleanse the land.

And so, there's this defilement of these corpses. And a special cemetery is set up. All these corpses are, in fact, brought to this cemetery so that this special area is set apart.

And this will cleanse the land. We're actually told in Numbers 19 that corpses are unclean, and so they couldn't stay where they were. And so, verses 11 through 16 really carry on from the thought of the defeat of the people earlier.

Right. And part of the consequences of the soldiers dying. And then verses 17 through 20, Speak to the birds of every kind and to all the wild animals.

Assemble and come, gather from all around till the sacrificial feast I'm preparing for you. A great sacrificial feast on the mountains of Israel and you shall eat flesh and drink blood. You shall eat the flesh of the mighty and drink the blood of the princes of the earth.

You shall eat fat until you're filled and drink blood until you're drunk. You shall be filled at my table with horses and charioteers, with warriors and all kinds of soldiers says the Lord. Now, there's a little problem with this section.

They've already been buried. We've just spoken of those dead soldiers being buried. In fact, what we're doing, verse 4, really belongs to the end, 17 through 20, really belongs to what it says at the end of verse 4. I will give you to birds of prey of every kind and to the wild animals to be devoured.

And logically speaking, it was only the bones that were left after they'd had their meal: no more blood, no more flesh. Just the bones left that would be buried.

That's a sort of logical reconstruction one can give to this whole sequence here. But it strikes one as very strange, very strange that we've got mention of the birds of prey and wild animals coming and eating up these corpses. And we may ask, well,

why was that done? Why was that done? And the reason seems to be that we're getting very near the end.

We're getting to the end of the narrative here. What follows is going to be a theological comment, but this is the end of the narrative. And so, this dramatic climax is made of these birds and animals swooping on these corpses, though we know that logically, we should have ended with a calmer ending about the cemetery and about these corpses or bones being transported to this special cemetery.

So, there we are. But then after that, we come to a series of what I call theological comment. Verses 21 through 25.

I will display my glory among the nations, all the nations who see my judgment I've executed and my hand that I've laid on them. And so, the whole Gog incident is really the point of it or one point of it is to glorify God. God is glorified through it.

Not much more than that. But of course the other great assurance is that the people of God are secure. And this has been an experiment, what one might say, the fire alarm being set off to see if it works, that one could really deal with a fire.

And so, yes, it does work. And God has got the fire extinguisher, and he puts the fire out before any damage is done; in point of fact, though it looked as if it was going to be pretty terrible, the fire that would break out and cause destruction. But along with that security, theologically, God's glory is promoted by this whole affair.

And so 22, the house of Israel shall know I am the Lord their God from that day forward. And all the nations shall know the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity. Now, we're having a general summary.

In this last section, from verses 23 to 29, we have a summary of the messages of Ezekiel. And we had summaries like that at the end of chapter 28 and also at the end of chapter 37, but they only concerned messages of salvation, a summary of the salvation that was going to come. You get piled up in a small compass in 28, 25 to 26, and in 37, 25 to 28.

But here you've got a wider summary and you don't just have the message of salvation that's summed up, but also the messages of judgment that came before them. And so, there's a fuller summary of the prophesying of Ezekiel from verse 23 onwards. The nations shall know the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity because they dealt treacherously with me.

So, I hid my face from them and gave them into the hands of their adversaries. They all fell by the sword. I dealt with them according to their uncleanness and their transgressions and I hid my face from them.

Therefore, thus says the Lord God, moving on to the messages of salvation, now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob, have mercy on the whole house of Israel. I will be jealous of my holy name, and they shall live securely, at the end of 26, in their land with no one to make them afraid. When I brought them back from the peoples, gathered them from their enemy's land and through them have displayed my holiness in the sight of many nations.

Then they shall know that I am the Lord their God because I sent them into exile among the nations and then gathered them into their own land. I will leave none of them behind. I will never again hide my face from them when I pour out my spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord God.

Now there are two things I want to say about these closing verses. They introduce some new vocabulary that we haven't had before and don't again in the book of Ezekiel. God's hiding his face, and more than once, we have a reference to this.

God's hiding his face, and that's an expression that we often find in other books of the Old Testament but never in Ezekiel, in point of fact. So, it may well be that these verses are from a later hand by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit added canonically to the book of Ezekiel. And then another thing, another different thing, in verse 25 in the New RSV I will have mercy on the whole house of Israel.

The NIV gives what I think is a better translation. I will have compassion on the whole house of Israel. But never again do we find that in the book of Ezekiel.

We find that God is described as having great empathy. Reading between the lines implicitly, we can see that God has a lot of empathy for the suffering of his people and for the grief and humiliation that they feel. And there is an obligation that he feels to go beyond it, but the obligation is for my own sake, for the sake of my name, and for my name's sake because it's been profaned among the nations.

And so here this is a new element. I will have compassion on the whole house of Israel. And then something else I need to mention.

In verse 26, they shall forget their shame and all the treachery they have practiced against me when they lived securely in their land. The NRSV says they shall forget their shame. The NIV says they shall forget their shame.

But I want to query that. In the New RSV it says in the margin at the bottom another reading is they shall bear their shame. They shall bear their shame and all the treachery that they practiced against me.

And that bearing of shame, that's what the text is saying, and you've got to make a slight alteration to the text to make it say forget their shame. But this bearing of shame is a very important theme because, do you remember, there has to be a remembering of shame. There has to be a remembering of the bad things that have been done so that there will be no temptation to fall into them again.

And so, that there can be a sense of God's grace in restoring the people of God. And so, I think this is in this summary there's a reminiscence of a theme that is bounced all the way through the Book of Ezekiel. The need to bear their shame in fact.

All right. And so there we are. We have this summary.

And how can we sum up chapters 38 and 39? They're obviously using a narrative, a sort of forward-looking narrative in which to convey the truth that they want to bring forth. And it has to do with security. And I think we can turn for comparison in the New Testament to the end of Romans 8. And in spirit, we're in the same place as we are in Ezekiel 38 and 39.

If God is for us, who is against us? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? We're more than conquerors through him who loved us. Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And Psalm 23 put it even more succinctly.

I fear no evil for you are with me. And this is the message that Ezekiel was passing on to the fearful exiles. The worst-case scenario would, in fact, do no harm.

Next time we should be moving into chapters 40 through 48. And we should be looking at chapters 40, 41, and 42.

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Ezekiel. This is part 6, session 20, Israel's Security put to the Test. Ezekiel 38:1-39:29.