

## *Ancient Paths*

---

### LOOKING AHEAD

I've told this true story before, but it's so good I'm going to tell it again – and it's one of my favourites. Dr. Henry Cloud tells this story of a real experiment done with FBI agents and professional American football players. Both the FBI agents and the footballers were to be given a simple task and the challenge was to see which group were able to complete the task, both groups were to be given the same task.

The task was this: to run, as a group, along a track to a gate ½ mile away, touch the gate and run back along the track to the start, and to complete the run in 9 minutes. For both groups this was considered a simple task without any real challenge. To run a mile in 9 minutes was, for both groups, easily achievable - they were fit and strong. They were given clear instructions and the goal was made perfectly clear: the real goal was to complete the task! They were told: you must complete the task.

The footballers were to go first and were supremely confident! As they stood at the start they were warned about snakes on the path: avoid any snakes they'll be rattlesnakes and dangerous! They were also told to be careful as wild boar had been seen recently. At all costs, they were told, keep away from any wild boar as they will charge and could be extremely dangerous. But remember – you must complete the task!

What they didn't know was that there were no wild boar – that was untrue. What they also didn't know was that half way along the path was a member of the research team, hiding in the bushes, pretending to be a wild boar.

The footballers set off along the path, their confidence high! Suddenly though, and totally unexpectedly, the bushes at the side of the path moved, and the sound of a wild boar could be heard. The footballers went into complete panic, and unsure of what to do, and fearing for their own safety, they turned and ran back to the start – away from the boar. They were absolutely devastated; they had failed to complete the task.

Without knowing the footballers' failure, it was the turn of the FBI agents to complete the task. Armed with exactly the same information they set off along the path. Half way along the path the bushes moved and the sound of a wild boar could be heard. The agents stopped, took a defensive position to protect one another and waited. When it became clear there was no wild boar and the danger had passed...they carried on to the gate and returned to the start within the 9 minutes – to complete the task!

Both groups had, unbeknown to them, been filmed during the task. They were shown the film of their run. The footballers were distraught at their inability to complete the relatively simple task they'd been given.

What was the difference, the researchers asked, between the two groups? Why had the FBI agents succeeded while the footballers failed? Their answer was simple: the FBI agents were trained to expect the unexpected while the footballers were not! When the unexpected happened the FBI agents were able to cope with it, respond appropriately and deal with it, while the footballers were not!

Remember in Ezekiel chapter 37 we have the wonderful, powerful and inspiring Vision of God breathing life into his people – the nation of Israel. Shouldn't life for Israel then be Hunky Dory? Then in chapter 38 & 39 we read about Gog from Magog with a huge army set on destroying Israel! Here's the truth: the vision of the dry bones coming to life hasn't happened yet and there's a threat of defeat from foreign nations!

Friends, isn't life often like that? Isn't the truth that we hold onto the promises in the challenges of ordinary life? Isn't the truth that we have to hold onto the promises and expect the unexpected? Isn't it often the truth that we look to the promises of God and yet things still seem to go wrong, or not how we'd hoped or not even as we thought God had said? We need to be ready and expect the unexpected! That's not a lack of faith, it's just how it is!

It's interesting that in his Revelation, John speaks of Gog and Magog falling prey to Satan's temptation to battle against what God is doing. Friends, there's a battle, a real one, in which Satan is trying to destroy what God is doing! The point that God makes to his people here in Ezekiel, is that God will defeat Gog and the victory will be total.

“Son of man, prophesy against Gog and say: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against you, Gog, chief prince of Meshek and Tubal. <sup>2</sup> I will turn you around and drag you along. I will bring you from the far north and send you against the mountains of Israel. <sup>3</sup> Then I will strike your bow from your left hand and make your arrows drop from your right hand. <sup>4</sup> On the mountains of Israel you will fall, you and all your troops and the nations with you. I will give you as food to all kinds of carrion birds and to the wild animals. <sup>5</sup> You will fall in the open field, for I have spoken, declares the Sovereign LORD. <sup>6</sup> I will send fire on Magog and on those who live in safety in the coastlands, and they will know that I am the LORD. (Ezekiel 39 v 1-6)

This is a devastating victory, and the reason is that God’s name will again be honoured. God has shown grace in his choice of Israel, and loved them through all they have done; he loves them even in exile and will fight for them to restore them, and the honour of His name.

There is a song we sing: ‘You are always fighting for us, heaven’s angles all around; my delight is found in knowing that you wear the victor’s crown.’ Friends, whatever promises and visions God graciously gives us, we are in a battle. We cannot expect things to be Hunky Dory, there is one who wants to destroy, but our God is greater!

Friends, choose the Ancient Path and walk in it; be ready and expect the unexpected and then hold onto the truth about the one who wears the victor’s crown!

We are going to take a little interlude here!

Some people want to interpret these last chapters of Ezekiel as prophecy. By that they mean he is speaking about actual events that will come to pass this side of heaven. Others want to interpret these chapters as being apocalyptic. By that they mean it is more of a vision of what will ultimately happen – it’s about the story not the actual events. The point here is – God wins! I lean more to the apocalyptic interpretation.

So with God and Magog it is true that there are still nations set against the people of Israel, but also against the people of God in any nation, and finally – God will have the victory. People speculated (those with the prophetic view) that the old USSR was Gog! Trouble is now... that doesn’t seem to make sense anymore!

You don't need to be worried between a prophetic or apocalyptic interpretation! But don't let it put you off struggling to understand what God is saying, or looking at world events and seeing God's word lived out!

So... now I've laid my cards on the table we'll take a look at the last part of Ezekiel's vision. I'm taking an apocalyptic view more than a prophetic one – although, without wishing to confuse the issue, I think the apocalyptic contains at least some prophecy! The point here is, I think, this now is about looking forward.

End of interlude!

Is the glass half full or half empty? Show of hands.

Sometimes we say this is the view of either the optimist or the pessimist. The optimists will say its half full, the pessimists will say its half empty. “The optimist proclaims we live in the best of all possible worlds and the pessimist fears this is true.” “A pessimist is someone who has lived all his life with an optimist.”

These last few chapters of Ezekiel talk about something far more powerful than optimism. I think they talk about something we might call vital optimism. Vital optimism is a quality of spirit that holds to the belief that the best is yet to come. It is the belief that the world is not some random accident, but that it holds purpose and meaning. It is the belief that I am not just a victim of circumstance, but that my life really means something.

I think that the final vision given to Ezekiel was, in part at least, to give them vital optimism. It is a vision of the future that tells them – the best is yet to come – and come it will. You are not just a victim of circumstance. Vital optimism enables the desire to abandon yourself to a cause that is bigger than you are, it breathes hope into those around you, it leads to the courage to dream and take risks, and where it is present it energises people, businesses, churches and nations. And when it is lost, people begin to die. It is exactly what the people of Judah needed!

The presence or absence of vital optimism determines the way we live our lives. It is a condition of the heart. For those who believe, vital optimism comes from knowing God and the truth of His word.

Vital optimism is not naive optimism:

- If I believe everything will work out for me
- Because I believe things will go the way I want
- Because I believe I can have everything I dream of

John Ortberg says this: “Vital optimism is the confident expectation that an all powerful God is at work even in this fallen world to redeem it and to bring good out of it. It is also the confident expectation that this good and powerful God is intimately aware and deeply concerned about my life, my future and the role he wants me to play in this world, which means I can face today with a resilient confidence and unshakeable poise, not because things will work out for me, but because an all powerful, all good God is at work.”

How on earth does Ezekiel teach us this? Well very briefly..... from chapter 40 Ezekiel is taken up in a vision in which he is shown a city, in which there is a new temple!

### The New Temple

<sup>48</sup> He brought me to the portico of the temple and measured the jambs of the portico; they were five cubits wide on either side. The width of the entrance was fourteen cubits and its projecting walls were three cubits wide on either side. <sup>49</sup> The portico was twenty cubits wide, and twelve cubits from front to back. It was reached by a flight of stairs, and there were pillars on each side of the jambs. (Ezekiel chapter 40 v 48-49)

Ezekiel gives a detailed description of the city surrounding and leading to the temple, and then of the temple itself. He was shown around by a man with a measuring rod who measured everything with great accuracy. In chapter 43 the glory of the Lord returns to the temple.

### God’s Glory Returns to the Temple

Then the man brought me to the gate facing east, <sup>2</sup> and I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory. <sup>3</sup> The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown. <sup>4</sup> The glory of the LORD entered the temple through the gate facing east. <sup>5</sup> Then the

Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. (Ezekiel chapter 43 v 1-5)

At the end of the tour Ezekiel is shown that the gate through which the glory of the Lord had come into the temple was shut. Its significance? Remember earlier in Ezekiel the glory of the Lord had left the temple and it meant that God had removed his presence from being with his people. Here His presence returns – what a powerful statement! That the door by which he entered is shut shows that God is serious about what His presence means.

#### The Priesthood Restored

Then the man brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, the one facing east, and it was shut. <sup>2</sup> The LORD said to me, “This gate is to remain shut. It must not be opened; no one may enter through it. It is to remain shut because the LORD, the God of Israel, has entered through it. (Ezekiel chapter 44 v 1 -2)

The rest of the chapter 44 details all the responsibilities of the priests and is a stark contrast to what had previously been happening in the temple, when God removed his presence. What would all this mean to Ezekiel? He was, remember, still a captive in Babylon. There had been a gap of around 15 years between when God spoke to him in chapters 38 and 39, and this vision beginning in chapter 40. And this vision, after a long silence from God was about the promise of restoration.

To Ezekiel it meant that God’s purpose for his people was that he would again rule and reign in their midst. The people would be fully aware of the presence of God and their lives would be lived in the light of his presence. This would have stirred vital optimism in Ezekiel: a return to the land, the people living as God commanded!

This vision would certainly have energised Ezekiel, the people and a nation! Ezekiel in exile with the confident expectation that an all powerful God is at work even in this fallen world to redeem it, and to bring good out of it.

Prophetic or apocalyptic? Well, we know that the people did return to the land and the temple was rebuilt under Nehemiah – remember that story? But it was never built in the way described in the vision, and the people never lived

as God intended! The prophetic interpretation has its difficulties – not least, what does it mean for us?

An apocalyptic interpretation? Well...quite simply.... The best is yet to come! It means that this promise of the presence of God fully with his people and his people fully being who they were created to be...is for us.

It is still to come!

We can look forward with the confident expectation that an all powerful, all good God is at work even in this fallen world to redeem it and to bring good out of it. It means we can face today with a resilient confidence and unshakeable poise, not because things will work out for me, but because an all powerful, all good God is at work. It means that we can live with vital optimism, because God will fully come.

Friends, we need to be ready for all the evil one will throw at us, but we can keep looking ahead with vital optimism, living in the truth that the best is yet to come.

Preached in Crawley Baptist church on Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> April 2015, by Rev. Ian Phillips.