



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Back to the Basics:
Redemption
Dr. Bruce Lancaster

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm 130

Psalm 130 is a cry for help. Our psalmist, waking in the darkness of night, believed that with the dawn, watching for the morning, there would come redemption, salvation, hope, healing, freedom, new life.

Simply said, we cry for help because we need help, and we need it urgently. We cry for help because for some reason or another, we cannot help ourselves.

Biblically, think about the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, for instance. They needed to be saved from slavery. That's what they were crying out for day after day.

Think about those exiles in Babylon, and how Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones was, for them, a sign of their need for help, and with it, a promise that God wasn't going to leave them to rot in exile, but rather restore their life and bring them home.

Story after story, when the people of ancient Israel became helpless, as our psalmist prays, "*Out of the depths I cry to you...*", and note the shift from the personal "*hear my voice, O Lord*" to the community, "*O Israel, hope in the Lord...with him is great power to redeem.*"

Dry bones seeking life, God would come after them. God would come looking for them, seeking out their redemption.

God's breath of new life into dry bones, God's help to our cries is more than being saved from our sins, and more than being saved from hell.

In other words, there is more than one way to be saved and more than one thing we need to be saved from:

- I think about the man who sits in his office at home, long after quitting time, wishing that he didn't have to go home just outside the door. He's made a success of himself at the expense of his family, and the atmosphere on the other side of the door is toxic. He looks at the picture on his desk, the one that was taken on his wedding day, and wonders: "Can these dry bones live?"
- I think about the single mother, sitting at her kitchen table after a long day trying to work from home and at the same time be the teacher's aide for her two children doing school virtually. She wonders how long her job will last, thinks of her children, and all she dreams for their lives. She shakes her head and wonders: "Can these dry bones live?"
- I think of the young man who has just been released from prison; convicted of a crime that he admits was the tragic result of drugs and the wrong crowd. But he's clean, worked hard to get his GED, but there are no jobs and he's afraid that the past will never let him go, and he asks, "Can these dry bones live?"
- I think of the young girl starting her senior year in high school at home 24/7, and school has always been the place to escape a father who never lets her forget she can't do anything right and a mother who will not protect her. "Will I ever please my parents and make them happy; proud of me" lead to those 'I can't wait for the morning' kind of thoughts creeping back in of why not just end it now, "Can these dry bones live?"

- I think of the older couple who settle in their chairs on the front porch of the home they've lived in for over forty years. They look out over the neighborhood where their children grew up and notice how dirty and run-down it is, how different from those neighborhoods on the other side of town. "Can these dry bones live?" they ask themselves.

As Ezekiel would sigh and wonder, too, "You tell me, Lord. I don't know."

And then God does tell him, he tells him to preach to the bones and say, "*O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.*"

Whether Ezekiel believes it or not, God believes that new life is possible. God commands the prophet to preach to the bones. And to his credit Ezekiel does, and when he does, a miracle occurs.

It is the miracle of our psalm, the miracle that comes as the psalmist waits through the shadowy valleys of a deathly night, sitting in the intensive care unit of one's own soul on life-support.

"Hope in God!" is the word that redeemed people offer to the dry bones of humanity.

A call to hope cannot be issued by people who live in despair.

A call to hope will not be issued by people who live burdened by a sense of failure.

A call to hope will never be persuasive when made by religious people who sing about "Amazing Grace" but practice piling on guilt.

The Bible tells us repeatedly that God is a redeemer. God is in the business of redemption.

God is in the business, in particular, of redeeming human lives not only from trouble or exile or slavery but God has a passion to redeem human lives from futility and meaninglessness, from bondage to old ways and bad habits, from the consequences of our own stubborn willfulness and at times our own stupidity.

God longs to redeem our lives from every effect of sin within our lives that breaks down our relationship with God; that breaks down our relationships with others, especially the least of these among us; that breaks down our relationship even within ourselves, when we no longer know who we are.

From everything that would cripple us, God longs to redeem us and even from the power of death itself, God's redemption longs to be active.

In the songs we sing, the words *redeem*, *redemption*, and *redeemer* are words that we throw out as big religious words.

But we miss it sometimes, not really understanding what's being said. In the Bible, all of these words are related to the world of being rescued.

“For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.”

A youth choir director tells the story about Chris. He was about 8 years old and lived a few blocks from the church where she served. She first met Chris when he wandered into the church parking lot one day, little brother in tow, approached some adults, and they steered both boys toward the children’s activities.

His eyes shone bright blue, and he had freckles sprinkled on his nose. His friendly smile and easy-going personality made it easy to bring him into the group.

He always had more than the normal childhood smudges on his skin and his ill-fitting clothes never seemed fresh.

There was no doubt that Chris was neglected. What was unusual, she says, was the absence of some typical behavioral problems for a child in his situation.

On his own, Chris began to attend the youth choir. He seemed oblivious that the other children were openly reluctant to sit by him.

He never really sang on pitch, but he would smile and give it his all, and just looked happy to be there.

During choir one Wednesday evening, Chris asked the choir to pray for his family because his dad was in jail for trying to kill his mom.

Their house was vacant soon afterward, and they lost track of Chris and his brother.

But a few weeks earlier, she said she introduced a new song to the choir and asked them to think of reasons why we love God.

Chris was the first to raise his hand, his face lit up as he waved excitedly, gushing, "I love God because God gives us second chances!"

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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