

Sunday June 18, 2023

Lesson 3: Do You See What God Sees?

Scripture: Ezekiel 37: 1-10; Ephesians 2: 4-7

**Context:**

Today we continue our summer curriculum, “Inspired By God.” In this third lesson of our first unit, “The Rich Literature of the Bible,” we examine the various genres in the Bible and how the Old Testament connects to the New Testament. Thus, each lesson will contain a scripture passage from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Today we will look at our lives from God’s perspective, insofar as it is possible.

The Old Testament passage comes from the book of Ezekiel. The book of Ezekiel is set in the time when Ezekiel was exiled to Babylonia during the first deportation by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BCE.<sup>1</sup> His message was shaped not only by the exile, but also the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in which, presumably, Ezekiel had served as priest.<sup>2</sup> The writings reveal an immensely learned individual, one deeply rooted in the priestly traditions of the Jerusalem Temple.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Ezekiel saw both the despair and the terror during the exile and the mark it left on the people as they watched their cherished communities and Temple destroyed.

The passage today is an extensive metaphor of what God can do in the brokenness of the time. The context for our passage comes from around 585 BCE when news reached exiles in Babylon that Jerusalem had fallen.<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel can speak after being silenced for a bit, and he is given a vision of God restoring a dead army and breathing life into them. The metaphor is meant to convey how God will bring Israel back to life.

The New Testament passage comes from the book of Ephesians. The book is a letter to the church in Ephesus and is a book of ecclesiology, focusing on the church (from Greek term “ekklesia,” the called out). The main themes of the letter include a focus on unity in Christ, church members learning to be in relationship with one another, the importance of prayer, and the gift of the Spirit to lead and guide Christians.

The focus of the passage today is the life God gives to humanity and the power of Jesus Christ in forgiving sins and the redemptive grace Jesus gives. These gifts set against hopelessness are meant to inspire and encourage the early Christians.<sup>5</sup> What is interesting for today’s purpose is the tense of saved – for Paul asserts the church’s salvation as something which

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<sup>1</sup> Coogan, Michael D., ed., *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 385.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 386.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 392.

<sup>5</sup> Martin, Ralph P. “Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 27.

has been already fully achieved.<sup>6</sup> Salvation is not about what the individuals or church does, it is about what God has already done.

### **Application**

A valley of dry desiccated bones does not exactly sound like a place for a restorative vision to take place. If anything, it sounds like the beginning of a horror movie where you wonder what horror is around the corner to trap you. Yet this is the vision God gives to Ezekiel in response to the collapse of his world.

Luckily, I have never walked into a valley of lots of bones jutting out of the ground. I do remember an experience though where I saw something which was once alive now lie in ruins, more so due to age and time. A few years ago, I had the opportunity to go on a tour of the Holy Land with my ordination class. I decided to do one of the extensions at the encouragement of a mentor and I am glad I did as it allowed me to visit Jerash, an old city in Jordan.

The ruins were immaculate. You could see the bazaar, the amphitheater, an old drinking fountain, a temple to Artemis, an old cathedral, and a smaller church. While none of the roofs were intact, most of the original structural pieces were there. What I absolutely loved at the cathedral was seeing the pulpit carved in stone still standing there. You could even climb up in it and look out at the space of once was a cathedral floor which would have had Christians gathering to hear the proclaimed Word and sing praises to God. The place might have been in ruins and yet the experience breathed new life into me.

Ezekiel's vision and the passage in Ephesians reminds us God will always breathe new life into us. God also loves us and will love us from generation to generation even despite us when we rebel and push God away. God keeps coming into our lives, whether they are in ruins or intact, and reminds us of how God has put a claim on us.

When I think about the church in Jerash, I often think of how at times the church today faces its own ruins of sorts. Sometimes it is because of forces outside our control like moving patterns or job availability and churches once full are now empty. The people have done nothing wrong; it is just the nature of life cycles.

Other times, the church is quite good at ruining itself. We fight, bicker, and at times we do not act our best. And sadly, people outside the church we might want to invite in, say "No thanks!" and move onto to other places to find meaning and belonging. We become our own worst enemy.

Yet these texts remind us God is not done with any of us yet, whatever we might face. God can repair our lives and the Spirit gives us life even when we feel like dry bones. Or we can be reminded in our own sinfulness of how Jesus has forgiven us; his love upon the cross reminds us as such. And God will remind us again because God also knows us well enough to know we will miss the mark again even as hard as we strive for goodness and obedience.

One of the reasons I like to journal is to occasionally revisit different entries particularly those dealing with when I travel. I often make notes about the places I have seen commenting on history or architecture. Sometimes though, I get a snippet of something I recorded on my heart, or my mind and it causes me to smile or give thanks. I can look back and see God was pushing me or encouraging me in something or even preparing me for future events in life. I feel God reminding me of how God is always at work in my life, actively saving and redeeming me.

Both the Old Testament and New Testament reminds us God is always looking for ways

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 28.

to reach God's people. God knows we are sinners in need of grace. God also sees when we look at ruins and feel scared and overwhelmed. And God can see when we are struggling with our own sins and mess-ups. God then finds a way to send us the vision, or look to the cross, and be reminded God is actively at work in our lives.

How have you felt like the dry bones in the Ezekiel narrative? When have you felt God "saving" you from something? Why is it important to reflect on where God is at work in our lives? How can we remember the love God has for us? What are the ways we can see God at work in our lives?

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