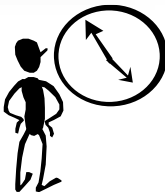


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Time of Assembly



Sunday:

Bible Study	9:00 a.m.
Worship	10:00 a.m.
Worship	5:00 p.m.
(every other week)	

Wednesday:

Bible Study	6:30 p. m.
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The Valley of Dry Bones

By Matthew W. Bassford

We all know the song. In fact, many people who aren't religious know the song. It is easily the most familiar concept from the book of Ezekiel, even though I think most people don't know that the content of the song comes from the book. Stripped of its context and meaning, the core idea is still striking. Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around!

In context, though, Ezekiel 37 is profound. The valley of dry bones isn't merely a geographical curiosity. Instead, it represents the nation of God's people, which is D-E-A-D dead.

After all, Ezekiel, though a member of the priesthood, is writing from exile in Babylon, many hundreds of miles from Jerusalem. Jerusalem itself has been conquered by Babylon, along with all the rest of Judah. The temple has been burned; the people have been carried away captive.

Nor is this disaster the result of chance. Instead, it has occurred because God's people broke their covenant with Him and rebelled against Him. Through idolatry, oppression of the poor, and every kind of wickedness, they provoked the Lord into fighting against them rather than protecting them. As God warned in Jeremiah 37:10, even if the men of Judah had succeeded in badly wounding every Babylonian, the wounded men still would have risen up and burned the city. Truly, there is no strength, no understanding, and no counsel against the Lord!

From here, the rest of the story would have been brutally obvious to everyone. There was no way for the Jews to defeat Babylon, no way to get out from under the boot of the oppressor. The people were going to remain in exile indefinitely until they became indistinguishable from the nations around them. The great work that God had begun at Sinai had failed.

However, God has other ideas. As He restores life to the bones in Ezekiel's vision, so too He is going to restore life to the dead nation of Israel. Indeed, He does. Mere decades after Ezekiel writes, Babylon is conquered by the Medo-Persians, and the Persian king Cyrus allows the people to return. Against all odds, God's people continue dwelling in the land, and God's work continues until its culmination in Christ.

Today, American Christians like to wring their hands over the wickedness of the United States and its downward moral trajectory. Generation Z is the least religious generation that our country has seen since before the Second Great Awakening. Many of our own congregations increasingly resemble AARP chapter meetings.

We are doomed, I tell you! Doomed!

I am not worried, not about the future of the church, at least. We serve a God who can give life to a valley of dry bones. The devil has never been able to destroy His people or defeat His will, and he's not going to succeed this time either.

I don't know how this is going to play out. Maybe this nation will see a Third Great Awakening. Maybe the truth will be extinguished here but continue to shine in places like the Philippines and Mozambique. Maybe their descendants will send preachers to evangelize ours.

I don't know, but I am confident that God does. Don't lose sleep over the future. It belongs to Him.

Working Behind the Scenes

By Bill Fairchild, Jr.

"I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience ..." (Revelation 2:2).

It is said of the early Christians that each determined to do his part in Acts 11:29-30 "...which also they did."

I was engaged in a gospel meeting and had arrived at the building earlier than expected which was a real blessing. I could catch my breath, let the supper settle, and give a little more thought to the lesson for the night.

And when I got out of my car, I noticed an older model pickup parked away from the building. The lights were already on in the building. I went inside and found an elderly gentleman probably in his late 60s or early 70s and we sat down on the back bench and visited.

In the course of our conversation, the subject came up about how long he had been a member there and then he mentioned the fact that he had never preached a lesson or offered an invitation, but he had led prayer.

But then he said something that really stuck with me, "I don't really do much here at the church! Oh, I'm here for all the services including gospel meetings ... I sing a bit off-key ... and follow along in Bible Class and Worship services. Like I said I real-

ly don't do much ... just been taking care of the yard and anything else on the outside of the building all these years!"

Needless to say, it was my pleasure to remind him that he was doing all that he was able to do and that the Lord knew what was in His heart and saw his desire to serve God as best he could!

I must tell you, the big smile on that elderly man's face was worth a million dollars that night, for he was able to finally figure it out. He really was doing things for the Lord, lots of things!

There are always those in most congregations that you rarely see "upfront" but who are always in attendance and participating in all the activities. He was one of those members that it could be said are among those you rarely hear about but our God knows!

Just like He knows who are laboring in difficult situations, where attrition of the members over time has led to small numbers and small classes, but they come, they sit down, they sing, they pray, they remember the Lord's death in partaking of the Lord's Supper, they pay attention to the lesson being taught (at least most of the time!), and they are so happy to have seen each other.

From the Lord's perspective "*every member of the body of Christ*" is important - - needed to work with all the other members in unity and to help the church bring "*the glory to God*" that He alone deserves! That is the way the Lord has always intended for the church, "*the Body of Christ*," to be --united with all of the parts.

As diverse as the parts of the human body, so is the spiritual body of Christ. That for which He gave His very life's blood in order to purchase it (Acts 20:28). Every member of the "body of Christ" is dependent on every other part, the feet, ears, and hands, as well as the internal organs that cannot be seen without technology, all the members need to be spiritually healthy!

What's the takeaway from this writing? It's really very simple. Whoever you are, wherever you live and worship, regardless of the size of where you worship, seek to serve the Lord with "*all of your heart, soul, strength, and mind.*"

Look around and do all that you can do!

Each member of the "body of Christ" is important and that, my friend, is **you!**

As the beloved apostle Paul would write, "*I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 3:14).



The God Seen in Nothing

By Matthew W. Bassford

I love that God thinks so differently than we do. Because His ways are not our ways, He consistently reveals Himself to us using means that we never would have chosen. We prefer straight lines and straightforward propositions, but God works in subtlety and paradox. These things are His signature, His proof that He has not sprung from the mind of man.

Consider, for instance, the way that God represented Himself in the Old Testament. Humans answer the question of divine representation in human ways. We make idols that display the characteristics that we think belong to gods. Perhaps the idol incorporates elements of powerful animals. Perhaps it simply looks like a large, unnaturally good-looking man or woman. That's as far as our ingenuity takes us.

God's solution to the problem was very different. He gave instructions for the construction of the mercy seat that was to sit atop the ark of the covenant. Two cherubim sat to either end of the mercy seat, flanking a space in which there was. . . nothing. Any other religion on earth would have put an idol there, but God did not. In place of a focus for the devotion of His worshippers, there was only empty space.

Human wisdom finds this baffling, even maddening. What are we to make of a God like that? There is nothing extraordinary about empty space!

Here, of course, we find the paradox that is the divine signature. Indeed, there is nothing extraordinary about empty space, but a God who scorns all representation as inadequate is truly extraordinary! Our highest ideals of what God should look like fall so far short of His reality that we should not even attempt them. The nothingness between the cherubim signified a God who transcended the knowable and visible.

Making representations of God is not a human business. It is God's business. Here we encounter more paradoxes, more of God's fingerprints. Somehow, a God who cannot be constrained in any way was compressed into a human form that nonetheless was and is the image of the invisible God, the exact representation of His nature. We make images of wood and stone; God makes a second Adam. This too is incomprehensible, unfathomable even to the people who had been warned for a thousand years to expect it.

In more divine contempt for human expectation, the Word become flesh had no stately form or majesty. He didn't need them. Those with eyes to see had no trouble recognizing His divinity anyway.

As Jesus died, the divine paradoxes multiplied. The God who does whatever He pleases tasted the extremity of human weakness. The Savior of the world could not save Himself. The Prince of Life was put to death. And yet, impotence, failure, and death combined to produce the greatest victory that God would ever achieve.

The sign of this victory is a familiar one. Humans know how to celebrate victories. We hold parades, commission paintings, and build monuments. God does none of these things. Instead, just as He once revealed Himself through the empty space between two cherubim, He revealed Himself in the empty space between two angels sitting in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. The empty space proclaimed and proclaims more than any direct signifier could.

Christ is risen.

Sullen and Vexed

By Matthew W. Bassford

The Israelite king Ahab is one of the most complex characters in the Bible. He isn't a straightforward villain like Sisera or Caiaphas. There is good in him. When Elijah confronts him over the judicial murder of Naboth in I Kings 21, he repents and humbles himself.

However, Ahab is doomed by two fatal flaws. First, he is a weak man married to a strong, evil woman, the Sidonian princess Jezebel, and she drags him into all sorts of trouble. Killing Naboth was her idea, not his.

Second, he usually responds negatively to godly correction. When Elijah and other prophets come to him with unpleasant spiritual truths, he takes the criticism personally instead of taking it to heart. He doesn't view the prophets as friends who are trying to help him. Instead, he considers them enemies.

His encounter with a prophet at the end of I Kings 20 epitomizes the problem. Here, the prophet tells him that he is going to lose his own life because he spared the life of the Syrian king Ben-Hadad. When similarly confronted with sin in II Samuel 12, the great King David repents immediately, leading God to spare his life instead.

It is not so with Ahab. He doesn't brush off the warning like the foolish monarch Jehoiakim, but neither does he try to make amends with God. Rather, in the words of I Kings 20:43, he goes to his house sullen and vexed.

God is very patient with Ahab, giving him chance after chance rather than destroying him. However, this patience is wasted on the childish king. Ahab's lack of moral courage ultimately leads to his death and the destruction of his entire house.

The devil would love nothing more than for us to walk in the footsteps of Ahab. Indeed, the temptation to be like him is present in all of us. None of us enjoy correction. None of us like having our sins pointed out. All of us are inclined to take it personally. It's easy for us to regard those who tell us things we don't want to hear, whether a preacher, a loved one, or a friend, as our enemies.

However, rising above these ungodly impulses can make a heaven-and-hell difference in our lives. The problem is that all of us are very good at lying to ourselves about our sins and our spiritual condition. We prefer to believe that we are fine just the

way we are, and most people will go on believing that all the way to destruction.

Thus, it often is easier for others to see and diagnose our problems than for us to do so. When someone comes to us, we must learn to check our egos and honestly consider their painful words. Then, we must be strong enough to make needed changes in our lives, especially when those changes are painful and difficult.

It's easy to be an Ahab. It's easy to respond to rebuke by becoming sullen and vexed. However, the easy path leads only to disaster. Instead, we must take the wise words of David in Psalms 141:5 to be our own. There, he says, *"Let the righteous smite me in kindness and reprove me; It is oil upon the head; Do not let my head refuse it..."* Let our heads not refuse it either.

Burdens

By Johnathan Perz

Struggles, infirmities, and adversities are a part of life. We all face them. Paul describes a struggle he brought before God on three occasions, seeking that God remove it from him. Instead of removing the burden, God let Paul bear it, admonishing him with the words, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."*

Some burdens are self-inflicted, and we bear them because of our own folly (though God's mercy often prevails despite our follies). God allows and gives other burdens so that we may grow stronger through absolute reliance upon Him. Paul accepted his burden by learning to most gladly boast in it that the power of Christ would rest upon him. Let us learn to bear our burdens with joy, knowing God's grace is perfecting us and that He is working in us and through us. He hasn't abandoned us to our burdens. He is empowering us to carry them in ways we could never on our own!

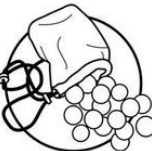
"And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (II Corinthians 12:7-10).

Coins of the Gospels

SILVER DENARIUS
The denarius was considered a fair day's pay for a common laborer in the first century. Jesus asked to see this coin when asked if it were lawful to pay taxes to Caesar (Matt 22:16).

What one coin could buy:
15 lbs. of wheat
(in a basket).

JUDAS' SILVER
The 30 pieces of silver that Judas took in exchange for betraying Jesus were silver shekels, the equivalent of 120 denarii.



SILVER HALF SHEKEL
The temple tax was one half-shekel per year.
Worth: 2 denarii
What one coin could buy:
A wooden bucket, 15 lbs. of wheat, and a clay oil lamp.



SILVER SHEKEL
Minted in Tyre, the shekel and half-shekel were the only coins accepted for the temple tax in Jesus' time because of the high purity of their silver.
Worth: 4 denarii
What one coin could buy:
A lunic, a liter of olive oil, two 1lb. loaves of bread, and a half-liter of cheap wine.



BRONZE PRUTAH
The bronze prutah was a common coin, worth only 1/48th of a denarius.
What one coin could buy:
1/3 lb. of bread.

BRONZE LEPTON
The widow in Mark 12 gave two leptas coins to the temple, each worth only half a prutah.
What one coin could buy:
A bath at the public bathhouse.

Size comparison



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