

IT IS NOT OVER UNTIL IT IS OVER!

Today's Text: Ezekiel Chap. 37

Extracts:

The hand of the Lord came upon me (Ezekiel) and brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones. Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold ... they were very dry. ... (And) He said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, ... 'Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live.' " So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ... Then (the Lord) said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They in deed say, 'Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!' (But) say to them, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then, you shall know that I am the Lord" [Ezek. 37: 11-5, 7-8, 11-13]

The New York Mets is a major baseball team which won the World Series Championship in 1969 and 1986.¹ At the beginning of the 1972 season, Gil Hodges that had led the Mets to the championship victory in 1969 died suddenly after a heart attack. Yogi Berra, an ex-New York Yankees player that was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame that year (1972) was appointed to take over. By the end of August 1973, the Mets were at the bottom of the National League East with 61 wins and 71 losses. As far as Mets' fans and lovers were concerned, the season was over. However, Yogi Berra rallied the team with "Ya gotta believe!" The Mets went on to win 21 out of the last 29 games, good enough to win the NL East championship with 82 victories and 79 losses! When Berra was asked how he did it, he said, "It ain't over till it's over!"

Yogi Berra and his team snatched victory from the tight jaws of defeat because they refused to accept that it was over. How many of you are there right now? You are contemplating giving up. You have done all that is humanly possible and things are not getting any better. When you give up, does that make the problem go away? If you do not give up, where is the guarantee that things can change for the better? How do you get out of the dilemma? Today's study has helpful suggestions on the matter.

¹ Story based on the following sources: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_Mets#1970-1979; and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yogi_Berra

1. The dawn of despair or an irreducible bottom line?

The report is final and there is nothing that can be done any more. The doctor says that the illness is terminal and there is nothing any more that he can do about it. The barren woman who desperately wants to be a mother has just been informed that she is experiencing the onset of menopause. Therefore, she should consider adopting a child. Your house is facing foreclosure because you have defaulted on your mortgage payments. Or, you have just been served with divorce papers by your spouse of over twenty years. If you were the affected one in the above cases, what would you do?

When we face such inevitability, it is *logical* to accept our fate and wait for the end. After all, everything that has a beginning must have an end. We can minimize our costs (material and emotional) by accepting the verdict and activating a coping strategy. On the other hand, there are some of us who will not give up, no matter what. After all, they claim, how do you know that it is over? How do you know that it is not a test of your faith or endurance?

Take the case of King David when the son of his adultery with Bathsheba fell ill. God had sent to him through the prophet Nathan that the child would die. Therefore, it was a closed case and no matter the quality of medical care available in Israel at the time, it was a hopeless case. But what did David do? Instead of arranging for the child's imminent burial, he "pleaded with God for the child, and ---fasted and went in and lay *all night* on the ground. So the elders of his house arose and went to him, to raise him up from the ground. *But he would not, nor did he eat food with them.*" On the seventh day of David's vigil, the child died. In explaining his attitude to his servants, David said (in part), "*While the child was alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who can tell whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live?'*" [2 Sam. 12: 13-18, 21-22].

On the surface, David's fasting and praying would appear to have been wasted. However, examine his words, "while the child was alive." In other words, David was not going to give up for as long as his son was still alive. Hopelessness contains an irreducible bottom line! Every cloud has a silver lining. No matter the floods of trying circumstances that you face, there is a straw to hold on to. You may have no shoes but you still have feet. The homeless may live under a busy bridge but he may sleep more soundly than the millionaire on a water bed in an exclusive mansion. Therefore, it is your *choice* to make that hopelessness confronting you either a valley of hope or a bottomless pit of despair.

2. God restores Israel

In today's bible text, God took Ezekiel up in spirit and brought him to a valley that was full of the bones of dead people [Ezek. 37: 1-2]. The bones were very dry, suggesting that they had been there for a long time. Have you ever asked why bone does not decay? If we are dust and to dust we shall return at death [Gen. 3:

19], how come that bone does not decay? The scientific answer is that bones contain calcium which is quite hard. A plausible spiritual explanation is that bones may be the residue of our mortal bodies upon which God will attach our immortal flesh for the New Jerusalem. For example, Job said, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; *and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God*” [**Job 19: 25- 26**]. In the Great White Throne judgment, the apostle John was shown a vision of the dead standing before God. Among them were those who had died at sea and “the sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them” [**Rev. 20: 12-13**]. At Christ’s resurrection in Jerusalem, “the graves were opened and many *bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised* after His resurrection (and) they went into the holy city and appeared to many” [**Matt. 27: 52-53**]. Clearly, the sea and the graves could have had only the bones of the dead ones while their souls were in heaven or hell. Therefore, it is possible that God used this episode in part to give Ezekiel a glimpse of the resurrection of the body at the end of the age.

Today’s Bible passage essentially deals with God’s plan to restore Israel from its grave of captivity and exile to its permanent abode in the Promised Land. We shall adapt some principles from the restoration process to examine and deal with our contemporary situations. Note the following among others:

a) *Let God lead the way*

God caused Ezekiel to pass by the bones all around. The prophet found out that the bones were very many in the open valley and that they were in deed very dry. Then, God asked him, “Son of man, *can these bones live?*” Ezekiel replied, “O Lord God, You know” [**Ezek. 37: 2-3**].

Ezekiel wisely threw the question back at God! If he had answered in the negative, that would have amounted to doubting God’s powers because nothing is impossible before Him. If he had answered in the positive, that would have been presumptuous of God’s intentions. Therefore, the best answer was to throw it back at the One who knows it all! That attitude to spiritual questions is demonstrated in several parts of the Scriptures. For example, when an angel woke up the prophet Zechariah, he showed him a lamp stand of solid gold with a bowl on top of it, and on the stand were seven lamps with seven pipes to the seven lamps. There were two olive trees by it; one on each side of the bowl. Zechariah asked the angel what those things were and he threw back the question, “Do you not know what these are?” Zechariah replied, “No, my lord.” It was then the angel told him that it was a message from the Lord to Zerubbabel, that his victory would not be by his might or power but by the Spirit of God [**Zech. 4: 1-6**]. He let God’s messenger lead the way instead of guessing the correct answer. In another example, the apostle John saw a vision of multitudes of people arrayed in white robes, standing before the throne of God in

heaven. One of the elders that sat before the throne of God asked him, “Who are these arrayed in white robes and where do they come from?” John replied, “Sir, you know.” Then, the elder went on to explain it to him [Rev. 7: 9-14].

So, when you find yourself in a desperate situation, stop leading the way and let God take over. If experts, specialists, advisers and family could do it, why would your case still be unresolved? Let go and let God!

b) *Cooperate with God*

God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to the dry bones and say to them, “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!... I will cause breath to enter into you and you shall live. I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the Lord.” Ezekiel did so “as I was commanded” [Ezek. 37: 4-7]. As used here, to prophesy has two meanings: to preach and to predict. Ezekiel preached to the dry bones. However, since he was pronouncing definite outcomes, he was also prophesying. No matter how he understood it, he obeyed God’s command.

Many people may be able to surrender their circumstances to God but how many of them are prepared to do what He commands them to do? Some people disobey God’s commands that go against their denominational rules and practices! Some people are too “big” or too proud to do what God requires them to do. How many believers today would have obeyed Jesus’ command to the blind man (on whose eyes He had put wet mud made with His spittle!) to go and wash in the pool of Siloam [Jn 9: 1-7]? The man obeyed and he came back seeing! His “civilized” counterpart of today would have regarded the Lord’s command as coming from ephemeral spirits because it was ritualistic!

If you want a rare miracle, do rare things. Be like the woman with the issue of blood. Her religion had taught her that “if a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, other than at the time of her customary impurity, or if it runs beyond her usual time of impurity, all the days of her unclean discharge shall be as the days of her customary impurity. She shall be unclean” [Lev. 15: 25]. So, she could not go to the house of God for healing. Instead, she suffered for twelve years and “spent all her livelihood on physicians and could not be healed by any” [Lk 8: 43]. She got tired of religion and decided to go to Christ. Her friends and family who had seen Him heal so many hopeless cases encouraged her to go to Him that God had sent “to heal the brokenhearted” [Lk 4: 18]. So, weak as she was, she broke through the security wall of overzealous disciples and curious crowds to touch the garment of Jesus. She was sure that she

would be healed if only she could touch Him. In deed, she touched Him and became instantly healed [Lk 8: 44-48].

c) *You must become a new being*

As Ezekiel prophesied to the bones, they revived but there was no breath in them. Then God commanded him to prophesy to the breath saying, “Thus says the Lord God: ‘Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.’” In deed, breath came into them and they stood upon their feet like an exceeding great army [Ezek. 37: 8-10]. However, the new army (representative of the reborn nation of Israel) would not be like the one that had been slain. God would put His Spirit in them [v. 14]. They would not defile themselves anymore with their idols or with “any of their transgressions” but God would cleanse them and they would become His people and He their God [v. 23].

It is instructive that after Jesus had healed people of their physical or spiritual ailments, He always told them to go and sin no more [see, for example, Jn 5: 14; 8: 11]. The gratitude that you owe God after He has done for you what the world thought was impossible is to spend the rest of your life serving Him in spirit and in truth.

It is also for your own good because you are thereby signing a covenant of peace with Him. As He has assured the reborn Israel, you will become established and multiplied and God’s sanctuary will be in your midst forever [Ezek. 37: 24-28]. Your body will become the temple of the Holy Spirit so that you can glorify God both in your body and in your spirit [1 Cor. 6: 19-20]. God keeps in perfect peace those whose eyes are stayed on Him because they trust in Him [Is. 26: 3].

We learn from the forgoing that we are all in God’s hands. He is the only one who can say it is over and it will in deed be over. When He is not yet finished with us on this side of eternity, *nothing but ourselves* can stop us from getting what He has planned for our destiny. When you give up instead of fighting, you tie God’s hands and He *cannot* help you. Happily, you are not there yet!

3. Conclusion: Christ is your Prince of peace!

During the just concluded Wimbledon tournament in London, Marion Bartoli, the 22-year-old French tennis player (ranked No. 19 in world women tennis) faced world No. 1, Justine Henin, in the semi-final on Friday, 6 July 2007.² It took Henin barely 22 minutes to win the first set 6-1, and it looked like it was going to be a quick end for Bartoli. She was under enormous stress. Playing at that level in

² Story based on the following sources: Caroline Cheese, “Bartoli stuns Henin to make final,” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/sport2/627644.stm> and “Henin ousted; Venus reaches sixth final,” <http://msn.foxsports.com/tennis/story/6997202>

a Grand slam tournament like the Wimbledon was a dream come true. Now the dream was turning into a nightmare. It was at that stage that she saw Pierce Brosnan in the crowd. Brosnan has played James Bond in a number of films and he was one of Bartoli's favourite actors. She saw him clapping for her! That was the bottom line of her hopelessness. She steadied her game by winning the second set at 7-5, and stunned the tennis star 6-1 in the third set! James Bond was Bartoli's anchor in her valley of despair. Who is yours?

God told the revived Israel that His servant David shall be their prince forever [Ezek. 37: 25]. We know that David is dead and his bones are buried under the hallowed grounds of Jerusalem. But the Son of God, Jesus the Christ, came in flesh to take the throne of His father David "and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" [Lk 1: 32-33]. He was crucified for our sins. He died and was buried but His bones are not in any grave! The Spirit of God breathed into His dead bones and He rose from the dead. He now lives on the right side of God the Father in heaven. So, He has demonstrated, as Job had prophesied, that the Redeemer lives and we shall soon see Him with our risen bodies.

Through His disciples, Jesus has assured us, "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; *not as the world gives do I give to you*. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" [Jn 14: 27] and "in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulations; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" [Jn 16: 33].

Jesus is your anchor at your point of hopelessness. Your bones of hardship, lack, disease or injustice may look dry. The world may tell you that it is all over. But Jesus the Prince of peace has asked you to cheer up. It is not over until He says it is over!