

**“Something We Cannot Do for Ourselves  
Ezekiel 37:1-14  
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April 2, 2017**

It is a day I would rather forget, but one I am destined to remember. Nearly thirty years ago, when we lived in Warrenton, North Carolina, I was on my way back to Warrenton from Durham. I had driven down I-85 to see a couple of church members who were in the hospital and was hoping to make it back to Warrenton in time for the Wednesday Night Bible Study I was supposed to lead.

The trip took about an hour if you drove 70 miles per hour, which is, of course, what law-abiding citizens drive when the speed limit is 65. Since I had some time to spare, I got off at the Creedmoor exit to get a cup of coffee at a fast food restaurant – one never wants to be stuck without a cup of coffee – and back on the road I went.

I was feeling quite content when suddenly my car lost power. I checked the gear shift, but the car was in gear. I had plenty of fuel. Yet when I pushed the accelerator, nothing happened. I looked in my rear-view mirror, only to see that I was surrounded by cars and trucks travelling at 70 miles per hour, while suddenly I was not.

It is not a position you want to be in under any circumstance, especially when your car weighs little more than the average bicycle – I drove a 1985 Toyota Tercel Hatchback at the time. The first thing I did was toss my coffee on the floor so as to get both hands on the wheel (I drove a manual transmission). Then, somehow, I managed to pull my little Tercel off the road to safety in the emergency lane.

Off the road, I tried to calm myself. I looked over at the spilled coffee and shook my head, not at the mess in my car, but the fresh coffee wasted. Then, after checking my rear-view mirror, I got out and did what any full-blooded American male would do. I walked to the front of the car, lifted the hood and gazed at the engine.

Now, there was very little I knew how to do, other than check the oil and the butterfly valve underneath the air filter to make sure the

accelerator shaft was connected to it, so as let fuel into the engine. But the oil was fine, as was the valve. There wasn't much else I could do.

After a few minutes, I began to realize my predicament. Even if I knew what was wrong, I couldn't fix it, and this was before the time most people had cell phones. I began to grow concerned. Not only did I have a Bible Study to lead, but the sun was going down. Many of you have been on I-85 just north of the Creedmoor exit. There isn't much there. I began to feel vulnerable, exposed, helpless. I take pride in being independent, but this was a situation I could not control. There was nothing I could do for myself. It was a terrible feeling.

But it is a feeling we have all had. We try desperately to live with an illusion of independence, but every now and then, we have an experience that reminds us of our frailty – a breakdown on the road, a crisis with a child, a medical emergency, a sudden loss. Just when we think we have it all together, we are reminded that there are some things in this world over which we have no control. Physically, emotionally and spiritually, there are things we cannot do for ourselves.

Israel found itself in just such a predicament. This was a proud nation, a nation confident in its strength and favor with God, but Jerusalem had fallen. The people had been taken into exile, and to make matters worse, the prophet's explanation of this twist of fate was that the nation had betrayed God and was being punished for unfaithfulness. Israel was not the victim of some random event, like the breaking down of a car. Israel was reaping the harvest of its own planting. As a result, the people had lost a homeland, and with it, their hopes and dreams, and there was nothing Israel could do to rectify the situation. The nation could not forgive its own sin nor could it defeat the Babylonians.

So, Israel felt vulnerable, exposed, helpless. "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them;" the people said, "how then can we live (Ezekiel 33:10)?" It was a question born of painful experience. How can we live as a proud nation when we have no land? How can we continue when we have no hopes and dreams? What is the point of going on if we have lost control of our lives and there is nothing we can do to help ourselves?

Israel's answer came in the form of a vision to the prophet Ezekiel. It was an eerie vision with more than a touch of the macabre. It was like something out of a Stephen King novel. But the message was pure life and joy. In the vision, the prophet was taken to a valley that was littered with dry bones. It had the appearance of a former battlefield where thousands had been slain and left unburied. In the vision, God asked Ezekiel if the bones could live.

The normal human response would have been to offer an unequivocal "No!" but this was God with whom Ezekiel was speaking. So, he feigned ignorance. As it turned out, Ezekiel was wise to do so. For as the prophet proclaimed God's word, the bones came to life. Bones came together, sinews grew with flesh and skin upon them, and finally, the spirit of God breathed life into those bones! It must have been a terrifying yet exhilarating experience.

However, lest the prophet get carried away with the spectacular nature of the vision, God quickly explained the meaning of what Ezekiel had seen. The bones were the house of Israel. The nation was dried up and without hope within itself. Like bones on a battlefield, Israel was helpless, completely incapable of bringing itself back to life. But what the nation could not do for itself, God could do for it. As God could breathe life into dry bones in a valley, God could breathe life into a nation in exile, and the people could have a future. The message was that what Israel could not do for itself, God could do for Israel.

This is the message for us as well. No matter how much we try to live with our myth of independence and strength, we all have experiences which expose our vulnerability and weakness. We all reach a point where we realize there is something we desperately need that we cannot provide for ourselves, and if it is left up to us, we will throw in the towel, give up on life. But to do so is unwise, because there is One waiting to help us who can bring dry bones to life. There is One willing to shout to the dead, "Lazarus, come out (John 11:43)!" There is the Spirit of the God who raised Christ from the dead, dwelling within us, giving life to our mortal bodies (Romans 8:11), infusing hope into the most desolate circumstances.

Sometimes hope comes in simple and direct ways. When I was stranded on I-85, a Good Samaritan came along. I do not know whether God sent him or he came on his own, but a man stopped because he drove Toyotas and never had any trouble with them. He said that when he saw me broken down, he had to stop and see what the problem was. Fortunately, he also had some rope in the back of his car and he agreed to tow me all the way to the closest dealership in Henderson. A new igniter box, a reworked alternator and a couple of hundred dollars later, both car and driver were fine. Sometimes hope comes just this simply and directly – the car gets fixed, the loved one gets well, we find employment; a need is met, help is found and we are on our merry way.

Far more often, however, hope comes in a more complex and indirect form. We do not necessarily obtain what we think we need, but God provides something we had not even considered – a sense of peace as our loved one is dying, a different kind of opportunity than we had imagined, a measure of grace in the midst of some challenge - and in the process, God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves

The following is a personal testimony to this reality that I share with permission of a young mother in another church I served.

On Monday, January 18, while driving back to Richmond from a weekend's visit with relatives, I was facing the likelihood that I would be forced to undergo a drastic chemical treatment, to control an attack of multiple sclerosis. For the first time, my left side and especially my hand were becoming badly impaired; I am left-handed.

So, there in my car, I prayed to God for courage and strength, and for an ease of my concern for my children and my husband in the face of this crisis. That evening I began to make arrangements for my children's care, should I indeed be hospitalized.

I found that night that I was not fearful, for I have an ever-increasing trust in God's presence and grace, and I lifted my cares to Him and simply... rested in Him. My prayer that night was that however my MS progression might go, I might continue to be employed in His work within the ways He made me able.

I was hospitalized on Tuesday and received four days of high dosage steroid treatment... a day longer than expected. I continue to taper off this medication at home.

I wish to write a message of deep and heartfelt thanks to the people who responded to our need. But foremost, I want to praise God for my amazing spiritual experience. At no time did I feel alone, victimized or afraid, and believe me, with a major, life-altering illness like MS, fear is a potent force. But God's promises of steadfastness, hope in Christ's salvation, and a continuity beyond this mere life have given me the deepest satisfaction and joy.

As for my family, friends have transported and hosted my children, provided meals to ease my husband's burdens, cleaned house, given me rides, run errands, and most amazingly of all, searched and grown in their faith, as they prayed together for us. I felt humbled and honored to be used by God as a focus for these beloved friends to fathom their own relationship with our Lord. It's an incredibly special feeling. I am so blessed.

Over the next month, my condition will stabilize to its new level of ability and hopefully a long interim of remission (I may hope to regain 90% of nervous system function). But please know this, I have felt a deep and abiding love, and I feel no fear at all!

It is a marvelous testimony to the reality that God does provide in our time of need. God did not heal that dear friend's MS. Nor did God appear in some extraordinary form. But God did provide through the community of people who helped in different ways and through the deep-down sense of peace and assurance this young mother was given.

Many of us have had experiences like this. We have felt an inexplicable sense of peace in the midst of some crisis. We have been surrounded by friends and fellow believers who have put a human face on God's love for us. We have found a strength beyond our own to persevere through some difficult transition, to put one foot in front of another when we didn't think we could.

And even if we cannot identify a specific physical, emotional or spiritual trauma through which God sustained us, we can all point to our basic sense of estrangement from God, others and our own best selves, and acknowledge that in such a condition, we are vulnerable, unable to help ourselves, utterly dependent upon the grace of God.

One image that illustrates our condition is that of a frail newborn finding comfort by grasping a parent's little finger. In the early weeks and months of life, a child is as vulnerable as a human being can be. There is much to frighten a little one. There is much that he or she cannot understand. Yet the child finds comfort in hearing a familiar voice, in taking hold of a familiar finger, in being embraced by loving arms, hearing a familiar heartbeat.

Such is our condition before God. We like to think that when we are mature, we develop a sense of independence, we establish mastery over our environment, we take control of things. And at one level, this is what maturity is about; it is about taking responsibility for our lives.

At another level, however, a deeper level, maturity is about recognizing what we cannot do for ourselves, seeing that we are still vulnerable in many ways like a newborn child, remembering just how dependent upon God we are. Maturity is about listening in our most fearful moments for a familiar Heavenly Voice and laying hold of the hand of the Divine Parent who breathes life and hope into all we do.

No matter how secure we may seem, there is always something we cannot do for ourselves. The good news is we know and serve and love a God who can do what we cannot!