

Second Sunday of Easter: Ezekiel 37:1–14

Don O'Connor

27 March 2005

There are a lot of people, who have experienced material poverty in our culture, but they are not poor - they are quite rich - independent. Pride will always say, "I have no need of thee." You go along quite while not talking to him, or to her during the week, because you're doing good. I don't judge you. God judges the motives and intents of the heart. Every day I come up short - my motives fail me

We no longer live in a guilt culture, but we have been thrown into meaninglessness, existentialism, the abyss. Meaninglessness is just the byproduct of something else. The more you think of yourself, the more you turn inward into the meaningless abyss, the less meaning you can make out of anything. .

We're told that now life is meaningless, and who is responsible for meaninglessness? Sin, if it ever enters our consciousness at all, is something "they" did to us.

People like Mazlo make a humanistic appeal to the church. The church isn't weird enough, so it appeals to people. We appear to be middle class and value oriented. There has to be a prophetic word in the church that challenges everything, but not from a variance place. It is always healthy. It is always healthy to have the prophetic flowing, although dangerous for prophets.

The real problem isn't your sins; it's your righteousnesses, your goodnesses. Stop and think how our righteousnesses separate us.

How would you epitomize pride, if you chose one scripture?

Each of you has a unique gift of the Holy Spirit; God has fashioned you in such a way that you are unique. Some of you have hidden it for 20 years. Or you can do, like Annie Herring said, invest your gift for your own glory - to receive the praise that comes from men. Not only does it become perverted, but the gift diminishes.

The proudest thing you can do is: 1 Cor. 12:21 (KJV) And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

We don't even know how to be needy, naturally.

Paul had a problem with these Corinthians - they knew a lot. They had a lot of gifts, but their problem was their knowledge.

How many of you don't want grace and peace multiplied to you today? You have quite enough. You're doing alright, aren't you? Grace and peace is multiplied to you through the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Stop and think of the knowledge you get every day; mostly knowledge of how you can get what you want. "I've been going all day and it's not wrong to want a little peace and slack time." There are different kinds of peace. The world's peace is no conflict.

Luther says that a person who is into faith would die a thousand deaths for it. A person overflowing with the faith of Christ is meddlesome.

The Master exposed the tyranny; what others give themselves over to on any given day.

How many of you want to know God? Paul counted everything loss for the Excellency of the knowledge of Christ, and the fellowship of his suffering. Jesus is held up as an example, but this has nothing to do with the Jesus of Scripture.

The older brother is serious. Anyone who knows a lot is serious. Children aren't serious - we have to train them to be serious, to get them some knowledge. They are kind of like the Kingdom Of God - they just want to party. The kingdom of Heaven is like a little child, not like a serious old man. You'll have to become like them if you're going to enter in.

We will continue the baptism today. But as the Catechism says, you're to be drowned in daily contrition and sorrow.

Gerhard O. Forde, On Being a Theologian of the Cross, Martin Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 18

It is certain that a man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.

You and I must totally despair.

2 Cor. 1:1-2 (KJV) Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, unto the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints which are in all Achaia: [2] Grace be to you and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

You are his and He's yours and there is nothing left to worry about. It is your Father's good pleasure to give you good things.

2 Cor. 1:3-4 (KJV) Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; [4] Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

You comfort others with the comfort you've received from God. How many ways can he comfort you today?

The theologian of glory can only call suffering evil. It is like the dirtiest word in the world. "They're using the "S" word over there." How many of you know I invented suffering? How many of you came into the world suffering and causing your mother to suffer? Nine months of ingratitude on your part. When you finally did come out you started screaming and keeping her up nights. And then you started lying in the crib - manipulating your mother to get what you wanted.

Bill Gates: Life's not fair. Get used to it. We're not only partakers of suffering, but we cause others to suffer also.

Imagine: God comes down and empties himself of being godly, becomes totally human and totally God, and suffers for us who are ungrateful.

I wouldn't worry about resurrection, because He is risen. Your mind can't comprehend the things of God. You need the mind of Christ. When you get His mind, you'll realize that resurrection is no big deal to Him. Compared to the Mind of Christ, we know nothing as we should.

2 Cor. 1:5-7 (KJV) For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. [6] And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. [7] And our hope of you is steadfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation.

Some of you might deny that you suffer. Most of our suffering isn't for God, it's for sin. It's not the law that keeps you in line, it's the consequences. "I might have to suffer if I continue to do this." No work - no \$.

2 Cor. 1:8 (KJV) For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life:

Thesis 18: It is certain that a man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.

We may even agree intellectually that this is true and mentally ascent to it, but nobody I ever met wanted to suffer. A lot of people have wrong motives in suffering - glory. Luther had bad motives for suffering, but he didn't know it. Not Paul, though.

To trust in yourself is to say that you have no need of grace. "I don't need the gift of God in you, in him, or in her because I'm doing alright getting my own. This is the religious world and we're part of it.

How then are we prepared to receive the grace of Christ? We must utterly despair of our own ability. The thesis states the matter categorically. "It is certain." It is not a matter for conjecture.

The law wills that man despair of his own ability, for it leads him into hell and makes him a poor man and shows him that he is a sinner in all his works...

Gifts and abilities are vain unless they are used for the right purpose. Television and the internet can be used for evil and they can be used for good. Plastic can be used for good and for evil. Nothing is evil in and of itself, but the use you make of it can be.

We smell like death to some people. The preaching of the cross smells like death. If you could have done anything, then God made a big mistake in allowing Jesus to be crucified.

Paul said, basically: "Because we loved the Church, we went to Asia and many other places that were unhealthy." People tried to tell Paul not to go to Rome or he would be killed. It grieved him that someone would be so concerned about a little thing called death.

Don't beat yourself for not doing enough. God hates you beating yourself because it says that what Christ did wasn't enough.

When you love the Church, she will press you out of measure. There is a difference between strife and being pressed out. Strife - busybodies - Martha - gathering information and knowledge. Women who go from house to house because their husbands haven't washed them with the water of the Word. There is a place to be clean before God, where the washing water of God's Word washes the bride.

He who simply acts in accordance with his own ability and believes that he is thereby doing something good does not seem worthless to himself, nor does he despair of his own strength. Indeed, he is so presumptuous that he strives for grace in reliance on his own strength.

Luke 13:27 But he shall say, I tell you, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity.

Thesis 18 announces that a man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.

When, as theologians of glory, we think our own works are the only way out, we get trapped in our own sins. Then we are without hope and on the way to ultimate despair, the despair, say, of a Judas. "If only I had not done it!" "There is no hope for me." Despair becomes ultimate. The cause of such ultimate despair is that we are still trapped in a false regard for our works.

Notice the difference between the words ultimate and utter. Ultimate despair is used to keep the theologian of glory's world in tact. God has funny way of letting us think what we want for years, that our world hasn't come to an end.

Deut. 8:1-2 (KJV) All the commandments which I command thee this day shall ye observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the Lord sware unto your fathers. [2] And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no.

God's love - to humble thee. You cannot humble yourself. Humility is death - you have to be humiliated. How many of you have been humbled at times? Don't worry; God isn't finished with you yet. I am not going to get off of God's hook, but he lets me think I am. Being good, going here, doing that, and knowing this (which is the worst of all) are idolatry). Humble is a passive work. You are rendered passive in humility. God may be setting you up.

Jacob was running and running and running, and he finally got caught up at Penile. He got caught up in all his craftiness. He came up against the brother he tricked - the brother that swore to kill him. He got down and prayed, kind of, and then he did trust God. He ran out of options. Laban was chasing him from behind, and Esau was in front, and he had to ford the river there. He remembered that Esau swore to kill him. He had a family and his prayer was quite interesting. We pray best when we're so humiliated that we run out of options, and then we take the dive. God had a plan. He was tricking the tricker. The Lord had already talked to Esau, but Jacob didn't know it. God said, "Fear not, Jacob thou worm." What if someone came up to you on the street and called you a worm? Oh, if I were only just a worm.

How many of you persecuted the church? Paul has nothing on you inasmuch as you have thought evil, spoken evil, and done evil to the least of the brethren.

Where is the boasting? He keeps the chosen in the desert, a wilderness, for 40 years. What grows in a wilderness? Nothing. Isn't it amazing who the chosen are? The weak things: The base things, the despised things, and the things that are not. Do you know what makes you not? You're not useful to the world anymore? Remember when you used to size people up as plusses or minuses? If they were a plus they were useful to you. If not, you didn't even exist to you (the uncomely and unattractive don't exist in your life because you can't use them).

The are not company - it's no longer I who live, but Christ that liveth in me. It's not just merely Scripture, but a reality. How can Christ live in someone that vile, that weird? Where else do you think he would live? Read 1 Cor 1 - weak, base, despised things. You were once despised as being not useful. You're not that useful as consumers. How many of you want to be attractive? What do you want to attract? I don't think you have to be ugly either.

Deut. 8:2 (KJV) And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no.

If God owns all the cattle (all the Mercedes) on a thousand hills, why wouldn't he just bless his children with opulence right off the bat? God works in opposites. We naturally call evil good and good evil. If you saw a father by the name of Eli just letting his sons do what they wanted and not confronting them and chastening them, and they end up dead, you would think? Would you think Eli was an understanding father and that loves his sons? No, he hates his sons. He put his sons before the Lord.

Hebrews 12:6-7 (KJV) For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. [7] If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?

40 years of chastening would seem evil. I've called my son out of Egypt but I can't bring him into the land directly because he has some Egyptian ways of thinking and would want to impose his will upon others, as Pharaoh did. How many of you have had people love you with tyranny? Isn't that sweet? Don't you just love the little dictators?

Not only to humble you, but to prove something to you, that you would know what's in your dirty little heart; not your sweet Christianized heart, but the other heart. Out of the heart flow abominations, perversions, adulteries, and murder. Jesus doesn't define murder as an outward thing only. How many of you have been mad enough to kill - well, at least shoot someone's foot - and they were someone you loved?

Deut. 8:3 (KJV) And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live.

He humbled the prodigal son, Israel, and suffered Israel to hunger that he would learn that man doesn't live by bread alone or wits alone, or by strength, ability or gifts, alone. I have to learn this and I don't like it; I'm naturally opposed to this.

Deut. 8:5 (KJV) Thou shalt also consider in thine heart, that, as a man chasteneth his son, so the Lord thy God chasteneth thee.

A natural person would wonder that God put Israel in a dry and thirsty land for 40 years. This is where the rebellious live. We should know. Dry is an interesting word in Hebrew

Because he loves you, he chastens you. To give a child the keys to the car wouldn't be loving them. Sometimes the word NO doesn't seem like love. NO means you don't love me. NO in God's economy means, Yes, indeed. Nothing for you to eat today, no bread, because I love you so much, but I am going to let it rain manna and I may even give you what you think you want, quail that will cause you to vomit. Many a person has rushed into something they thought they wanted only to find out it was just quail, flesh.

Could you consider today that if you've been in a desert for 40 years, perhaps God's been chastening you and he will comfort so you can comfort others with the comfort you've received?

Keeping the commandment is no longer an imperative.

Deut. 8:6-7 (KJV) Therefore thou shalt keep the commandments of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, and to fear him. [7] For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills;

Hosea is having wife problems. Well, God told him to marry a whore. Hosea is one of the deepest books there is regarding the church.

Hosea 1:6 (KJV) And she conceived again, and bare a daughter. And God said unto him, Call her name Lo-ruhamah: for I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel; but I will utterly take them away.

Some children carry this name. In a legalistic home there is idolatry, so children are legalistic and judgment; fearful more than anything. They run in tight grooves - condemned, angry, and stuffing it.

Hosea 2:2-3 (KJV) Plead with your mother, plead: for she is not my wife, neither am I her husband: let her therefore put away her whoredoms out of her sight, and her adulteries from between her breasts; [3] Lest I strip her naked, and set her as in the day that she was born, and make her as a wilderness, and set her like a dry land, and slay her with thirst.

Hosea 2:14-15 (KJV) Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. [15] And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope: and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt.

God's ways are different than ours.

1 Peter 5:5 (KJV) Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble (those who God has humbled).

God is so abundant; he longs to give us everything. Think of the things you hunger for on any given day.

You may be going along as a river, thinking life is great. Rivers, deserts, wildernesses, are all poetic ways of saying something.

Psalm 107:4 (KJV) They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way; they found no city to dwell in.

The rebellious dwell, although, in the midst of a crowd, in a solitary place - lonely place.

Psalm 107:4-6 (KJV) They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way; they found no city to dwell in. [5] Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them. [6] Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses.

This whole Psalm is about peoples' trouble.

Wilderness - byproduct of saying that your life is your own. Now they have functions and acquaintances, mutual people they can use and be used by, but it is a solitary way. People who deny that they were purchased by the Lord. These are people who don't give God the glory although God did all for them. They have been given everything. If you or I insist on being my own, and my will be done, then this is what hell is filled up with. Since you won't receive my son, your will be done - do it your way. The will is not free - it is bound to save its life at any cost.

Ezekiel 37:1-2 (KJV) The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones, [2] And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry.

DRY: yabesh, Hebrew 3002, Strong's yabesh, yaw-bashe'; from Hebrew 3001 (yabesh); dry :- dried (away), dry. yabesh, Hebrew 3001, Strong's

yabesh, yaw-bashe'; a primitive root; to be ashamed, confused or disappointed; also (as failing) to dry up (as water) or wither (as herbage) :- be ashamed, clean, be confounded, (make) dry (up), (do) shame (-fully), × utterly, wither (away).

Religious lives without the fruit of the Holy Ghost manifest, all they have is another day of being religious and being good. God dies for the ungodly. He justifies the ungodly. Are you qualified? Yes. Are you telling me you've sinned? How many of you have been selfish this last week? Shame on you! If you don't have shame you have the therapeutic - victims on a search

for the victimizer. There is no forgiveness for blamers because they have no sin to be forgiven of. If you've actually been selfish again for a whole week, you're a candidate

Imagine how this rubs against religion.

Ezekiel 37:3-4 (KJV) And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest. [4] Again he said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

Oh you arid bones, barren bones, solitary bones, bones dwelling in a wilderness, you fruitless bones - prophesy to them. What should I say to them?

Ezekiel 37:5 (KJV) Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live:

Ruah - life - The breath of God caused Adam to become a living soul. This is why I don't like Rebecca as much as Rachella. Rachella - ruah. You dry bones, you shall live. Imagine the faith teachings perspective of this. They're out there because they didn't believe. Look at their confession.

Ezekiel 37:11 (KJV) Then he said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel (THE CHURCH): behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts.

"That's why they're there - bad confession." No!

Ezekiel 37:12 (KJV) Therefore prophesy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel.

Ezekiel is brought to the valley of bones - the whole house of Israel. How many times has the enemy told you that you're cut off, it's too late, you've been too bad, and there is no hope now? It's just that you need more positive thinking - under that religion you deserve what you're getting

The people who have been cut off, fruitless, and in a desert he wants to engraft into his family, breathe life into them. See what God does to people who are bad - that's how they got in the desert? Dry bones - no marrow in them. The life comes from the blood. Without the blood there is no life. They are parched and fruitless.

Ezekiel 37:13 (KJV) And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves,

They've come to utter despair. Lazarus, out in the desert , flesh gone and now dry bones, is the whole church in the United States today, including us. He brings us down to hell before he brings us up to heaven.

1 Samuel 2:6 (KJV) The Lord killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up.

He brings you to a wilderness before he brings you into the land. He chastens us until we come to where we utterly despair of ourselves - to where there is nothing good to say about ourselves - until we are dead in sin. Our hope is lost - and that should be the attitude of a true Christian. Then he gets you where he wants you. He can now give to you. This is brought about through the alien work of God - tribulation, affliction - suffering. You can wait another 20 years if you'd like, to believe this. No chastening seems pleasant for the moment.

You can slow down the process of entering in simply by being independent and not being caught up loving the Church, or by saying "I have no need of thee," or not being pressed out of measure because of the vision God has given you - starting with your family.

They will sell out Christ before they sell out their natural flesh. They will sell out God before they sell out their natural family. This didn't help Eli's family at all - both his sons had to die because he put them before God.

You bones, you dry bones - this plays out in every life. What does God do?

Ephes. 2:1 (KJV) And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins;

What trespasses and sins? Probably things I won't look at. Are your children making a name in this world? If your husband or wife doesn't bow down are they being evil? Do they exist for you or do you exist for them?

Revelation: Seven churches - the whole church, or an individual Christian - this is the church God loves.

God uses deserts to humble us There are worse things - a lot worse.

Michael Horton, A Permanent Address: We call the church a family -- the family of God. And like any family, it has its pluses and minuses. We know that there is an ideal church consisting

of all the elect -- the so-called invisible church -- but precisely because it is invisible, affirming its existence does not mean that we can point to it and say, "There it is." The only church we know is the visible church, by whatever form of church government we call it (local, regional, national, international, or all of the above). And we have to admit that if seeing is believing, we might be hard-pressed at times to identify the church we know with the uncompromised church in glory.

Jesus promised that when he left, he would send the Spirit to testify concerning him, bringing conviction and forgiveness through the gospel proclaimed. In the meantime, our Lord went "to prepare a place" for us to be together forever (John 14:3). It will be a permanent address at last. At its best, the church below is the staging area for the things to come: a kingdom of grace, not yet a kingdom of glory; a church militant, not yet the church triumphant. So the wheat and the weeds grow together until the Son returns to gather and make the final separation (Matt. 13:24-30). Until then, there is no pure church, but only churches more or less pure. For now, it is a "mixed body," with no doubt some sheep outside it and some wolves within.

Augustine, one of the key sources for this invisible-visible church distinction, can be improved on by reference to eschatology. In other words, the proper distinction is not between two types of churches, one "inner" and another "outer," but rather two eras of the one church's existence: "this present age" and "the age to come." This is the import of the parable of the wheat and weeds: Jesus will sort things out in the end. But for now, the visible church is a garden of wheat and weeds and sometimes we cannot tell them apart. In this age, the church is compromised; in the next, it is glorified -- completely purged of being, as we lament in the hymn, "by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed." The distinction between the present and the future condition of the church is the corporate analogue to the paradoxical life of the individual believer as "simultaneously justified and sinful."

You're being humiliated and fail every day in your vocation, if you're doing right. If we set Christ as the ultimate criteria and not the morality of this age, we will fail. If you compare it to this age, you'll appear as a winner.

How blessed you are to know that you are simultaneous - simul iustus et peccator. Despite the days when you lose the battle with the devil - you're not cast aside.

But just as we are definitively new creatures in Christ, despite our continuing battle with sin, the church really is the site of God's covenantal grace. Like any family, it has its problems, but because it is Christ's family, "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). To this church Christ has entrusted the keys of the kingdom, so that "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (v. 19). Just as the individual believer is a work in progress, so corporately the church even in its weakness is the place where the age to come breaks in on this present evil age.

It is difficult to identify the church in its present state with the bride of Christ, but the gospel says that this is in fact the case (see Rev. 21:2, 9; 22:17), so it must be whether we see that reality or not. The church is our permanent address, despite appearances to the contrary. It is not a vague, abstract, invisible reality, but a tangible, concrete, visible one -- amid all the counterevidence. If we are inclined to break bruised reeds and smoldering candles in our self-righteous zeal to create an absolutely pure church, it is comforting to know that the King of the church is not. If ever there were examples of corrupt churches, Corinth, Galatia, and the churches addressed in the Apocalypse would come pretty close to it. And yet they are all addressed as "the church," warts and all (see 1 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:2; Rev. 2 and 3). As an eschatological reality, the church -- yes, even the one to which you belong -- is an "already-not yet" form of God's saving presence in the world in Jesus Christ and by his Spirit.

We ended the meeting by taking communion. We don't take communion in perfection.

Confessed sins can be forgiven. The ones who come to utter despair will be raised, as in Ezekiel (Ez. 37:11-12). Remember Deut 8:2 – God must humble us, we can't humble ourselves, but remember why.

SOURCE

Sermon Notes - Don O'Connor - 3/27/05

The message through Jennifer's ears.