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Sermon

Resurrection

Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

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What are we dealing with in these accounts from Ezekiel and John?

Remember Ezekiel was living during the Babylonian exile. All Israel's hope was lost: conquered by her enemies, enslaved and in exile. The temple which was the earthly dwelling place of God had been destroyed, its gold stripped and temple vessels taken by the conqueror. They had lost their land, their future, everything but their lives – even the covenant with God.

With this background, Ezekiel was shown a vision. He saw dry, dry bones scattered in a valley. He was told in the vision to command them to come together. He did as he was told and with a rattling the bones reassembled and aligned again. Sinews, flesh and skin covered them but they were still dead bodies. Then he was told to command the breath (or spirit) to enter those bodies and restore them to life. Again, he did as he was told and the spirit came into them and they lived. They stood up and were a great army.

But note what follows from verse 11:

Then He said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, 'Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!' "Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, O My people, 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, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. "I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it," says the LORD.' "

The vision was a metaphor for state of the people of Israel. They said they are as good as dead, without hope or a future. But God said to them through Ezekiel that he would restore them. They would live and be restored to their land. The Valley of the Dry Bones was a vision intended as a promise of restoration.

The people of Israel had strayed far from the covenant they had made with God. Time and again, he had implored them to return to him but to no avail. When King Manasseh promoted the worship of the Canaanite god Molech by burning babies alive, God said things had gone too far and he would have to turn them out of the land. There was to be a time of discipline. Yet even as they went into exile there were glimmers of hope

that they would return. Jeremiah had prophesied¹ that the exile would last seventy years and then there would be restoration. Over and again, God has promised restoration to his people.

In our relationship with God through Christ, judgement is dealt with through the cross. However, there may be discipline for our own good. Hebrews 12 speaks of God disciplining his children. It may be that you are going through such a time.

Hebrews 12:10-12 Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. ¹² Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees!

If you are going through such a time, you can take comfort that God cares about your character. He loves you too much to leave you as you are!

But discipline and condemnation should not go together. If there is anything from which you need to repent – then repent; ask forgiveness – get the relationship right again. Don't accept condemnation - it is never from God. God deals cleanly with us. The discipline may still persist, but at least you can strengthen yourself and follow after him, confident in his love and acceptance even if chastened by his correction.

Let us now turn to the Gospel, we have the account of the raising of Lazarus and later the resurrection of Jesus. Are we also dealing with metaphor? For that is what the more extreme liberal theologians would have us believe. Lloyd Geering distinguished between resurrection with a small 'r' and Resurrection with a capital 'R'. By 'capital-R-Resurrection' he meant real physical rising from the dead and by 'small-r-resurrection' he meant a metaphor. He did not believe in true resurrection only in a metaphor.

Paul asserts that if Christ has not in fact risen from the dead,

.... your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.²

Friends, the great majority of the Apostles were martyred for their faith. Would they die for a lie? If you knew Jesus did not really rise from the dead, would you die for that belief? That does not make sense. I believe in this book as the inspired Word of God. I believe it reports truthfully. I believe that Lazarus was raised from the dead. I believe Jesus was raised from the dead.

However, there was a difference between Lazarus and Jesus. Lazarus was restored to physical life – he would die later from natural causes – whether old age, illness, violence or accident. Jesus, however, was raised to eternal life. He is the first fruit of the resurrection. The resurrected body is of a different order from these natural bodies. Paul puts it like this in 1 Corinthians 15:

There are also bodies in the heavens and bodies on the earth. The glory of the heavenly bodies is different from the glory of the earthly bodies. The sun has one kind of glory, while the moon and stars each have another kind. And even the stars differ from each other in their glory. It is the same way with the resurrection of the dead. Our earthly bodies are planted in the ground when we die, but they will be raised to live forever. Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength. They are buried as natural human bodies, but they will be raised as spiritual bodies.³

Turning back to this account of Jesus restoring Lazarus to life again, there is much in this account but time does not permit more than two points.

¹ Jeremiah 25:11-12

² 1 Corinthians 15:17-19

³ 1 Corinthians 15:40-44 (New Living Translation)

The Resurrection and the Life

Verse 25&26: Jesus said to [Martha], "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. "And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

What does Jesus mean by saying he is the resurrection? It is more than saying he can call someone back to life – although he can. And that in itself is wonderful and astounding. It should cause us great awe for this God-man Jesus. It is also a huge comfort that death is not final. If someone can die and be dead long enough for the body to be smelling, and then come back to life- surely that shows us that the essential personality is able to persist in spite of the demise of the body. If you are entirely materialistic in your thinking you may say that is not possible because there is nowhere to store the information of personality and memory. It seems to me the obvious answer is the personality is a function of the spirit rather than the body so it can outlast and transcend the state of the body.

Again, what does it mean for Jesus to say, "I am the Resurrection and the Life"? In 1 John 1:2, Jesus is described as being himself eternal life. "We proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us."⁴

When Moses had the encounter with God at the burning bush. He asked whom he should say had sent him. He was told "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD [Yahweh], the God of your fathers--the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob--has sent me to you.' This is my name for ever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation."⁵

Scholars say this name Yahweh is a form of the verb to be, probably meaning "he is". So when God speaks to Moses of himself, he names himself "I am". When Moses refers to him to others, his name becomes "He is". The essence of the name of God is existence – life. God is himself life and he is the source of all life.

In John 5:21, Jesus said, "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it." God the Father and Jesus the eternal Son of God are essentially life and can give life and even restore life to the dead.

Jesus is the Life and also he is the Resurrection. It is only in him we find this resurrection, eternal spiritual life. When we live in Christ, we receive his life – the life, the resurrection.

Have you received that life? It starts now and continues through into eternity. Do you know you are in Christ? Make sure you have responded to Jesus' invitation to have real life.

Anyone who believes in me will never die.

Jesus also said to Martha, "He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. "And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die."

The first part is not too hard. If you believe in Jesus and you die, you have eternal life.

The second statement probably troubles people more: Whoever lives and believes in Jesus shall never die. It probably sounds absurd to unbelievers when they hear it at funerals. It is clear that Jesus preferred to call death "sleep" and reserve the word "death" for the state of the eternally lost. An example occurs in the early verses of this chapter, when he said that Lazarus was asleep and then had to explain to his disciples that he meant he had died. We understand he reserved the term "dead" for being found guilty in the Judgement. So the one who lives and believes in Jesus will not be found guilty at the great judgement.

However it is clearer than that. I checked the Greek of this passage and was amazed by what I found. There is no need for inference at all. My literal translation of the Greek is:

And everyone living and believing in me shall not not die into the age.

⁴ 1 John 1:2

⁵ Exodus 3:14-15

The Greek Lexicon or dictionary says “into the age” is an idiom for eternally or forever. Thus it reads,

Everyone living and believing in me shall emphatically not die through all eternity.

Or we could say:

Everyone living and believing in me shall emphatically not die eternally,

There we have it the answer. Jesus makes it clear that the death the believer will not die is eternal death. And he is strongly emphatic about it. He will not not perish. He will never ever perish.

He wasn't being obscure it is perfectly plain – and it is literally glorious.

Friends, again I say – please be sure you have put your trust in Jesus as Lord and Saviour so you may have confidence in that promise of his: Everyone who believes in me shall have eternal life.

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