

HOPE

Romans 5:2-5

INTRODUCTION

- A. Learned Helplessness and the Lowly Rat.
 - 1. Most of us think of “hope” as a human characteristic ... something that requires the intellect and cognitive ability only humans possess. But, in a series of tests conducted by Dr. Curt Richter, 1957, even rats appear to have the capacity to hope.
 - 2. Domesticated Norwegian rats were able to swim around 40-60 hours on average. But wild Norwegian rats in the exact same situation, they would die within 15 minutes. They were the same breed of rat; the only difference was one group was domesticated and the other was not.
 - 3. In further experiments, they found that if they put the wild rats into the water, and then pulled them out after a few minutes — and then repeated this a few times before the final testing — the rats would end up lasting about the same length of time as the domesticated group when the final test was run.
 - 4. The team postulated that the deaths were more psychological than physiological; that the real issue was one of hopelessness.
 - 5. The wild rats were not used to being confined, so as soon as they were thrown into this new environment, one which seemed impossible to escape, they simply gave up. But if they had already been exposed to this same environment, and had then been removed, they knew that there was a chance the researchers could take them out of the water at any moment. It was no longer entirely hopeless, and they ended up lasting way longer than they would otherwise.
 - 6. I don’t know if rats feel hope. But it seems clear that one group has learned to give up and the other group has learned to keep trying. If the difference between the two isn’t exactly “hope,” it comes pretty close.
- B. Rats and people need hope to keep going.
 - 1. It’s hard to keep struggling when you’ve lost all hope. If there is no connection between what we do and what happens to us, why not give up?
 - 2. People cannot persevere unless they have hope.
 - a. Give them hope that their behavior can make a difference and people will work and suffer and sacrifice for a lifetime.
 - b. But take that hope away, and after a few feeble minutes of swimming, they will give up and sink.
 - 3. Like Job’s wife, if ever we lose our hope, we are tempted to curse God and die.

I. THE LIFE OF EZEKIEL.

- A. The Early Years.
 - 1. Ezekiel 1:1-3. Ezekiel would have been born in 623 or 622 B.C.
 - a. Ezekiel would have been born about the time Josiah rediscovered the Law and launched his religious and social reforms.
 - b. Ezekiel was probably raised in Jerusalem.
 - c. Ezekiel’s later visions of the Temple are detailed and imply some personal acquaintance with Jerusalem and its environs.
 - 2. Life before the exile.
 - a. He would have been 16 or 17 when Nebuchadnezzar carried off the first wave of exiles in 605 B.C.
 - b. Though he doesn’t mention Jeremiah, Ezekiel must have heard the preaching of the “Weeping Prophet” during this period.
 - c. When the second wave of exiles was taken to Babylon, Ezekiel was among them – twenty-five years old Jew, taken away to a land of strangers.

- B. Babylonian Captivity: Nebuchadnezzar settled this group of exiles at Tel Abib, near the River Chebar, not far from Babylonia itself.
1. Life in exile was not terrible – No concentration conditions; No forced labor as in Egypt; No back-breaking taxes.
 - a. Ezekiel married and lived in his own house.
 - b. Able to move about freely and carry out his prophetic mission.
 - c. The exiles went into business, governed themselves, and worshiped.
 - d. And almost 150 years later, when Ezra led a band of exiles back to Jerusalem, most preferred to stay in Babylon.
 2. But for Ezekiel, the exile must have been frustrating.
 - a. He was of an age when he should have been serving as a priest in the Temple.
 - i. But the Temple was hundreds of miles away.
 - ii. Soon, it would be destroyed completely.
 - iii. Jeremiah sent a letter during this time indicating that none of these exiles would ever see Jerusalem again.
 - b. How hopeless things must have seemed to Ezekiel and his fellow exiles.
 - i. The gloomy pronouncements of the prophets had come true. And the worst of their predictions were yet to come!
 - ii. God was becoming increasingly harsh in His treatment of the Jews.
 - from rebukes to plagues to oppression to destruction.
 - from discipline to public humiliation to rejection to execution.
 - But still the people continued in their idolatry and rebellion.
 - iii. The glory of the Lord had left the Temple. The covenant was revoked.
 - iv. The Davidic line of kings was about to come to an end.

Transition: It is in this context that Ezekiel receives his calling from God. The potential priest becomes a prophet. His entire ministry would take place far away from the holy city in which he was raised. Though he would have dreams about Jerusalem and speak often of Jerusalem, never again would he see his beloved country, city, and Temple. Ezekiel, in keeping with the prophecy of Jeremiah, died in exile.

II. THE PROPHECIES OF EZEKIEL.

Ezekiel is a difficult book for modern Christians too understand. But the fundamental message of Ezekiel is not all that difficult. It is a message about hopelessness and hope, about giving up and persevering, about God's will expressed in judgment and salvation.

- A. Ezekiel's Words of Hopelessness.
1. Chapters 1-24 contain Ezekiel's oracles of judgment against Jerusalem.
 - a. All of them occur before Jerusalem is actually destroyed.
 - b. All graphically emphasize the hopelessness of the situation.
 - i. Ezekiel lies on his left side for 390 days and then on his right side for another 40 days to demonstrate God's judgment of the people's sin (ch. 4).
 - ii. He shaves head and beard to enact the fate of the people of Judah (ch. 5).
 - iii. He accuses Judah of adultery and prostitution, painting vivid pictures of Judah's unfaithfulness (ch. 16, 23).
 - iv. His terrible words culminate in the death of his wife. God refuses to let him mourn openly to demonstrate the hopelessness of their position. Nothing they do can avert God's anger from their homeland.
 2. Chapters 25-32 contain Ezekiel's oracles of judgment against the nations.
 - a. These are dated during or just after the final siege of Jerusalem.
 - b. All emphasize the hopelessness of Jerusalem's situation and the danger of gloating over her fate.
- B. Ezekiel's Words of Hope.

1. A great transition occurs at Ezekiel 33.
 - a. Aug. 14, 586 B.C. Jerusalem and the Temple are burned to the ground.
 - b. That event marks a radical change in the tone of Ezekiel's prophecies.
 - i. From a prophet of doom, he becomes a messenger of hope.
 - ii. Before, nothing could be done to avert the disaster that was about to fall on Judah and her people.
 - iii. Now, however, the time of hope had arrived again. There was something the exiles could do to make a difference – repent.
2. Chapters 33-48 contain Ezekiel's oracles of hope for the people. They are some of the most beautiful and lyric prophecies in all the Old Testament.
 - a. God will be the Good Shepherd of His scattered and wounded sheep, ch. 34.
 - b. Ezek. 36:24-28. The people of God will be restored.
 - c. Israel and Judah will be made one nation under one king, ch. 37.
 - d. No nation will threaten God's people for God will protect them, ch. 38-39.
 - e. There will be a new Temple, a new Jerusalem, and a new Israel, ch. 40-48.

Which brings us to the most famous passage in Ezekiel. Ezekiel is given a vision of a valley filled with dead, dry bones. In what is surely one of the most powerful demonstrations of hope in the midst of hopelessness, God shows Ezekiel that when you deal with a Resurrection God, there is never reason to lose all hope.

III. DRY BONES – EZE. 37:1-10.

- A. *"Can these bones live?"*
 1. Ezekiel sees a valley full of "very dry", thoroughly dead bones.
 - a. The volume of bones – the valley is full of them, vs. 1.
 - b. The age of the bones – they are dry, sun-bleached, lifeless, vs. 2.
 2. God asks Ezekiel a powerful question: *"Can these bones live?"*
 - a. Is God taunting Ezekiel? Is he rubbing his nose in the hopelessness of the situation?
 - b. Notice Ezekiel's wise answer:
 - i. Ezekiel knows he cannot see life among the bones. He could have answered, "No way!"
 - ii. But Ezekiel knows what kind of God he serves.
 - iii. *"O Sovereign Lord, you alone know,"* vs. 3. Not a question of whether dry bones can live, but whether the God of life chooses to make it so.
 3. *"Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones."*
 - a. The word of the Lord goes out, vs. 5-6.
 - b. Bones come together and reassemble into skeletons.
 - c. Flesh and tendon cover the bones.
 - d. But they are lifeless still – they lack breath.
 4. A new creation.
 - a. The word of the Lord goes out again, vs. 9.
 - b. Breath entered the bodies.
 - c. *"They came to life and stood up on their feet – an exceedingly great army."*
- B. Can this people live again?
 1. Ezekiel knows he has witnessed a demonstration of what God is going to do with His nation Israel. But, just in case he missed the point, God interprets the vision.
 2. Ezekiel 37:11-14.
 - a. The bones are Israel – dead, dry, lifeless.
 - b. *"Our hope is gone..."*, vs. 11.
 - c. A new word from the Lord is about to go forth: *"I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them..."*

- d. Dead bones will live again.

CLOSING

- A. Romans 5:2-5
- B. Where there is a God with resurrection power, there is always hope.
- C. If rats can learn to keep swimming, those who serve this kind of God have no excuse to give up.