

Impossible?

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[0 : 00] Do you ever find yourself in a situation where it feels that everything is going wrong? Everything.

No matter how hard you look, how deep you dig, it feels that there's just nothing there that seems to represent anything like hope. This passage, this vision that's set before us this morning, that vision of the valley of dry bones that encounter resurrection, words that encourage us in those situations to remember that there are two ways in which you can see things.

You can look at the dead or you can look at the life that is to come. The late Rabbi Lionel Blue told a story years ago about a young man and everything was going wrong for him.

He was in a lot of debt. He'd lost his job. His house was being repossessed. He had a very chronic health condition that he'd recently been diagnosed with.

His marriage was falling apart. And he was sat at the breakfast table one morning doing himself some toast and he was buttering this toast and thinking about all of these things that were going wrong with his life.

[1 : 32] When he accidentally dropped the toast, he thought, oh great, one more thing to go wrong. That's why I thought it couldn't get worse. He looked down and his astonishment, he saw that the toast had landed on the floor, butter side up.

He thought to himself, is there just a possibility that this is a sign from God that the direction of my life is taking something of an upward turn?

He was so excited with this idea, he ran straight out of the door. He picked up his toast with him and he went straight round to his rabbi, banged on his door.

The rabbi came to the door. He said, can I come in? He said, sure. Sat down with his rabbi. He said, what can I do for you, my son? He said, rabbi, you know that everything seems to be going wrong in my life at the moment.

I've got this horrible health condition. I'm in a lot of debt. The house has been repossessed. I've lost my job. My marriage is falling apart. He said, I know. I'm praying for you. He said, but rabbi, I think I might have a sign from God.

[2 : 38] He said, what is it? He said, well, I've just eaten it, but I was getting my breakfast ready and I was putting some butter on my toast and I accidentally dropped it and I looked down and to my astonishment, I saw the toast almost smiling at me, butter side up.

Rabbi, rabbi, is this a sign from God? My fortunes are about to change. Rabbi thought for a few moments.

He stroked his beard and he said, no, my son, you buttered it on the wrong side. Things are going wrong.

Glib reassurances won't do. But glib reassurances are not what we find in the Old or the New Testament. Let's remember that it's out of the earthy reality of suffering and pain that the scriptures are written, where ordinary human beings, but often experiencing extraordinary disaster, experience the power of the extraordinary resurrection promising God.

The year was 586. Ezekiel, a priest, was speaking into a situation where he had this vision of this valley of dry bones.

[4 : 10] In the year 586, the city of Jerusalem had been besieged for about a year. And eventually it was captured by the Babylonians under the leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar.

You can read about it in 2 Kings, chapter 25. The king of Judah was taken from the city of Jerusalem once it was captured.

King Zedekiah was taken by soldiers and they slaughtered his children in front of him before ripping out his eyes, putting him in chains and sending him off to prison where he eventually died.

Three weeks later, they burned the city of Jerusalem to the ground. They destroyed the city walls. They destroyed the temple, the king's palace and all the houses. Those that were not infirmed were forced to leave.

And they were put in exile in Babylon. The temple was stripped of everything. And in 2 Kings 25, we read about, in some detail, the things that were taken.

[5 : 23] The thing that's not mentioned was the thing that was most holy to the Jewish people, the Ark of the Covenant. And some say that that represented such, so much of the sacred, that such was the humiliation of that taking place, that it just might have been possible that the writers of history just couldn't even bear to put that reality into words.

It was devastating. And so it is to these, before these people that have now lost literally everything, everything, that this vision comes through Ezekiel.

He sees this vision of the valley of the dry bones. Everything is death. And yet, he then hears the word of the Lord saying to him, but look again.

There are two different ways of seeing reality. These bones shall live. And in fact, as that vision, as that story unfolds, ten times God says, He says, one, I will cause breath to enter you.

Two, I will lay sinews on you. Three, I will cause flesh to come upon you. Four, I will cover you with skin. Five, I will put breath in you. Six, I am going to open your graves. Seven, I am going to bring you up from your graves.

[6 : 51] Eight, I will bring you back to your land. Nine, I will put my spirit within you. And ten, I will place you on your own soil. There are different ways of seeing reality.

And then three times God says, And you shall live. And you shall live. And you shall live. Ezekiel is confronted with this valley strewn with dead bones.

And yet the word of the Lord says, And you shall live. There are different ways of seeing reality. And like everything in the Old Testament, and it's not always obvious, but it points ultimately to Jesus.

And this imagery that we have of the resurrection points forward to the reality of Jesus, who when he dies on the cross just doesn't die and slip off to eternity straight away.

No, the way that story untold, that Easter weekend narrative, talks of the agonizing death on the cross, when Jesus is then declared dead on the cross. In that state of being dead, he is taken from the cross and he is buried.

[8 : 00] And he stays there for that Easter weekend. And only then, as that story unpacks and unfolds, do we then experience the reality of resurrection. It is the story that says that only, only through the earthly reality of pain and despair and hopelessness and death and disaster and ruin, only when we see that as the starting point do we then meet God in all his fullness.

And he says, You shall live. The theologian Tom Wright puts it this way. It's actually very timely for this morning.

He says, Imagine if you go to another country, you normally have to reset your watch. Today we do that anyway. But when you enter a new time zone, you have to reset your watch to that new time.

You've entered a new zone of time. Tom Wright says that for the earliest disciples of Jesus, that is precisely what they had to do. Of course, they didn't have watches in those days.

But they had to adjust to a new sense of time. No longer did time end with death. Now it ends with the promise of resurrection. That was a paradigm shift.

[9 : 14] Some 2,000 years later, we've gotten used to that narrative because we've grown up with the story. But in order to really take hold of that story and to understand it, we need to understand it not through our own lens of history, but through the lens of those who experienced it.

That experienced it not as the story whose ending they know, but as the story that was unfolding before their very eyes. The story that says when you see death and chaos and destruction, there are more than one way of looking at it.

You can see death and its apparent finality. Or you can see resurrection hope and you shall live.

The thing is secular humanism would say that what you see here is all there is. In the 1800s, there was a man called Charles Bradlaugh.

He was an MP and an atheist. And he founded the National Secular Society. And during his life, Bradlaugh would often challenge prominent Christian leaders of the day to public debates.

[10 : 41] He would argue against the existence of God. He had quite a reputation for this. And one day he was visiting London, or he was about to visit London, and he publicly challenged one very prominent evangelist to such a public debate.

The evangelist's name was Hugh Price Hughes. He was a Methodist superintendent minister of the West London City Mission. In that particular time in history, he was working among some of the most deprived parts of the city, living and working in what we would regard as slums.

Hugh Price Hughes accepted Bradlaugh's invitation to debate the existence of God. But he laid down a condition. He said, if this is a debate, let us regard it as though it were a court of law, where you would not go into such a discussion unless you had evidence.

Therefore, I challenge you to bring some evidence. Let us bring some witnesses. And he said, as we debate, we're not just discussing a set of lofty ideas. We're discussing the reality of how life has changed when people encounter the resurrection God, who promises not death, but resurrection. Not guilt and shame, but hope and freedom. He said, I will bring with me 100 men and women whose lives have been changed and transformed, completely turned around by the Christian gospel, by the message of hope, by the message of resurrection, by that message that when we look at the world, we don't just see death and chaos.

[12:30] We see life and hope and resurrection promise. I will bring along 100 men and women of such people who will witness to the reality of how that has changed their lives.

If you can do the same and bring 100 men and women who have been set free and transformed by your message, that death is the end.

In fact, he wrote this. I will bring 100 such men and women, and I challenge you to do the same. If you cannot bring 100, Mr. Bradlaugh, to match my 100, I will be satisfied if you can bring 50 men and women who will stand and testify that they have been lifted up from lives of shame by the influence of your teachings.

If you cannot bring 50, then bring 20 people who will say, as my 100 will, that they have a great joy in a life of self-respect as a result of your atheistic teachings.

If you cannot bring 20, I will be satisfied if you bring 10. No, Mr. Bradlaugh, I challenge you to bring one, just one man or woman who will make such a testimony regarding the uplifting of your atheistic teachings.

[13:51] Mr. Bradlaugh withdrew his challenge, and the debate never took place. See, the reality that we're talking about here is not just some set of lofty, philosophical, obscure claim about life after death.

It's about life here and now, that when we look at life and death here and now, we see it through a completely different lens. It's transformed. You shall live.

One last story, just to illustrate that last point a little bit more. You may have read or seen at Christmas the TV adaptation of *The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and The Horse*, Charlie Mackesy. Charlie Mackesy is a Christian, and I recently heard him, you can look this up on YouTube, he tells it far better than I can, but he recently held him tell the story about a friend of his who happens to be a hospital chaplain.

And the story is about how this chaplain would often visit this particular ward, and there was a guy in the ward who had been there long-term sick for quite some while.

[15:11] And every time this chaplain walked past, presumably he was wearing his collar, the guy in this bed just gave him two fingers.

Every time. And he was there for quite some time, so every day he would walk past, and it was just... It actually became quite amusing to him, I think, but he would just smile.

Anyway, one particular day, he walked past this guy in the bed, and there were no two fingers. Instead, he just called him over. And he said to this chaplain, he said, is it all right if I have a chat with you when you've got some time?

Sure. And he sat down. He said, I just wonder if you could just tell me a little bit about the stuff that you believe. Tell me about Jesus and about why you believe in it.

How you pray, and all that kind of stuff. So, this chaplain told him about Jesus, he told him about grace, he told him about the cross and the resurrection, and how anybody can come to Jesus and know Jesus, and know the reality of God.

[16:26] He said, well, what about prayer then? How do I go about praying? And the chaplain had a thought for a few moments, and he's pulled up an empty chair, and he said, this might work for you.

He said, you could look at this and just see an empty chair, but I want you to look at it differently. I want you to imagine that Jesus is actually sat right in that chair. He said, yeah.

He said, now just talk to him. Tell him what's going on. He said, right now. He said, yeah, just tell him. This man said, well, I'm scared.

He said, that's good. Talk some more. He said, well, I look back at my life and I'm not very proud of it. I've effed up. I'm sorry. The chaplain said, that's good.

That's honest. Say some more. And so this went on for several minutes as he was talking more, and eventually the chaplain said, I'm going to leave you to it. A few days later, the chaplain returned to the same ward, and the guy wasn't there.

[17 : 33] So he went to see the nurse's station and said, has he been moved to a different ward or something? She said, actually, no, he's just passed away. In fact, it wasn't that long after you visited last.

He said, we don't know exactly what you said to him, but he was a completely different person. He was actually quite bouncy and chirpy after you left that day. In fact, we couldn't quite shut him up. The chaplain thought, that's really amazing. Thank you. And he went to walk away, and then the nurse called him back.

She said, something else I need to tell you. He kept talking to us about this Jesus chair thing. We didn't quite understand it.

But when the duty nurse found him dead, his hips were on the side of the bed, and his arms were wrapped around the back of this chair.

[18 : 41] There's two ways you could see that. An empty chair. Or Jesus. who's beside you.

Always is. Always will be. Let's pray. Lord, you're the God of resurrection hope.

And when we look around us, we can see, as Ezekiel initially did, deadness, bones. Decay.

Everything going wrong. Despair. Hopelessness.

We can look on our TV screens and see war. We can see hunger and poverty. We can just see injustice. We can hear stories of hopelessness and disaster. We can look at our own lives and just focus on everything that we see that is going wrong or that we fear could go wrong.

And yet, Lord, you call us to see things in a radically different way. And as you called Ezekiel to set before his people that vision that was radically different where the valley was filled not with dry bones but with resurrection life.

[19 : 56] so you call us to see things through a different lens. To step into that different, changed understanding of time that sees the end of history not as death but as eternal life.

Lord, help us to see things differently. Help us to see things through that lens of resurrection hope. Whatever is going on in our lives now as we look at those realities, help us to see things through your lens of promise and hope. To know in our hearts we shall live.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Through May. Run. Amen. Through May. In Jesus' name, In Jesus' name, In Jesus' name.

In Jesus' name, in Jesus' name, In Jesus' name. In Jesus' name, in Jesus' name, in Jesus' name, in Jesus' name. In said, In Jesus' name, In Jesus' name, in Jesus' name.

[21 : 02] In Jesus' name, in Jesus' name, in Jesus' name, in Jesus' name,