There Is Therefore Now

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On Romans 7's Wretched Self, the Valley of Dry Bones, and the One Step Worth Taking Into the New Year

Projecting Our Picture of God Back Onto Ourselves

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16). And the love the Lord has for the world is the love we are meant to have for the world, and the love we are meant to have for ourselves.

And we can start to think of ourselves as inadequate, as not up to the task, as messed up or screwed up. And that vision of ourselves goes back to a diagnostic an earlier teaching this morning offered us. Sometimes we project what we believe about God back onto ourselves. The human nature has the ability to project. If you think God is angry with you, that he sees you as a screw-up, then you begin to live into that. You believe: well, I am what I am. I am the screw-up he thinks I am. And the picture of God you have been holding gets reflected back from him to you, and you begin to operate from inside the reflection.

But God loves us. He loves his creation. He gave his only begotten Son for it. And do you know what the very next verse after John 3:16 says? Everybody knows John 3:16. Does anybody know John 3:17?

“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (John 3:17).

God did not send His Son to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. That is the verse most of us have not memorized. And the picture of God we have been carrying is incomplete without it. The Father who sent the Son sent him for the world’s saving, not for the world’s condemnation. And if that is the picture we are projecting onto ourselves, then the self-condemnation we keep performing inside our own interior is not actually coming from the Father at all. It is coming from a misreading of who he is. And the misreading shapes the self-loathing.

O Wretched Man That I Am

And Paul gives us the single most piercing diagnosis of the self-loathing condition in Romans 7. Listen:

> For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do . . . For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice . . . For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7:15, 19, 22–24)

O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? That is the cry of the self-condemnation pattern at its most honest. Paul is naming the experience every honest believer has: that the good we want to do, we do not do; and the evil we do not want to do, we keep doing. There is something in us, Paul calls it the law of sin in my members, that wars against our better intentions and brings us into captivity to behavior we would not have chosen.

And the chapter ends with the cry of the wretched. Most of us read it as a closing description of the condition. But Paul does not stop there. The chapter division that the translators put in between Romans 7 and Romans 8 was their decision, not Paul's. I think they thought we needed a break before we could keep reading. But Paul cannot wait to get to the rest of the story. Right after the cry of the wretched, before the chapter break interrupts him, Paul says:

"I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:25).

I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. That is the pivot. The wretched cry meets the answer immediately, and the answer is in the person of Jesus Christ, who has delivered the wretched from the body of death they could not deliver themselves from. And then comes Romans 8, which opens with one of the most pastorally important verses in the entire New Testament:

"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:1).

There is therefore now no condemnation. In this new creation age. In this new day that dawned when Jesus rose from the dead. In this present pastoral moment, after the cross has accomplished what the cross accomplished. No condemnation. None. Not from the Father. Not from the Son. Not from the Spirit. The only condemnation still operating in the lives of those who are in Christ Jesus is the condemnation they keep generating internally, projecting their own self-image back onto a Father who has already declared his verdict in the other direction.

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. Let that sentence do its work in you tonight. Read it slowly. Read it again. Let it dissolve the long-accumulated self-loathing that has been operating in you under the mistaken assumption that it

was coming from God. It was not coming from God. God has been on the other side of the Romans 7:25 pivot for as long as you have been in Christ. And he is still there. Patient. Faithful. Waiting for you to catch up to where his verdict on you already is.

The Valley of Dry Bones

And the apocalyptic image of what Romans 8 is announcing comes back in Ezekiel 37, which I want to spend a few minutes on tonight. *Ezekiel 37 is the great vision of national resurrection*, and it operates as the Old Testament's deepest preview of what the new creation in Christ is going to be.

Ezekiel opens his book with one of the most disorienting visions in all of Scripture. In chapter 1, he sees the heavens opened, and he sees the glory of God on the divine chariot-throne. And then across chapters 8 through 11, he watches the glory of God depart from the Jerusalem temple: first from the Holy of Holies, then to the threshold of the inner sanctuary, then to the threshold of the temple gate, then to the Mount of Olives outside the city. The glory leaves Israel. And then it joins the exiles in their captivity in Babylon (Ezekiel 11:23). The book gets dark from there. Long stretches of judgment-oracles. The watching prophet sitting among the exiles, processing what God's departure from the temple means.

But across the long darkness, there are little flashes of possibility. Periodically, God speaks through Ezekiel and says, I am going to give you a new heart and a new spirit. I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh. I will put my Spirit within you, and I will cause you to walk in my statutes (Ezekiel 36:26–27). The promise of unilateral divine restoration keeps surfacing in the darkness. And then in chapter 37, the vision arrives that gathers up the whole promise into a single haunting image:

> The hand of the Lord came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones. Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, there were very many in the open valley; and indeed they were very dry. And He said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” So I answered, “O Lord God, You know.” (Ezekiel 37:1–3)

A valley full of very dry bones. Israel had, in a real sense, died when they were carried captive into Babylon. They were lying, so to speak, in the graves of the nations they had been scattered across. Their corporate body was no longer functioning. Their bones were drying in the dust. And the diagnostic image Ezekiel was given was the most extreme image of human hopelessness imaginable.

Think about how extreme. If someone dies on the operating table, and the surgeons have all the technology of modern resuscitation right there at hand (paddles, bypass machines, the brightest doctors in the building) the patient might be brought back after thirty seconds, forty-five seconds, a minute, two minutes of working on him. We have all watched the scenes on television. The crash cart arrives. The surgeons act. Sometimes the patient comes back. That is recoverable death. But if the patient dies, and the body is taken down to the morgue, and the coroner comes and takes it out into a field, and the body sits there in the open for seventy or eighty years until only the bones are left, what technology have we got to resuscitate that? That is the situation Ezekiel was being shown. Not recoverable death. Long-decomposed death. The death from which no surgical intervention could possibly retrieve the patient.

And then the Lord speaks. And the bones begin to come together:

> So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. Indeed, as I looked, the

> sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them. Also He said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.’” So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army. (Ezekiel 37:7–10)

And the bones came together. And the sinew. And the flesh. And the skin. But there was no breath in them. Even with the bodies reassembled, the resurrection was incomplete until the breath of God entered them. And then the breath came. From the four winds. The Spirit of God, the same Spirit that hovered over the original chaotic waters in Genesis 1:2, the same Spirit that breathed into the original Adam in Genesis 2:7, the same Spirit that descended on Jesus at his baptism in Matthew 3:16: the same Spirit comes now over the valley of decomposed bones, and the nation that has been dead for seventy years begins to breathe again, and stand again, and have hope again. An exceedingly great army. That is the Spirit’s signature.

The Heavens Opened Again

And Ezekiel had begun his book by saying; I saw the heavens opened (Ezekiel 1:1). The departure of glory began with the heavens being opened over Ezekiel as he was carried into exile. The next time that exact phrase appears in Scripture, the heavens opened, is when Jesus comes up out of the waters of baptism in Matthew 3. The same phrase. The same opening. Now the glory is returning. To Israel-the-One (to Jesus, the personification of all Israel in a single body) and through him to the people the glory had left centuries before.

The heavens opened over the river Jordan. The Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove. And the voice spoke: This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased (Matthew 3:17). And

what was happening in that moment was nothing less than the return of the divine glory to the people of God after a four-hundred-year absence following Malachi. The Ezekiel-1 vision and the Matthew-3 vision bracket the entire intertestamental period. The glory departs at the front. The glory returns at the end. And the location of the return is significant. Not at the temple, where the religious establishment is going about its business. At the wilderness, where the John-the-Baptist-figures are calling people out of religious complacency back to repentance and renewal.

Are you a son or a daughter of the Creator of this planet, of this universe? If you are a creature of God, if you are breathing right now, then there is life that can come into you that is Spirit-life. Supernatural life. Not the life of hopelessness, of continuing to beat your head against the wall of frustration and disappointment. An opportunity to breathe in and walk in newness of life. God is calling us to new-life possibilities. What Jesus did on the cross and in his resurrection is eternal life. It is new life. It is new creation. What the old Adam failed to do, the new Adam did. And now we get to walk in what he accomplished.

Buried With Him, Raised With Him

And the bridge between Ezekiel's valley of dry bones and our present possibility of new life runs through Romans 6, which I want to back up to from Romans 8:

> Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3–4)

Buried with Him through baptism into death. Raised with Him to walk in newness of life. That is the formula. The waters of baptism are the valley of dry bones reduced to a single

human-scale moment. The descent into the waters is the death. The rising from the waters is the new creation. And the breath that enters the new creature as he rises is the same breath that entered the exceedingly great army in Ezekiel's vision.

Newness of life. Not the old life with a religious veneer painted over it. New life. The decomposed bones reassembled, breathed into, raised up as an army. And the same Spirit that did the work in Ezekiel's vision is the Spirit that does the work in every one of us who has been baptized into Christ.

It does not mean we will walk without disappointment or heartache. It does not mean the wilderness disappears. Jesus himself, immediately after his baptism, was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days of testing. Newness of life does not exempt us from the wilderness. It equips us for it. The Spirit who descended at the baptismal waters is the same Spirit who leads us up into the testing-ground, sustains us through the testing, and brings us out the far side as the new creation we were declared to be from the moment we came up out of the waters.

A New Center in the Wilderness

And the whole reason John the Baptist had gone out into the wilderness to baptize was to relocate the center of God's activity. He was moving himself away from what seemed like reasonableness: reasonable faith, reasonable government, the established institutions of Jerusalem and Rome. Who would reject the Pax Romana? Who would reject reasonable peace, reasonable safety, reasonable accommodation with the powers that be? Anyone who rejected the Roman peace died on a cross. We do not want to die on crosses. So we accept the reasonable arrangement.

But John was making a new center for God's activity. No longer at the temple mount in Jerusalem. Out in the wilderness, in the river Jordan, where the long story of Israel's deliverance

had been enacted across generations. And every time the people of God give up their preconceptions of what God wants for them, and begin to move in faith out into the wilderness, they are reenacting what Israel did when they were delivered from Egypt: going down into the waters of the Red Sea, coming up on the other side, being guided by the cloud and the fire through the wilderness until they received the law at Sinai and crossed the Jordan into the promised land.

The center of God's activity is on the margins of human society. Not in the centers of power. Out in the wilderness, where the conventional supports have been taken away and only the trust in the Father remains. And when we begin to move out toward that center, we are reenacting the whole long story of God's people being formed for the kingdom that has been promised but not yet fully received.

One Thing in the New Year

And so the question I want to leave us with tonight (on this New Year's Eve, with the new year about to begin) is not about doing a thousand different things differently in the year ahead. Let us do this: one thing. One thing.

Can we make Jesus our Lord, really, indeed? That is the only resolution worth making. Every other resolution is downstream of that one. Read more, pray more, exercise more, eat better, save more, give more, every concrete behavioral resolution is at best a downstream tactic of the one upstream commitment. And without the upstream commitment, the downstream tactics will not hold.

God is not going to quarter us in what appear to be the centers of power, the centers of safety. He wants us to walk and journey with him into the wilderness. And the wilderness looks different for each of us. My wilderness is different from yours. But God is calling every one of

us to take a step this year. One step. One direction. One thing. Pray about it. Think about it. Listen for it. Where is God leading you? And when you go out into the wilderness and follow him, something will happen that you have not yet anticipated.

And here is what we will find, just as Jesus found in Matthew 4 when he was answering the devil's temptations in his own wilderness:

"But He answered and said, 'It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:4).

Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. When we begin to take steps into our own wildernesses, we will find (exactly as Jesus found, exactly as Israel found, exactly as every previous generation of the people of God has found) that the words of God sustain us when the bread runs out, that the Father provides in the wilderness in forms we could not have predicted, that the testing is, against all our expectations, the very means of our formation.

Read. Study. Pray.

And let me suggest three concrete practices that, taken together, anchor the one thing in daily reality. Read. Study. Pray. These three practices are not magic. We know that people can pray and read their holy scriptures and still fly planes into buildings. The practices alone do not get it done. But if you come to the practices with a heart of faith (if you read seeking God, study seeking God, pray seeking God) there are infinite possibilities for renewal in your own spirit, in your family, in our church community, in the broader community we serve. The practices are the conduits the Father uses to deliver the renewal. The heart of faith is what makes the conduits functional.

What does it actually mean to be saved? Do we just say the sinner's prayer and go off as if nothing has happened? Do we have one encounter with God and assume the encounter has covered the rest of our lives? Or has God given us a job to do, as co-conspirators with him in taking back his kingdom from the kingdoms of this world, from the oppression and the suffering and the pain that have accumulated in the surrounding age? Salvation is not principally a transaction we completed in the past. It is a vocation we are walking out in the present, toward a consummation that is still ahead of us. And the daily practices of reading, studying, and praying are how the vocation gets walked.

The Fan in His Hand

And John the Baptist, after he warns the Pharisees and Sadducees about the wrath to come and tells them to bring forth fruit worthy of repentance, says something striking about the One who is coming after him:

"His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12).

His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather the wheat into the barn. He will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. And there is a judgment-passage here that, honestly, I have skipped for a long time in my preaching. I have not always known how to handle the judgment passages, because I have wanted to emphasize the Refiner over the Smiter, and the judgment-language has felt like it works against that emphasis. But I am going to say something tonight that may be uncomfortable, because the chapter requires it. Praise God for judgment.

But the judgment Peter says always begins at the household of faith (1 Peter 4:17). It does not principally fall on the unrepentant outsider while leaving the household-of-faith untouched. It begins right here, in this room, with the people who have been claiming to walk with the Father. And the judgment is the patient sifting work, the separation of what is wheat from what is chaff in our own lives, that the Refiner performs across the long years of our formation.

Let me make this honest with my own experience. Last night I was watching a film, a true story set during World War I, and I watched a scene of a man of power abusing a young woman. And I felt my anger rising. I am a man with multiple daughters and nieces. To see that power abused, even in a fictional dramatization of a hundred-year-old story, I felt something rising up inside me. I was sitting there angry about a thing that happened a hundred years ago.

And then I thought: what do you think God is feeling, with all of the collective sin and suffering and pain that is being caused in this world right now, every minute, in real time? If a hundred-year-old fictional scene can rouse my finite human anger, what is the actual Father feeling about the actual ongoing oppression that the actual contemporary oppressors are perpetrating against actual contemporary victims? And when someone wants to hold on to their power and continue to be abusive, after all the opportunities for repentance, then there is only one answer for someone like that. That is judgment. Judgment is the Father saying: enough. The protection of the victim now requires the removal of the abuser. The patience that had been waiting for repentance has finally let the abuse-pattern run its course, and the abuser meets the consequence the pattern has been earning.

That is judgment. And there is nothing in the Refiner-not-Smiter framework that should soften this. The Refiner is patient with the willingly-being-refined. The Refiner is not patient

forever with the willfully-refusing-to-be-refined. And the difference between the two is the difference between the wheat and the chaff that the winnowing fan separates.

For Everyone Else, Mercy

But for the rest of us, for everyone who has cried, my God, be merciful to me, a sinner (cf. Luke 18:13), mercy is the answer. Jesus did not come to deliver us from Rome or Babylon or Egypt. He came to save us from our sins. The things we are committing against one another. The abuses we commit toward one another. The small daily failings that accumulate into the larger patterns of harm. God wants to deliver us from those things. And the deliverance is real. And it is available. And the door is open right now.

And our vocation, after the deliverance, is not to be sent happily under a palm tree, fanning ourselves and drinking a mint julep. That is not God's call for us. Our call is to go into the world and pray. Sometimes for people we do not even know how to pray for: Paul says we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit makes intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered (Romans 8:26).

And as priests of God in this earth, that is our vocation, to groan for this earth, to pray for one another, to pray for this planet that God would recover it. And not just prayer alone, because repentance without action is no repentance at all. The prayer becomes hands-on engagement. The interior groaning becomes exterior ministry. The intercession-from-the-armchair becomes feet-on-the-ground showing up for the very people we have been praying for.

When Did We See You?

And Jesus gives us one more separation-verse in Matthew 25, right after the parable of the talents, which makes the action-component of our vocation unmistakable. Listen:

> Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ . . . ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’ (Matthew 25:34–36, 40)

When did we see You? When did we feed You, clothe You, visit You? The righteous in this scene do not remember their own acts of mercy. They cannot recall when they did them. The acts had been so reflexive, so deeply built into their kingdom-formed character, that they had not been keeping a ledger. And the King answers: inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to Me.

And the ones on the other side of the separation (the ones I am most afraid of resembling, because I have resembled them many times) ask the same kind of question, but from the opposite direction:

> Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ (Matthew 25:44–45)

When did we see You and not minister to You? The condemned in this scene also do not remember. But their non-remembering is different from the righteous’s non-remembering. The righteous did not remember because they had not been counting their good deeds. The condemned do not remember because they had not been performing the good deeds in the first place. They had been busy with their own concerns, and the people the King now identifies with

had been invisible to them the whole time. That is the diagnostic. And there is an action to our faith. It is a ministering action. The faith without the corresponding action is not, in the end, the faith that the King will recognize as his when the separation is performed.

Get up the Next Morning

So God help us to take stock every day. To be intentional. To get up in the morning and look out into the day ahead and ask, what kind of person am I going to be for God today? And the day may end and we may say: well, that was a screw-up. That was a failure. But the grace of God brings no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. Just get up the next morning and walk after the Spirit, not after the flesh.

And let us see what we are talking about this time next year. Let us see what great and marvelous things we will have to testify to twelve months from tonight. I do not know what they will be. I know that they will be there for whoever has stepped out into the wilderness in trust and walked the one step in the direction of the Father's leading. And the cumulative effect of three hundred sixty-five days of one-step walking is more transformation than we can usually imagine in advance.

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. Walk forward, brothers and sisters. The new year is in front of us. The Father is ahead of us. The Spirit is in us. The Son has gone before us through the valley of dry bones and come up on the other side as the firstborn of an exceedingly great army. And we are part of that army. Take the step. Trust the leading. Walk after the Spirit. And meet the Father at every milestone on the road into the year that is opening to us tonight. Amen.