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The Leprosy Mission - Letting the Light In Devotionals

**Week 1 – Renewed Life**

Please find the following readings at the end of the devotional for reference:

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (the valley of the dry bones)

John 11:1-45 (the raising of Lazarus)

Over the past two weeks I have observed the machinery of our modern world coming to a slow halt. The clicks and zooms of cars have evaporated, the yawning gaps between airplanes flying overhead in the morning have widened, and bustling streets have been vacated, as though we were releasing them back into nature. And as the city’s inhabitants creep into exile, what we leave behind is an increasingly soundless, lifeless world. Our former lives, for now, on hold – and the future uncertain.

When Ezekiel is given the prophecy in the valley of the dry bones, the Jews would have been living for decades in this kind of exile, albeit in a much worse situation. The Jewish Kingdom had recently been invaded by the Neo-Babylonian empire. They were forced to swear allegiance to the emperor Nebuchadnezzar II and live under its laws, which may have included worshipping the moon-god Sin. Ezekiel himself was among the many Judeans forced into captivity by the Babylonians. Later, the Jewish Temple was destroyed, and the Jews were deported from Jerusalem to Babylon. It was the ancient Mesopotamian equivalent of ethnic cleansing.

When Ezekiel prophesies that Israel would be restored to the land the Lord had given them, this promise would have seemed impossible in light of Israel’s present condition. The nation of Israel was swiftly nearing its demise; even if dry bones were to come back to life, there would be no Temple, no infrastructure, no land, no sustainable future in sight. Believing the promises of God in these challenging circumstances would have been difficult.

The same can be said for the friends and family of Lazarus. We learn that Mary, the one who poured priceless perfume on Jesus’s feet, has a brother in Bethany who is critically ill. When Jesus receives the message, he does not immediately arise and travel to them. Instead, he stays where he is for two days, confidently saying ‘this sickness will not end in death’.

The question we are left with is: why does Jesus delay? If one of us telephoned the NHS to tell them we had serious respiratory problems and showed symptoms of Covid-19, and someone casually responded: ‘this sickness will not end in death, but it is for God’s glory so that Jesus may be glorified through it’, would we be satisfied with this response? Why then does Jesus not go to Lazarus immediately?

Let’s look at the reasons Jesus offers. Jesus told the disciples that he waited “so that [they] may believe” (John 11:15), and He told Martha that he waited so she could learn to trust Him as “the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die” (John 11:25-26). Fair enough; but why four days? The answer to this one requires further study. Ancient Jewish texts reveal an important belief held by the Jews who were waiting at the tomb of Lazarus. The Jews of this time period believed that “until three days [after death] the soul keeps on returning to the grave, thinking that it will go back [into the body]; but when it sees that the facial features have become disfigured, it departs and abandons it [the body]” (see, e.g. Genesis Rabbah 100:7, Leviticus Rabbah 18:1, and Ecclesiastes Rabbah 12:6). Jesus waited until all hope was lost for those waiting for death’s confirmation. Only then did Jesus raise Lazarus, and the result was stunning amongst those Jews who held these primary beliefs about death and the soul. The text says ‘Therefore many of the Jews’ – maybe the same Jews who were intent on stoning Jesus – ’put their faith in him’ (John 11:45).

The waiting for two days, the four days in the tomb, the absence of Jesus at the time he declares Lazarus’s condition will not end in death, the prophecy of the dry bones at a time when the Jewish nation is facing certain extinction…The point Ezekiel and John want their readers to derive from all these elaborations is for us to see clearly that *with God, nothing is impossible*.

When I visited Nepal in November last year, I met a woman called Mitha who had suffered immensely over the years due to her leprosy. She had experienced rejection, separation from her family, endured the loss of a spouse who abandoned her, and was still living in a damaged home as a result of the earthquake in 2015. And yet, Mitha was emphatic about the love she has received from The Leprosy Mission. Mitha may still bear the scars of her leprosy, but she is now living a renewed life even in the midst of her greatest darkness.

Ezekiel left no doubt to the reader as to why the Spirit of the Lord might choose to whisk him to the valley of the dry bones. He was taken to a place of extremes; a place where there is no life, not a single sign of it. And it is here, in this place of death, where God brings life to those dry bones, standing on their feet as a vast army. Similarly, the raising of Lazarus occurs at a time when all hope was lost. In both stories, we are being set a scene where there is no hope, life, or power, in order to be shown that, with God, there is hope, life, and power, even to resurrection.

May we too, in this uncertain time, tread this valley with confidence, knowing that power of renewed life made available through Jesus Christ. And may we continue to renew, day by day, our commitments and fellowship to one another, being part of his body here on earth.

Amen.

*Written by Jarrett Wilson-Gray*

Bible readings

**Ezekiel 37:1-14**

The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. **2**He led me to and fro among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. **3**He asked me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ I said, ‘Sovereign Lord, you alone know.’

**4**Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones and say to them, “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! **5**This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ezekiel+37%3A1-14&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-21403a)] enter you, and you will come to life. **6**I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.”’

**7**So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. **8**I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

**9**Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.”’ **10**So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army.

**11**Then he said to me: ‘Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.” **12**Therefore prophesy and say to them: “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. **13**Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. **14**I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.”’

**John 11:1-45**

Now a man named Lazarus was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. **2**(This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay ill, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) **3**So the sisters sent word to Jesus, ‘Lord, the one you love is ill.’

**4**When he heard this, Jesus said, ‘This illness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.’ **5**Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. **6**So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was two more days, **7**and then he said to his disciples, ‘Let us go back to Judea.’

**8**‘But Rabbi,’ they said, ‘a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?’

**9**Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the day-time will not stumble, for they see by this world’s light. **10**It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.’

**11**After he had said this, he went on to tell them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.’

**12**His disciples replied, ‘Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.’ **13**Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. **14**So then he told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead, **15**and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.’ **16**Then Thomas (also known as Didymus[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+11%3A1-45&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-26540a)]) said to the rest of the disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’

**17**On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. **18**Now Bethany was less than two miles[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+11%3A1-45&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-26542b)] from Jerusalem, **19**and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. **20**When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. **21**‘Lord,’ Martha said to Jesus, ‘if you had been here, my brother would not have died. **22**But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.’ **23**Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ **24**Martha answered, ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’ **25**Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; **26**and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ **27**‘Yes, Lord,’ she replied, ‘I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.’

**28**After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. ‘The Teacher is here,’ she said, ‘and is asking for you.’ **29**When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. **30**Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. **31**When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

**32**When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ **33**When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. **34**‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked. ‘Come and see, Lord,’ they replied. **35**Jesus wept. **36**Then the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’ **37**But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’ **38**Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. **39**‘Take away the stone,’ he said. ‘But, Lord,’ said Martha, the sister of the dead man, ‘by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days.’

**40**Then Jesus said, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?’ **41**So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. **42**I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.’ **43**When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ **44**The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth round his face. Jesus said to them, ‘Take off the grave clothes and let him go.’

**45**Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

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