
Christian Holidays: Oh You Dry Bones, Hear Ye the Word of the Lord

by: Ronald L. Dart

I had a friend once who likened us human beings, as it were in the sight of God, to fish eggs. We were sitting in the sun in a bass boat, trying unsuccessfully to catch something and he was trying to make sense out of the world. A fishing boat, by the way, is a great place for philosophizing. "I know," he said, "there's only one way to salvation. I know that is by the name of Jesus Christ," but he said, "I also know that the vast majority of people in the world who ever lived have never so much as heard that name."

So my friend, likened us human beings to the life cycle of a large mouth bass, who lays millions of eggs. Now many of her eggs will be eaten by the male that fertilizes them. Most of her eggs will be eaten by brim and other small fish and will never hatch. Of those eggs that do hatch most of those tiny little fish fry will be eaten by minnows and brim. She has to lay millions of eggs, and as they mature to minnow size, most of those will be eaten by adult bass. In the end, only a tiny fraction of the eggs actually laid will become mature bass. She has to lay millions of eggs in order to get a very few mature fish.

My friend speculated that God in order to bring a very few sons and daughters into His kingdom had to put billions of people on the earth to allow for wastage. I had to admit that the idea had a perverse kind of logic to it, but what did it say about the kind of being who would create a system like that for man?

Would God Waste People?

We are not fish. We are human. We suffer, we hope, we love, we create. Is the God that we read about in the Bible the sort of person who would waste people in their billions to achieve His objectives?

It's one thing for God to give man the freedom to accept or reject life with God, but it's another thing altogether to subject man to the kind of suffering that we see in this world without giving man hope of something better.

There is a little passage that Paul makes in a letter he wrote to Timothy, its first Timothy two and verse three and he says, "For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior; {4} Who will have all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

So, right off the bat we understand that God's objective is not to waste anybody, it is to save everybody. It doesn't mean that everybody will be saved necessary in the end, but nevertheless that is what He wants.

Paul Agonized Over the Jews Rejection of the Gospel

The apostle Paul was concerned about the wastage of people. It was unlike God, he thought, to throw people away, to cast them to the wolves or in the metaphor of fish to the largemouth bass.

There's a long passage in Romans where Paul agonizes over the question of the Jews. We would really like to think that men like Paul had all the answers. We sit down and we try to define from the writings of the men in the Bible, the truth, and oftentimes we come to stylized constructions of what we think is the truth from their words, but the fact of the matter is, we don't understand it any better than they did and they didn't understand it perfectly, because God left a certain amount of ambiguity in all of these questions and I guess just to frustrate all the know-it-all's in the world.

Paul struggled with this and in his letter to the Christians in Rome, he thinks out loud about how troubled he was about this question. He tried to take what he knew about God and His plan, to create an explanation for his lack of success in taking the gospel to the Jews. Because in every city where Paul went, the Jews rejected the gospel while the Gentiles flock to it, and it didn't make sense to Paul.

When you think about it, it doesn't make any sense, because here is a Messiah who has come to the Jews, who had been for generations expecting a Messiah. The very idea of the Messiah is a Jewish idea. So here are a people expecting a Messiah, looking forward to a Messiah, praying for a Messiah and with high levels of anticipation of the Messiah at the time when Paul comes on the scene.

Paul walks into the synagogue and says, "The Messiah is here," and the people who expected the Messiah turned him down and the Gentiles who never even heard of a Messiah accept Him in droves.

Has God Cast Away His People?

What Paul is asking is that because of this wholesale rejection of the gospel by the Jewish people, his question is, "Has God then rejected his people?"

This section in Romans where Paul talks about this, you could read the entire section beginning with Romans nine to eleven. For right now, I want to focus on Romans the eleventh chapter. Paul says, "I say then, Has God cast away his people?"

"No, he says, For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. {2} God has not cast away his people whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the scripture says of Elijah? how he makes intercession to God against Israel, saying, {3} Lord, they have killed your prophets, and torn down your altars; and I am left alone, and they are trying to kill me. {4} But what was the answer from God to him? I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal. {5} Even so at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace." Okay, so Israel has not rejected it entirely, a remnant, have accepted it.

Verse seven, "What then? Israel has not obtained what he seeks for; but the election," that is a small selection out of Israel has "obtained it, and the rest were blinded " Wow, in other words, here is a whole nation of people and only a tiny handful of them were selected out of that who could see the truth and the rest of them were blinded

In verse 8 Paul says, "As it is written, God has given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear; unto this day. {9} And David said, Let their table be made a snare, and a trap, and a stumbling block, and a recompense to them: {10} Let their eyes be darkened that they may not see, and their backs be bent forever."

Now this is very troubling because it seems to suggest that God did not allow the majority to see, to hear and understand.

Now, what in the world are we to make of that, based upon what we know about God from the pages of the Bible?

Paul then continues in verse 11, "I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? No, but rather through their fall salvation is come to the Gentiles, to provoke them to jealousy. {12} Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness?"

This is an awkward sentence that Paul has written here, and it is hard to follow, but the logic of it is even harder than the grammar.

Why should the fall of Israel, lead to salvation for the Gentiles? How on earth can it help for Israel to fall, for Israel to turn away, and God's great objective of converting the Gentiles. Then what about all those who fell? Are they lost forever? Some of them might repent later, but in the meantime, many would die not having returned, what about them?

Paul then continues writing in verse 13, "For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify my office: {14} If by any means I may provoke to emulation those who are my flesh and might save some of them." In other words, I want to somehow provoke the Jews to respond to this and save some of them.

Life From The Dead

Romans 11 and verse 15, "For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?" But look at the problem here, why should the casting away of Israel be the reconciling of the world in the first place? Then Paul asks, what is the receiving of them but life from the dead.

Now Paul is struggling with the same question that troubles a lot of people. What hints does he find in the word of God to help him to understand what God is doing? If God is going to ultimately save people who live out their lives and die without knowing Him, how is He going to do this? It is the thing that people talk about a lot, and a lot of people lose sleep over it because they have people they know, that they love, who never accepted Christ and who never knew Christ in this life and their church, their doctrine believes that these people who never knew Christ in this life are already in hell starting out on an eternity of torment.

Yet Paul seems to be holding out hope for these people. He hints at it when he says, "What shall be the receiving of them but life from the dead." Does he see this taking place at a resurrection? It would seem so.

An Olive Tree

Paul continues in verse 16 of Romans 11 looking for a way to develop this theme and he turns to an analogy of an olive tree, and he says, "If the root is holy, then so are the branches. {17} And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them partake of the root and fatness of the olive tree." Do you see what he's driving at? He's basically saying, you have a tree and we broke off some of the branches to make room for the Gentiles to be grafted in, and therefore the Gentiles are every bit as holy as the original branches or as the Jews were.

Then Paul says in verse 18, "Don't boast against the branches, because you need to understand, you don't bear the root, the root bears you. {19} You will say then, well the branches were broken off, so that I might be grafted in. {20} Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. But don't be high-minded, but fear: {21} Because if God did not spare the natural branches, take heed lest he also not spare you." So, he could break you off, just as easy as He broke off the natural branches.

The logical question that follows on the heels of this is why does breaking these branches off help? This is what we keep coming back to. What is the point in cutting all of these Jews off from the faith in order to make room for Gentiles? Why isn't there room for everybody? Why does it help to remove the branches of Israel, in order graft in the Gentiles?

The simile that Paul draws is of the olive tree, which has a limited capacity for branches, both in room and substance. If we are going to make the graft, we have to make room for it. It is a fact that most Jews were simply not ready to make room for the Gentiles in the community of God's people.

You can actually see hints of it in the Gospels and primarily in the book of Acts where the Jews simply didn't want to accept the Gentiles. They said, "Well if they are going to come in then they all had to be circumcised." Now if you are an adult male and you're facing the question of circumcision, this would put a real test on your faith, to see if you really did believe or not.

Gospel To The Gentiles

The New Testament Church made the decision early (Acts 15) that circumcision was not going to be required for the Gentiles and the whole question is, can the gospel continue to go to the Gentiles or is this going to be purely a Jewish religion?

The fact is, as Paul went on his missionary journeys, if every synagogue had accepted Christ in its entirety, the chances are they probably would've still wanted to be strictly a Jewish faith, and that's where it would've ended.

But it didn't. When the Jews rejected the gospel, Paul was forced to turn to the Gentiles who with marvel of marvels accepted it wholeheartedly.

Now in Romans 11 and verse 22 Paul says, "Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; toward you, goodness, if you continue in his goodness: but you can be cut off too."

And this is what my friend cited to support his idea. "Behold, the severity of God for the minnows that get eaten, it's just tough luck."

But Paul is not quite ready to allow this.

Paul went on to say in verse 23, "They also, if they abide not still in unbelief, can be grafted in: for God is able to graft them back in. {24} If you were cut out of a wild olive tree which is wild by nature, and you were grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?"

How much easier is it to bring them back?

All Israel Shall Be Saved

Now Paul says this in Romans 11 and verse 25, "I don't want you, brethren, to be ignorant of this mystery." Paul acknowledges the fact, that this isn't something that's real plain and on the other hand, he doesn't want us to stay ignorant of it,

"Lest we should be wise in your own conceits, that blindness in part. has happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. {26} And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob:"

Now, I dare say, you and I could ask more questions right here than Paul himself could ever answer, but he understood the basics. He understood that the cutting off of the Jews was a

temporary expedient. It was being driven by the plan of God. Paul understood that it was God's intent to save all of Israel, not just a few of them. Now we naturally wonder how in the light of history, but Paul doesn't help us much here.

Paul continues in verse 27, "For this is my covenant with them, when I shall take away their sins. {28} As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: as touching the election, they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. {29} For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance. {30} For as you in times past have not believed God yet have now obtained mercy through their unbelief: {31} Even so these have now not believed, that through your mercy they may obtain mercy."

Strange. Paul was implying in that through the mercy of the Gentile converts Israel will be saved.

God Will Have Mercy On All

Then Paul gives us this in verse 32 of Romans 11, "For God has concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all."

Now, how on earth is it possible, to shut people up in a state of unbelief to have mercy on them? You would think giving them belief would be the way you would have mercy, wouldn't it?

There is a short statement in the book of Hebrews that I think might help us understand this. It is in Hebrews chapter 10, beginning in verse 26, the writer says, "If we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remains no more sacrifice for sins, {27} But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. {28} He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: {29} Now how much sorer punishment, do you suppose shall he be thought worthy, who has trodden underfoot the Son of God, and has counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and has done despite unto the Spirit of grace?"

Do you realize what he saying? He is saying that willful sin, when you have the knowledge of the truth, is the end. That's it. You're finished, but if you conclude that people sinned ignorantly in unbelief or in weaknesses, you leave room for mercy. So, if God senses that the Jews will reject the knowledge of the truth, perhaps he concludes it is safer not to show them the truth for the time being.

Paul concludes his argument in Romans 11 and verse 33 by saying, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways are past our finding out! {34} For who has known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his advisor? {35} Or who has given to God, and is going to get it back? {36} For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen."

Now Paul does not do us the grace of explaining his conclusions, but he has given us something to go on. As someone once said, "I don't know how God is going to save all these unconverted people who never had a chance to be saved, I just believe that God will make a way."

Where would we look to in the Bible to find something that might help us to understand what that way might be? What scriptures might have supported Paul in his belief? What scriptures, because Paul knew the Scriptures, might have led him to his conclusion?

Oh You Dry Bones, Hear Ye the Word of the Lord

There's an obscure prophecy from Ezekiel, that I've always found fascinating ever since I first heard it as a Negro spiritual. Now you have to understand that this prophecy that I'm going to read to you from the book of Ezekiel, is set way out into the future, not merely from then, but even from now. It's obscure in its own way, as many prophecies are, but it may provide a glimpse into the mind of God on this very important question

On this one occasion, it was a vision and he said, in Ezekiel 37 and verse 1, "The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he carried me out in the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley which was full of bones." Now try to visualize this, skeletons, broken pieces of skeletons, rib cages, skulls, femurs and all kinds of bones scattered all over the place.

Verse 2, " He caused me to pass by them round about: and there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry." They were all old, dry and dead. You may run across a carcass of a dead animal, or a deer or something that has been dead a long time in the field when you're hunting, and the bones are bleached white and very dry.

Verse 3, "And he said to me, Son of man, can these bones live?" And Ezekiel probably stepping over some of these bones said, "O Lord GOD, you know." He is not apt to get trapped on this because he knows something is coming. "Can these bones live?" Normally, you'd say "No."

Verse 4, "Again he said to me, Prophecy upon these bones, and say to them, O you dry bones, hear ye the word of the LORD."

Now that's how the old spiritual goes. You know, you preach to these dry bones, "Hear ye the word of the Lord."

Now the word 'prophecy', basically I'm bringing you forward into the modern English, means 'to preach.' And what God told Ezekiel to do was to go out here in the middle of this valley and preach to these bones and say to them. "Oh, you dry bones, hear ye the word of the Lord."

Verse 5, "Thus saith the Lord GOD to these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live: {6} I will lay sinews upon you, and I will bring up flesh upon you, and I will cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you will live; and you shall know that I am the LORD." Ezekiel said, {7} "So I preached as I was commanded." Ezekiel probably felt a little bit silly, standing out in the middle of a bunch of skeletons preaching to them.

Ezekiel said, "As I preached, there was a noise, and a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone." And I suspect that some of the shaking was Ezekiel's bones. {8} "And when I beheld, lo, sinews and flesh came up upon them, and skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them." Just a bunch of dead bodies lying around on the ground all over the place. It's

hard to imagine how strange all of this must've sounded in generations gone by. I think it probably sounds less strange to us because of the movies and special effects. We have seen things like science fiction, but it still an incredible thing to visualize.

Well he says there they were, and then God came to him and said, {9} "Preach to the wind, preach, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. {10} So I preached as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and they stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army."

What in the world is this? Who are these people? What is this all about, and what does it mean?

A Physical Resurrection

Ezekiel 37 and in verse 11, "Then he said to me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel." Remember Paul's words, "and so all Israel shall be saved and what shall the receiving of them be but life from the dead."

"Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel, look, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts. {12} Therefore preach and say to them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves and bring you into the land of Israel."

Now it doesn't take a lot of imagination, I realize that we are talking about a vision, a vision of a long time ago, but that looked right down to the end times, and he says, "There's going to be a resurrection," and something more important to understand about this resurrection, this resurrection is a resurrection to physical life. Normally, when Christians think of the resurrection, they think of becoming spirit beings and flying off into the sky and meeting Jesus in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17), but not this one. This involves bones, flesh, sinews, skin, breath, human physical life.

And he says, "I'm going to bring you into the land of Israel." Continuing in verse 12, "And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, {14} And shall put my spirit in you, and you shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: and you shall know that I the LORD have spoken it, and performed it." Notice, I will put my Spirit in you. This whole thing, whatever the model may ultimately mean, the possibilities that it holds out are that at some time in the future, there's a resurrection of bone to bone, skin to skin, flesh to flesh, breath to breath, and an opportunity for salvation to be given to those people who will be raised up and put back into the land. Can God do that? Is that fair? Is it right? Hey, God is sovereign, He can do whatever He wants to do. Putting it another way, whatever He does is right.

Let's continue in verse 15, Ezekiel said, "The word of the LORD came unto me the second time, saying, {16} Moreover, son of man, take a stick, and write upon it, For Judah, and for the children of Israel his companions: then take another stick, and write upon it, For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel his companions: {17} And join them together one to

another into one stick; and they shall become one in your hand. {18} And when the children of Israel shall speak to you, saying, Are you going to show us what you mean by this? {19} Say to them, Thus saith the Lord GOD, I am going to take the stick of Joseph, the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel his fellows, and will put them with him, and the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they shall be one in my hand."

Now if you didn't know that way back in history before Ezekiel's time, Israel had been divided into two kingdoms, one, Joseph and the house of Israel. The other, the house of Judah. Now the house of Israel had gone into captivity, many years before Judah did and it had disappeared and was lost to history. You may not understand the significance of this, that, at the very end time, the time of the resurrection, the time when the people of Israel will be brought back into land of Israel again, that at that time, the Jews and the house of Israel, will be reunited.

Now at the time of the end, the house of Israel and the house of Judah are two separate political entities. Nearly everyone knows where the house of Judah is, right now it's in Tel Aviv, it is in Jerusalem and it is in the land of Israel.

But where oh where is the house of Israel, as a separate political entity? And that's a fascinating question but that will have to wait for another time.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. What are your thoughts to Mr. Dart's friend's fish egg analogy?
2. Isn't it awesome that God actually doesn't desire to waste people?
3. Why do you think that "the fall of Israel [leads] to salvation for the Gentiles?"
4. What are your thoughts on Paul's olive tree analogy?
5. How would you answer Mr. Dart's question: "how on earth is it possible, to shut people up in a state of unbelief to have mercy on them?"
6. What are your thought on the point that "willful sin, when you have the knowledge of the truth, is the end"?
7. Is it possible to understand Paul without studying the Old Testament?

8. What are your thoughts about Ezekiel's dry bone prophecy?
9. Do you believe that this is the only day of salvation, or is this time a day of salvation for some but not all just yet?
10. What scriptures do you use to back up your ideas for question #9?