

Wk 8 | How to find faith & hope when it looks like the devil is winning

Intro | If there ever was a time when you may start to think God's enemy, the devil, is most certainly gaining ground – it is now.

We are all aware that there are times in life when it feels like we lost the battle and we quickly become overwhelmed by our sense of failure.

But what about times when it is not only **us** that has failed – what about times when it seems as though God has failed? When God's master plan for humanity and the world seems to be unravelling?

When it begins to look like God's enemy, the devil, is having more success than God. Think about it ...

The devil has successfully closed down every Christian church – barring our ability to worship together, fellowship in each other's presence, and in many ways hindered our ability to share the good news story of Jesus with our next door neighbours, in shops, at our clubs and restaurants.

It really looks like the devil has gained significant ground over the past couple of months, weeks, days – doesn't it?

Or does it? Is all hope lost?

Transition | How do we find faith and hope when all around us it looks like the devil is winning? That is the question which, I believe, all of the passages in today's readings - answer.

It is probably how Ezekiel was feeling as he looked over the desolate valley, and all he could see was a field of dry bones, the results of a brutal battle which ended in utter defeat.

Or how the pilgrim felt as he ascended towards Jerusalem, making him cry "From the depths of despair, O Lord, I call for your help." (Ps 130:1)

Or how Mary and Martha felt when their brother Lazarus fell ill, yet their friend and Saviour chose not to respond in time – and so he had died ...

In every instance ... desolation, destruction and despair polluted the atmosphere – and God's life-giving presence seemed very far away.

Right now, there is a powerful viral enemy circulating the atmosphere. This viral enemy is forcing us to retreat into our homes, isolating ourselves from everyone who we love, trust and normally fellowship with.

This viral enemy has successfully contaminated the air with disease, destruction and desolation – bringing despair and fear to rule the atmosphere.

And God's people, just like the Psalmist, have started to call out for help.

Like Ezekiel, we are asking the Lord "can these dry bones live again?"

Like Mary and Martha we are asking the Lord, "Where were you Lord, why did you not come earlier?"

God's people are asking, "Lord, why did you allow this virus to spread so rapidly? Why did you permit the devil to close our churches? Why did you not rescue us earlier?"

Yet, the answer to these questions is exactly what the overarching story of God reveals, and it is exactly the answer to these questions of despair which today's passages address.

Point 1 | The over-arching story of God reveals God's intention to bring eternal restoration and healing to a world corrupted by the devil's evil and contaminating schemes.

We know at the beginning of our story, the devil, God's enemy, deceived the first humans so that they allowed sin, disease and fear to reign in the world.

Now, the world lies under the power of God's enemy, the devil. In Ephesians 2:2 we read *"Once you were dead because of our disobedience and many sins. You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil – the commander of the power in the air. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God."*

Sum up Point | We must acknowledge that this viral infection, this contaminating virus, is a physical manifestation of one of the devil's many schemes. The devil's intention is to steal, kill and destroy God's beloved creation. (John 10:10)

Like Ezekiel, like the Psalmist, like Mary and Martha – we are looking at a world which is under the power of an evil, contaminating spiritual

presence – whose scheme is to bring total devastation, total desolation, death to God’s creation.

Yet, in all our passages, God speaks and breathes into this devastation ...

Point 2 | All our passages today, reinforce the theme that from utter despair and hopelessness, God promises and demonstrates the ability to bring resurrection, life-giving breath, and revitalising strength.

We can see Ezekiel’s despair at the desolate state of the nation of Israel, when the Lord calls him to consider “can these bones become living people again?” (37:3)

Ezekiel rightly acknowledges “only the Sovereign Lord knows.”

We understand Mary and Martha’s despair, yet we see Mary’s faith at Jesus special relationship with God “I know that God will give you whatever you ask.” (John 11:22)

Transition | Yet for Ezekiel, for the Psalmist, and in our Gospel passage ... there is a period of waiting, a period of believing and trusting in God’s ability to restore and bring life.

In Psalm 130 we read “*I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope*”.

Point 3 | In every passage God expects his people to believe that in the midst of crisis, desolation and despair, God’s intention is always to bring a demonstration of the glory and power of his Son Jesus Christ.

Consider Ezekiel ... the valley was not just filled with lifeless bodies ... the valley was scattered with dry, brittle bones ... utterly hopeless – all traces of life had been lost.

Yet God commands Ezekiel to prophecy to dry bones words of hope, life and restoration to the desolate nation of Israel.

“Dry bones, listen to the word of the Lord! Look! I am going to put breath into you and make you live again!”

God is calling to his people to listen, trust, and use the restorative power of God’s Word.

That's why the Psalmists declares "I have put my hope in his Word" (Ps 130:5)

Even though Mary and Martha had sent a message to Jesus that Lazarus was near death, Jesus had not dropped everything to come to him.

Why? Why did God delay the restoration of Israel?

Why did Jesus delay his return to Bethany for four days?

In Jewish tradition, mourners continue going to visit the body of their dead loved one, for three days. They believe the soul continued to visit the body with the hope its return. But after three days, the soul sees that the body has become so disfigured, that it abandons it. (Genesis Rabbah 100:7, Leviticus Rabbah 18:1, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 12:6)

Jesus waited until Lazarus body was long past the hope of any resuscitation. His body had begun to decay. There was no natural hope of Lazarus coming back to life again.

Yet, into this hopeless situation, Jesus reminds Mary and Martha, "*I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying.*"

Then he challenges Martha, "Do you believe this?"

God challenges Ezekiel. Jesus challenges Mary and Martha.

Sum up point | Jesus challenged his disciples twice to look at their hopeless, disastrous situations in a totally different way.

Today, Jesus challenges us to view this desperate, hopeless situation – where we think the devil is gaining far too much ground – in a totally different way.

Jesus said, "It happened for the glory of God so that the Son of God will receive glory from this." (John 11:4)

Again in verse 40 "Didn't I tell you that you would see God's glory if you believe?"

Application |

We are walking through a valley in which it can look as though the devil, and his evil schemes to destroy God's beloved people, are winning.

How do we find faith and hope?

We meditate on God's powerful promises.

We trust in God's ability to bring great revitalisation out of what is dead.

We refuse to give place to a spirit of fear. We look rather to the power of the Spirit of God to restore, to revive and to resurrect our lives – not just in the future, but also in the here and now.

God's Spirit is not far off. Rather, as we read in Paul's letter to the Romans, "*Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. ¹¹ And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.*"

What reassuring, hope-filled promises we have.

Our life is hidden in Christ, no virus can steal it from us.

Our eternal life is secure in Christ, no virus can kill it.

God's Spirit is within us, no virus can destroy it.

The devil's schemes may succeed against those who have not entrusted their lives to Jesus Christ.

But it is certain, no scheme of the devil will succeed toward those who have been adopted by Abba Father – those he has made heirs of his salvation.