

# Zero Tolerance for Lust

*Dr. Joel R. Beeke*

Psalter: 162

Scripture: Ephesians 5

Psalter: 309

Sermon Text: Ephesians 5:3–4

Psalter: 123

Psalter: 360

*But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks.*

—Ephesians 5:3–4

In the last few years, we have heard a lot of talk about possible radioactive contamination from the Japanese nuclear reactor damaged in 2011 by the earthquake and tsunami. But the accident in Japan pales in comparison to the disaster that took place in 1986 in Chernobyl of the former Soviet Union. Even today, an exclusion zone of a thousand square miles prohibits public access. When the accident happened, many emergency responders rushed to the scene to put out the fire. They thought they were only battling fire and smoke. They did not understand that invisible to their eyes was the radioactive contamination in that smoke. Dozens of workers died within a few months, and hundreds suffered from acute radiation sickness. Downwind of the nuclear reactor, horses, cattle, and even trees died. No one knows how many people in Europe were affected.

Today I am warning you about a kind of spiritual contamination that is invisible to the eye but, just like

the smoke of Chernobyl, has the power to bring sickness and death. Many people today scoff at this warning, yet in their souls is a growing cancer that will ultimately destroy them if it is not removed by the great Physician. I am speaking of sexual lust. “What?” someone may say, “Sexual lust is fun and natural. I enjoy it.” But like a poison that tastes sweet but destroys your life, so sexual lust is candy-coated death.

*We must have zero tolerance for lust.* Some places and schools have a policy of zero tolerance regarding harassment or drugs. Ephesians 5:3–4 calls upon Christians to have a personal policy of zero tolerance regarding sinful sexual lust. This Scripture speaks of “fornication,” which means having a sexual relationship with someone to whom you are not married. It also speaks of “uncleanliness.” That does not refer to getting dirt on your body but of contaminating yourself with things offensive to God and harmful to you, especially sexual sins of various kinds.<sup>1</sup> It also speaks of “covetousness,” a super-sized desire for more and more, whether it is a desire for more money or more sexual pleasure.<sup>2</sup> Put these words together and you have worldly lust, especially sinful sexual lust.

When it comes to having zero tolerance for lust, this Scripture answers three questions. How do we have zero tolerance for lust? Why should we have zero tolerance for lust? What should we embrace or “put on” instead of lust? So, with God’s help, based on Ephesians 5:3–4, we want to consider the how, the why, and the what of *zero tolerance for lust*.

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1. On the association of “uncleanliness” (*akatharsia*) with sexual sin, see Rom. 1:24; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 4:19; 5:3; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:7 (in context).

2. Charles Hodge takes “covetousness” (*pleonexia*) here to refer to materialistic greed. Andrew Lincoln takes it as sexual greed. See Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 205; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 322.

### How Do We Have Zero Tolerance for Lust?

Ephesians 5:3 teaches us, “Let it not be once named among you.” To “name” something in this case means to mention it or talk about it.<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that we can’t even say the words “fornication,” or “lust,” or “immorality.” If it did, then we couldn’t even read this verse of the Bible aloud. What it means is that sexual sin should be a matter of shame.<sup>4</sup> It is disgraceful. It should be such an unpleasant subject that we don’t even want to talk about it if we don’t have to. It is like a huge, disgusting sore that you want to cover up so no one can see it. Ephesians 5:12 says, “For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret.”

It is truly sad how our society has lost its sense of shame. While we should not seek to cause people inappropriate shame, there is a healthy and good kind. Shame gives us a sense that some things are not normal; they are revolting, horrifying, and wrong. Shame is a voice inside of us that says we should avoid such things. It arises from a sense of the evil of sin. Sin damages us, for we were created in the image of God.

Sex is not a form of private recreation. Sex outside of marriage has huge personal consequences. A single sexual experience can affect you for the rest of your life. Fornicators sin against themselves, violating the natural principle of self-love. The Bible warns in 1 Corinthians 6:18, “Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.” Romans 1:24 warns that those given up to “uncleanness through the lusts of their own bodies...dishonour their own bodies.”

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3. See Isa. 19:17 and Jer. 23:36 (LXX), where the same Greek word for “name” (*onomazō*) is used in the sense of to mention or speak of something.

4. The idea of shame is clear in the Greek text. The term “filthiness” in Eph. 5:4 is literally “shamefulness” (*aischrotēs*), from the same root as “shame” (*aischros*) in v.12.

God created us to be men and women of honor and dignity. He did not make us to grovel in filth like animals, but to walk with Him in holiness and ultimately walk with Him in glory. Our noble calling on earth includes our sexuality. Sex itself, when properly enjoyed within the marital relationship, is beautiful and clean, not dirty or shameful. It is precisely because sex is good and honorable and promotes a good conscience that we should allow no tolerance for sins that twist and pervert God's good gift. Hebrews 13:4 says, "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge." The "bed" (the sexual union of a husband and wife) is inherently precious, honorable, and clean as God's plan and creation. The price of waiting for sexual relations until marriage is well worth the exercise of self-control to embrace the joy of beautiful marital relations.

Sexual sin and the evil desires that produce it therefore should be viewed as shameful, a kind of ugliness we want to avoid. There was a time in our society when getting pregnant without being married would have brought shame. Now many people think that living together outside of marriage is normal, desirable, and preferable. Pornography, homosexuality, and having multiple sexual partners<sup>5</sup> are no longer done in secret, but celebrated, promoted, and forced upon us in the public square. Today we even have a president who has persuaded his political party to inscribe into its political platform an unqualified support for homosexual marriage. We are told that it is beautiful and normal and healthy and good for anyone to have sex with anyone so

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5. We can expect to read of increasingly bizarre examples of this in the future, e.g., in Brazil a government official recently granted a "civil union" to a trio (one man and two women). See Mariano Castillo, "Unprecedented Civil Union Unites Brazilian Trio," August 31, 2012, *CNN*, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/31/world/americas/brazil-polyfaithful-union/index.html> (accessed Sept. 13, 2012).

long as all the parties consent. But God, who made us and owns us, does not give His consent.

Having rejected God, our society is seeing the inevitable consequence described in Romans 1:32: “Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.” In many ways, we are beginning to see North America slide into the same corruptions that wreaked havoc in the Roman Empire, the wicked society where Christianity was born. We see Ephesians 4:19 sadly fulfilled among us, as people are calloused to the evils they commit, “who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.”

It is time for Christians to rise up in holy rebellion against this evil and to show the world what true love looks like. Romans 12:9 says, “Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.” Literally, that could be translated, “Love without hypocrisy, hating the evil, clinging to the good.” Fake love, hypocritical love, may accept all kinds of evil with a mindless smile. But real love, true love, must always include hatred against what is evil just as surely as it rejoices in what is good (1 Cor. 13:5). If we really care about people, then we will hate sin because sin destroys.

How do we show zero tolerance for lust in practical ways? If fornication and uncleanness and covetousness are normal and acceptable in a wicked world, how can we be abnormal and radical in a good and holy way? Romans 13:14 says, “But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.” Let me unpack that in five ways.

### *1. No tolerance for lustful talk.*

Ephesians 5:4 focuses the issue on how we talk: “neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting.” Does it surprise you that sexual sin often begins with how we talk?

Immorality often begins with smooth, pleasant words (Prov. 6:24; 7:21). It might sound like a compliment about how good your body looks or how much someone likes you and wants to be with you—with sexual overtones that should be reserved for how a husband speaks privately to his wife. It might be a joke. This world is full of sexual innuendo. In fact, much of modern comedy consists of the clever use of words to make you think of sex when talking about other things. In other cases, people openly talk in a vulgar and filthy manner, such as in telling dirty jokes.

What should the Christian's response be to this kind of talk? We must have zero tolerance for it. We must never speak in a way that promotes fornication or uncleanness. If our friends ever talk that way, we should walk away. If they insist on talking that way, we should find better friends.

## *2. No tolerance for lustful looks.*

Christ taught us in Matthew 5:28, “That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.” You need to take severe action to avoid lustful looks. This is particularly a problem for many men, but women are increasingly falling prey to it. Like Job, you need to make a covenant with your eyes not to look upon someone's body with the intent of sexual desire and enjoyment unless you are married to that person (Job 31:1).

Zero tolerance means you must cut out of your life everything that entices you to lust. If you have pornographic images in your possession, whether in print or stored electronically, destroy them. If you visit or are tempted to visit pornographic websites, establish an accountability partner and install a protection system that works. If a video game, movie, television program, or magazine entices your eyes, get rid of it. If a particular person allures you, find ways to avoid looking at that person in lustful ways.

### *3. No tolerance for lustful reading.*

Just as spoken words are powerful to excite our desires, so are written words. In fact, some women who have little interest in pornographic pictures may be caught up in reading books that excite romantic fantasies that are just as defiling. Furthermore, many science fiction and fantasy books popular among young people depict sexual immorality—sometimes subtly and sometimes scandalously, but always in a positive light without showing its tragic consequences.

Ask yourself, “Does this reading material show the honor and dignity of sexual purity, or does it lift up sin?” Remember the command of Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

### *4. No tolerance for lustful dress.*

Your actions express your character, and how you dress expresses your heart. If you desire to draw attention to your body, then you dress in a way that accentuates parts of your body to grab the attention and stir the desire of others. If you dress provocatively, the Bible says that your heart is wrong (Prov. 7:10). You will then attract the kind of man to you that would be attracted to a prostitute. Perhaps you are beautiful, but Proverbs 11:22 says that a beautiful person without godly wisdom is like a piece of golden jewelry in the snout of a pig.

I am not suggesting that you should dress in a potato sack. There is nothing wrong with spending a moderate amount of time and money to wear attractive clothing. The Lord Himself showed a concern that people have adequate clothing after the fall of man (Gen. 3:21). But we should dress with modesty and focus on the inward beauty of the heart, not flaunting beauty (1 Tim. 2:9;

1 Pet. 3:3–4). Very soon these bodies grow old, die, and return to the earth.

*5. No tolerance for lustful touch.*

As physical creatures, we were made to touch and be touched. In our culture, people use physical touch, such as a handshake or a hug, to greet and welcome each other (Rom. 16:16), without there being anything sexual about it. However, there is such a thing as a sexual touch (1 Cor. 7:1). In order to bless us with a vibrant sexual life in marriage, God designed our bodies to respond to sexual touching and kissing. In marriage it is a beautiful and delightful thing to communicate our affection, friendship, and sexual desire through touch.

But kissing and touching can lead unmarried couples to lust and fornication (Prov. 7:13). Christians therefore need to exercise wisdom and self-control in how we touch people, especially someone to whom you are attracted but not married. There are some actions that the Bible clearly associates with making love, such as touching each other's private parts (Prov. 5:19–20). These are off limits for single people. And if someone touches you in that way against your will, you need to get away from him, end the relationship, and confide in a close friend or pastor, or, if you are young, tell your father immediately.

With regard to holding hands and kissing in a courting or Christian dating relationship, it would go beyond the Scriptures to lay down laws for all Christians. Each Christian must know himself, be wise, and exercise self-control. Wise is the father who establishes guidelines and rules for his children in these areas for their protection and guidance. Wise is the couple who talks these matters over early on in their relationship and, with God's help, resolves to set firm biblical lines of self-denial for their premarital relationship.

Have zero tolerance for lustful touch. So ask yourself these questions. Does this activity stir sexual desires in

me or the person I am with? If someone saw us doing this, would he think that we are likely headed for sexual intercourse? If my parents caught me doing this, would I feel ashamed? Dear friends, let there be not even a hint of sexual immorality among you!

### **Why Should We Have Zero Tolerance for Lust?**

Why does love for God and love for people move us to firmly reject sexual sin? What motivates us to view fornication and uncleanness as shameful? Why should we have no tolerance for lustful talk, lustful looks, lustful reading, lustful dress, or lustful touch? Ephesians 5:3–4 and its context give us five reasons.

#### *1. Lust is not love (v. 2).*

It is no accident that just before warning us against lust, Paul wrote about true Christian love. Throughout history people have confused lust for love. Like Amnon towards Tamar, they can feel so much desire for someone it makes them feel sick. But their lustful desires have more in common with hatred than love (2 Sam. 13:1–2, 4, 15). No matter how much someone might say he loves you, if he tries to draw you into a sexual relationship before marriage, that is not love. It's probably mostly selfishness and using other people to get what he wants.

Ephesians 5:2 says, “And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour.” Notice here that the character of true love is self-sacrifice. Sacrifice is costly. It can be painful to wait until you are married. It's hard to say goodbye in the evening to someone for whom you have strong feelings, and nights can be long and lonely. But love is willing to sacrifice yourself for the good of the other; mutual self-restraint is well worth the price of preserving an unstained wedding day and of avoiding a bad conscience in marriage. Premarital

relations have a way of wreaking havoc in the area of intimacy within marriage.

Seducing someone or allowing yourself to be seduced into fornication is the opposite of love; ultimately it is an act of hatred. The Bible says in 1 Thessalonians 4:6 that those who commit fornication “defraud” others. The idea is that you greedily steal something precious from them.<sup>6</sup> For the sake of your own pleasure, you have led someone to sin against the living God and robbed that person of a good conscience and heavenly reward. You have used that person’s body and jeopardized that person’s eternal destiny. Furthermore, you have also defrauded that person’s parents and family and your own family, bringing shame and dishonor on them and robbing them of the joy of seeing their dear children walk in purity to their wedding day.<sup>7</sup>

Sexual sin also has massive public consequences for a nation. Sexual sin is an act of hatred against society at large. Sex in marriage is the cement that holds together the foundation of our society: the family. Sexual immorality breaks up that foundation by weakening marriages. It spreads painful, embarrassing, and sometimes deadly diseases. Immorality also naturally produces children out of wedlock. Standard contraceptives still fail to prevent pregnancy in 9–15% of cases per year.<sup>8</sup> Among teenagers

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6. The term “defraud” (*pleonekteō*) means to take advantage of someone, often financially but also in other ways (2 Cor. 2:11; 7:2; 12:17–18). Interestingly, it is from the same root as the word “covetousness” (*pleonexia*) in our text.

7. The text in 1 Thess. 4:6 says, “...defraud his brother,” not “...defraud the woman,” suggesting that the crime in view is particularly against the father of the woman. Under the Mosaic law (Ex. 22:17), a man who seduces a virgin must pay her father the bride-price even if they do not marry each other.

8. Haishan Fu, Jacqueline E. Darroch, Taylor Haas, and Nalini Ranjit, “Contraceptive Failure Rates: New Estimates From the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth,” *Family Planning Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (March/April 1999): 56–63, <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/jour->

the contraceptive failure rate is even higher. That means that tens of thousands of children are conceived every year by people using contraceptives. What will happen to these children if their parents are not joined in a loving marriage? How many are aborted? What is happening to our society right now as millions of people have grown up without a stable family? Is this love, to engage in an activity harmful to your friend, family, future children, and nation?

This is one great reason to have zero tolerance for lust: lust is not love.

## *2. Lust defiles desire (v. 3a).*

Lust takes something good, useful, beautiful, and pleasing to God and turns it into evil, a monstrosity that is wasteful, ugly, and displeasing in His eyes. In particular, it deforms our desires and makes them dirty. That is why sexual sin is called “uncleanness” (v. 3). It is like throwing vomit and manure on an expensive painting by a gifted artist; sin casts spiritual dirt and filth upon God’s amazing creation of our sexuality.

One way lust does this is by wrapping itself in the lie that sex can be our god. Ephesians 4:22 speaks of “deceitful lusts”—strong desires driven by lies. All sin is at root an attempt to treat God’s creations as if they were the Creator instead of trusting Him who alone has never-ending happiness (Rom. 1:25). Sex is good, but it is not God. But when in lust we worship sex as our god, we hope for more than it can deliver.

This is a reason why fornication is connected to “covetousness” or greediness (Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5). Sinners think that if they will just feed their sin, it will be quiet and satisfied. But the truth is that the more they feed their lust, the more it consumes them and the greedier

it gets. In the end, lust will turn you into an empty shell of hunger, always wanting more and never content with what you have. The only answer is not to feed lust but to kill it by the grace of Jesus Christ.

Have zero tolerance for lust because it does not satisfy desire, but defiles it.

*3. Lust contradicts our holy calling (v. 3b).*

In Ephesians 5:3, Paul reminds us that we must give no place to lust because this “becometh saints.” In other words, sexual purity is fitting and proper for those called and consecrated to belong to God. The word “saint” literally means “holy ones.”<sup>9</sup> It does not describe some elite class of super-spiritual people; all true Christians are saints by the blood of Christ (Eph. 1:1). Ephesians 5:8 tells us that we were once “darkness” but now are “light in the Lord,” so we must walk as people who belong to the light. Lust is what we expect from people who do not know God (1 Thess. 4:5). It simply does not fit with who we are in Christ.

If you are a believer, God is building you, together with other believers, into His “holy temple” where He lives (Eph. 2:21–22). The temple in the Old Testament was a beautiful building full of sparkling gold. Now the temple is people, and we are beautiful in God’s sight with the righteousness of Christ and the holiness of His Spirit. Do you want to paint obscene graffiti on God’s temple? That is what lust does. Don’t you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit? You are not your own. You were bought at the price of Christ’s blood. Therefore glorify God with your body and spirit, which belong to God (1 Cor. 6:19–20). Submit to the Spirit’s work and grow into a beautiful and holy temple where God will live forever! We have a holy calling, and lust contradicts that calling.

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9. Greek *hagioi*.

*4. Lust corrupts conversation (v. 4a).*

Notice that the sins listed in Ephesians 5:4 revolve around how we talk: “neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks.” Our ability to communicate in verbal language distinguishes us from the animals. Nothing like the complex and profound speech of human beings is found in the animal world. Lust takes the noble gift of human speech and turns your mouth into a sewer. There are some people whose speech is so filthy that even if you love them, you hate being around them.

God gave us our mouths to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). He especially gave us our ability to speak so that we could live to the praise of the glory of His grace (Eph. 1:6). Don’t allow lust to pollute the streams of your words with the poison of sin. Keep them clean and clear for the glory of God.

*5. Lust damns sinners (vv. 5–6).*

Paul’s warning against lust and greed ends with these sobering words in Ephesians 5:5–6, “For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience.”

Dear young people, “Let no man deceive you.” Lust is not healthy. Lust is not a joke. If it is not broken by the ruling power of Jesus Christ, lust will condemn you and your friends to hell forever. If you continue in the path of sexual lust without repentance, then you are a fornicator at heart and you have no place in heaven. Unless you declare war on your sexual sin, you remain at war with God. Will you trifle with a few passing pleasures and provoke the living God to anger? Will you plunge yourself into a sea of fire for the sake of a few drops of gratification? Hell

is no party, but the never-ending experience of the burning anger of God.

If, on the other hand, you truly repent of sexual sin committed in the past and forsake it, you may find forgiveness in Jesus Christ, even if the scars of sin may remain. As with the woman caught in the act of adultery, Jesus speaks to penitent sinners who are guilty of sexual sin, “Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more” (John 8:11).

Let us pray for God’s grace to conquer this sin so that we have zero tolerance for lust. We must not pamper it. We must not permit it in our lives. We must turn from it in disgust and put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Conclusion: Turn from Lust to Grace and Gratitude**

We must put off sexual lust and covetousness, throwing it away like an article of clothing stained by some repulsive, life-threatening contamination. And what shall we put on in its place? Every sin needs to be replaced by some form of righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:22–24). Paul teaches us that we must replace lust with gratitude, writing in verse 3, “but rather giving of thanks.”

Giving thanks for what? For the love of God in Christ. Ephesians 5:1–2 says, “Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour.” Here is true love! Here is the God who loves sinners and makes them His “dear children,” adopting them and embracing them with eternal affection. Here is Jesus Christ, giving His life as a sacrifice for our sins so that instead of the revolting stench of our disobedience, He can perfume us with the sweet smell of His obedience and the Father will be pleased with us.

In some ways, sexual lust is a twisted cry for love, but it seeks love in the wrong ways. But God’s love can satisfy

you and give you peace and contentment. If your heart is hard and cold, His love can give you a new heart that is soft and warm. If you have defiled your mind or body with uncleanness, here is love that can wash you as white as snow. If you have betrayed God with your sins, perhaps sins that no one else knows about, here is love that will accept the repentant sinner. He will be your shield, your glory, and the lifter of your head.

Revel in the grace of God and cultivate gratitude by trusting in Him, for gratitude will heal what lust has destroyed. Lust is not love, but thanksgiving to God ignites love. We love because we are amazed at how He first loved us. Lust defiles desire, but thanksgiving to God purifies desire. It sets us free to enjoy good things but to let God alone be our God.

Lust contradicts our holy calling, but thanksgiving to God fulfills our holy calling. God calls us to give thanks in all things to our God and Father in the name of Jesus Christ. Lust corrupts conversation, but thanksgiving to God gives honor and dignity to our conversation. Lust damns sinners, but thanksgiving to God springs from salvation by grace.

The ultimate reason why Christians should have no tolerance for lust is that Christians have no need for it; we have a God who loves us as His dear children, a Savior who died for our sins—including lustful sins, and the Spirit who lives closer to our hearts than the most intimate companion. Repent of every known lustful sin, and entrust your soul and body to the triune God of grace, believing in His Son alone for salvation. Know this God, whom to know in Christ is life eternal (John 17:3), and be satisfied.



# Can These Bones Live?

*Dr. Brian DeVries*

Psalter: 281

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1–14

Psalter: 259

Sermon Text: Ezekiel 37:1–14

Psalter: 123

Psalter: 141

No doubt each one of us has been following the news of the economic situation in the world and particularly on Wall Street in New York City. The Dow Jones Industrial Average fluctuates so much, causing concern not only to investors but also to many of us who worry about the future of the economy, about our jobs, and our financial futures. These are indeed reasons for concern.

Those of us who have access to any form of media cannot avoid another issue that is also a reason for concern: the political situation in North America. We are all bombarded by political statements from various ideologies, all promoting their own cause; and we as Christians look at the cause below the cause. We look at the Christian cause and we look at the ideology of the various individuals that are running for office. We are often very concerned, are we not, about the political and moral situation here in North America? As we see the various political ideologies and recognize the relative scarcity of consistent Christian values, we wonder what might happen in the near future.

Clearly, economic and political challenges are many at present, but let's go a little deeper. What about the moral situation in North America? Politically, there are major issues, but we know that many of these are motivated by socioeconomic and cultural undertones of

immorality or godlessness. We are facing many financial, political, and moral troubles. But, as Christians, we need to look even deeper at the *spiritual* state of society. What is the condition of souls?

How many souls do you pass on the way to church? You no doubt pass many houses and cars full of people. When you go to the grocery store, or mall, or airport where you see crowds of people, what is the state of their never-dying souls before God? It is either spiritually dead or it is being spiritually recreated, alive through the Spirit.

And what about our own souls? What is the condition of our spiritual life, our walk with God? Is it strong? Is it vibrant? Or is it dead? Are we still outside of Christ? Are we still in a state of spiritual deadness?

How about your own family? Maybe the Lord has given you spiritual life that desires after Him and pants after Christ. What about your children? What is their spiritual state? Some of them, perhaps, outwardly display that they are not Christians. Others perhaps are what we call “serious-minded,” but we know that being serious-minded is not enough for salvation. If you die serious-minded but outside of Christ, you will go to hell! I know people who go to church week after week, year after year, decade after decade and still profess, “I am not a Christian in my heart.” They hear the message but somehow it doesn’t awaken them and give them new life. What is your own spiritual state?

When we consider these things, we recognize that the spiritual crisis in America—even in our various churches—is of far greater importance than other outward concerns like our political or financial future. What is your spiritual state before God today? These things are woven into this message, and we will return to them.

I want to focus on Ezekiel 37:1–14, carefully considering each verse. First we will only read verse 3, which is the pivotal point in this passage:

*And he [God] said unto me [Ezekiel], Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest.*

My theme is the question: *Can these bones live?* I have three main thoughts to consider: (1) the battlefield of bones; (2) the Spirit of prophecy; and (3) the promise of the Lord.

### **The Battlefield of Bones**

Who is Ezekiel the prophet? The book of Ezekiel is one of those Old Testament books that, in our private devotions or family reading, we might stumble through without fully understanding its background and context.

Ezekiel is both a prophet and a priest, speaking in particular to the children of Judah but also to Israelites who were exiled. He began his ministry around 597 B.C. and prophesied for about 20 years, until around 577 B.C., during which time the nation-state of Judah, centered in Jerusalem, fell to the Babylonians. So Ezekiel's prophecy starts by predicting the fall of the southern kingdom, Judah and Jerusalem, to the Babylonian conquerors. He then ends by giving comfort to God's people who are in exile.

Chapter 37 is near the end of Ezekiel's prophecy (assuming the book is in chronological order), likely written during or immediately after the fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel is speaking to God's covenant people in a state of destruction, despair, and despondency in a foreign land. He aims to encourage, comfort, and give hope to the exiled people long after the fall of Samaria and the northern kingdom to the Assyrians.

Though the financial and political situations might be bad in North America, consider the situation for these refugees in Babylon. Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple was burned, the stones were cast down, the people were in exile, and nothing was left—all to fulfill prophecy. Their sins brought judgment upon them and they were

reaping the results. They had very little hope of being returned to the land or of being restored as a nation.

God, however, is highlighting His sovereign power and ability to work a mighty revival. This is the first of several prophecies in chapters 37 and 38 that focus on how God will make a difference in the lives of His people. These prophecies give us hope today as we understand the context of that day and realize how God’s Word applies to us in the same way. This is a passage meant to encourage us.

Let’s look first at verse 1: “The hand of the LORD was upon me, and carried me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley.” The first question we must answer is this: Who is the Spirit of the Lord? The Spirit is the active agent in this verse, not the prophet. The prophet is being moved by the Spirit. We start by understanding the “hand of the LORD” and the “Spirit of the LORD” who is acting.

The word *spirit* in Hebrew is identical with *breath*. *Spirit* and *breath* and *wind* are different words in English, but they are the same word in Hebrew. Think about this passage with that insight. Verse 1: “The *spirit* of the LORD.” Verse 5: “Cause *breath* to enter into you [the bones].” Verse 8: “There was no *breath* in them.” The same word in the Hebrew is used in verses 1, 5, and 8. The same applies in verse 9: “Prophesy unto the *wind* [or the *breath* or the *Spirit*]...and say to the *wind* [or the *breath* or the *Spirit*]...come from the four *winds* [or *breath*] and *breathe* on these slain.” These are all the same word in Hebrew. We will come back to this fact.

So who is the Spirit of the Lord? The Lord’s Spirit in the Old Testament is rarely so clearly described, though He is certainly present. However, in books like Ezekiel and Jeremiah, we find future-looking references of what the Spirit will do. It is the Lord’s Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, almighty God, the Spirit of the Lord, and

the Spirit of Christ as we learn in the New Testament who is the One moving the prophet in this chapter.

What about the second phrase, “The hand of the LORD”? This too is a very important phrase that sets the context for this passage. “The hand of the LORD,” particularly in the Old Testament, refers to God’s power at work in the world. It is none other than God’s Spirit of power who is actively working in the world through Christ. We find Him at work in Acts 11:19–21 where “the hand of the Lord” was with the disciples and the believers, and there was a great revival in the city of Antioch.

These two very important phrases at the start of this passage set the tone. The Spirit is working with the prophet and brings him to this battlefield of bones: “...and [He] set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones.”

The “open valley” of verse 2 can be interpreted as a wide open area, perhaps a flat area in the midst of mountains, which would be a likely place for battles to occur; a place where large armies could fight each other with swords and other implements of war. This passage pictures the place where two armies had fought. A great massacre had occurred, and the dead bodies were left unburied on the ground of the valley.

So Ezekiel receives a vision of a battlefield filled with bones and skulls, a gruesome sight to imagine. We perhaps have seen pictures showing Cambodia’s killing fields, bones from a regime that was so merciless, or of Hitler’s concentration camps in Germany. Heaps and heaps of skulls turn our stomachs. Do you find this vision repulsive? This is its intended effect—to make us recoil. In verse 2, the Spirit caused Ezekiel to pass around them, almost as if the prophet is taken on a tour past skulls and other bones. A ghastly atmosphere of death permeated the place. Our attention is drawn to the horridness and the finality of this massacre, perhaps of thousands or millions of people. The prophet saw the stark reality of death.

At the very point when this vision is starkly before him, what does the Lord ask Ezekiel? Verse 3 says: “And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live?” What an incredible question! Imagine what it must have been like for Ezekiel to walk around these bones, and then be asked by God, “Can these dead, very dry, sun-bleached bones live?” It is like a rhetorical question in the negative. It is impossible, is it not, for these bones to come to life again? The only obvious answer is no. But this is the question asked by Almighty GOD, the covenant-keeping LORD of the Old Testament, the triune God of the promise in the New Testament.

Ezekiel knew, and we today know, that all things are possible with God. So how does Ezekiel reply? Verse 3 says: “And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest.” Was this an evasive answer? If you are asked a pointed question and you deflect by saying, “Well, uh...” you really don’t answer the question; you barely give a response. “O Lord...thou knowest” could seem evasive. Or possibly it is an indifferent answer? Or perhaps it is an answer of wonder and trust? Ezekiel evokes the covenant-keeping name and actually puts together both the almighty God and the covenant-keeping name LORD. “Oh Lord, sovereign LORD, sovereign keeper of the covenant, thou knowest.” Ezekiel gives an answer of faith in the covenant-keeping and sovereign LORD. “Oh LORD, thou knowest all things, that it is impossible, but that all things are possible with Thee.”

Consider situations in our own lives: not just the present financial crisis surrounding us; not just the moral decay of our nation, the onslaught of sin and evil that we see around us, the temptations that bombard us. Let’s look a little closer—at our church, to our own ministries. Maybe you are one of the workers in the Sunday school program or some other ministry, such as the jail or prison outreach, and your hands are hanging down right now in discouragement because the work just goes on and on without any visible results. Maybe as a mother you are

praying for a son or daughter who seems to be going in the wrong direction. Maybe your time is limited and you would like to spend time with your family. Whatever ministry you are involved in takes work; it involves significant commitment for the activity itself, and there are often considerable preparations and other sacrifices as well. Yet these investments often seem wasted.

We are dealing with spiritual issues here in this chapter. This is not a literal prophecy; it is a spiritual matter. So the question comes to us just as it did to the prophet: can these bones live? The discouraging situations in which you find yourself—at Sunday school where the children may be misbehaving, or speaking with an unsaved coworker—can often be such that you ask, “Can these bones live?” How can this sinner ever be given new life? How can this hopeless situation be turned around? How can my life be made conformable to the image of Christ when I live like this, when I have these sins plaguing me, or these temptations bombarding me? How can I ever get through to my wayward son? It seems like there are no opportunities for communication. How can I make him understand and change? Can these bones live? Is there any reason for hope, or is hope as dead as these dry bones?

How can we as a church be a witness in this community when there are so many things testifying against us? People might say, “Oh, they are just rich people with nice cars. They don’t care about us.” Or maybe our own inconsistencies stand in the way. It may be the hardness of those we reach. How can we do mission work? How can we do evangelism when both we and they seem so dead and lifeless? The question comes to us as it came to Ezekiel in this battlefield of bones: Can these bones live? Is this even possible? How can life be given to spiritually dead people?

Now some have interpreted this prophecy literally, saying that this event would actually happen at some

point in time after Ezekiel received this prophecy. The people of Judah (and/or Israel), they say, will be returned to their own land. Some say this has already happened, either with the return of the exiles from Babylon before Christ, or perhaps more recently when Israel returned to Palestine in 1948. Some have suggested a future literal meaning of these words. Others have applied these words to a different contemporary fulfillment. For example, a group of refugees today may try to read these words literally for themselves.

Most biblical commentaries, however, reject such literal applications and say the meaning of this prophecy is spiritual. This is a much safer answer, especially because of what God Himself says to Ezekiel in verse 11: “These bones are the whole house of Israel.” These bones represent the spiritual reality of the state of the church in Ezekiel’s day. The same application can be made about the spiritual state of the church in our day: spiritually bankrupt, spiritually dry, or even spiritually dead.

Why does God give this prophecy through Ezekiel to His people? It is to encourage God’s people in exile to stop looking at their literal circumstances—the deadness and hopelessness of their present condition—and to start looking in faith to the sovereign LORD and to place their trust in Him, causing them to desire Him. The meaning is the same for God’s people today.

So as we consider situations in our own life and the ministries that God has given to each one of His people, we look at this prophecy not just to focus on the hopelessness of the battlefields in which we find ourselves. We are encouraged to look away from this hopelessness, and to look away from ourselves and the circumstances. Instead we are encouraged to answer in faith with Ezekiel, “O Lord GOD, thou knowest.” Will my son return again to the faith? “O Lord GOD, thou knowest.” Will I be able to speak Thy Word to the children in Sunday school or the inmates at the prison? “O Lord GOD, thou knowest.” Will

my witness be used in such a way so that many people are added to Thy church? “O Lord GOD, thou knowest.”

God can change a dead stony heart into a life-breathing, living, faith-demonstrating soul. Ezekiel knew this to be true, so he very intentionally demonstrates his faith in the sovereign Lord. “O Lord...thou knowest.” Ezekiel cautiously places his hope in this reality because he knew the LORD, and he knew the power of the Spirit of prophecy.

### **The Spirit of Prophecy**

Consider five key statements from verses in the passage that follows. First, look at the last part of verse 2: “...and, lo, they were very dry.” These bones were very, very dry. Often in evangelism, when we are hoping for a change in the person to whom we were witnessing, we look for signs of life. Yet, without the work of the Lord, the people to whom we witness remain very dry. We confess the doctrine of total depravity and we know it is true. When we seek to evangelize others in the community or try to be a careful witness in our own families, we may be tempted to expect some preexisting ability in spiritually dead sinners. But there is no hope and no life in dead sinners. Like the bones in this vision, sinners are spiritually dead and are spiritually very dry. We must look elsewhere for hope.

Second, what happens in verse 4? Ezekiel is commanded to prophesy. “Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.” This verse describes so beautifully what evangelistic ministry is all about. Maybe you are striving to fulfill your parenting vows and patiently instructing your children in God’s Word, but it just seems as if you are talking to a brick wall. It seems to have no effect.

What is Ezekiel commanded to do? “Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.” Evangelism is like standing in a cemetery and offering food to the first one who takes it. “Does anyone in this cemetery want some free food? Come

and get some free food.” Similarly, when evangelizing, we offer the gospel, we speak the truth, we let the dead bones hear the Word of the Lord, knowing full well they are dead and very dry. This is what we are commanded to do as Christians. It is not optional to speak with those around us who do not know our Savior. Say to the dead bones, “Hear ye the Word of the LORD.” The authority here doesn’t come from the speaker; the Word of the Lord comes with authority in itself. So command them, “Hear the Word.”

Third, in verse 6, God makes a promise. Speak to the bones, “And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live.” That is motivation for our ministry work. “I will, I will, I will,” says the Lord. We only have to share the Word with dry, dead bones. We have to look away from the situation and look to the Word and share this powerful message, this passionate truth, this gospel promise: *God will!*

Think of what this meant for the people in Ezekiel’s day. They were refugees in Babylon. Their harps were hung on the willows; they were singing a dirge, a death song, recognizing the hopelessness of their situation. Despair naturally permeated their thinking. But God says, “I will, I will, I will do all of these things.” So speak the Word of the Lord. Here is the command. Here is the promise. Here is the glorious activity of gospel witness that every Christian is called to do. Each believer who has experienced the truth of forgiveness through Jesus Christ is commanded to share this truth with others, knowing full well that nothing in them will accomplish anything.

Fourth, consider verse 8, “But there was no breath in them.” Maybe some of you are discouraged in your ministry activities. Perhaps a teacher is saying, “Children come to Sunday school; there is a large crowd every week, but there is no spiritual life there. I am unable to witness successfully, even though I speak to them, and share with

them and feel I am ministering to them in some way.” Maybe it seems as if you are plowing on rocks. You complain, “There is no breath in them!”

Ezekiel saw the bones coming together. He saw the power of the Word bringing the bones together with a great noise and shaking; he saw sinews and flesh coming upon them—an amazing sight! “But there was no breath in them.” Here, too, we must confess our dependency upon the Lord. The Word may come with power. All of the arguments may be consistent and contemporary. The Word may be exegeted perfectly. All the tactics and strategies may be employed. But all these things in themselves are hopeless; they only bring bones together.

Spurgeon has a sermon in which he refers to a church as “a crowd of corpses.” There can be impressive numbers. Yet without the power of the breath of the Spirit, there is no life.

Fifth, we read in verse 9 what the Lord said to Ezekiel: “Prophecy...and say unto the wind, Thus saith the Lord GOD...” The Lord speaks this way to those who are faithful in ministry and He sometimes speaks this verse to us when we are discouraged. When we recognize the impossibilities, we return in faith to the Lord and say, “Thou knowest.” When we see some hopeful responses on our work and yet do not see lasting change, the Lord comes with verse 9 and says, “Prophecy unto the wind, prophecy, 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.”

Remember that word *wind* and the word *breath* and the word *Spirit* are all the same word in Hebrew. The Lord tells the prophet to prophesy to the Spirit, providing a command with a promise: “Thus saith the Lord GOD; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” But how can we, sons and daughters of men, have the authority to speak to the Spirit of God in that way? We know we need the Spirit;

without the Spirit giving life, the bones are dead, without breath, and Spiritless. The situation is completely bleak without the Spirit and spiritual life.

So how do we have that authority to command with an oracle, “Come, Holy Spirit, and breathe”? “Prophecy unto the Spirit.” This is our prayer and this is the prayer of the Church of all ages. When we consider the bones around us and the Word within us, we prophesy to the Spirit. We say, “Come, Holy Spirit, come.” When we see the Sunday School children, when we minister in the jail or prison, when we talk to a coworker who is bringing all these endless arguments against the Christian faith, when we try to reason very carefully with a friend who has denied the truth he once knew, this is our prayer: “Come, Holy Spirit.”

This prayer includes a confession of our dependency and weakness. It is also our plea and our expectation. I like the name that the Lord uses for Ezekiel throughout the book: “son of man.” It highlights the prophet’s humanity and his weakness. It highlights our nothingness even as we witness for Christ. This “son of man” confesses his dependency upon the sovereign Lord and on the Spirit of God. Our ministries are nothing without the Spirit. Our feeble efforts are nothing without the blessing of the Holy Spirit. If we ever think they are anything more than nothing, we are wrong; without the Spirit, there is no breath in them.

This confession of dependency on the Spirit of God is also a prayer of the church of all ages. “Come, Holy Spirit, breathe, give life, give Spirit, give breath to dead bones.” That is the prophet’s duty, and if you are a believer it is your duty as well. In the New Testament, we are all prophets in the sense that we are called to speak the Word with the prayer that the Holy Spirit will bless the Word to our audience, whomever that may be. So the prophet prophesies and the Spirit comes, and then “an

exceeding great army” is raised up (v. 10) as the result of the Spirit’s revival.

We can only marvel when the Spirit works. His work exceeds human calculations, forecasts, and expectations. When the Spirit chooses to use us—sinful sons and daughters of men—we are amazed: “This is the Lord at work.” Do you, my friends, expect the Lord to work like this today? Do you expect a revival? We see the dead bones around us. This fact is undeniable. We can describe in detail all the various pieces and parts of the skeleton, I suppose, if we look at our society. But do we expect revival? Do we expect the Lord to work revival in His own sovereign time, in His own sovereign way? Are we praying for this?

As you are busy with whatever ministry is laid upon your shoulders, suppose the question came to you from the Lord, “Can these bones live?” What would your answer be? Perhaps you look at pictures of your grandchildren and pray for them every day; perhaps you count the ones who are believers and the ones who are not believers. Do you expect the Lord to work wonders? Can these bones live? Is your answer an answer of faith, a humble surrender before our sovereign God, and a confession of faith and hope in the “I wills” of the Lord? Do you cry out, “Thou Lord knowest. Sovereign God of grace, Thou knowest.” Do you have faith in the power of a gracious Savior and the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit?

Or maybe you are one of those people who are still rejecting the gracious Savior and His gospel promise, the “I will” so clearly explained in God’s Word. He says, “I will do all these things for them and they shall glorify me.” Yet you still turn away. Do you know what you are doing? When you turn away from this Savior, you are rejecting the gospel promise as it goes out—“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” Yet God comes with power in the Spirit, striving with your spirit year after year. Dear friend, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Confess your sins and be saved. He is the One who gives life and He is the One who is striving with your spirit even now.

Do you believe the Lord can work wonders today? Do you passionately and expectantly desire to see the Lord work wonders not only here in North America but around the globe? Why not? Isn't our God almighty? Isn't He the gracious covenant-keeping God of the Bible? Isn't He the One who worked great revivals throughout history? Why can't He send revival in Africa like He did in Europe so many years ago? Why can't He transform a troubled continent with so many challenges like our own? Why can't He raise up a church from all generations, from all areas and ethnic groups? Do you expect the Lord to do great things?

I think this chapter gave hope to the people of God in Ezekiel's day. It gives us confidence and expectation in the Lord God, and it causes us to look away from the circumstances and the bones that surround us, looking instead to the sovereign Lord God who has sent His Spirit at Pentecost so that the nations may know that He is God. Let us, finally, consider this glorious promise of the Lord.

### **The Promise of the Lord**

Ezekiel the prophet came to the people in his day with a hope-inspiring message from the Lord. This message was intended to encourage them to hope in the sovereign Lord, and to realize that only through His Spirit would their relationship of love with the triune God be restored.

The living Word of God still comes to us today for the same purpose: to inspire in us the faith to look away from ourselves and the deadness of our situation, and to hold on to that hope set before us, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the One who gives the Spirit and offered His life for sinners, shedding His blood for them. He died to give hope to covenant breakers. This same Messiah gives hope to us as well, even if we have been rejecting Him for decades.

It is for this reason that the Holy Spirit was sent at Pentecost. The Spirit now goes out in the world to all nations, and the Word of God comes to you today with a prayer that the Spirit will speak through it to your hearts. Spurgeon believed that Pentecost was only the first fruits of revival with the larger harvest soon coming. What expectations do you have of God? God wants to give our souls encouragement, inspiration, motivation, faith, hope, and love.

In conclusion, there are three matters to consider. First, consider *God's commentary on Ezekiel's vision*. How does God interpret this vision? We already briefly touched on verses 11 and 12, but it is helpful to examine them more in depth. "Then He [God] said to me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel." As we already noted, this is a spiritual vision concerning the spiritual state of God's people. Verse 11 continues, "They say, our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off from our parts." This is the language of the people of Israel. Perhaps we also hear that language today? "Oh, there is no good in me. There is nothing I can do. There is no way for me to be saved. The promise isn't for me." This is "Slough of Despond" thinking, wallowing along in the mire of hopelessness. These are all true statements if we honestly examine ourselves. But the Lord says to you, "You are not looking to Me; you are looking at the dry bones. You are looking in the wrong direction!"

It is as if God is saying to Ezekiel, "This is what the people are saying, but I want you to tell them something different." Look at the words in verse 12: "Therefore prophesy and say unto 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." The focus here is on what God is doing. God addresses the people who are wallowing in despair and claiming that the situation is hopeless, and He promises to change the situation. They say, "We are cut off"

but God says, “I will open your graves.” God gives them hope—and He gives us hope, too.

Second, consider *God’s promise and the prophet’s responsibility*. What was Ezekiel’s duty in this passage? The sovereign Lord says three times, “Prophecy, son of man. You, the weak one, the son of man, the one who has no power, you must prophesy to these bones.” For us this means witnessing, despite our personal weakness, to those around us who are spiritually lifeless. Prophecy to the Spirit praying, “Holy Spirit come with power.” Verse 12 is God’s exhortation to prophesy to these people: to repeat the promise to them, and not just speaking to the lifeless ones who do not know the promise, but especially to His people. They need to hear the promise again when their situation seems hopeless. Repeat the promise again.

As with Ezekiel, our duty is to prophesy by speaking the authoritative Word of the Lord with boldness and clarity while having no authority in ourselves. Our duty is to speak plainly and simply the truths of Scripture with examples and illustrations, to teach it in the way and out of the way and in season and out of season, to rebuke, to correct, and to instruct. For example, how can you as a mother speak to your son who seems to be rejecting what you say about the truth? Speak with boldness and love, coupled with dependency.

In the New Testament we learn that the Spirit of God indwells all believers, giving them boldness and empowering them for witness. “Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me” (Acts 1:8). Witnessing begins with the Spirit, and that opens great possibilities despite our impossibility. Speak with boldness and with authority—not authority in yourself, but with humility and loving boldness *in the Spirit*.

We often fall prey to either one of two extremes in this regard. Sometimes we become bone specialists and we spend all our time examining bones: how dry they are,

how dead they are, where they belong in the skeleton. We are caretakers in the kingdom, always focusing on the problems. This is a serious danger. Then there is the other extreme, which is just as dangerous. We become physicians who create these artificial breeding machines. It is as if we try to give life to dead bones, and then say, "Look at all this life that we have created in our ministries." Both of these extremes are dangerous because both of them minimize our dependency on the Holy Spirit. They minimize our faith in the power of almighty God and His ministry through the Spirit. We should be prophets of the Lord who speak the Word with authority as the Lord's faithful witnesses.

Third and finally, let me draw your attention to *God's promise to His despondent people*. Read again the many "I wills" of the Lord. He addresses their situation in the final verses of our passage: "I will open your graves." "I... shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the LORD have spoken it, and performed it." The result is spiritual fellowship with the triune God: "Ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves." There is intimacy and fellowship with Christ the Lord, the covenant-keeping God. The more the Holy Spirit teaches us these things, the more He will use us in this process to teach others, and we will experience more and more this fellowship with our covenant-keeping God. "O my people...then shall ye know that I the LORD have spoken it, and performed it."

Let us end with this trust and this hope in our gracious Lord.



# The Third Test of Faith on the Sea

*Rev. David Lipsy*

Psalter: 260

Scripture: Matthew 14:22–36

(Mark 6:45–56, John 6:14–21)

Psalter: 2

Sermon Text: Matthew 14:22–36

Psalter: 184

Twice the disciples had their faith tested on the Sea of Galilee. The first test was when Jesus began to call those whom He would make apostles—Peter, James, and John. Remember that time, children? Simon was told to launch out into the deep and let down the nets for a draught. You remember now, right? And Simon answered, “Master, we have toiled all the night and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net.” When they had done this, they caught such a great multitude of fish that their net broke.

Perhaps that was a little test compared with other ones, but it was the first. Would they rely on their knowledge and experience as fishermen or would they obey Christ’s command contrary to what they thought? They obeyed, and the Lord richly blessed their obedience.

The second test of faith on the sea was a great deal more serious and dangerous. You remember, right, children? They were sailing on the Sea of Galilee and Jesus was asleep in the ship when a great storm arose. The apostles were terrified, thinking they would all drown. They awoke Jesus and said unto him, “Master, carest thou not that we perish?” That was the time Jesus rebuked the wind and the sea and made it calm. That

astonished the apostles—that He had such power and authority. But even though that second test was far more serious than the first, at least Jesus was with them.

This morning we're going once again to the Sea of Galilee and once again the apostles will be tested. But this time they will be alone without Jesus.

Beloved, sometimes there are trials in a believer's life where that believer is comforted by the Lord's goodness, even in the midst of the trouble or trial. But there are other times, aren't there? Times when it seems Jesus is nowhere to be found. Times when we feel like Job did when he said, "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I cannot perceive him." Such storms in life can be the very hardest to endure, for it's one thing to go through a deep trial *with* the Lord but quite something else when it seems from all appearances that we're going through this one alone.

Our text is Matthew 14:22–36. The parallel accounts can be found in Mark 6:45–56 and John 6:14–21. Let's read again together Matthew 14:25, "And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea."

1. *Praying and rowing*
2. *Walking and sinking*
3. *Running and healing*

### **Setting**

The disciples had just witnessed the miraculous feeding of the five thousand men, not counting women and children. They were actually involved in that miracle, as they were told by Jesus to distribute the bread and fish He had multiplied and to gather the remains.

It is John who tells us the reaction of the people who witnessed this: "Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world (John 6:14).

This appears to be a clear reference to that mysterious prophecy God gave in Moses' day about the prophet who would one day come—like unto Moses, but of tremendous authority so that the Lord issues a dire warning to those who would not heed Him.

John then tells us where the people wanted to take this (v. 15): “Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force to make him a king.” The people were thinking, “Here is one who can take care of us. If we follow Him, we'll have all that we need for our daily lives. We won't be dependent on the Romans anymore, for this Jesus seems to have the power needed to throw off the yoke of Rome.” And we must not forget that the apostles thought this way, too, as evidenced by the mother of James and John asking that her sons might occupy the places of honor in the kingdom they thought Jesus would set up—and the apostles, even after Jesus' resurrection, asking if He at *that* time would restore the kingdom to Israel.

But this is not at all what Jesus came to the earth to do. This would not be the nature of His kingdom, and the same is true today, beloved. This whole notion that if a person had enough faith they would be healthy through multiple faith-healings, affluent by believing that God wants the best (in earthly terms) for His children, and would be protected from all kinds of difficulties is false. To borrow from the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 14:17, “The kingdom of God is not meat and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.” Knowing God, union with Christ, holy living, and the blessings that flow from such things—this is what the kingdom is all about.

Jesus, knowing what the people were thinking, “...straightway constrained his disciples to get into the ship and to go to the other side before unto Bethsaida, while he sent away the people” (Mark 6:45). John adds this detail, “When Jesus therefore perceived that they

would come and take him by force to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone.” Matthew and Mark inform us that Jesus went to that mountain alone to pray.

### 1. Praying and rowing

As Jesus saw what was developing, He did something that must have seemed strange to the apostles—He compelled them to enter the ship and sail to the other side of the sea without Him. Why do this? Did the Savior not want them near to Him? Why would He want to dismiss the multitudes Himself? Why shouldn't they help Him do it? And how would Jesus join them if they sail across without Him? He had no boat of His own, so would He walk around this large body of water? Yes, all of this must have seemed so strange, especially the fact that Matthew and Mark both use the word “constrained”—He urged them, compelled them to go on without Him.

So again, in obedience to Him, they begin across the sea once more. The last time they went He was with them and that's when the storm came. But, in any event, they do as He commands, and Jesus, after sending the people home, goes up a mountain alone and prays.

Beloved, this is so instructive for us in several ways. First, we remind ourselves that this is God on the mountain, God the Son. In one sense, Jesus didn't need to pray, for being God meant He needed nothing, for all is His. But, on the other hand, Jesus came to earth as a mediator on our behalf. So there He was, praying. We are not told for what He prayed or even what He said—just that He prayed. Here is our great High Priest, undoubtedly glorifying His Father but also interceding for His disciples and us His people. Perhaps that heart of compassion which was moved for the multitudes was pouring out prayer also for the elect among them, too.

But secondly, we see that our Lord valued private prayer. With all that had to be done in His relatively brief

time on earth, we see that a good part of that time was spent in prayer. It can be so tempting for each of us, because of our many responsibilities, to minimize our times of prayer alone with God. But I think we would be pretty hard pressed to realistically say any of us are busier than the Lord Jesus was each day or that the work we're doing is somehow more important or more pressing than His. There He was praying, and the context suggests for several hours.

The disciples were not aware He was praying. No one else appears to have been able to know He was. But our God wanted us to know it. That is why He had it recorded in the gospels—for our benefit and encouragement. Beloved, if our Savior could pray several hours that His Father would be glorified and that those for whom He died would be helped as well as that His Father would help Him to do what He came into the world to do, all of which we can surmise from the kind of prayer we find in John 17, then surely we ought to be able to set aside time to pray for the glory of our heavenly Father, for others needing prayer, and that we would be better fitted by the Lord for our callings.

“When evening was come, he was there alone,” Matthew tells us. He goes on to say what was happening with the disciples at this time. “But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary.” John adds that “the sea arose by reason of a great wind that blew.” We don't know if this storm was as grave as the last one they experienced when Jesus was asleep in the ship, but at the very least it must have reminded them of that except that this time Jesus was not with them. At least He wasn't with them in the ship. We'll revisit that thought later.

John 6:19 informs us that the disciples had gone between three and four miles from shore. Matthew says they were in the midst of the sea. One can only imagine what went through their minds. Here they were, once

more, where the Lord told them to go. And now again they meet with trouble, except that now Jesus was nowhere to be seen.

Beloved, can you relate to this experience? You are doing what the Lord would have you do the best you can. For some reason it doesn't seem that the Lord is near as before. Devotions are a bit more mechanical and church seems like duty; you might still pray but not as lively as you once did. And now, trying to do the will of God, the storm comes down. You are rowing and rowing but no shore is in sight. You've tried all that you know how to try but to no avail, and now you're in the storm without any sense of Jesus' presence.

We don't know if the disciples prayed; we would hope so. We know they were rowing, toiling to make headway. But clearly it appeared they were unable to overcome the wind. And now there's no Jesus in the boat to say, "Peace, be still." There are times in our storms that we really don't see how it can go well. Encouragements aren't appearing anywhere, despite all that we're trying to do. So we row and we look for Jesus.

These are hard moments, aren't they? So often our sins from the past come back to us at times like this. We see how we've been so unfaithful to the Lord and now, when we're in need, we almost feel guilty asking the Lord for help. But we must not let Satan persuade us not to pray.

Thanks be to God, the disciples weren't alone. Even though they were between three to four miles from shore, Mark tells us something so sweet—"And he saw them toiling in rowing." Mind you, it was already evening. They were miles away. It wasn't like they were in a large ship that could be easily spotted. But Jesus saw them working hard to row to some shore, row to safety. Beloved, the same is true today. Jesus sees you. You could almost imagine Jesus turning during prayer—His eyes scanning the Sea of Galilee. There they are. It's going so hard for them.

Our great High Priest ever lives to make intercession for us to God, but that doesn't mean His eyes are closed to us when He prays. He is praying and watching, praying and watching. What a comfort! But it is not a comforting thought that Jesus is watching us if we're consciously not living the way we know pleases Him, living in some sin. How grievous if that is the case! Knowing that He sees us but acting as if He was far, far away and did not see.

By this time in history, the Romans had divided the night into four parts, each of which was three hours long. Each segment was called a "watch." The Jews had done so earlier, but they divided the night into three four-hour sections. So according to the Roman division, used in Jesus' day, the first watch would be from 6 to 9 p.m., the second from 9 p.m. to midnight, the third from midnight to 3 a.m., and the fourth watch from 3 a.m. to 6 in the morning. Mark tells us that after Jesus saw them toiling in rowing, "about the fourth watch of the night He cometh unto them." They had been rowing for hours. We can't imagine that Jesus sent the multitude away after it was dark or that the disciples would have taken ship to cross the sea near to night. So it is likely that at the very least they were rowing six hours and perhaps as much as nine or more. And after all that, they had only come about halfway across.

About the fourth watch of the night, He came to them. In the midst of their exhaustion, perhaps near despondency, He came. He came to them in a way no one ever had done before. He came to them on the boisterous waves and made clear headway as if the waves were a smooth path for His feet. Mark adds the fascinating words that He "would have passed by them." They were rowing as good fishermen do. Jesus walked. In six to nine hours, they made it only so far. But He was about to pass them. Children, Jesus had no ship, no sails, no oars—He walked.

One can only imagine how terrified the apostles were when they spotted this *person* walking on the waves!

Matthew 14:26 says, “And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit, and they cried out for fear.” Mark adds, “They all saw him and were troubled.” This figure on the water—would it pass or confront them? There was already a sense among many Jews that the Sea of Galilee was a foreboding place, especially at night, because of the dangers. So the disciples were already tired, weary, undoubtedly discouraged—and now *this*. Would this specter approaching them seal their doom? Where was the Lord when they needed Him the most?

When we are weary, despondent, exhausted, and alone, we too might fear that Satan himself is about to overwhelm us in our woe. It can be so dark, so stormy, so seemingly hopeless, and now there is one more frightening development on top of all else. We too cry out!

## 2. Walking and sinking

The apostles’ cry of fear did not go unanswered. In Mark 6:50 we read, “And immediately he talked with them and saith unto them, Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid.” The Lord spoke to them and said three things. First, “Be of good cheer,” i.e., be encouraged or take courage. The third thing He said was, “Be not afraid.” But the *second* thing He said reads in English, “It is I.” In the Greek it is literally, “I am.” “Be of good cheer. I am. Do not fear.” Of course, “I am” can rightly be translated, “It is I.” But there are simply too many “I am” passages associated with Jesus in the gospels to think this was merely meant to communicate, “It’s me.”

What is interesting and important is the Lord comforts them with Himself. He doesn’t promise them anything. Doesn’t rebuke the wind or the sea this time. The storm hadn’t ended, but He fixes their hopes on who He is—the “I am.” Beloved, is not this the deepest source of comfort we could have in the midst of all our woes—to know that the great “I am” is here? And He is here! He

promised it in His Word. To those who are looking to Him by faith, He promises never to leave you, never to forsake you, storms notwithstanding.

If we compare the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we find out that Jesus did not immediately enter the ship. Something happened first. But before we look at that something, just pause to think about this moment. The storm wasn't over yet. The waves were still mounting up. It was still dark, being only the fourth watch of the night. The wind was still howling and making it difficult to row. But Jesus was above the waves. He fixed their faith on Him as though to bid them not to regard the storm anymore. He told them to be of good cheer and not be afraid even though in the very moment the storm was just as fierce as it was before.

This is the Christian life. The Christian life isn't about miraculous healings. It isn't about miracles. It isn't about the Lord solving all our problems and providing all we ask Him for. It's about how we live our lives before the face of God and others. It's about the Lord being with us each day in every situation. It's about having faith in the Lord being with us in every situation. It's about living in the reality that the Lord is with us in every situation. It is even dying with the reality that, even then, the Lord will be with us.

So the storm continued, but Jesus was there. Peter, in a hard-to-explain request, says to Jesus, "Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water." First of all, it does not appear this request of Peter's was born of faith. The Lord said, "I am." Peter replied, "*If* it be thou...." Peter should let the word of the Lord be the final say. We do not need to ask for signs and wonders if God's Word speaks. We don't need to pray about something if God already gives us clear direction about it from His Word.

But let's give Peter the benefit of the doubt that he made this request because he was just so afraid of being deceived by the evil one. What a request he makes! We

just observed how no one had ever walked on water. The closest thing we have to that is the prophet Elisha causing an axe head to swim. But no sooner did Peter see Jesus do this, he himself would do it, too.

We see such patience on Jesus' part with respect to this somewhat unusual request of His impetuous disciple, Simon Peter. "Come," Jesus says to him. Peter climbs down out of the ship in the pitch dark in stormy seas and begins to walk on the water! Did not Jesus say that faith could move mountains? When the Lord calls us, beloved, we can go anywhere. We can go to dangerous Muslim nations to bring the gospel. We can go to frightful Communist countries with the gospel. We can even speak with our difficult neighbor or child or spouse! Here Peter not only obeyed but he also believed. If Jesus said to come, Peter would come, no questions asked. And so he did, himself now risen above the storm. As long as the eyes of faith trusted in Jesus and not in wind or water or physics, Peter would be fine.

Have you ever walked on water as your faith locked onto Jesus Christ? Though winds and waves wrapped about your senses, pain gnawed within, and circumstances felt as if they would crush you and sink you, did that faith catch hold of the words of the Savior and uphold you, keep you from sinking, fill you with wonder, give you to stay above it all even while having to go through it all?

In Matthew 14:30, we read, "But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me." Beloved, do you remember the last storm on the sea? Jesus pointed out a relationship between fear and faith. So it is in this history as well. As long as Peter's faith embraced Jesus and His command to come, the apostle was fine. But as soon as he began to observe the wind, he began to be afraid and so began to sink. Faith sees through the storm; fear sees nothing but the storm. Faith keeps our head above water;

fear sinks it beneath the waves. Faith credits God's Word to be true; fear says, "I'm not so sure it is." Faith honors and pleases God; fear dishonors and displeases Him.

But even as Peter was sinking, his faith came up for air, crying to Jesus. If Peter had absolutely no faith in this moment, why cry out? "What could Jesus do?" would be the language of absolute unbelief. But faith was weak and so Peter's cry was strong—"Lord, save me!" It is better to have a quiet, steady faith keeping us near to Christ daily than to have a waxing and waning faith that has to cry out often in fear. Yet it is better to have a weak faith than no faith at all, for then all there will be in the storm is winds and waves and fear.

In verse 31, we read, "And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" Jesus is strong enough to keep Himself and Peter above the surface. He's strong enough to keep all His children above the waves. He's strong enough to hold you, even if you have but a little faith. Jesus didn't accuse Peter of having no faith—just little faith. And again Jesus chides Peter for doubting. Doubting what? His own ability to walk on water? No, of course not. Doubting that winds and waves are a dangerous place to walk? No. Doubting Jesus. Jesus would not have Peter to doubt Him.

Beloved, Jesus would not have any of us doubt Him either. It is really a shame to doubt God the Son, Jesus Christ.

In verse 32, we read, "And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased." The Master was there and so the storm ends. We don't read that Jesus commanded the wind and waves this time. It just stopped as soon as He was there with them. What does this mean? It means storms last only as long as God has a use for them. Once the lessons were taught and learned, the trial ended. Not only does our Lord have control over all things, but His infinite wisdom puts all things to the best use in the best

time with the best duration for the best purposes. We can trust Him with how long our storms need to last.

“Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.” This is worship and this is faith, beloved—acknowledging God to be who He really is. Faith honors Him greatly. Sadly, however, this wasn’t all that happened at this time. In Mark 6, we read, “They were sore amazed in themselves beyond measure and wondered. For they considered not the miracle of the loaves: for their heart was hardened.” Why do we keep acting surprised when God does what He says He will do? He has proven His Word so many times in our lives; yet it seems with almost every new challenge, fear flees and doubts rise. Let us prayerfully fight against this, what Scripture is calling a hardened heart. Let us remember the Word and works of the Lord and trust in Him!

### **3. Running and healing**

In Matthew 14:34, we read, “When they were gone over, they came into the land of Gennesaret.” Gennesaret, also known as Chinnereth, was a region southwest of Capernaum across the Galilee. Jesus and the apostles drew near to shore there. But it’s interesting to note what John writes about the rest of their journey to that place. After they willingly received Him into the ship we are told, “immediately the ship was at the land whither they went.” John is saying they went from the middle to the end of their journey right away, in an instant. So we have yet another miracle here. Jesus didn’t have to take over the rowing from these tired men. He but had to will it and the ship was at the shore.

Beloved, so will the ship of our lives be—in one instant, believers will exchange the stormy sea, the rowing and toiling, for the calm shore of eternal glory. But, in that same brief instant, the unbelieving and unsaved will

also suddenly find themselves on a shore of wretchedness called hell.

Seeing it was the fourth watch that Jesus came to them, and they arrived immediately at the shore to which they traveled, it was still early morning when they arrived. In Mark 6:54 and what follows, we read, "And when they were come out of the ship, straight-way they knew him and ran through that whole region round about." Matthew 14:35 says it this way: "When the men of that place had knowledge of him, they sent out into all that country round about." So some recognized Jesus when He left the ship for shore and they ran to tell others who, when they heard, sent messages all over. Messages about what, we might ask? Matthew is somewhat brief, writing, "And brought unto him all that were diseased; and besought him that they might only touch the hem of his garment." Mark is a bit more expansive: "And began to carry about in beds those that were sick, where they heard he was. And whithersoever he entered, into villages or cities or country they laid the sick in the streets and besought him that they might touch if it were but the border of his garment."

What a sight this must have been! The one carrying the other, people calling out, reaching out, beseeching Him that they might but touch His garment. Sick and crippled and troubled folk from all over coming to Jesus. And the result of all this? "And as many as touched were made perfectly whole." Picture a cripple comes to Jesus and he is able to walk away. Another comes coughing and wheezing and walks away strong and healthy. Perhaps a leper comes and leaves a cleansed man. Another maybe came unable to see and leaves with sight. Wasn't there one person, just one, who came to Jesus and went away disappointed? Unaffected? Not cured? No, not even one! "As many as touched were made perfectly whole." Well, if that's the case with all manner of bodily disease, why

would anyone doubt that the same would happen with spiritual maladies?

Has there ever been a poor, broken sinner who came to Jesus who went away disappointed? Unaffected? Not cured? No, not one. And this blessed fountain of cleansing is still open. Whether it's for the first time or the ten thousandth time, come to this precious Savior and be cleansed of all your sins, your guilt and shame removed afresh. Faith, not sight, brings us to Him. So you must not look on how awful a person you might see yourself to be. Look rather on Him, so that you too might touch the hem of His garment and be made perfectly whole. Perfectly whole.

Have you no need of this Physician of souls? Are you satisfied with how you are, with your portion in the world? Your case is far sadder, far worse than the most diseased one who came to Jesus that day on the shore. They saw their need and came to Him, looking for His healing power. And are you so lifeless spiritually that you don't even see the need of Him? Repent of this hardness of heart and seek Him immediately.

Look to Jesus as the only hope for lost sinners and born-again saints alike. Blessed is the man, woman, or child who looks by faith upon Jesus Christ and trusts in Him—His ability, His willingness, His power, His compassion, His blood. "Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, whose hope the Lord is."