

+ Ezekiel 37:15-28 + In Hopeless Times, Saints Look Forward With Hope +
+ Third Sunday of End Time: Saints Triumphant + 16 November 2008

We live in depressing times. Turn on the news and you'll hear about another plunge in the stock market, jobs cut, and homes foreclosed. On the home front, you see an increasing gap in your own checkbook between your bills and your income. The struggling economy even impacts our synod's ability to do mission work here in New York and abroad, but it's not just the economy. You hear about violence and crime, families breaking up, absolute truth denied, and attacks on family and marriage as God intended them. Sin runs rampant. Hearts grow colder every day as people reject God. Plus we know what's coming any day now off the lake.

We live in depressing times, so we might be tempted to lose the hope we have, but God has a sure remedy for it all. So for a moment, let's turn off the TV, step away from the computer and close the checkbook. Let's step away from the constant struggle of being God's "saints" (his people made holy through the blood of Christ), and go to his Word, where he tells us, **IN HOPELESS TIMES, SAINTS LOOK FORWARD WITH HOPE.**

Because of home foreclosures all over the country, many people out there are without a home or are struggling to hang on to the homes they have. We've been blessed here in that it hasn't been that bad, but there are still plenty of challenges. With the Lord, though, there is no challenge. He has a solution that has nothing to do with mortgages or bailouts. **In hopeless times, we look forward with hope to a new home.**

Nearly 600 years before Christ lived the prophet Ezekiel, who served among the Jewish exiles in Babylon or modern-day Iraq. The Lord wanted these people to look forward with hope to a new home he himself would provide. To do so, he had them look back to their old home, from which they were exiled. Centuries before, the Lord had brought the Israelites into the land of Canaan, which God had promised to their forefathers. After about 400 years of peace, the combination of sinful backsliding and long-held family rivalries split the kingdom of Israel in two. Soon the people abandoned the true God to follow local fertility gods. The Lord sent many prophets to warn them about this, but no one listened. Finally, God destroyed both kingdoms—scattering the Northern Kingdom to the four winds and sending the Southern Kingdom into exile.

The Jewish exiles longed for their old home and a return to a restored, united kingdom of Israel. God wanted them to look forward with hope, so he used an object lesson. He had his prophet Ezekiel take two sticks and inscribe on each a name representing one of the two old kingdoms. He was to hold them in his hand so they looked like one stick, and then say, ***"This is what the Lord GOD says: 'I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation...and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms.'***"

God promised to provide a new, restored home that would be perfectly united. This gave hope to God's faithful people, but when the time came for the exiles to return home, it didn't turn out that way. The exiles from the Northern Kingdom never returned and no united kingdom was ever formed. Plus what unity they had was marred by sin. So what did the Lord mean?

God used familiar, physical imagery to help the exiles look forward to an even better home...in heaven. For those who looked forward to the promised Savior, God provided a glimpse of the new home he would provide—a home with perfect unity in the most blessed country of all, where God's people would enjoy greater blessing than anywhere on earth.

In the same way, the Lord leads us to look forward with hope to a new home. In the hymn, ***"I'm But a Stranger Here"*** there's a line that states, ***"Earth is a desert drear; heav'n is my home."*** Now God does provide us a beautiful world filled with blessings, so it's not meant to be ***"a desert drear"***, but to a certain extent it still is. You see, our earthly "home" is filthy with sin and corrupt to its core. It's filled with division over things like gender, race, family relationship, social status, and age. Conflict and rivalry, selfish ambition and pride mar even the best attempts at unity from marriages to nations. By nature, we are more inclined to break up unity for our own self-serving ambitions than to form it. It's amazing the Lord hasn't foreclosed on our earthly "home" yet!

He hasn't done so, because he is the God of free and faithful grace. He is now getting a new home ready for us in heaven! On the night before Jesus died, he promised, ***"In my Father's house are many rooms*** (literally "homes")... ***I am going there to prepare a place for you."*** Jesus, our Lord of grace, is preparing this new home for us and he promises this new home will be cleansed of sin. He says that through Ezekiel, ***"I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them."***

Besides having a new home in heaven, the Lord also promises we'll have the best neighbor of all living nearby—himself. ***"I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them..."*** The apostle John also looked forward with hope when that would become a reality. ***"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem,***

coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them.'"

We have more to look forward to, though. Recently we went through another election cycle and will again in the future as leaders change. It was no different for the exiles, whose rulers changed power several times, but God doesn't change. That's his answer in hopeless times as **saints look forward with hope to a new, eternal king.**

The Lord wanted his Old Testament believers to look forward with hope to the eternal reign of the promised Messiah—his Son, Jesus Christ. To do this, he had them look back to their old king—King David. Under David, Israel reached its pinnacle of power and prosperity. At no other time was God's hand of blessing so wide open for his faithful people. Their territory reached its farthest and their storehouses were filled. God blessed the land and the people under David, but David and his descendants were sinful. When the descendants of David chased after other gods, they lost the kingdom.

God had an answer. **"There will be one king over all of them...My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd."** Ancient kings sought to be regarded as "shepherd-kings" because they wanted to be known for caring for their people. David was such a shepherd-king for Israel, but God didn't raise him from the dead. He sent Jesus, David's descendant and God's anointed Shepherd-King, to rule not an earthly kingdom, but hearts and minds. Sadly the people rejected Jesus and forfeited his blessings, but God still fulfilled his promise.

Look no further than your own life. The spiritual enemies that plagued Israel now plague you and me. Unbelief and doubt in God's promises threaten to rob you of hope in these depressing times. The sinful nature attacks with guilt for past sins or daily ambushes with sins of weakness. The world and what it thinks your attitude, your lifestyle and your priorities should be batters you from every side. Leading the charge is Satan, who wants nothing more than to rob you of your hope of heaven in Christ.

To rescue you from this onslaught, the Lord of grace sent Jesus, the sinless descendant of his servant David. Jesus came to be your Shepherd-King. He came to fulfill every one of God's promises and keep everyone of God's commands. Jesus came to remove the doubt in your heart. He came to cleanse you of the guilt of past sins and to defend you from the daily ambushes of sins of weakness. He vanquished the power of your evil foe by laying down his life to rescue you and then defeating death by his glorious resurrection. He came to rule over your heart forever, so his holy will gets first priority in your life. By doing all this, the Lord also changes your relationship with him, so you can always look forward with hope.

In this life, relationships and people change. One of the biggest factors that lead to depression is the loss or break-up of a relationship, but such losses and break-ups have one primary source—our ruined relationship with God. That relationship was ruined when our first parents, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God and befriended Satan. We unfortunately share that wicked friendship, but still the Lord makes it possible to look forward with hope.

As he had done before, the Lord had the Jewish exiles look forward by looking back once more—to their old relationship with the Lord. At one time, the Israelites had a close, loving relationship with God. He had set them apart as his chosen nation from which the promised Savior would come, but they failed to remain faithful to him.

They didn't deserve a new relationship, but the Lord had one for them. **"...I will save them from their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God...I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant....My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people."** Here the Lord speaks of an eternal peace between him and his people—a peace that comes only through Jesus, **"the Prince of Peace"**.

Jesus brings a peace to our hearts that comes without any strings attached, as he said **"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."** Jesus came to reconcile us with God through his death on the cross as Paul wrote, **"For God was pleased... through him to reconcile to himself all things...by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."**

In spite of the hopeless, depressing times in which we live and in spite of our sin and guilt, the Lord of grace has reconciled us to himself by cleansing us of our every sin. Through the blood of Christ sealed by his resurrection from the dead, God established an everlasting covenant of peace with us so we enjoy that beautiful new relationship here in part, but fully and forever in heaven, as God says, **"I will be their God, and they will be my people"**.

Yes, we live in depressing times, but look forward with hope to what the Lord has in store for you! Look forward to the new home personally prepared by your Savior! Look forward with hope to joining the saints triumphant—all your loved ones in Christ as part of the united nation of Heaven praising King Jesus, our Savior and our God. Look forward to enjoying your relationship with that same Savior for all eternity! In Christ, look forward with the hope of heaven! Amen.