

**Hope when otherwise things
might seem to be hopeless**

A close-up photograph of a person's hand, wearing a white shirt cuff, resting on a dark brown leather Bible. The Bible is lying flat on a wooden surface. The word 'BIBLE' is embossed in gold on the spine and the cover. The background is a warm, brown gradient with a subtle circular pattern.

**Rev. Ian A Arnold
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Please read beforehand Ezekiel Chapter 37: verses 1 to 14

1And it came to pass, when king Hezekiah heard it, that he rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of Jehovah. **2**And he sent Eliakim, who was over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and the elders of the priests, covered with sackcloth, unto Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz. **3**And they said unto him, Thus saith Hezekiah, This day is a day of trouble, and of rebuke, and of contumely; for the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth. **4**It may be Jehovah thy God will hear the words of Rabshakeh, whom the king of Assyria his master hath sent to defy the living God, and will rebuke the words which Jehovah thy God hath heard: wherefore lift up thy prayer for the remnant that is left. **5**So the servants of king Hezekiah came to Isaiah. **6**And Isaiah said unto them, Thus shall ye say to your master, Thus saith Jehovah, Be not afraid of the words that thou hast heard, wherewith the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. **7**Behold, I will put a spirit in him, and he shall hear tidings, and shall return



unto his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land. **8**So Rabshakeh returned, and found the king of Assyria warring against Libnah; for he had heard that he was departed from Lachish. **9**And he heard say concerning Tirhakah king of Ethiopia, He is come out to fight against thee. And when he heard it, he sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying, **10**Thus shall ye speak to Hezekiah king of Judah, saying, Let not thy God in whom thou trustest deceive thee, saying, Jerusalem shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. **11**Behold, thou hast heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, by destroying them utterly: and shalt thou be delivered? **12**Have the gods of the nations delivered them, which my fathers have destroyed, Gozan, and Haran, and Rezeph, and the children of Eden that were in Telassar? **13**Where is the king of Hamath, and the king of Arpad, and the king of the city of Sepharvaim, of Hena, and Ivvah? **14**And Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it; and Hezekiah went up unto the house of Jehovah, and spread it before Jehovah.



Historical background

In the year 587 B.C., little more than four hundred years since David had become king of ancient Israel, what was left of that kingdom was overrun and conquered by the mighty empire of those times, Babylon. Jerusalem was invaded and its walls broken down, the temple was destroyed, its treasures were looted, and thousands of the leading people were carried away captive into Babylon.



Over those four hundred years, and with increasing acceleration, the people of ancient Israel had descended into grievous and abominable sinfulness. The kingdom had split into two following the death of King Solomon, and though there had been periods of attempted reform, things soon reverted to the old patterns of godless behaviour, wickedness, and, at best, lip-service worship of God.

As to how grievous things became, we need only to read through the prophets of the Old Testament, from Isaiah onwards. Apart from cataloguing the awfulness of what people were doing, and notwithstanding the admonitions of the prophets, what we also read about is that the people remained convinced throughout that **no great harm would befall them. After all, they assured themselves that they were God's chosen people.** "All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword", the Lord said, "who say, 'This calamity shall not overtake us.'" (Amos 9:10) This is what they truly believed: that



It was, therefore, a massive shock to those who were alive at the time when Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians and so many of its people were taken captive and compelled to go into exile, in Babylon. And it is not surprising that in Babylon these people, now bewildered and sad, and feeling abandoned by God, started to lose hope, being filled with sadness and discouragement.



In my English Bible Psalm 137 is summarised as “Longing for Zion (Jerusalem) in a Foreign Land”. And the first part of it reads,

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in the midst of it. For there those who carried us away captive required of us a song, and those who plundered us required of us mirth, saying, ‘Sing us a song of Zion!’ How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her skill! If I do not remember you, let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy.” (Verses 1 to 6)

Wonderfully, and though the people had behaved so badly and deserved what had happened to them, **the Lord never abandoned them.** Two of the great Old Testament prophets were serving the Lord at that



Through Jeremiah the Lord challenged the people **not to sit around feeling sorry, forever looking backwards to what once was, but to be pro-active and to turn the situation into positives.** In a letter Jeremiah sent to his people, now exiles in Babylon, Jeremiah wrote, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters - that you may be increased there, and not diminished.....For thus says the Lord: After seventy years are completed in Babylon, I will visit you and perform my good word towards you, and cause you to return to this place. **For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says**



And here, through Ezekiel, is another unforgettable message of hope and encouragement. Whilst the situation in which the captives found themselves seemed like a valley of dry and scattered bones; the whole situation eerie, quiet and death-like; yet the Lord promised them, **“Surely I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live”**.



A message from 2,400 years ago still relevant to us today

There is an immensely important and reassuring message here which comes down through the centuries to us today through these words. And, though it be in very different ways and in very different circumstances, this message is as relevant to us today as it will be for all future generations which come after us. And this message is, **however, dire, black and discouraging a situation may be in which we find ourselves the Lord never abandons us.**

This, too, is true, that however dire, black and discouraging a situation may be in which the world finds itself the Lord never abandons it. In this regard, also, and as is the teaching given to us in the Writings, **He offers hope and has a plan.**



The Lord never wills what is evil, and continually warns us against it. But when we have freely and stubbornly chosen it, notwithstanding those warnings, He reluctantly permits it. As is the teaching in the Writings, “The Lord permits evil, not as one who is willing, but as one who is not able to prevent it, on account of the end in view, which is salvation.” (“Divine Providence” 16) **And in the midst of what He has to permit the Lord is working in unseen ways, and in accordance with His Love and Wisdom, to bring good out of it.** (See “Arcana Coelestia” 6489)

In the meantime, **His focus is on maintaining in us feelings of hope.** And this may be through Bible verses and reading from our childhood; or a point which caught our attention in a sermon, or in what someone once said; or in the remembered example of someone we knew and who impressed us profoundly by the way they handled a very unwelcome and challenging situation that had arisen for them. It can be from the lyrics of a beautiful song, the words of which come to mind when we need them most. A centuries old saying in English, which helps people when they are feeling lost in darkness and cut off from the Lord, is “This too will pass”.



And what might be one of those remembered verses from the Bible which restore and strengthen hope in us?

You will remember the beautiful and much-loved Psalm 23, one verse of which reads, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow”. (Verse 4). “The valley of the shadow” in Old Testament times would have been understood as the place where a traveller was most vulnerable to attack and ambush from robbers and thieves. From time to time **we walk into a spiritual valley of the shadow when we are vulnerable to attack and ambush from evil spirits.**



There are calls to hold fast to hope throughout the Word, some explicit, some not so explicit. “Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him, on those who hope in His mercy, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine.” (Psalm 33:18,19). Similarly, “O Israel, hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption. And He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.” (Psalm 130:7,8). And from what the apostle Paul taught, “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”

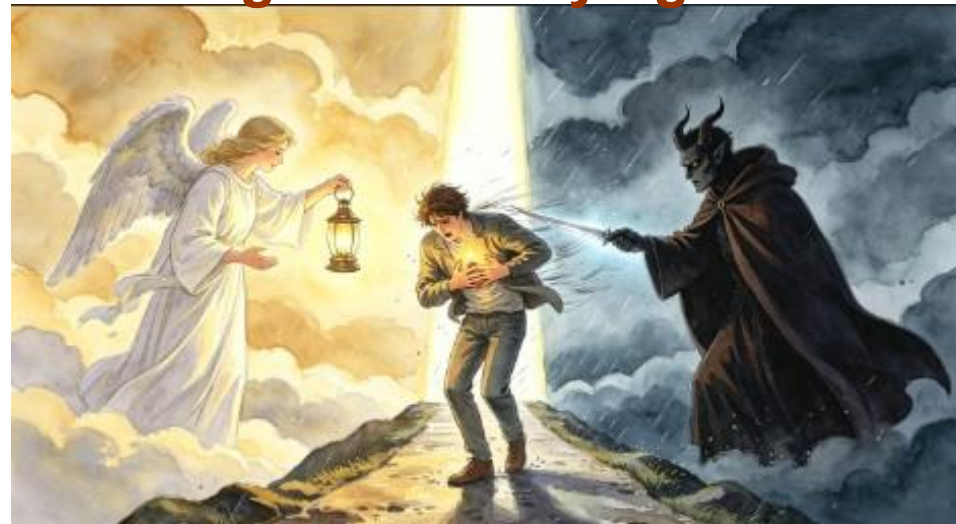
(Romans 15:4)



One of the great and most admirable of the people whose story we read about in the Old Testament is Joseph. And one of the things we admire about Joseph was his enduring hope in the Lord, even in what were his darkest days. It is an example that inspires us to this day.

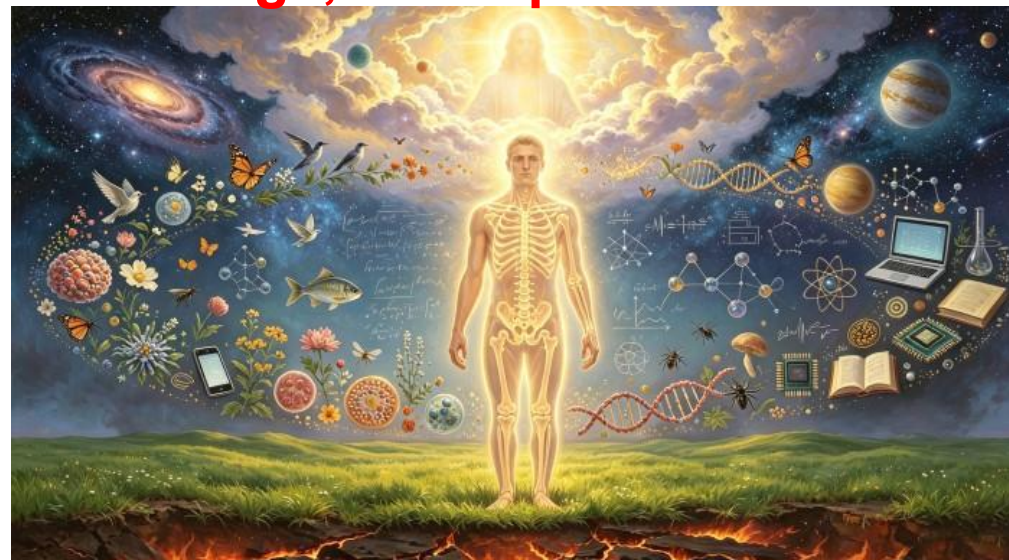


Hope is what the voices of darkness, meaning evil spirits, concentrate on destroying. And here is the great challenge, to hold on to hope when such attacks on it within us are being made. Or, as we can be called on to do, to help others hold on to hope in the midst of their despair and increasing sense of hopelessness. We read, “When people are undergoing temptation....evil spirits are present at that time, injecting a feeling of distress and causing them to despair of salvation.” (“Arcana Caelestia” 6828). This is totally consistent with what we are taught elsewhere in the Writings, that “unceasingly the hells are focused on doing evil and trying to destroy heaven.” (“Arcana Caelestia” 9492) And this is heaven, in general, and heaven within each of us.



The valley of dry bones

Picture images are very powerful, just as this one is of the valley of dry bones here in the prophecy of Ezekiel. Bones are what give our body its structure and, of course, enable us to be up and active and doing things and being useful. And this is what truth does. **Truth gives structure** to how we see ourselves, see the world, make sense of our purpose in the world, of Who God is, what our responsibility to others involves and what it means to live a good life. **Each person's set of bones, meaning each person's understanding of these things, is unique.** This understanding is our identity; it is who we are; it is what other people see in us.



Vital as this structure - this understanding of truth - is, it is only a structure. It is a skeleton. **And a skeleton has no life in it. It only has life when it is clothed with flesh.** And so we have the teaching of the Writings, “truth is the mainstay of good as the bones are of flesh.” (“Arcana Caelestia” 3812:8). And, “Bones mean truth before it is brought to life by being infilled with good. It is truth in the memory only.” (“Apocalypse Explained 555:14)

Here in Ezekiel's vision the bones, however, are not even connected. They are scattered all over the place. What does this mean?

We need to remember that what Ezekiel saw was a representation of how it then was with the people in captivity, or exile. They were under the control of Babylon. **And so what is being depicted here are those times when we have come under the control of the love of self, which - in the spiritual meaning -Babylon represents.**



The love of self

“The love of self” carries a wide range of meanings, principally such things as, *our insistence that we live in modern times and have no need to strictly obey the ten Commandments;

*or, telling ourselves that we don’t need the Lord’s help, such as He gives to us in His Word, to navigate our way through life;

*or, feeling superior to others around us;

*or, silently or openly insisting that our opinions about things should prevail over everyone else’s.

*or, wanting to be in control of another person’s life, as can happen in an unequal and unhappy marriage

When we come into such states; in other words, when “Babylon” has us in its grip; **the way truths connect together in our understanding breaks apart**

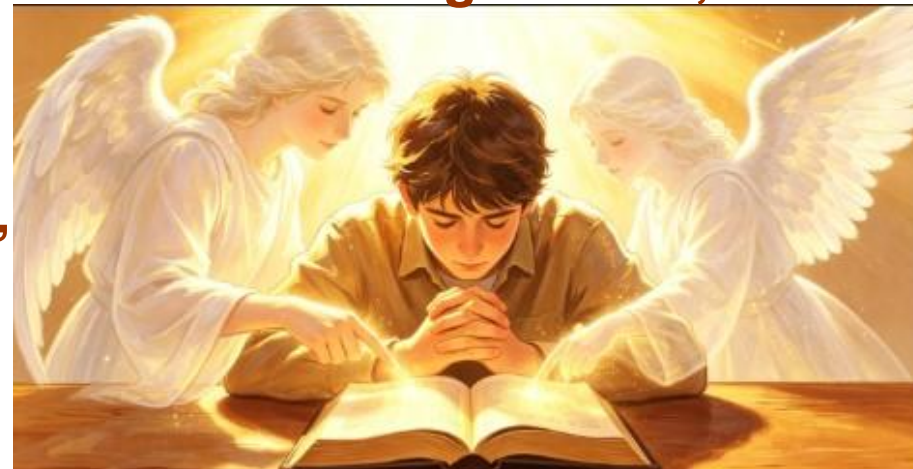


As an example, think of someone, a Christian, who becomes indignant and resentful towards another person because of what that person has done or said which has offended them. Once that indignation and resentment is confirmed, (and it can be in a matter of seconds), suddenly other truths which all have relevance to the situation are scattered, so to speak, to the wind. What has happened to the truth about forgiveness? Or the truth about being merciful? Or the truth about not rushing to judgement of another? Or the truth about controlling anger? Previously they formed a recognizable network, each truth complementing the other and each a part of the other. But now they are scattered. **And instead of light and brightness there is now death and darkness.** Looked at in the light of heaven our mind becomes a valley of dry bones.



But it doesn't have to stay that way. This is one of the wonderful messages this story holds for us. Whilst evil spirits start piling on us guilt and shame and self-hatred, the Lord through the angels present with us strives in all ways possible to get us **to hold on to the hope of spiritual life renewed and of connection with heaven restored, beyond this spiritual calamity.**

"Temptations", we read, "involve feelings of doubt regarding the Lord's presence and mercy, and also regarding (the possibility of) our salvation. The evil spirits who are present with us at such times and who are the cause of the temptation do all they can to infuse a negative outlook, but good spirits and angels from the Lord in every way disperse that doubting attitude, all the time preserving a feeling of hope and in the end strengthening an affirmative outlook."
("Arcana Caelestia" 2338)



The Holy Spirit

What is also a wonderful message, and promise, that is enfolded in the spiritual meaning of this vision of the valley of dry bones is that **renewal, revival, and new life surging back into those truths we know and thought we believed in, is possible.**

But this doesn't just happen because we would like it to happen.

Do you remember the message that the prophet Jeremiah sent to his people, languishing in captivity in Babylon? The message was to be up and doing, not sitting around and feeling sorry for themselves. They were to be pro-active. They were to prepare for a future. They were to take to heart the promise God had for them, that He had a plan and a purpose for them.

When we are going through those states when Babylon is in control and, looking within, we see darkness and are not making sense of the truth we know, **there are things we can do and strategies we can**



We have a wonderful teaching in the Writings that **“Action comes first, then the desire for it in the person’s will follows.** For when people are led by their understanding to carry out any action, they at length are led by their will to do it, until at last they have taken it on as an action performed habitually.” (“Arcana Caelestia” 4353).

We may not be especially comfortable, or enthusiastic, offering an apology to someone we have upset or disappointed, but we need to do it. We may not be comfortable, or enthusiastic, about gently confronting someone who has hurt or disappointed us. But we need to do it. When we have let ourselves, and the Lord, down, through something sinful we have said or done we may feel so bad about ourselves that the repair of our relationship with Him seems impossible. But we can resolve with



There is a Chapter in Swedenborg's book "Conjugal Love") on the subject of "Apparent Love in Marriage". And what we read there is so relevant. When things in their marriage look dark and discouraging and Babylon has been holding sway, partners will find that if, nevertheless, **they affirm courtesy, respect and affection**, even in they do not at the time feel it, this opens the door for a genuine affection for each other to flow back in from the Lord.



Remember what was said at the beginning of this sermon, that the Lord never leaves us, even in our darkest, most unpromising, “captive-to-Babylon”, states. **His goal is to keep hope alive in us and He promises to bring to life again what can seem lifeless and dead.**

And we, through whom He does good to others, can serve a wonderful use, as opportunity arises, to restore hope and to renew His promise of a future, with those we know when they are themselves in such captive states and feeling cut off from the Lord.

Amen



Readings:

Arcana Caelestia 2916:

When regenerated man dies as regards his former self and rises again as regards the new. **It is through regeneration that from being a dead man he becomes a living man**, and it is from this that the meaning of ‘a grave’ is derived in the internal sense. When the idea of a grave presents itself the idea of regeneration comes to mind with angels.....**That ‘a grave’ means resurrection and also regeneration** is evident in Ezekiel, “Therefore prophesy and say to them, Thus says the Lord Jehovah, Behold, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, O My people, and I will bring you into the land of Israel, and you will know that I am Jehovah when I open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, O My people. And I will place you in your own land. Here ‘graves’ stands for the former self (‘old man’) and its evils and falsities, while the



opening of them and the coming up from them means being regenerated. Thus the idea of a grave perishes and so to speak is discarded when the idea of regeneration or new life enters.”

Matthew Chapter 27: verses 51-53

(At the point when Jesus died on the cross)
“Behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.”

Arcana Caelestia 6574:2

“The Lord Himself is present directly - and by means of angels indirectly - with those undergoing temptation and is offering resistance by refuting the falsities of the spirits from hell and dispersing their evil. From this comes renewal, hope, and victory.”



THE END

