

**March 8, 2014,
Finding Refuge amidst the Dry Bones
Mark Hoffman
Foothills Christian Church**

I want to talk tonight about what I feel like is a real problem with a lot of people. And, you know, when you look at poles in America today, the great majority of people now feel like America's going in the wrong direction. People are afraid of the future. They're expecting to live as at lower levels. They're expecting that their kids are not going to have the same advantages that they had. How many of you know that's true if you pay any attention?

But it's also true that in the church there is discouragement and there is, I think, a fatigue among many people. They try to do some things and yet we haven't gotten the results we wanted. And there's this fatigue. People are thinking "Why try?" You know we have been in a downward kind of a spiral for a few years. Things haven't turned out how we want. How many of you guys know exactly what I'm talking about?

So there's a lot of sort of escapist thinking. I won't go into that but there's a lot of ways in which people just kind of want to get out of the battle. I want to let the Bible address that tonight. How should we live in days like that? How can we be encouraged in days like that? If you have your Bible, if you want to open it to Psalms, chapter 11, we're going to just read beginning with the first four verses. This is the psalm of David. And it says this:

Psalms 11:1-4

¹ In the LORD I take refuge [now say that word, 'refuge.' That's going to be key tonight];

[So David asked the people around him.] How can you say to my soul, "Flee as a bird to your mountain;

*² For, behold, the wicked bend the bow,
They make ready their arrow upon the string*

To shoot in darkness [to shoot from concealment, to ambush] at the upright [righteous] in heart.

*³ If the foundations are destroyed,
What can the righteous do?"*

*⁴ The LORD is in His holy temple; the LORD'S throne is in heaven;
His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men.*

Let's just begin looking at the first two verses there. Let's read them again:

In the Lord, I take refuge. So, how can you say to my soul run away, flee as a bird to your mountain, for behold the wicked are bending the bow, they make ready their arrows upon the string to shoot in darkness at the upright in heart.

Now David says here that the Lord is my refuge. I have made God my refuge. Therefore he feels secure. He is safe. He is at peace. He is at rest. But others who surround David do not feel this way. They counsel David to flee, to run away. All around, they see danger. They see the upright being chased. They see the advantage that the unrighteous and the ungodly seem to have. And so they say, "flee" (that word in the Hebrew is in the plural). In other words, "Join everybody else in fleeing. Can't you see that everybody else is running away? So, join them."

Now perhaps this psalm is written near the end of Saul's reign. We don't know for sure but it seems to fit there. And so, at the end of Saul's reign, Saul has become completely corrupt. And he has been consorting, as you know, with clairvoyance and stuff. He has been trying to call forth the dead, trying to get a word from Samuel. He dies a suicide. We know that the Philistines have destroyed the army and they are taking over the land. And all around people have lost hope. There's mass fear and panic. And so they say, "Flee, like a bird. Fly away like a bird."

Have you ever noticed that birds are some of the most skittish animals there are? I mean there can be a whole flock of birds, maybe hundreds of them and if you take a couple steps towards them they all take off at the same time. I mean if one or two fly, they all fly. They don't even know why they're flying but they get so skittish, they're so afraid. It's easy, I think sometimes for people to be like that, to be caught up in what everyone else is feeling.

Do you ever feel like you're surrounded by people who feel defeated, who are afraid, who are pessimistic about the future, who are cynical about efforts to try and change things? They point to the strength of ungodliness. They point to the recent defeats. They point to the advantages that the godless have. They have the press and this and that and the other and so they say "Fly to your mountain."

Well, what is a mountain? It's a high place. It's a place where you think you're safe. If it's dangerous in the valley and you're a bird, if you can fly in the mountain that is your perceived place of safety. And times like this, people are just looking for a place to be safe, a safe investment. "Should I put my money into gold? Where's a safer community? Where can I escape for a while?" You see the truth is, people who do not know the Lord as their refuge always feel like they have to find a safe place of their own devices. But how many of you know there is no refuge that's true and lasting except the Lord.

David said, "I have made the Lord my refuge." Now, David is in a different place. They're all panicking but David knows the Lord as his refuge so he says, "How can you say to me 'Flee like a bird'?" You see, David has come to know the Lord. He's

come to trust the Lord, to experience the Lord as his confidence, as his peace, as his supply. And so he's not thinking about running.

How many of you guys know there's a close connection between faith and courage? How many of you know there's also a connection between fear and unbelief? One brings forth, the other.

Let's look at that word 'refuge'. David said, "The Lord is my refuge." Here's a dictionary definition. I consulted a couple different dictionaries:

Refuge is a place of shelter, protection, and safety; a condition of being safe or sheltered from danger or trouble.

That's beautiful, isn't it?

Psalms 2:12b

12 ...How blessed are all who take refuge in Him! [that is in God]

How blessed are they who truly know the Lord as their refuge, as their strength, as their confidence, how they sleep at night, how they can keep doing the right thing without fatigue, how they can be strengthened in the Lord.

Psalm 91 is a tremendous psalm but we're just going to read two verses from it.

Psalms 91:1-2

*1 He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High [how many of you guys know that you have to be pretty close to God to be dwelling in His shelter?]
Will abide in the shadow of the Almighty [you've got to be close enough to be in that shadow in the heat of the day].*

*2 I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress,
My God, in whom I trust!"*

Notice he doesn't say, "God is just a refuge, as if it's come kind of theoretical truth he's been taught. How many of you know a lot of us have heard a lot of good teaching and we know that the Bible says that God is a refuge? You know. We heard that. We can spout it back. But he says "the Lord is **my** refuge" he has experienced the Lord's deliverance. He knows how to abide in the Lord and be safe. And how many of you know that's different than just a theoretical knowledge?

I'm going to give you maybe a homework assignment, or maybe your devotions for tomorrow. Mark this down: Psalm 91 begins with this statement:

Psalm 91:1

1 I'm going to dwell in the shelter of the most high and I will make the Lord my refuge.

And in the verses following that there are over 20 benefits or blessings that come to the person that makes the Lord their refuge (personally), that comes to trust in Him. You can look those up tomorrow.

Let me ask you a question. Have you made the Lord your refuge? I mean, can you say the Lord is my refuge? I know how to abide in the refuge of the Lord, no matter what comes about.

Now, I've never bought a lot of art or even a lot of posters. I've never done that. I can only remember two that I've ever actually bought for myself. But let me put a picture of one that I've had in my office for about maybe 20 years.



How many of you guys have seen that? I think you guys recognize that. I'm sorry it's not bigger. But there's a doorway in that dark spot. That's a man and he's standing in that lighthouse with his hands in his pockets. And I tell you, look at that wave. Look at that water surrounding him and yet he is in there as safe and secure as he could be.

And one day, I don't know, 15 or 20 years ago I was actually at Parkway mall and I walked by a poster shop, an art shop and I saw that and for only the second time in my life, I said, "I've got to have that poster." And it's been in my office ever since because that is who God is to me. I'm that guy in that doorway because God is my refuge. I know it.

There is so much fear and anxiety and defeatist talk all around us, whether you're on TV or listening to the pundits or whatever you're doing, people that are trying to sell you gold. Hey, I think gold's great, by the way, but I'm just saying. How

many of you know they're going to sell more gold if they can scare the *berjebbers* out of you? Do you know that? Or they want to sell canned goods or something like that. If they could really scare you real good, they're going to make more money. So there's an awful lot of that AND it's also in the church. You see, the argument is the same in David's time as it is in ours. And that is, "it's just gone too far to turn around."

Now let's go back to Psalms 11 and pick up with verse 3. Listen to what they say:

Psalms 11:3

*³ If the foundations are destroyed,
What can the righteous do?"*

In other words, they're saying "if the foundations were still there, if they were good and in place, then we would rebuild. But it's gone too far. The foundations are destroyed. There's no hope of turning this thing around." They're saying, "The monarchy is gone." I mean, perhaps at this point Saul and his sons are already lying dead on the battlefield. The Philistines are racing into the country. The army is destroyed. The nation is in disarray. It doesn't seem like there is anything left to pull it together. But they've forgotten something. It looked bad but they forgot something. Look at verse 4. Here's what they forgot.

Psalms 11:4

*⁴ The LORD is in His holy temple; the LORD'S throne is in heaven;
His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men.*

Here's what they forgot. God is still on His throne. He's still in His heaven. He's still in control. And actually what He's doing is, it says He's watching and He's testing. He's watching His people first of all. He wants to know: Do they know Me as their refuge? How bad do things have to be? How many things have to collapse around them before they quit thinking that this is my mountain and this will keep me safe, and I can run away to here, and I can cross to this, until they know that there is no ultimate safe place except Jesus. He is our salvation.

And He's watching the ungodly, those that haven't accepted Christ and He's watching to see if they will turn? How long until they'll turn to me. Who will turn to Me? He's watching.

Psalms 11:5-6

*⁵ The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked,
And the one who loves violence His [that is God's] soul hates.
⁶ Upon the wicked [upon those who cause damage and hurt others] He will
rain snares;
Fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup.*

You see if people remain wicked, God will judge them. How many of you know there are a lot of people today who are just like those people who surrounded

David? They said, "Can't you see the wicked are bending the bow? Can't you see they're putting arrows in? Can't you see that everything's gone? God's so far that the foundations are destroyed."

People today say if the foundations were still there we'd have some hope. If our nation still believed in the national motto which is 'In God we Trust.' If they still had the faith of the forefathers, if they still followed the writings of the forefathers, if our courts still followed the constitution instead of legislating from the bench, if our public schools weren't lost, if our universities (some of them that actually were begun like Harvard and Yale to produce pastors and ministers) if they hadn't become so hostile, if they weren't so completely gone, if we'd done better in the last several elections, if the churches weren't so empty, if it wasn't so hopeless, well, we'd rebuild. But such people forget. What do they forget? They forget that God is on His throne. God is in His temple. God is in control. And God is watching and God is testing the heart of men.

Let me do a little math with you. Everybody loves math. Do you know that if in any equation you forget to include a sovereign and mysterious God, you are not going to come up with the right solution, with the right answer? Let me put up one right here:

$$3+4>2$$

How many of you guys know that three plus four is greater than two? That is self-evident. That is always true. Let me make one little change that will make that no longer necessarily true.

$$3+4>2n$$

How about this? Three plus four is greater than two n. That is no longer a true statement is it? What if n is 10,000? What if n represents God? So many people look with their natural mind and they look at the equation and they think they've had it figured out but they're forgetting this unknown factor, which is an all-powerful and all-sovereign God who is able and who does act in the lives of not only His people but in His world. Any calculation that leaves out God and His promises will be a false calculation.

Now, let's take a closer look for a minute because in the period in which the psalmist was writing, the nation seemed hopeless, lost, and overrun. The monarch seemed destroyed, everything seemed hopeless, and there was corruption. There are many different times actually or a number of different times in Israel's history that were similar to that. How many of you know that? But we're not going to take the time to recount those.

I want us to look at one other time in Israel's history where the conditions were just as hopeless. It's a time when Jerusalem was completely destroyed. The wall was destroyed, the temple was destroyed. It was the only time, by the way, that the temple had been destroyed like this. The leadership was all massacred. All the leaders were killed. All the people were carried out into Babylon. There were other

people from other nations that came in and inhabited Israel. And, Ezekiel, the prophet was called to minister to those people who were so hopeless. God gave Ezekiel a great vision.

Turn to Ezekiel chapter 37. We'll begin to read verse 1:

Ezekiel 37:1-3a

¹ The hand of the LORD was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones. ² He caused me to pass among them round about, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley; and lo [that means 'underline'], they were very dry. ³ He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

Well, the answer that most people would have given is "No". The body has died. It's decomposed. The skeleton has fallen apart. The bones have been scattered far and intermixed with each other and been here so long that they've dried out and there's no marrow in them whatsoever. No, those bones can't live.

You see, they said, "No. The nation is destroyed. The monarchy has been destroyed. The temple has been destroyed. We've been carried to another nation. Other people have moved into Israel. There's no way it can ever be reconstituted." Well, look at what they said in Ezekiel 13:11.

Ezekiel 37:11

¹¹ Then He said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, [here's what they say, here's how they see the situation] they say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off' [meaning we have no future, we'll have no descendants. There will be no future for Israel]."

Now, only one who knows the Lord as their refuge could possibly see it differently. Only one who has experienced the Lord as their refuge could receive a vision and see it the way God sees it. And that man was Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 37:3-6

³ He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, [only] You know [remember the equation? God is the N-factor, only God knows what He is going to do]." ⁴ Again He said to me, "Prophecy over these bones and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.' ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones, 'Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. ⁶ I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the LORD.'"

You see, where others saw only death and dried up bones. Do you know what God saw when He looked at all those bones scattered all over the face of that valley?

Dried and separated and mixed up and lifeless. Everyone else saw nothing but hopelessness and death. Do you know what He saw? He saw a foundation to build upon. He said, "I am going to build with those dead bones." He saw a foundation, because here's what He knew: He knew Israel still had its covenant with God. He knew Israel still had the Law of Moses. They still had the promises of God. They still had a priesthood. They still had their history. They still had their traditions. And that God could take all that and make it live again.

Many despair today. And they say, "You know, there's less people going to church than there were 20 years ago." Many churches are half empty or even more fully empty. Atheism is growing. Our national motto, our Christian history, our traditions, they're ignored. They're ignored in the schools. They're ignored in the media.

The faith and writings of our founders are ignored. And in all these things where they see retreat, they see nothing but death and hopelessness and despair. But I want to tell you that God sees a foundation. He sees the foundation to build on. Because a lot of those churches may be empty but they're still there. And a lot of times there are histories not taught in school but it's still our history and it's still in books that can be picked up.

We have Bibles everywhere you want to go and even though we have universities that have moved away from the truth, they still have a history of God. We have a ministry, we have so many things. God looks at our nation and He says, "Those things can all live again."

Let me tell you, some of you that have prodigal children, the words that you spoke to your children are still there. The experiences that they had at camp, the experiences that they had at Future Quest or something like that, that is still in them. And so how is God going to do it? He's still on the throne in Israel. He's still in His temple. He's still has a plan. So how did God turn everything around? How does He do that? And how can He do it in our day?

Let's look now at verses 4 and 7 and we'll see that it's going to require Ezekiel's faith and obedience for this to happen.

Ezekiel 37:4, 7

⁴ Again He said to me, "Prophesy over these bones and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.'

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone.

So what did he do? Ezekiel had to go down among the bones, the dead bones and preach to them. He had to preach life to dead bones. And you see the principle is we've got to be willing to go out in the midst of death and proclaim words of life.

Let me tell you, where else does the truth and the word of God need to be proclaimed more than where it has been most forgotten, where it is most unknown and most misunderstood? How many of you know most people don't understand the word of God. They don't understand the beauty of the reasoning behind it. That it's not, you know, negative and judgmental but it's the pathway to life. Where else does the gospel need to be most proclaimed than where people are most lost? Where else does the light need to be spoken more than where it is the grossest darkness?

So what happened, verse 8, as he preached?

Ezekiel 37:8

⁸ And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them

So, what happened? As he preached to these dead bones, all of a sudden there was a great commotion? There was a great stirring. All of a sudden bones from all over the valley began to rise up and they began to fly and hit each other and there was a great dust cloud as these came up. And it must have been frightening. It must have seemed unsafe, it must have seemed chaotic. Can you imagine? Bones flying and hitting each other and you're sitting there and they're flying by your face and all the noise. And yet, God was bringing in order.

How many of you know, if you're going to boldly preach the word of the Gospel, there will be a reaction? And it may not always be the one that you're hoping for. You see, God's word is powerful and it upsets the status quo.

You know, this has been pointed out so many times before but how many of you guys know there's no trouble if someone starts talking about Buddhism at the office or at the school? In fact, they can even talk about Islam, despite its history. They can talk about the American Indian religion or anything else. It's not until you say the 'Jesus' word or the 'Bible' word that all heck breaks out.

Now how many of you guys know a little about what I'm talking about? This is not untrue. Because why? Because it is a powerful thing. It upsets the status quo and it can create a fire storm.

Now let me ask a question. Have you ever shared God's word? Have you ever shared your opinion based on God's word or ever shared the gospel somewhere and it created a firestorm? People got so angry and you probably thought to yourself, "Well, I'm going to think a long time before I do that again. Maybe I'll just quiet it because it caused a reaction." But think about it, would it really be better for you not to say anything?

You see, here's the deal. When Ezekiel was in that valley and the bones were flying and it was scary and it was chaotic and there was violent clouds and everything and there was dust coming up and it hurt his eyes. He couldn't see it, he didn't know it, but God was putting everything into order. You know, we need

to have movement if God's going to restore things. Isn't that right? You know, sometimes, when somebody gets really mad, it can mean that God is beginning to bring their life into a divine order. And the first thing people do when they come under conviction is maybe get angry because we don't like to change. And so we need to not be afraid when we get a response because God's word is powerful. But declaring God's word was not enough. Let's look at verse 8:

Ezekiel 37:8-9

⁸ And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then He said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they come to life.'"

Now, when he simply gave the word of God, it created a reaction. There was movement but there was not yet life. Ezekiel had to speak to the wind, or to the breath. In Hebrew the word 'ruach' is the exact same word. You can translate it breath, you can translate it spirit, or wind depending on the context. The Greek word 'pneuma' is the same too. It can be wind, breath, or spirit.

And so, it wasn't enough to proclaim the word of God to those dry bones, he had to intercede and he had to call upon the spirit, the 'ruach,' of God to come.

How many of you know witnessing and preaching without intercession, without prayer is not going to accomplish much? How many of you know that apart from the Spirit of God we can do darn little, in fact, maybe nothing? So, we have to be ready to go into dead places and speak the word of God, humbly, and share the gospel knowing that it's going to create a reaction. Things are going to move.

But we have to also be committed to prayer. Are you committed to prayer? Are you praying for lost people? Are you praying for the restoration of America? In your own private life but also joining with others, the home groups, Saturday morning, Wednesday afternoon, the once a month Sunday night prayer meetings, wherever, joining together?

Well, as he spoke, and as he called for or prophesied to them, in other words, he spoke under inspiration, he declared God's word to the wind. How many of you know God has told us to pray for the Spirit of God and then He'll bring the Spirit of God.

As he spoke and called forth a miracle happened:

Ezekiel 37:10

¹⁰ So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them [that means into these new lifeless bodies], and they came to life and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

Now, that's pretty exciting. He spoke to the dead and there was a great army that arose, a great nation, a great people, out of the bones that came alive.

Now, I want to tell you I'm praying because I want to see the church of Jesus Christ arise filled with the Spirit of God. I want to see the United States of America return to its former glory, when it was a city set on a hill, when it sent missionaries around the world, when it set a standard for righteousness and democracy, and when it was the light to nations that all nations and people in those countries could measure themselves by (measure what was possible).

But if we are to be revived, we must have both. First of all he proclaimed to those bones. He said, "Hear the word of the Lord." And then he interceded and called forth the Spirit of God to fill those new bodies with life. And we've got to have both.

Let me tell you, some of you have never heard this old saying but it's really great. *If you focus only on the word of God, you will dry up.* How many of you know there are some churches and people who have very clear doctrine, very good doctrines but they've never led anyone to Christ? On the other hand if you focus only on the Spirit, what happens? You blow up. How many of you know there are a lot of times when people forget about the word of God and they get so caught up in the experiential that they start to fall apart.

But as it says, if you focus on them both, you grow up. If you focus only on the word you can dry up. If you focus only on the Spirit and you forget the word you can blow up. But, when you focus on both together then you grow up.

That's what the church needs. We need to be both, 100%. You need to be 100% committed to the word of God, and you need to be hungry for the Spirit of God, and humble in front of what the Spirit of God initiates and what He leads us to do, and to be obedient to Him.

Unfortunately, how many of you know this is true that a lot of people camp out at one side or the other. I mean, they are more comfortable on this side or they are more comfortable on this side (and even a lot of churches). But we need to understand that both are important if we're going to see restoration.

Well, the last point I'm going to make on that story is this that the breath, or the Spirit, it says it came from the four winds. He prophesied from the four winds. And it came from every direction. It makes me think of what Jesus said in John 3:

John 3:6, 8

⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

⁸ The wind [that is the pneuma, which could also be the Spirit which is the sense in which Jesus is using it] blows where it wishes [you can't control it] and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and [nor do you know] where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

How many of you know that God is working but His working is mysterious? We don't know where He's going to come from. We don't know what He's going to do. He remains sovereign at all times. But we can hear and respond to the sound of it.

I want to tell you that most Christians need to be a lot less impressed with what *people* are doing, and a lot more impressed with what *God* is doing, with the sovereign God.

When you get up in the morning, where do you get your news from? I'm a person that watches the news. I watch it on TV and I follow it online and sometimes I read the newspaper. Not as much as I used to. But I always read my news first every morning from this book (Bible). And the news that this tells me about the world I live in is so much more relevant than anything I get on my news channels that I watch. How many of you know that's true? When I finish this (Bible), reading this, I know more about how the world is today than when I listen to a bunch of talking heads who are almost never right. Can I tell you that?

These people make their predictions all the time. Is it global warming or is it global cooling? What's the biggest crisis? Is it acid rain or is it the loss of the rain forest? Is it the doomsday clock or the atomic bomb? I mean, it's always a crisis. It's always confusion and it never happens the way they predict. But when I read the word of God then I know the truth.

I want to go down in the valley and I want to preach to the dead bones. I want to believe God: that as I go into the valley and preach to the dry bones there's going to be movement. You know, we get to see so many people come to Christ. We have seen so many Baptisms because we just go out where it's dry and we just proclaim God's word. But more than that, more than going out and preaching to the people whether they want to hear it or not, just making God's truth known.

I mean, you're going to go someplace and there are people that need to hear the word of God and there're other people that are going to be angry but you've got to preach. And so those people who need to hear it can. So I not only want to go down into the valley and preach to the dry bones, I want to stand steadfast when there is noise and when those bones are flying around and when there's confusion, and when I don't understand the response. But I know that, in a way, I cannot understand that God is bringing divine order because I've been faithful to lovingly speak His word and share His gospel.

And finally, I want to pray for the Spirit to come. I want to believe that as I pray, as we pray the Spirit will come. And I want to see the Spirit come into individuals and come into churches and I want to see them live again. I want to watch what happens.

I believe God is sovereign. I believe that one thing you can say about the people of God is that they have been in some bad situations throughout history and God has been faithful. And if you think about Israel, here's one thing to think about. That moment when things looked the worst they could possibly be, other people

were living in their nation, they were carried off, they had nothing to go back to and yet God restored it. Think about this: He restored them to the point that through that people He brought the Savior of all mankind that has saved over a billion people right now that call Him Savior around the world. From a situation that was hopeless, because Ezekiel obeyed the Lord.

Heavenly Father we praise you and we thank you and we lift you Lord Jesus. Have your way with us in Jesus Name. Lord, stir our hearts. Let us be encouraged. Amen.