

ENDORSEMENTS

"The world got a little bit brighter after reading *Nothing Is Wasted*. Thank you, Joseph Bentz, for plugging a missing hole in contemporary Christian teaching—balance in tragedy, and finding hope without glossing over difficulty."

Pastor Jake McCandless
Mount Vernon Baptist Church
Mount Vernon, Arkansas

"This invaluable book is for anyone who has ever questioned why life is so painful, chaotic, and messy. Joseph Bentz powerfully unveils God's continuous thread of redemption that is woven throughout the complicated and broken tapestry of our frayed world."

Pastor Ed Simons
South Central Ohio District
Church of the Nazarene

NOTHING

How God Redeems What Is Broken

IS WASTED

Joseph Bentz



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1 THE SONG OF REDEMPTION

When you glance around the world, you may not think you see much redemption. You may notice more trouble instead. Terrorists blow up innocent children. Bombs demolish homes and send frightened citizens fleeing toward the squalor of refugee camps. Disease sweeps through impoverished nations and wipes out hundreds, their bodies tossed aside. Drought kills crops and puts farmers out of business. Politicians posture, blame, and take feckless stabs at solving intractable problems. Celebrities enmesh themselves in scandals, providing the public a perverse escape from all the real tragedy of the world.

Closer to home, maybe your own life isn't faring so well either. You're worried about money. You fret about work. What about the crises in your family? What about all the sickness among the people you love? Where is your life headed? Even if your life is going well now, you wonder how long it can last. All around you, everything is falling apart. People you love are getting older. *You* are getting older, much faster than you'd like. The possibility of disaster lurks in every automobile trip, every medical checkup, every unknown terrorist's scheme.

If you let yourself dwell on it, you realize nothing is as stable as it looks. Temporariness and decay are built into everything around you. The building in which you stand looks solid, but you know it is slowly crumbling. The car you drive will be obsolete in a matter of years. No matter how trendy you try to be, your clothes are beginning to go out of style from the moment you put them on. When you look at photos of yourself in them twenty years from now, assuming you live that long, you may even be embarrassed that you wore them. Your haircut, the music you listen to, the way you decorate your home, will all become hopelessly old-fashioned faster than you think. You yourself will fade and then die.

One way to look at life is as a series of losses. We lose loved ones, our youth, our decaying possessions, and eventually our lives. The world is a fallen, suffering, fading place. In that kind of world, how are we supposed to see hints of redemption?

The pattern of loss is pervasive. The fallen, corrupt nature of the world is real. But there is also a countervailing force at work in the world. In the midst of all this loss beats a relentless pulse of redeeming love and good that thrusts itself through the chaos and pain. It does not obliterate the pain, but it does not allow it to be wasted either. Good is wrenched from pain, like a gold nugget pried from deep underground.

Learning to Hear Redemption's Song

When you watch a movie, it may have a theme song that is played in fragments of various lengths throughout the film. The music may be slowed down or sped up a little to fit the action on screen, and at times the few snippets of song may be so brief and subtle that you're not consciously aware of them. But the effect is powerful anyway. Whenever you hear about that movie for days or weeks afterward, you may still remember pieces of that melody.

That's what redemption is like. God has blended it into the world. It's as if God is saying, *This song is so good, and it so embodies what I'm all about, that I'm going to spread traces of it throughout the movie.* Sometimes it will be loud and obvious; other times, you'll barely be able to recognize it's the same song. By the time the show is over, you'll know it. You'll be humming it all day.

In this book, I want to play the song of redemption. I want you to hear it in all its variations, in places where you can't miss it and in places where you would least expect it.

It's easy to find hints of redemption in beautiful elements of life, obviously, in things that make you glad you're alive even when the rest of the world stinks. Loving relationships, the joy of meaningful work, the deep pleasures of music, walks on sandy beaches, hikes through forests, good meals, enjoyable books, and countless other good facets of life certainly offset many of life's harsher realities. These redeeming elements of life are easy to see.

Does God also plant redemption in ugly, smelly, unpleasant things? Can it be found in things people see only as destructive, or mean, or sad? Can redemption spring from things that people believe have no value? Can even the worst circumstances life has to offer give rise to redemption?

When a Destructive Insect Embodies Redemption

The boll weevil is an ugly little insect that loves cotton. Over the past hundred years, it has caused billions of dollars in damage to cotton crops in the United States and elsewhere. Numerous farmers across the decades have gone bankrupt because of this one pest. Scientists have used every means they can think of to try to eradicate it—pesticides, wasps, fungi, specially engineered anti-weevil cotton plants, and other methods. The fight against it continues to this day, and the eradication programs have been largely successful.

No one sheds a tear for the boll weevil. Just about everybody wants to kill it. So I was surprised when my friend Jim Davis, who lives in Alabama, a state that historically has been plagued with weevils, told me that a town named Enterprise, Alabama, has a boll weevil monument prominently displayed in the center of its downtown.

A monument to a destructive insect would be surprising in any town, but for Enterprise, Alabama, to honor such a creature seems especially strange, considering the destruction the boll weevil has wreaked on that town and the surrounding county. As the town's historians report, in the early twentieth century, the boll weevil destroyed almost 60 percent of the county's main crop of cotton, and farmers were at risk of utter ruin.¹ Their failure would have meant devastation for the entire economy of that region.

The monument the town built to this pest in 1919 features a statue of a woman standing in Statue-of-Liberty-like robes, her arms held high above her head. In her hands, on top of a kind of pedestal, stands a large and ugly boll weevil. A flowing fountain surrounds this statue.

Is it a joke?

The farmers in Coffee County, Alabama, where Enterprise is located, were determined not to let the boll weevil defeat them. Instead, they turned its destructive behavior into an opportunity to diversify their crops and be more successful in the long run. If the crisis of the boll weevil had not forced the issue, they might never have made changes and would have missed out on the prosperity the shift brought them. Peanuts in particular became an especially profitable crop for the region. As the Enterprise history relates, "By 1917, Coffee County produced and harvested more peanuts than any other county in the nation. (In 1993, Coffee County ranked 4th in the state of Alabama with 128,000 acres planted in peanuts.)"² The plaque that accompanies the monument states, "In profound appreciation of the Boll Weevil and

what it has done as the herald of Prosperity this monument was erected by the citizens of Enterprise, Coffee County, Alabama." The work of a pest was redeemed.

Smelly Carcass or Tasty Feast?

Although a monument to a bug is unusual, redemptive elements scattered throughout the uglier side of nature are common. For instance, it's hard to think of many things uglier than a carcass, but in nature, such a thing is not wasted. Whales, for example, can weigh eighty tons or more, and when dead ones wash up on a beach, as they do occasionally, they are smelly, rotting, and hard to dispose of. But in the ocean, where they belong, one dead whale becomes a *meal* that can feed countless other animals for *decades*.

When a whale carcass sinks to the seafloor, the first animals that feast on it are interested in removing the flesh from the bones. Hagfish, rattails, crabs, sharks, and other scavengers pick the bones clean. But the meal has not even started for a whole variety of other creatures that enjoy dining on the bones.

Scientists at the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute (MBARI) wanted to learn more about the bone-eating animals, so they dragged five dead whales off the beach and sank them with weights at various depths in the ocean to see what they could find out. As they kept track of what came to dine on these tasty carcasses, they discovered fifteen new species of bone-eating worms and several new species of bone-eating snails.³

With all these creatures chomping at flesh and bones, the MBARI scientists estimate their five whale carcasses will be gone within about ten years, but in other areas, where different carcasses are deeper, the food source may last from fifty to a hundred years. As the carcasses continue to disappear, the researchers keep finding even more new species of limpets, worms, amphipods, and snails.⁴ From the whale's perspective, of course, its own death

may seem a disaster, but for many other hungry creatures, life springs from that death.

What About My Own Pain? How Could It Be Anything but Wasted Suffering?

It's one thing to spot hints of redemption in things like whale carcasses and boll weevils, but how much will those hints mean to people if they can't find similar clues of redemption in their own difficult lives?

What about people who suffer the worst things life has to offer? For example, what about someone whose young child is killed? What about someone whose own health is wrecked by accident or cancer or other illness? What about people whose dreams for their future are shattered by circumstances beyond their control? Is that pain wasted? Is pain the final word in the lives of those people, or is there something more?

I asked them. I went to people who suffered those catastrophes and asked them whether they saw any hints of redemption in the midst of their suffering. Rather than interpret their experiences on my own, I wanted to know how *they* perceived what had happened to them. For most of them, the pain still continues, but they also find threads of redemption in their own stories. They do so not in a way that brushes aside or minimizes their suffering but in ways that acknowledge that something else is going on. Suffering is at work in their lives, but so are other forces.

What Meaning Can Be Salvaged from the Mess?

This book does not treat suffering lightly, nor does it try to explain it away or find an explanation for why it exists in the first place. The world is filled with many horrors. People do cruel things, and people are victims of tremendous evil. It is an off-kilter world, damaged by sin. If that were not so, there would be

no need for redemption. As a Christian, I believe that if the world were not a fallen place, Jesus Christ would not have had to come and be crucified to save it.

To revise an image from G.K. Chesterton, think of the world as a beautiful ship that has been wrecked on the rocks of sin. We survived and have found ourselves beached on an island, with some of the ship's possessions having washed ashore with us. We await an ultimate rescue, but in the meantime, we make the best of those salvaged pieces we have pulled from the wreck. Should we see our state as good or bad? On one hand, we survived the wreck! We are saved. On the other hand, we are not yet rescued and at home. We do not have all the possessions from the original ship, but perhaps the real surprise is that we have *anything*, given the fact that the ship went down.

God could have walked away from the sinful world. He could have destroyed it and started again from scratch, but he loved us too much to do so. Instead, through Jesus Christ, God held out the promise of something eternally good being pulled from the muck of the sin-damaged world. The story of that divine reversal is told most fully in the Bible. *Echoes* of that story can be heard in thousands of other stories—in movies, novels, children's stories, and elsewhere. Hints of it pervade our popular entertainment and literature, even when people aren't intentionally telling it. What is that central story of redemption?

If you simply read the Bible straight through in order to find it, you may succeed, but you would almost certainly feel overwhelmed at many points along the way. The story of redemption in Scripture does not follow the tidy story structure you may have learned in a high school literature class, with a beginning, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Nor does it follow the neat, three-act structure of a screenplay. It's messy.

I remember how bothered I was as a young Christian when I first read the Bible all the way through. It seemed so complicated and went off in so many directions. There were all those generations of chaos, bad behavior, and disobedience, with an occasional breakthrough in which God freed the Israelites from Pharaoh or helped his people win a battle. I would read about a few good kings here and there, but then there were more outrageous acts of disobedience by their sons who followed them. That would be followed by books of prophecies of doom, with a little bit of hope sprinkled in.

I read all that even before I got to the books about Jesus. The four Gospels offered the uplifting accounts of Jesus's teaching and miracles, of course, but they were also filled with people resisting him, not understanding him, and finally crucifying him. The rest of the Bible was similarly untidy, with all those letters focused on straightening out troubled churches and talking of imprisonments and persecutions and other difficulties. Then the whole book ended with one of the most difficult sections of all—Revelation. That book held out the promise of eternity with the resurrected Christ in a new heaven and a new earth but did so in the midst of head-spinning imagery that challenged my young mind.

Why, I wondered, didn't God clean this up and put it in a neater package?

Other writers, theologians, and preachers *have* told the gospel story more simply, and it has been very helpful for them to do so. I first learned about the Christian faith as a child from teachers and preachers who told the story in ways I could understand. As I got older, I relied on others to help me grasp it even better at whatever level of understanding I found myself. I am still doing that today, finding new writers and teachers who capture the essence of the story of God's redemption.

When I was a college student, for example, I was particularly moved by C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. I came across his book at a time when I was hungry for a deeper understanding of the faith that had gripped me so strongly as a child and teenager. I had encountered Christ and had become a passionate follower, but there was still so much I didn't understand. I found Lewis's book challenging, but I also felt liberated by the way he cut through the web of theological side issues and speculation to get to the essence of the Christian faith, which he states this way:

We are told that Christ was killed for us, that His death has washed out our sins, and that by dying He disabled death itself. That is the formula. That is what has to be believed. Any theories we build up as to how Christ's death did all this are, in my view, quite secondary: mere plans or diagrams to be left alone if they do not help us, and, even if they do help us, not to be confused with the thing itself.⁵

I was thrilled to read that statement because, even though I had questions about all kinds of Christian issues, I didn't want to miss "the thing itself" when it came to redemption in Christ. That "thing itself"—salvation through Jesus Christ and the promise of eternity with him—is the plot of the Bible's story; but, in Scripture as in life, redemption shows up not only in the main plot but also in the strange little subplots.

Nothing Is Wasted will trace this redemptive pattern in some of those unexpected corners of life—in the work of the dung beetle, in the goo of a chrysalis, in the blasting of a woman's career dreams, in a car accident that leaves a woman broken and bleeding on the road. At first glance some of these examples will look like sheer ugliness. It will seem impossible that any good could come from them. But that's how redemption works. It grows up from smelly, sometimes disgusting, soil.

The sprawling nature of the story of redemption—the way God has scattered and buried hints of it throughout every area of life—is perhaps one reason why Scripture itself looks so fragmented and varied. The subplots play out in psalms, parables, history, prophecies, and poetry. People fail God time and time again throughout the book, but instead of giving up on them, instead of stopping the story right there and starting over with someone else, God uses the flawed people and complicated situations to keep the central story of redemption moving forward.

Take Abraham and Sarah. They are two of the greatest people in Scripture, but their lives are full of complications. When God is slow about fulfilling his promise to provide them a son, Sarah comes up with a plan for Abraham to have the child through her servant, Hagar. Ishmael is born through that arrangement, but his birth leads to family strife, abuse, and endless future difficulties in the years to come.

Is God's plan thrown hopelessly off course? No. Isaac is born to Abraham and Sarah, and the promise is fulfilled. Hagar keeps going too, running away for a time but then moving back in with Abraham and Sarah and making the best of her life. The angel of the Lord promises Hagar, "I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count," but he also says of Ishmael, "He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers" (Genesis 16:10, 12).

Trouble and promise live side by side in this story. It's messy, but God's thread of redemption is woven through it.

Even in the stories of the Bible that look disturbing or just plain strange to modern readers, redemption still emerges from the mess. In one of my literature courses, I teach the story of Lot's wife, found in Genesis 19. As Sodom and Gomorrah are about to be destroyed, Lot and his family flee the scene. They are told not

to look back, but Lot's wife disobeys, looks back, and is turned into a pillar of salt. No other information about her is given. Many modern poets have written about Lot's wife in order to speculate on facts and motives the Bible leaves out, such as: Why does she turn around? What is going on in her mind? Rebellion? Longing? Suicide? Modern writers and biblical commentators have endlessly debated and retold the story. But there is another strange episode in the aftermath of this story that bothers my students even more than Lot's wife's sad demise.

According to Genesis 19, Lot's two daughters survive the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and move with Lot to the mountains of Zoar. Since there is a shortage of men there, the daughters decide to get their father drunk and have sex with him so they can preserve the family line. They both get pregnant and give birth to sons.

My students squirm when they read this story. What are we to think of it? Why on earth is a story like this even in the Bible, of all places? The passage tells only the facts and gives no direction to the reader on what to think about this story. Are we supposed to see what happens as evil? Twisted? Or is it somehow hopeful, a story of survivors who do what they have to do?

Commentators are divided about what it means. Some see the episode as a kind of punishment for Lot for offering up his daughters for sexual purposes earlier in the story. He offered them for abuse, and now he is the one abused.

Other commentators, however, find redemption even in this troublesome episode. Lot's firstborn daughter gives birth to a boy she names Moab, and the reader is told that he is the father of the Moabites to this day. Ruth, for whom a book of the Bible is named, is a Moabite, a descendant of that child born under such strange circumstances. Ruth is also one of the few women named in the genealogy of Jesus, in the book of Matthew.

So, from this disturbing episode, which seems such a sad aftermath of Lot's rescue from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, redemption springs, even though it takes hundreds of years to happen.

We could fill pages with stories like this from both the Old Testament and New Testament. Look at episodes from the lives of Moses, David, Hannah, Jeremiah, Gideon, Joshua, and many others. In the New Testament, Paul is repeatedly imprisoned, but, rather than stopping or slowing down the spread of the gospel, those setbacks actually speed it up as he spreads the message in Rome and elsewhere and writes his letters that still lead people to Christ today.

The messiness of the Bible represents God's willingness to enter into even the most hopeless of circumstances and draw something good out of them. The Bible does not follow a predictable narrative, and neither does my own life. In both Scripture and my life, I see God's persistent thread of redemption, and that gives me hope.

What Difference Does It Make?

If you begin to see the hints of redemption scattered throughout the world, what difference does that make? Why should you bother with it?

I have known people who impoverish their lives by having too narrow a definition of redemption. Some Christians believe in ultimate redemption in Jesus Christ, but they miss the thousands of other places throughout their lives where God has lovingly planted reminders of redemption. Faced with catastrophe in their own lives, they see only the loss, and they either reject or else fail to see the good that may also spring from it. They miss it in nature, in music, in the portions of life considered ugly or useless, in the stories that bombard them throughout the day. Without realizing they are doing so, they have relegated God to a particular,

crucial—but narrow—sliver of life, and refuse to open their eyes to his presence in the rest of the world.

I know other people who do the opposite. They acknowledge the redemptive thread in the ways that new life might burst from the devastation of a forest fire, or how a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly, but they wouldn't think to tie that to God's larger plan of redemption for human beings and for creation itself. They either don't believe in this ultimate redemption through Jesus Christ, or, if they do, they see spiritual redemption as a separate category from everything else.

People have always missed the clues of redemption, not only in our day—when open skepticism is more common—but even when people had Jesus right there in front of them. Take the story of the man born blind in John 9. Jesus and his disciples see him as they are walking down the road on the Sabbath. The disciples, instead of seeing this encounter as an opportunity for Jesus to turn this man's life around through a miraculous healing, instead want to turn it into a theological debate. Whose sin caused the blindness, they ask, the blind man's or his parents'? Neither, Jesus says. Instead, this encounter is "so that the work of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). And Jesus heals him.

You might expect that everyone would be happy about this—a man who has been blind his whole life now can see! Instead, controversy erupts, and the beauty of the miracle itself almost gets forgotten. The religious authorities launch an investigation. Jesus has performed this healing on the Sabbath, so it's a technical violation. The newly sighted man gets hauled in for questioning. So do his parents. The parents wither under the questioning of these powerful men. They decline to answer questions. They throw it back to the son: "Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself" (John 9:21).

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Everyone is running scared and missing the miracle, but the man who is no longer blind refuses to call Jesus a sinner, as the authorities want him to. He knows the good thing Jesus has done for him and won't deny it. "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know," he says. "One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (John 9:25).

The man has learned not only to see physically but also to see in the sense of understanding. He sees, and he *sees*. That's the kind of sight I want. His story shows what different people choose to do with God's hints of redemption. Some deny them. Some ignore them. Some welcome them and thank God for them.

I want to learn to decipher the hints better. I want to learn to see the ways that God wrests something good from even the most terrible things of life. If you want that too, then I invite you to read on.

Go to beaconhillbooks.com/go/nothingiswasted for a free downloadable study guide that includes questions for deeper personal reflection as well as activities for use in a small group setting.