

Dry Bones Can Live Again

5/27/18 – Pastor Randy

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The Lord took hold of me, and I was carried away by the Spirit of the Lord to a valley filled with bones. ² He led me all around among the bones that covered the valley floor. They were scattered everywhere across the ground and were completely dried out. ³ Then he asked me, "Son of man, can these bones become living people again?" "O Sovereign Lord," I replied, "you alone know the answer to that."

⁴ Then he said to me, "Speak a prophetic message to these bones and say, 'Dry bones, listen to the word of the Lord! ⁵ This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Look! I am going to put breath into you and make you live again! ⁶ I will put flesh and muscles on you and cover you with skin. I will put breath into you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.'"

⁷ So I spoke this message, just as he told me. Suddenly as I spoke, there was a rattling noise all across the valley. The bones of each body came together and attached themselves as complete skeletons. ⁸ Then as I watched, muscles and flesh formed over the bones. Then skin formed to cover their bodies, but they still had no breath in them.

⁹ Then he said to me, "Speak a prophetic message to the winds, son of man. Speak a prophetic message and say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, O breath, from the four winds! Breathe into these dead bodies so they may live again.'"

¹⁰ So I spoke the message as he commanded me, and breath came into their bodies. They all came to life and stood up on their feet—a great army. ¹¹ Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones represent the people of Israel. They are saying, 'We have become old, dry bones—all hope is gone. Our nation is finished.' ¹² Therefore, prophesy to them and say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: O my people, I will open your graves of exile and cause you to rise again. Then I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ When this happens, O my people, you will know that I am the Lord. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live again and return home to your own land. Then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done what I said. Yes, the Lord has spoken!'"

The following quote from John Mark Hicks provides a summary of the background to this text

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“Ezekiel’s valley is a metaphor for a moment in Israel’s history. After a thirty month siege, Jerusalem fell in 587 BCE to the Babylonian Emperor Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:3). Judah became a Babylonian province and ceased to exist as an independent nation. The devastation is likened to a valley of dry bones. These are the bones of a slain nation. Israel was dead.

Ezekiel, living in Babylon, records the lament of an exiled people: “We have become old, dry bones—all hope is gone. Our nation is finished” (Ezekiel 37:11). Bones are a vivid image and a relatively common metaphor. Living bones represent life and vibrancy, but bones that lie in the dust are crushed and broken (cf. Job 20:11; Psalms 32:3; 53:5; 141:7). Dry bones are powerless.

This is Israel’s position before the imperial power of Babylon. They are hopeless. The nation will never live again. Defeated and now exiled, they are scattered among the nations like dry bones scattered in a valley.” - John Mark Hicks

This vision that God gave Ezekiel was specifically focused on God’s promise to send His Spirit into the lives of the nation of Israel, the current “people of God” of that time period. However, this vision also represents what God was going to do in the lives of people from all nations. The OT prophets revealed, perhaps unknowingly, that God’s future plan was to reconcile and regenerate not just Jewish rebels but rebels from all nations by sending His Spirit upon people from all nations. (Isaiah 49:6; Joel 2:28; Hosea 2:23 in Romans 9:25) The coming of the Spirit is the fulfillment of the OT prophetic hope that the presence of God would return to the people of God. The whole story of the Old Testament can be summed up as follows. The people God created to dwell with Him; to be His people and He their God, continually act unfaithfully to their God, violating the covenant relationship God had established with them. Because God is just and true to His word, his people suffer the judgment of being exiled (expelled, banished) from God’s presence. However, our just God is also a merciful God!! Despite man’s continual rebellion and faithlessness, God initiates redemptive acts to bring His people to repentance, reconciling them to Himself and restoring them to experience His favor. Throughout this historical cycle of failure, redemptive judgment, and restoration, God prophetically declared by words and symbolic events

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that He was going to one day send His Supreme Servant-Son-Savior-King to bring about a final and complete return from exile for His people. This Supreme Servant-Son-Savior-King will bring dead bones back to life forever. How will the Supreme-Servant-Son-King do this?

Part 1 – Jesus satisfied the justice of God by bearing the punishment for sin once for all as our representative and substitute.

The prophet Isaiah told us that He would be “pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins” (53:5) but “when his life is made an offering for sin” (53:10) this “righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins.” (53:11).

Part 1 dealt with our rebellion problem and our guilt problem. But we needed more than just forgiveness and justification!! We needed transformation! We needed life!

Part 2 – Jesus death and resurrection was followed by the impartation of His Spirit to bring us new life and sustain in us new life so we could actually live like people created in the image of God.

Since the goal of Jesus atoning work on the cross was to remake us in His image and bring us to final glory, we needed the Holy Spirit to give us life. Without the Spirit all we have is a positional transformation, but not a practical and personal transformation. The Spirit brings real, tangible, spiritual “change”. The Spirit brings dead bones to life! Not just dead bones but dry bones.

As Ezekiel described it, dead bones would one day live again. His words were applicable in a narrow sense to the Israelites who were, figuratively speaking, “as dead as dry bones” in their state of exile. In the NT we discover the wider application of these words. Outside of faith in Christ we are all “dead as dry bones” spiritually and need to be brought to life by God’s Spirit.

John’s gospel does not record Jesus quoting from the prophet Ezekiel directly. However, John’s gospel includes a lot of sayings of Jesus wherein Jesus clearly appropriated, or borrowed, the language of the prophet Ezekiel. Because of the strong relationship between the book of Ezekiel and Jesus’ teaching found in John’s gospel, there is good reason to see an intentional allusion by Jesus to Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of the dry bones on two specific occasions.

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A. The first was Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus recorded in John 3. Nicodemus, a religious leader from the sect of the Pharisees sought out a meeting with Jesus. Jesus told him, "Unless you are born again you cannot see the Kingdom of Heaven." Nicodemus was troubled and asked, "How can someone go back into their mother's womb and be born a second time?" And all the mother's said, "Amen". Pushing out an 8,9,10-pounder is enough!!" Jesus replied, "*Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit.*" Jesus' use of blowing wind as a metaphor for the regenerating work of the Spirit is an allusion to Ezekiel's vision where God said, "***Speak a prophetic message to the winds, son of man. Speak a prophetic message and say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, O breath, from the four winds! Breathe into these dead bodies so they may live again.'***"

B. The second time Jesus' words echo Ezekiel's vision was when, after His resurrection and prior to His ascension, "He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (John 20:21)

Each of these encounters reveals the broader fulfillment of Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones; Salvation through Christ includes forgiveness of sins, a right standing with God, and spiritual regeneration (recreation).

There are a few lessons God wants us to learn from this vision:

1. **There is Hope for Anybody When the Spirit is at Work.**

Ezekiel was not just looking at a valley of skeletons. He was looking at a valley of dried scattered bones and God asks him, "What are the chances of these bones turning into an army of men? Ezekiel gives the good Sunday School answer: "Only God knows!" That's a subtle way of saying, "No way!" The description of the bones as dry is another way of saying they are deader than dead. They are as dead as dead can be. That must be a problem for God, right? No! There are no bones to dry for God's Spirit to revive. There are no bones to dead for God to resurrect!! No one here above the need of God's grace, beneath the offer of God's grace, or beyond the reach of God's grace!

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2. The Spirit Gathers the Scattered.

The bones were scattered throughout the valley. This image spoke to the fact that God's people had become a scattered people in their exile.

Immediately following the vision of the dry bones is a parable of two sticks. The two-stick prophecy predicts the reunion of Israel's *divided* Kingdom which had been split since King Solomon's death. In 37:21-22 God says, *"I will gather the people of Israel from among the nations. I will bring them home to their own land from the places where they have been scattered. I will unify them into one nation."* Israel is the immediate narrow focus of Ezekiel 37, but its broader fulfillment is the work of salvation accomplished through Jesus' death, resurrection and sending of the Spirit. The Spirit not only brings new life to individuals as he reconciles them to God, but he also brings these born-again individuals together into a reconciled and restored brotherhood and sisterhood. New life results in new community!

The church is a church for all people! God's people are comprised of people from every nation, tribe and tongue. Jesus atoning death for sin was an atoning death for the sins of all people, irrespective of social status, ethnicity, family heritage, or any other non-moral, non-ethical characteristic. The church is a community open to all regardless of race, class, or nationality. *In Ephesians 2 Paul wrote, "For through him (Jesus) we both (Jews and Non-Jews) have access in one Spirit to the Father." He went on to write that Jews and non-Jews were now "being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."*

The Spirit-filled church must reflect the work of the Spirit which is a work of reconciliation and unification. One of the most encouraging words that I have heard in a while was spoken to me by Brian Pruitt. He practically grabbed me in the lobby after service and said, "You guys are doing a great job of building a diverse church from front to back." He said, "You don't know how many pastors ask me how to make happen what is happening here."

We still have room to grow and thankfully it is not just here where the Spirit is working to break down walls of division and bring reconciliation. Listen to this post by one of my Facebook friends, Bode Abodunde, Pastor of Transformation Church in West Philly.

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“An older black lady (first time guest) said to me and Kisha this Sunday “ I love seeing all these white people at your church... but where did they come from?” You see she’s been attending church most of her life in west Philly but has never seen diversity in the church... until this Sunday. We said “they come from right here in Philly, we just work really hard to create a space where EVERYONE is welcome... and we really mean that.”

Her next words were... “I really like this, I’ll be back here to worship next week”

I’m so glad I get to be part of what Jesus is doing in West Philly... destroying stereotypes and breaking down walls.” There is a movement across our nation of churches that are determined to break down walls of racial, class and ethnic division in order to be true to the Spirit of Christ who unites us as brothers and sisters in one family with ONE FATHER!

The Holy Spirit created the church as a diverse community that is unified around belief in the saving work of Christ and His lordship over all creation. Because Jesus is what unifies us, that means that anyone who becomes a member of this community of Jesus followers must be willing to submit himself/herself to the will of Christ. For this reason, the church is not diverse in respect to what we believe and how we behave.

3. The Spirit’s Breath is a Cleansing Breath.

He cleanses us from sin and selfishness. A major theme of Ezekiel is the promise of a new heart when the Spirit comes. A soft heart that turns away from hatred, gossip, cheating, lying, sexual immorality, greed, envy, etc. We are unified in our desire to flee from sin and pursue righteousness (1 Corinthians 10:14, 1 Timothy 6:9-11; 2 Timothy 2:22) so the church is not a diverse community in respect to its view and attitude towards sin, evil, and injustice. Just because there are certain prerequisites to becoming a member of the body of Christ, that does not prevent us from loving all people.

We do not express hatred when we confront sin and call people to repentance. When we don’t we express loveless indifference.

The Holy Spirit works among God’s people so that we truly act like the bride of Christ that we are supposed to be. A bride’s job is to honor the bridegroom. The bride does not laugh or enjoy entertainment that dishonors her groom. The bride is full of joy when she sees or hears her groom being honored.

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