

“The Valley of Dry Bones”
Ezekiel 37:1-14
March 15, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

This is easily the most well-known passage in Ezekiel. On the surface, it’s an easy passage to understand. In a vision, Ezekiel is shown a valley filled with dry bones. God tells him to preach to the bones, and he begins immediately to hear the bones come together, with flesh and skin added. He is told to preach again, this time to the breath or wind instead of the bones, and the corpses come to life as a great army. But this is just a description of what happens, and leaves unaddressed the more significant question of what these events mean. But the text itself, in verses 11-14, is quick to interpret the vision. The bones represent **“the whole house of Israel”** (v. 11). Because of their sin, they are in exile in Babylon. But God promises, **“I will bring you into the land of Israel”** (v. 12).

Since it’s been six weeks since we last reviewed the broad story line of the Old Testament, and since we must remember this story if we are to understand Ezekiel, I think we need to do one more review. The history of Israel begins with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Though God promised them a land, they never received this promise during their lifetimes. The entire clan moved to Egypt under the leadership of Jacob’s son, Joseph. They stayed there for 400 years until Pharaoh enslaved them and mistreated them so severely that they cried out to God for deliverance. God sent Moses to do that, and under his leadership they left Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for forty years because of their unbelief. Joshua succeeded Moses and led them into the Promised Land, where they were led by a series of judges for 300 years. They asked for a king, and God gave them a united monarchy for only 120 years, led by three kings who each reigned for forty years—Saul, David and Solomon. The nation split after Solomon into north and south. The northern kingdom, Israel, had nothing but bad kings until the Assyrians conquered them in 722 B.C. Judah, the southern kingdom, had some bad kings and some good ones, until they were conquered by the Babylonians in a series of conquests beginning in 597 and ending in the complete destruction of the city and temple in 586 B.C. Ezekiel was in that first group of exiles in 597, and it has now been about ten years. Their hopes for an early return to their homeland have been long dead. But God says that he will raise them up and return them, just like these bones were raised up and returned.

These events happened over 2600 years ago. What possible relevance could they have to us? The relevance lies in seeing exile as a common result of sin. The exile of Israel and Judah was clearly a result of their sin. All the way back in Deuteronomy, Moses had warned them that if they disobeyed God, one of the results would be an exile. **“The Lord will bring you and your king whom you**

set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known” (Dt. 28:36). Exile or banishment is older than that. After the sin of Adam and Eve, they were expelled from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:24), which brought the entire human race into exile from its original home. Sin takes us into exile, and this passage unveils God’s plan for taking us home. In essence, it requires a new birth.

I. The Necessity of New Birth

In his vision, God takes Ezekiel by the hand, and the two of them go on a walk through a valley filled with human bones. It is a scene of unimaginable devastation, and would have been particularly disturbing to Ezekiel. Remember that he was a priest, and priests were not allowed even to touch a human corpse. There are three things Ezekiel noted about these bones. First, there were very many of them. An entire valley was full of bones, and I don’t think we make a mistake in inferring from the text that it took Ezekiel some time just to walk around them so as to grasp how extensive this pile of bones really was. Second, he says that they were very dry. The scavenging animals such as the hyenas and vultures long ago completed their work of eating any of the soft tissue remaining on the corpses. Now the sun has bleached them to a state of complete dryness. The result of this would be that the human skeletons were no longer intact. This is just an immense pile of human bones, about as far from being in recognizable human form as imaginable. The third thing Ezekiel notices was probably the most alarming to him, though it is easily missed by modern readers. He notices that the bones were on the “surface” of the valley. In other words, they had not been properly buried. Here’s what Christopher Wright says about this.

Proper burial was of paramount importance in ancient near-eastern cultures—not just for the sake of the bereaved (as it still is in modern cultures), but for the sake of the deceased also. To be deprived of burial was the final insult, the ultimate degradation. To be unburied meant the perpetuation of suffering into the afterlife. It was a destiny fit only for the truly cursed. Indeed, it was one aspect of the fate decreed for Israel under the covenant curses. These bones, then, are not just evidence of death, but of death under curse. These bones proclaim that their ‘owners’ had been the victims not only of battle, but also of divine judgment (p. 304).

This is the condition of Israel in exile. It was their sin that had taken them to this place. Ezekiel has already catalogued their sin, summarized by the God-focused sin of idolatry and the human-focused sin of injustice. They have cut themselves off from God, and now find themselves in exile as a result. This is what sin does to us. It is like cutting a branch from a tree. At first, it still looks as if it is alive. But since it has been severed from its life source in the tree, its true condition of death will progressively make itself known as the branch first becomes leafless, then dries out and eventually rots and disintegrates completely.

By its sin, Israel had been cut off from its life source and now finds itself completely and utterly lifeless.

This is what sin does to us all. It is the consistent testimony of Scripture that in our natural state we are all just like this valley of dry bones. Paul says it like this: **“You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked”** (Eph. 2:1-2). Jesus taught the same thing, as indicated by a conversation he had one day with one of Israel’s most religious men, a man named Nicodemus. **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”** (John 3:3). His problem was such that nothing less radical than a new birth was needed. As Ezekiel testified, only God can bring such life. When God asked him if the bones could live, he could only answer, **“O Lord God, you know.”**

There is no help for any of us until we accept this diagnosis of our sinful condition. The natural state into which each of us is born is that of spiritual death. Let me mention a couple of implications of this before moving to our second point. If we are spiritually dead, that means that we cannot either hear or see. Dead people are always both deaf and blind. If we are deaf, that means that we can’t hear God speak to us. Have you ever heard anyone say, “If God is real, why doesn’t he speak to me clearly?” The other possibility, and the one the Bible teaches, is that God is speaking but people aren’t listening because they are deaf. I think I’ve mentioned before the story of the man who became frustrated with his wife for her increasing failures to answer him when he spoke to her. He was convinced that she was losing her hearing, but she refused to admit that this was the case. So he devised a test to prove to her that she was going deaf. One night as she was sitting alone by the fire, he called to her from across the room, “Can you hear me?” He heard no reply. So he walked closer to her and repeated the question, “Can you hear me now?” Again, no answer. He then walked right up behind her and asked, “Now can you hear me?” She turned around and said, “Yes, honey, for the third time, YES!” If you think God is not listening to you, let me suggest the possibility that the problem lies in the other direction—that there may be a spiritual deafness in your own life that requires God’s intervention with new life.

Dead people don’t just have a hearing problem, but also a sight problem. Apart from God’s new life, we are as those living in darkness. Imagine someone in the dark fondling an ebony brooch hanging around her neck. And then the lights go on, and she sees that it’s not an ebony brooch, but a large cockroach, which she flings from her breast as quickly as possible. In our deadness, with its resulting blindness, we are drawn to things that may become precious to us, but which the light will reveal to be disgusting. The attraction of pornography, or seeking comfort in eating or in gossip will be flung from us as the lights go on and God gives us more fully the ability to see.

II. The Means of New Birth

God doesn't show Ezekiel this devastating scene of judgment and destruction in order to leave him in despair. Rather, he is preparing to address the situation by bringing life to these dead bones. God asked Ezekiel to preach to the bones. He was to say, **"O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live"** (v. 5). That's it? No wild histrionics or secret incantations? Ezekiel did as he was told, with the result that the bones began to stir. There was movement among the bones as they began to reconnect to a human skeletal form. And connecting tissue was added to them, followed by flesh and skin. Who could have predicted that preaching should have such an effect?

The situation has progressed from a pile of unconnected bones to full human-like bodies. But notice that they are still nothing but corpses lying on the ground. It looks like another round of feasting for the vultures and hyenas. But God is not yet done, and Ezekiel is not yet done. He is told next to preach again, this time to the wind or breath, commanding it to hear God's word to come and breathe on the corpses that they might live. He does so, and they become living creatures once again.

What is the significance of these events? I think it is twofold. First, this two-stage process of coming to life is intended to imitate the Genesis account of the creation of humanity. We read in Genesis 2 that God first formed the man and then breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. The two-stage process in Ezekiel 37 is intended to be a rerun of the original creation because God is saying that he is creating a new humanity through a second creation. It is a new birth.

The second significance of this is to suggest the manner of this new birth. It is accomplished by the word of God, by prayer and most significantly, by the Holy Spirit. There is one Hebrew word in our passage that translates three English words: spirit, wind and breath. It is the Hebrew word for the Holy Spirit and is a picture word. It is the word *ruah*, a word that pictures air moving vigorously, even violently. It is a picture word because the pronunciation of the word requires a massive exhaling of one's breath. The "u" vowel requires more breath than any other vowel. The Holy Spirit comes as God's wind to accomplish the miracle of new birth, in accompaniment with God's word and with prayer.

III. The Result of New Birth

Did you notice that when these bones come to life that they form an army (v. 10)? They don't become a social club or a debating club, but an army. One result of the new birth is that you're either a soldier in the army or a corpse. This army is to march back to Jerusalem with a mission, and their mission is to be that of extending this new creation, the new birth, to all the nations. This is clearly

taught in the New Testament. So when the resurrected Jesus comes to his disciples in a locked room, we read that Jesus breathed on them and said, **“Receive the Holy Spirit”** (John 20:22). They were then empowered as this army to go forth and bring new life by the ministry of the word, prayer, and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

This miracle of bringing life out of dry bones has continued to occur throughout history. Let me tell you the story of one of these new births. On a September evening in 1931, C. S. Lewis had a discussion with his friend, J. R. R. Tolkien (author of *The Lord of the Rings*), about Christianity. Lewis was not yet a follower of Christ, though he had been wrestling for quite some time with Christianity. On the next day after his discussion with Tolkien, God would grant him the miracle of new birth. He was riding a bus on the way to the zoo. Here’s how Lewis described what happened.

I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven into Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. And yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion. “Emotional” is perhaps the last word we can apply to some of the most important events. It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with two applications. First, perhaps you are beginning to become aware that your sin has done for you exactly what Israel’s sin did to her—taking her into exile. If so, you need to understand that your problem is that, spiritually speaking, you are exactly like this valley of dry bones. You are the problem, not your parents or your spouse or your boss. Your main problem is your spiritual deadness which has made you an outsider to God. If you will accept that diagnosis, then the Holy Spirit has already begun to work in you, and you are ready for the next step. Jesus has come to live and die for you as a substitute, paying the penalty for your sin in the process. He even lived as an exile, having no place to lay his head (Mt. 8:20). He also died as an exile, outside the city where strangers belonged. He did so to bring you home for all who will come to him in faith.

The second application is to make yourself available to God to be used of him in bringing this new birth to others. You can do so either through bringing God’s word to others or praying for them to have this new life. Those are the two means God uses to bring his new life to people’s hearts.