

Creating a New Hope

Scripture Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14 **Background Scripture:** Ezekiel 37

Devotional Reading Ezekiel 37:24-28

TIME: About 585 B.C. **PLACE:** Babylon

Ezekiel 37:1-3

The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³ He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "Sovereign Lord, you alone know."

Ezekiel 37:4-10

⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! ⁵ This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath^[a] enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.'"

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them 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 it, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" ¹⁰ *So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.*

Ezekiel 37:11--14

¹¹ Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.'"

Introduction:

Although he was best known to us as a prophet, Ezekiel was a priest before he received his call to prophecy (Ezek. 1:3). His name means "God will strengthen." He was married (Ezek. 24:16--18), apparently childless, and a leader of the Jewish exiles in Babylon (Ezek. 8:1; 14:1; 20:1).

Taken to Babylon during the second major deportation of Jews in 597 B.C., Ezekiel first functioned as a priest among the exiles. Five years later, though, he was called to the prophetic ministry (Ezek. 1:1--2).

At first, Ezekiel's ministry was similar to that of Jeremiah--known as the weeping prophet. Ezekiel wanted to prepare the people for the fall of Jerusalem and quell any false hopes they had concerning a speedy return to Judah. However, once the city fell, Ezekiel became a prophet of hope.

Lesson Background

Last week's Lesson Background discussed the three phases of the Babylonian captivity. This week's lesson puts us into Phase 3 of that time of distress. The prophet Ezekiel, who was probably one of the ten thousand captives taken to Babylon in Phase 2, received messages from the Lord for his fellow captives. Some of the messages were given in visions (Ezekiel 1:1--3).

We take one of those visions as our text. As we begin our lesson from Ezekiel 37, we realize that we are now in Phase 3 of the exile because the city of Jerusalem has fallen (see Ezekiel 33:21).

It is significant to note here that the location of the "land of the Chaldeans" or Babylonians (Ezekiel 1:3) is modern-day Iraq!

"The hand of the Lord," - God's own power-takes control of Ezekiel and transports him to another place. The phrase *"by the Spirit of the Lord"* suggests that the Holy Spirit takes charge of Ezekiel's mind for the purpose of imparting some revelation to that prophet. Ezekiel seems to be saying that the Lord's hand carries him through the air and sets him down at his destination. Does Ezekiel's body go along on that trip, or only his mind and spirit?

As interesting as this question is, we should not allow it - and others like it - to delay us in uncovering what message the Lord is giving to His prophet Ezekiel.

1: How was Ezekiel carried to the valley? What do you think this experience involved? (Ezekiel 37:1)

The destination - a certain *"valley full of bones"* - is where Ezekiel found himself. Is this a real valley with bones visible to normal eyesight? Or is the whole scene a vision put into Ezekiel's mind by the Holy Spirit? Again, the importance of the discovery of the dried bones is its analogy to the exiled Israelites - who were akin at this point to being spiritually dead to God. Not only do the bones speak of death, indeed of many deaths, but for bones to be left in the open was an indignity and indecency according to Jewish custom. To leave bodies unburied until the bones were exposed was unthinkable!

This scene would have been unsettling, to say the least! It was as if a great battle had been fought in this place, with only the skeletons of the fallen soldiers remaining. Apparently, the bodies of the slain had not been buried, allowing vultures to devour the flesh. Dried and bleached by the sun, the bones were "many" and "very dry" (v. 2). Perhaps Ezekiel and the captives saw such scenes as they passed devastated cities on their way to Babylon.

2: What did Ezekiel find in the valley? (Ezekiel 37:1, 2)

"Son of man" is a Hebrew term that literally means, "human being." Over ninety times Ezekiel is referred to as "Son of man" - which may be surprising because Jesus used that phrase Himself many times in the Gospels. In the book of Ezekiel, though, this phrase points to that prophet's mortality (human being). It is not a reference to deity here.

When God asks the question, *"Can these bones live?"* it does not mean that He is seeking information. It never does. [Remember Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and when God asked Adam where he was (Genesis 3:8,9)? Our knowledge of God's omniscience tells us that He already knew where the two of them were. This question was put to them by God in order to begin a dialogue.] Rather, the question to Ezekiel is designed to start a conversation and to gauge Ezekiel's outlook. Accustomed as we are to the ordinary course of events, we might answer God's question, "No way!" But Ezekiel is God's prophet, and obviously God is setting the stage for something extraordinary. Wisely the prophet gives the answer he is sure of, *"Sovereign Lord, You alone know."*

3: By what title is Ezekiel frequently addressed in the book of Ezekiel? And what does God ask him? (Ezekiel 37:3)

God instructed Ezekiel to *"prophesy to these bones."* The prophet was now called upon to speak to the bones that lay before him in the valley. As he had proclaimed God's message to the captive Jews, now he was to call out, *"Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."*

While preaching to the dead might seem an exercise in futility, God's word has the power to create (Genesis 1:3) and to raise the dead (Deuteronomy 32:39; John 5:24-29; Romans 4:17). Preaching has, in fact, been described as thirty minutes to raise the dead. Ask any pastor, and he will tell you that he has often felt as if he were preaching to the dead, not the living!

Besides, God neither had nor needed a prophet to relay His word when He created Adam. But in verse 4, God chooses to honor Ezekiel by having him speak "the word for the dry bones." So God instructs, and His prophet obeys.

4: Once in the valley, what was the prophet told to do? (Ezekiel 37:4)

Like all those who are serious about doing God's will, the man of God did as he was "commanded." As soldiers of the cross, Christians are not to question our Commander; rather we are to obey Him. John 14:15 says, *"If you love Me, keep My commandments."*

As Ezekiel begins to speak to "the bones" as the Lord had told him to do, the response is prompt. But it is hard for us to know exactly what the prophet hears and sees. The "noise" mentioned in verse 7 may very well be a rattling sound as dry bones in motion click against one another. Whatever details of sound and motion we choose to imagine, the result seems clear: countless disconnected bones join themselves together to form thousands of complete human skeletons. This rattling of bones was a prophetic portrayal of the rebirth of Israel; of their coming together again.

5: What happened once Ezekiel began to preach? (Ezekiel 37:7)

Ezekiel watched as ligaments tie the bones together at every joint, as muscles appear and are joined by tendons to the proper bones. He watched as thousands of human skeletons become complete human bodies. But they are bodies with "no breath in them."

The Hebrew word translated "breath" is the same as the one translated "winds," and can also be translated as "spirit." The context usually suggests the best translation. Since God alone has power to bring that which was dead to life, this vision would testify to the fact that the Lord was the source of Israel's new life or rebirth.

6: What is the significance of the words "wind," "breath," and "spirit?" (Ezekiel 37:8-10)

These bones symbolize "the whole house of Israel." This identification picks up on imagery already used: (1) those identified as "dry" or spiritually dead (see verses 2-5); (2) those identified as despondent and dejected, with no apparent "hope" of being "resurrected" as the people of the living God; and (3) those described as disassembled and dispersed before being rejoined and rebuilt (see verses 6-10).

God told Ezekiel that the "bones" (Children of Israel) were saying or feeling that, "Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!"

The major thrust of this passage is the coming spiritual rebirth of God's chosen people through the agency of His Spirit (see verses 15-28; 36:22-32). The spiritual rebirth would miraculously revive and restore human beings to what God had intended them to be in the beginning. The same body-breath sequence occurs in the creation of Adam (see Genesis 2:7).

We know, though, that there is hope in Christ! We may sometimes feel "cut off," or "lost," or spiritually "dry," but we can rest in the blessed assurance that God is able to breathe life back into our dried bones just as He did symbolically to those bones found in the valley, and as He did for the exiled Children of Israel-and as He has promised to reunite them sometime in the future to their rightful home. We should never ever give up on God!

7: What did the bones in the valley represent? And how did the captives feel about their plight in Babylon? (Ezekiel 37:11)

Israel's sin had placed many of them in graves in a foreign land. The graves were literal for those who died there, and figurative for those who felt themselves to be as good as dead. But as God spoke to the exiles through Ezekiel, His voice was reassuring: "O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel."

God's promise through Jesus Christ to people of all nations is the same: "I'll raise you from the dead and bring you to the eternal place that I am preparing for you." Do we really have faith today that this will happen as God has promised?

8: How might the promise to open the graves of Israel be fulfilled? (Ezekiel 37:12, 13)

God again promised, *"I will bring you back to the land of Israel."* For the exiles, this was the message of

hope they needed to hear repeated again and again.

Like the promise of Jeremiah that God's laws would be written on the heart (Jeremiah 31:33), Ezekiel was told that God was going to implant His Spirit within His people. Earlier God said, "A new heart also will I give to you, and a new spirit will I put within you" (Ezekiel 36:26).

The concept of the coming of God's Spirit upon His people is presented several times in the prophets (Isaiah 44:3; Ezekiel 39:29; Joel 2:28). Perhaps that is why Jesus was surprised that Nicodemus did not immediately grasp the concept of being "born of the Spirit" (John 3:8, 10).

Can we believe that God is going to keep His word as given to the prophet? The final word to Ezekiel in this vision was *"I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it"* (Ezekiel 37:14). God is faithful to His people and His promises; of that we can be ABSOLUTELY certain.

9: What promise is made concerning the Spirit? (Ezekiel 37:14)

CONCLUSION

Never was there a people more hopeless than those held captive in Babylon. In their own estimation they were as good as dead. But God did not want them to be captives forever. He wanted them to be free in their own land, serving Him exclusively.

Hope in God is the best kind of hope! And to those of us who have put our trust in Jesus the Saviour, Peter writes, "who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God" (1 Peter 1:21). Hope does not die easily when it rests in God. "In the world you shall have tribulation," said Jesus (John 16:33), and sometimes we have it year after weary year. "But be of good cheer," Jesus says, "I have overcome the world."

So we look forward, taking to ourselves Jesus' own promise: *"Be you faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life"* (Revelation 2:10). Praise God for such a Savior!

PRAYER

Our Father and our God, we know that You are eternal and that Your promises can NEVER fail. Thank You for the bright hope they create to guide us and to energize us in the way everlasting. In Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God is dependable. Are you?