

God's Servant-King

Background Scripture: Ezekiel 37:15-28 **Devotional Reading:** Isaiah 50:4-9

Ezekiel 37:21–28 (NIV)

²¹ “And say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. ²² I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. ²³ They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

²⁴ “‘My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. ²⁵ They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your ancestors lived. They and their children and their children’s children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. ²⁶ I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. ²⁷ My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. ²⁸ Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.’”

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To explain Ezekiel’s prophesy of God gathering His people together.
- **Biblical Principle:** To know that God restores and renews through His presence.
- **Daily Application:** To commit to hearing, accepting, and trusting God’s Word.

INTRODUCTION

Establishing Trust Again

There is an old story of a man who comes to two great teachers and demands of them, “Teach me the Law of Moses while I stand on one foot.” The first one tells him that his request is unreasonable and sends him away. The second one tells him that the Law of Moses is about loving God and neighbor. “All the rest is commentary. Go and learn.”

We remember that Jesus said much the same thing in Mark 12:29–31. But behind the elegant simplicity of that observation lies the hard fact that learning the ways of God requires work. And for that work to yield valid and fruitful results, the seeker must demonstrate honesty and open-mindedness. That gets to the heart of the matter: learning God’s Word is about trusting Him. Learning to trust God requires a lifetime of effort. But a commitment to do so pays daily and everlasting dividends.

Hearing, accepting, and trusting God’s Word involves more than just intellectual ability (again, Mark 12:30). It requires us to reorient our desires. We must want to trust, to hope, and to love. The lesson text helps clarify this needed reorientation.

LESSON CONTEXT

Ezekiel lived at the time Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. (Ezekiel 1:1–2; 33:21). That destruction and accompanying exile was preceded by two other deportations. The first of those came in 605 B.C., when Daniel and his friends were taken captive to Babylon (2 Kings 24:1–2; Daniel 1:1–6). Ezekiel’s relocation to Babylon became part of the second deportation as he found himself among the 10,000 people of the elite citizenry taken in 597 B.C. (2 Kings 24:12–14). Daniel and other Jews were taken to serve “in the

king's palace" (Daniel 1:4), while Ezekiel found himself "among the captives by the river of Chebar" where "the hand of the Lord was there upon him" (Ezekiel 1:1, 3).

The book of Ezekiel features many astonishing word pictures. One of the most famous is that of the valley of dry bones, in Ezekiel 37:1–14. It is followed by the much less famous illustration of two sticks in 37:15–28. Both of these metaphors speak of the restoration of Israel while emphasizing different aspects of that reunification. The lesson explores the significance of the metaphor involving the two sticks. As the text opens, Ezekiel had just been directed to show the stick on which he had written "Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him" and a second stick on which he had written "Belonging to Joseph (that is, to Ephraim) and all the Israelites associated with him" (37:16). The explanation follows.

Ezekiel took two sticks, each one to represent one of the divisions of the Jewish nation... He explained that the Lord would gather the people together to one place, their own land of Israel. He would make them one nation ("one stick"), obedient to one king, and (most importantly) worshipping one God. There would be no more idols or disobedience to the law of the Lord.

Return to the Land: Ezekiel 37:21–25

In Ezekiel 37:21, the beginning word "*and*" connects what follows with the previous verses that introduced imagery of two sticks (see the Lesson Context). The explanation, which now begins, is introduced by the familiar declarative phrase *this is what the Sovereign Lord says*. This phrase and its variations occur hundreds of times in the Old Testament. That which follows the phrase is authoritative!

The verse introduces a series of specific future realities that together paint a picture of a new life to come. The predicted reality of the Israelites being regathered *into their own land* had been stated before (Ezekiel 34:13) and would be stated again (39:25–28). It was a message that bore repeating! And other prophets did indeed repeat it as well (examples: Isaiah 14:1–2; Hosea 11:10–11; Amos 9:15).

The dispersion and scattering of *the Israelites*—commonly known as the Diaspora—continued into the time of Jesus (compare James 1:1). It seems unlikely, therefore, that the prophets expected each and every person of Israelite descent to return to Palestine. As the books of Ezra, Esther, and Daniel make clear, some Jews chose not to return to the homeland, and they continued to live in Gentile settings. There they continued to reflect deeply on how to maintain faith as a minority that was often persecuted. Even so, the return home and the rebuilding of the temple signaled to everyone the presence of God.

1. What future reality was prophesied in Ezekiel 37:21?

The *one nation* of Israel had split into *two nations* in 931 B.C., following the death of King Solomon (1 Kings 11:41–12:24). That situation may have seemed permanent, given the facts of two exiles (Assyrian and Babylonian) and the passage of three and a half centuries. But Ezekiel expected the 12 tribes of Israel to be reunified, nonetheless.

In that regard, Verse 22 offers us an opportunity to clarify the use of some tribal names of Ezekiel 37:15–20 (see Lesson Context). The 12 tribes of Israel were descended from the 12 sons of the patriarch Jacob (died about 1860 B.C.), who had his name changed to Israel (Genesis 32:28; 35:23–26).

Two of his 12 sons were Judah and Joseph. In the naming of the 12 tribal territories, one territory each is named after Jacob's 12 sons, with two exceptions: the tribe of Levi (which received no territory as an inheritance, per Deuteronomy 18:1) and the tribe of Joseph. In the latter case, two tribal territories were named after Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (Numbers 34:23–24; Joshua 14:4). In time, the names Israel and Ephraim became synonyms in referring to the 10 northern tribes, while Judah became the designation for the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin (2 Chronicles 11:1; 30:1; Jeremiah 3:8; Hosea 11:12; etc.).

When no longer divided between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, the people would enjoy a renewed unity (v. 22 of today's lesson). This reunification would happen under *one king*, in distinction to the two kings that had characterized divided Israel between 931 and 722 B.C.

2. What kind of reunification was prophesied, and how would it happen? (Ezekiel 37:22)

The forthcoming restoration was also to be characterized by the end of idolatry in all its forms. Verse 23 features two words that refer to false gods. The first, translated *idols*, is Ezekiel's favorite in this regard; the underlying Hebrew appears 39 times in his book, out of 48 times in the Old Testament as a whole. The second word, translated *vile images*, occurs 16 times in Ezekiel, out of 50 total Old Testament occurrences; this word is also translated "abomination" Daniel 9:27; 11:31; and 12:11.

The double impact of both Hebrew words together occurs only here and in Deuteronomy 29:17; 2 Kings 23:24; and Ezekiel 20:7–8. The worship of false gods was the prime reason for all of the Israelites' other problems. It had led to the defilement of the land in general and of the temple in particular (8:1–16). Cleaning the land and the temple of such religious filth would be important (compare 2 Kings 23:4–16). Cleaning idolatry from hearts would be all the more so (compare Ezekiel 14:2–7).

3. What would have to occur spiritually for the people? (Ezekiel 37:23)

What Do You Think?

What in your life threatens to steal your attention and devotion away from God alone?

Digging Deeper

What people or practices help you identify and reject potentially idolatrous thoughts and behaviors?

However deep Israel's problem with idolatry had been in the past, Ezekiel prophesied that the future would be different. Ezekiel did not think that the people could completely purge idolatry by their own willpower. Rather, God was to *cleanse them*. The people would experience the sort of physical and spiritual purification necessary for anyone going to the temple to worship (see Psalm 24:3–4). The forthcoming purification would affect all of life—life with God and life with one another.

Verse 24 expands on Ezekiel 37:22 in specifying the "one king" to be *David*. Davidic kingship, not just monarchy in general, was being prophesied. Ezekiel did not expect the literal, physical reincarnation of that ancient ruler, dead for nearly 400 years by Ezekiel's day. Rather, the expectation was that of the rise of a new ruler who was to be like David in one or more ways.

An example of this kind of interpretation presents itself in the case of John the Baptist, whom Jesus declared to be "Elijah who was to come" (Matthew 11:14) as predicted in Malachi 4:5. John the Baptist was not the prophet Elijah resurrected. Rather, John the Baptist was the one who ministered "in the spirit and power" of that long-ago prophet (Luke 1:17; compare Matthew 11:14; 17:10–13).

Anyone who rules over God's people should function as a shepherd. That designation describes someone who protects others from harm. The *one shepherd* to come would stand in stark contrast to the worthless shepherds who had exploited the people (Jeremiah 23:1–6; Ezekiel 34:1–10). The contrast between good and bad shepherds continues into the New Testament (John 10:1–16; Acts 20:28; Hebrews 13:20–21; 1 Peter 5:1–4; Jude 12).

4. How could David be the shepherd-king of the people all over again? (Ezekiel 37:24)

What Do You Think?

How do you experience Jesus' shepherding in your present circumstances?

Digging Deeper

How can you become more attuned to Jesus' leading?

Verse 24c describes the behavior of the people that will result from the rule of the one shepherd-king to come. People tend to behave as their leaders do, and this fact was a driver of ending up in exile (see Jeremiah 44:16–17). The shepherd-king will be a model of behavior that reflects the opposite. The result will be an era of justice, in which faithful people obey God’s *laws* and *decrees* fully.

Verse 25 summarizes promises already stated (compare Ezekiel 11:17; 28:25; etc.). But it also adds a new idea: *forever*. The return to *the land* and the rule by *David* the *servant* will both be permanent in some sense. The Hebrew behind the wording *forever* does not necessarily require us to think in terms of “eternity without end,” since it may signify “age enduring” or “to the end of the age” (compare Psalm 132:12).

5. What is significant about the term “forever” in Ezekiel 37:25?

Covenant of Peace: Ezekiel 37:26–28

God would also bless the nation to be governed by a “covenant of peace” (Ezek. 37:26; 34:22-25), which is the “new covenant” that Jeremiah wrote about in Jeremiah 31:31-34. This would be better than the old legal covenant, because of an unchangeable covenant of grace (Isa. 55:3; Jer. 32:40). The promised peace would therefore be more than a mere absence of conflict. Rather, it was to be a condition in which the people would flourish as God intended.

6. How would God further bless the people? (Ezekiel 37:26-27)

What Do You Think?

When have you experienced peace as more than just the absence of conflict?

Digging Deeper

As far as it depends on you, what can be done to share such peace with others?

God will then set the people in an established position (Ezek. 37:26b); no longer unsettled as before. Furthermore, He will increase their numbers and set the (rebuilt) temple in Jerusalem (my sanctuary) where the glory of God will dwell (v. 27). In their wilderness days, Israel had the tabernacle to unite the camp of Israel, with each tribe assigned a specific place to pitch their tents. The temple in Jerusalem was also a source of unity, for three times a year the men had to go to Jerusalem to celebrate feasts, and the people were allowed to offer sacrifices only at the temple.

In chapters 40-48, Ezekiel will go into detail describing this future temple and its ministries. God called it “my sanctuary” (37:28) because it would be a consecrated place where there will be shelter from danger. God’s presence with His people will sanctify the land, the temple, and the nation, just as He promised in His covenant (Lev. 26:11-12). The nations of the earth will come to worship the Lord with His people Israel (Isa. 2:1-5) and “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14).

7. How would God’s covenant of grace bring awareness to the nations? (Ezekiel 37:28)

What Do You Think?

What evidence can nonbelievers see in your congregation that God lives among you?

Digging Deeper

What, if any, congregational issues might distract nonbelievers from experiencing God’s presence in your assembly times?

CONCLUSION

Finding Life Again

Rebuilding a community after any kind of disaster is difficult work. For progress to be made, those affected must acknowledge their pain, find resources for renewed hope, and take practical steps to build a new life. The Judean prophets, priests, and other leaders of the sixth century B.C. precisely took those steps during and after the Babylonian (Chaldean) exile. God made sure that they did!

Connecting practical steps with the values, commitments, and dreams of a congregation presents an ongoing challenge, as all church leaders know. We easily drift into saying, “We must do *something*; here is something; therefore, we must do this.” Clear thinking about *why* we need to act in a certain way easily gets lost. Ezekiel made sure that his audience thought deeply about what to do and why. He held out the hope not just of reclaiming lost spaces and practices, but of reentering the deeper meaning of those very spaces and practices.

We need constant renewal in this regard. Before assuming that “God is on our side,” we should ask, “Are we on His?” The latter question will invite a season of self-reflection and prayer. That in turn puts us in a position for being made “with everything good for doing his will, ... through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever” (Hebrews 13:20–21).

PRAYER

God of all generations, Who restores and renews us after catastrophes of our own making, grant us a deeper sense of Your presence in our lives. May Your church then become an example to all the world of what those created in Your image may be. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Bless your successors by your own hope-filled obedience to God.