

BRINGING THE DEAD TO LIFE

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Giles has already given us some background to Ezekiel, a prophet of the time of Israel's exile in Babylon around 590 BC when we began this series. Ezekiel's lengthy ministry totalled some 30 years. In the first part of that ministry Ezekiel brought warning to the Israelites intended to lead them to repentance and renewed faith in God. In the second part of his ministry, Ezekiel brought the Israelites comfort and encouraged them to look towards the future in hope. So far, we've been looking at the first part of Ezekiel's ministry, but today we turn to the second part of his ministry. Apart from the opening chapter of the book of Ezekiel that we looked at a couple of weeks ago, this is probably the best known passage in Ezekiel. It's an engaging passage with lots of meaning, so as we study it together you can find the main text on page [***] of the church Bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen.

The passage divides naturally into two sections, Ezekiel's vision in verses 1-10 and the interpretation of that vision in verses 11-14. Let's start by looking at verses 1 and 2:

“The hand of the LORD was upon 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. He led me to and fro among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry.” (verses 1-2)

In the vision Ezekiel finds himself carried away and deposited in an unidentified valley full of bones. We can't be sure exactly where this valley was, some scholars think it was the Kebar river valley where Ezekiel had his first visions, others think it was the Dura valley and that the bones were the remains of those slain by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. I think the Dura valley is more likely for reasons we'll see in a moment, but we can't be sure. Ezekiel sees a huge collection of bones of people who are clearly long dead, because the

bones are very dry and to maximise the impact of this vision, God leads Ezekiel back and forth all around these bones.

The Hebrew at the end of verse 1 makes it clear that Ezekiel was amazed by the large number of bones. The significance of their number won't become apparent until verse 10, but the scene seems to be that of a major catastrophe and the bones are on the surface of the ground, denied a proper burial – which is why I think this is the Dura valley. The picture is of death in all its horror and finality.

The style of the passage now moves from description to dialogue between Ezekiel and God, actually mainly direct speech from God – let's look at verses 3-10:

“He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. 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.’" 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. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’" So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.” (verses 3-10)

Ezekiel's words are subordinated to the words of God – what God says is more important than what a man, even a prophet, says.

God begins by asking Ezekiel a strange question “can these bones live”. On the face of it this seems ridiculous and I'm sure Ezekiel was overcome by a sense of helplessness before this mass death, but nevertheless he responds cautiously: “O Sovereign Lord you alone know” – after all with God all things are possible (Genesis 18:14;

Jeremiah 32:17; Luke 1:37). Yahweh responds by demanding that Ezekiel be involved in the answer – “Prophecy to these bones”. Ezekiel is to say that God will make life enter these dry bones, God will breathe life into them. No situation is too desperate or far gone for God to be able to put it right and bring life instead of death. So if you’re facing hard or even desperate times know that God is able to deal with your problems and bring life and renewal.

Verse 6 tells us that the process by which Yahweh will fulfil his promise involves four discrete stages: he will reconnect the bones with sinews, cover the bones with flesh, overlay the flesh with skin, and then infuse them with breath. God’s going to bring about a reversal of the process of decomposition. Ezekiel duly complies with Yahweh’s commands in verses 7 and 8 and the reconstruction proceeds rapidly. Ezekiel trusted God and followed him and obeyed him even when he didn’t really understand. That’s the kind of person that God can use. That’s the kind of people we need to be. Like Ezekiel we just need to obey God and listen and wait to see what he will do (Psalm 46:10).

Then in verse 9 Ezekiel is commanded to prophesy to God’s very own Spirit, his breath, the Spirit which will blow on these bones and bring them to life. The identification of these bones with corpses of the slain again points to the location as being the Dura valley. I think we can see here a fulfilment of the covenant curse against Israel:

“Yahweh will put you to rout before your enemies. You will march out against them by a single road, but flee from them by many roads. You will become a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. Your carcasses will become food for all the birds of the sky and all the beasts of the earth, with none to frighten them off.” (Deuteronomy 28:25-26)

and by his command to prophesy that breath should enter these corpses Yahweh is surely pronouncing a lifting of this curse.

In verse 10, after Ezekiel has complied with Yahweh’s command, he witnesses a most remarkable sight. The breath entered the bodies, and they came to life and stood up on their feet. The scope of the miracle

is highlighted by noting that the exceedingly numerous bones were transformed into an exceedingly vast host. When God's Spirit comes every single corpse is revived. The dead rise not because they are reconstituted biologically, nor because of some internal force, but because Yahweh has infused them with breath. It's just like the original creation account, the soil of the earth did not become man until Yahweh infused it with his breath.

Let's move on to the interpretation of the passage in verses 11-14: "Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O 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. Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. 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.'"" (verses 11-14)

This is a continuous divine speech – God's giving the interpretation.

So in verse 11 we see that the Israelite corpses in the valley represent the entire Israelite nation, "the whole house of Israel", including those in the Northern Kingdom who had been sent into exile 130 years earlier. The Israelites are despondent in exile, they say their "our bones are dried up" (verse 11). They had counted on Yahweh for security, but he had abandoned them when they failed to keep his covenant and they are despondent. But, this is a message of hope for the exiles. They may be dried up, but like the dried bones in the valley they can be revived by Yahweh's Spirit. Yahweh and Yahweh alone can bring restoration to a despairing people.

What a marvellous message of encouragement this was, both to Ezekiel and to the people in exile and for all of us today. If the Israelites remained faithful to God's call and proclaimed the word of God, the ultimate consequence would be a life-transforming experience that would result in a national resurrection. Let us do the

same in our time. I believe that Ezekiel's vision is one of the finest illustrations of the life-changing power of preaching God's word. That word has the power to transform those who are dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1-22) and make them new, living creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). God has always used the "foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21).

The enabling power of the Holy Spirit is also portrayed in this passage. The Spirit empowered the dead by giving their dry bones life and animation. This was Paul's testimony. He said that he was unable to live the life of a believer (Romans 7:13-25), faithful to the commands of God, without the enabling power of God's Spirit (Romans 8:1-17)

Further, I think we can see in this passage a pointer to the hope of bodily resurrection after death. A declaration that there is life beyond the grave. This vision of the resuscitation of dry bones is not *only* for the nation of Israel. The valley represents the whole world, and the bones the entire human race under the curse of death for its rebellion against God. So, this passage holds out hope for all who accept salvation by the grace of God offered in and through Christ (Ephesians 2:1-10). With good reason, we who are heirs of the glorious message of the prophets and apostles find in this passage a dramatic OT affirmation that the sting of death will be overcome by the animating power of Yahweh's Spirit.

The passage also holds out hope for a defeated and moribund church. Revival cannot be worked up from within; it will occur only as God, by his grace, breathes on us again and brings us back to life. After all, as Ezekiel had witnessed, and as he had heard on dozens of occasions, the Lord is Yahweh. He has spoken. He will make good his word.

Finally, let's be clear that the only way for us to be resurrected is through the power and grace of God through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Ezekiel recognised the death and utter hopelessness of the dry

bones and we need to recognise the death and utter hopelessness in our situation. As Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians:

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.” (Ephesians 2:1-5 NIV)

Because God loved us, even while we were dead in our sins, he made us alive through the shed blood of his son Jesus Christ Our Lord. From beginning to end the process of producing spiritual life in us was totally and completely God’s work, just as the resuscitation of the dry bones was totally God’s work. Spiritually, God has given us life by breathing his breath into us and, he will resurrect us physically and bodily at the second coming of Christ. Our passage today makes it quite clear that God is sovereign over death.

Unfortunately we live in a world where so many people are trying to create their own spiritual life or are trying to earn their salvation by good works. That way just won’t work because we can never do enough, we can never be good enough; again as Paul says a few verses on in his letter to the Ephesians:

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no-one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9 NIV)

Ezekiel demonstrates that principle quite well. He didn’t have to develop a clever plan to bring the bones back to life. He didn’t have to labour trying to fit them all back together. He merely had to believe God and trust in him and follow God’s instructions. If we truly want to have life, to have life in abundance, we have to do the same thing. We must allow God to breathe his life into us and allow him to do the impossible in our lives. All we need to do to gain God’s

salvation is to turn to Christ in faith believing in his death and resurrection and acknowledge him as Our Lord and Master. But we do need to do that to benefit from the free pardon from sin Christ won for us on the cross, so if there's anyone here who has never turned to Christ in faith then I urge you, I implore you, to do that right here right now this morning. Just as Ezekiel's telling forth God's words brought the dry bones back to life, so the goal of my preaching this morning is to enable God to raise the dead to life.