

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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[0 : 00] Let's turn back then to that passage we read in Ezekiel chapter 37.

And we'll take it from the very beginning again. 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.

He asked me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I said, O sovereign Lord, you alone know.

And then if you jump down to verse 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.

[1 : 10] Perhaps we could also read from John chapter 20. Just a couple of verses. John chapter 20 in the New Testament. It's the penultimate chapter. Of the gospel of John.

And this is the day when Jesus was raised from the dead. And verse 19.

John chapter 20 in verse 19. On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you.

After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again, Jesus said, Peace be with you.

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that, he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven.

[2 : 13] If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. I'm sure you can see already how these two passages come together.

But let's just focus, first of all, on the first of them, which was, of course, part of the large book of the prophecy of Ezekiel. Just to put it in historical context, you probably know about the prophet Jeremiah.

It's one of the major prophecies of the Bible. And we're talking round about the year 600 B.C. Now, when Jeremiah was prophesying, the king at that time was a man called Jehoiakim, who was deeply hostile to the message of Jeremiah.

At that time, Ezekiel was round about seven years old. So, if you like, if you want to put it this way, during Jeremiah's ministry, Ezekiel would have been in the YF.

He would have been one of the young people in the church. That kind of, I hope, sets it in context, in the historical context of the Old Testament.

[3 : 27] And, of course, Jeremiah was a prophet of doom. The reason for that is because God gave him a message of doom for the people of Judah. And as a result of God's judgment, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, came.

And after he besieged the city, they surrendered the city after three months. And he carried off a large number of people to Babylon. And this was round about 597.

And this was the first batch of people who were taken away, who were deported from their native land. And Ezekiel was among them.

God was not finished with his people. That is the message that comes across loud and clear in the book of Ezekiel.

And the way that God reveals his message to the people is by way of visions that Ezekiel saw. I don't know if you've ever tried.

[4 : 29] I'm sure that most of you have read the prophecy of Ezekiel. It's quite difficult to read. You have to close your eyes after reading the chapters that describe the prophecy, and try and picture the kind of visions that Ezekiel saw in order to get the picture of the message that God was giving his people.

In actual fact, if you really want to know, if you want to, there's some quite good stuff on the internet. If you want to Google Ezekiel's vision, some people have put together animations that kind of reconstruct what they thought the vision looked like.

And I think some of them are quite helpful. Of course, you've always got to watch and check it out against what you read to make sure that what you see on the screen is what you read because sometimes people get it wrong.

But sometimes it's helpful for us to understand or to try and picture what he saw. It's quite awesome, actually. The whole thing is quite breathtaking.

In actual fact, it took Ezekiel's breath away as well. He was totally freaked out by the vision that he saw in the first chapter.

[5 : 47] And here he is in chapter 37, and this is probably the best-known chapter in the book of Ezekiel. It's one that I'm sure you've read many times because of its sheer horror.

Sometimes God communicates his message by way of the Word. Sometimes he communicates his message by way of vision, as we've already talked about.

But sometimes those visions are horrific. And this one was, at least it was at first, it was a really frightening vision.

This was the second time that God had told Ezekiel to go to a valley. The first time, the first time he saw the glory of God and it had left him unable to leave his house for almost five years.

So when God told him to go to a valley again, he must have wondered, what is God going to show me the second time? In any case, it was very different.

[6 : 51] Or was it? The first time he had seen the glory of God in a vision. This time he saw, again, the glory of God, but it's displayed in an entirely different manner when he sees, at first, what was to the Jewish people the most horrific sight.

It's reminiscent of the kind of scene that you'd be warned about on TV if you ever watch the news and they're just about to show you something that is distressing and disturbing, then they'll tell you this scene might upset many of our viewers.

And this is exactly what you have. And if it's distressing for us to picture what's going on here with this vast number of dry bones, bones of people who had died and who had been dead a long time, how much more distressing was it for the people of Israel for whom it was unclean to touch or go anywhere near a dead body?

Death was something that they had to deal with right away. When a person died, he was buried right away, even today in Middle Eastern countries.

Once a person dies, the funeral is the very day. And in those days, it was the same. Because for God's people to touch or to have any association with a dead body was unclean.

[8 : 23] Now, Ezekiel was a priest. He wasn't just a prophet. He was a priest. So for him to have to look at the scene of death, it was particularly horrific.

There were a great many of the bones that were lying around. This was a scene of carnage. We can only close our eyes and imagine the utter carnage.

They weren't buried. They were there on the surface. And obviously, these people had been dying, had been dead for a long, long period of time.

There was no hope for them whatsoever. And it was even worse than that. Not only was it unclean, but that when a person had died and if they were left unburied, it was seen by the Jews as a curse, as God's judgment upon them.

Remember Saul, when he was killed by the Philistines, they left his body outside. And that added insult to injury in the fact that this was God judging Saul for what he had done, how he had disobeyed him.

[9 : 44] This was, in other words, the ultimate curse. Jeremiah chapter 34 says, And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and pass between its parts.

The officials of Judah and officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs and the priests, and I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives. Their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.

This was not only a horrible scene, this was not only a hopeless scene, but this was a scene of divine judgment. God had spoken and he had brought this carnage on his people.

But God was not finished with his people. That's the message in this chapter. He was not finished. This, to all intents and purposes, is a chapter that describes utter hopelessness.

I mean, we know, don't we, that death creates that separation between our loved ones and those who are left. And there's nothing you can do to reverse it.

[10:55] And so, at first view, this is a scene of hopelessness and tragedy.

And God is not finished with his people. Because when God takes Ezekiel to see the bones, his question is, son of man, can these bones live?

It's an interesting question, isn't it? One that required faith, one that probed underneath, into his heart, and asked him, what do you think, Ezekiel?

Is it possible for these bones to live? And Ezekiel's answer was a very clever and a very perceptive one. old sovereign Lord, he said, you alone know.

So then God takes it a step further. And he says to Ezekiel, all right, prophesy to these bones and say to them, dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

[12:02] And God's promise, as well as his command, was this. This is what the sovereign Lord says, 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 and then you will know that I am the Lord. So there was a command and there was a promise. And when Ezekiel heard the promise attached to the command, it encouraged him to do something that was bizarre and that something that naturally speaking was never going to have any effect whatsoever.

It was hopeless to speak to bones and expect it. And that's not to say that God hadn't raised the dead even in the Old Testament. You remember the story of Elijah and the young boy and how he stretched himself over the young boy and brought him to life.

Elisha was the same. There were occasional stories in the Old Testament of how people were brought to life by the power of God.

But these, there appeared to be absolutely no substance whatsoever to any hope that they might have because they had, all that was left was bones.

[13:17] And they were all scattered all over the place. There was nothing together about them. There was no sign of any kind of hope whatsoever.

And yet, Ezekiel knows who's talking about, talking to him and knows his power. And because he promised, he knows that God is able to do what is utterly impossible to us.

And so he did. 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. We close our eyes and we imagine this incredible scene, bone to bone.

I looked and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them. But it came to a halt. Once the bones had all kind of been reconstructed and come together again and tendons and sinew and flesh and skin miraculously appeared upon all of the bodies that were there, there was no breath in them.

There was another step to be taken. Verse 9, He said to me, prophesy to the breath. Prophesy, 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.

[14:43] So I prophesied as he commanded me and breath entered them. They came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast army. And so the last stage has taken place.

He's come upon the scene of carnage and hopelessness and divine judgment. God has said, do the impossible. Do the impossible. Tell these bones to live. Ezekiel has obeyed and the bones have come together.

Flesh has come upon them. They are now bodies and the last stage was to prophesy to the breath and they came to life and stood up. Clearly, this is not only a miracle, but it is a message.

A message that was first of all to go to the people of Israel and Judah. God says that. He says, Son of man, verse 11, 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, my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them.

[15:54] I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Now, this didn't mean that God was going to literally raise the dead in Babylon. What it meant was that the day would come and did come when

God was going to restore His people from being captives in Babylon back to Jerusalem and Judah once again.

And that's exactly what happened under the reign of Cyrus, the king of Persia. When he came to the throne, he allowed them to go back exactly as God had prophesied and as God had promised. And so, the nation of Israel came together once again with the return. But that didn't mean that everything was going to happen automatically. It still required the effort of His people.

Effort of men like Haggai and Zechariah and Ezra and Nehemiah who spent years of their lives fulfilling and restoring the walls of Jerusalem and the temple of Jerusalem so that God would be worshipped once again and so that God's people would come together as His people once again. And that's exactly what happened. But I can't help thinking that there is a more a prophecy that extends beyond what happened after Cyrus came to the throne.

[17 : 28] It's a prophecy that extends hundreds of years to the time of Jesus. You see, the people of Israel had sinned and they were suffering divine judgment in having been taken away into Babylon.

And now God was displaying His extraordinary mercy in keeping His covenant to His people in bringing them back to their own land once again. But the sin of His people mirrored the sin of a broken world.

God's ultimate purpose was not just simply to bring back the people of Israel to Jerusalem once again. His ultimate purpose was a plan for the whole world.

One which extended to every nation and tribe and tongue. It extended beyond Judah and Jerusalem and Israel.

It extended all across the oceans to people to people who needed to hear the voice of the Son of God.

[18 : 40] And that's what happened in the gospel. And that's why a chapter like this is so relevant for you and I today. You might say, well, this was all about the people of Judah and Israel in Babylon and what's it going to do with us today?

Because God's covenant promise extended beyond His people. many of His people didn't really accept that. They wanted God only to be theirs.

But if they had listened to God they would have known that even as far back as Abraham He promised that all nations of the earth will be blessed in you.

How was that going to happen? Well, we know how it happened. Because in time, in the fullness of time, He sent His Son into the world. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. That was God coming into the world when God became a man and when He gave His life on the cross and when He rose again on the third day.

He did that in order that God's plan of redemption which was worldwide would come to pass for people like me and people like you.

[19 : 54] And if we go to the New Testament we find this remarkable similarity to the way in which God speaks to Ezekiel in this chapter in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The language that Jesus describes, uses to describe the gospel is remarkably similar to the language here. It's the language of creating life.

It's the language of resurrection. It's the language of forgiveness. It's the language of eternal life, abundant life, new life. And that's what happens when a person becomes a Christian.

And that's why it's wrong to think that a person becoming a Christian is someone who just simply changes their religion and signs on the dotted line and does Christian things rather than what they were doing before.

That's not what happens at all. When a person becomes a Christian a miracle takes place in that person's life. The Bible talks of it as being dead in trespasses and sins just like the bones.

[21 : 02] As dead as these bones were, as hopeless and as helpless and as far away from God as we possibly could be. And yet, somehow, by God's Spirit, it's like what we were saying this morning, somehow, by God's Spirit, He's able to bring life out of death.

He tells us John chapter 5 and verse 25, Jesus says the most remarkable, this is Him describing the kind of change that He brings about in a person's life.

I tell you the truth, He says, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live for as the Father has life in Himself so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself.

You notice the language that He's using, the same kind of language as Ezekiel chapter 37 and He's describing the power of God working in a person's life and bringing that person to life again.

The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and live. That's what happened to you if you're a believer tonight. You heard the voice of the Son of God and you rose to live.

[22 : 22] The life that you now live is a new life. The life that God has given you. But there's more to it than even that.

When Jesus rose from the dead, and that's why I read John chapter 20, He performed this really strange action in the presence of His disciples.

Remember that first day of the week when He met His disciples? Thomas wasn't with them. They were in that room with the doors locked for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and He stood among them and He said, Peace be with you.

After this, He showed them His hands and His side to authenticate that it really was Him that they were looking at. Couldn't have been anyone else. And Jesus said, Peace be with you.

Now He says, As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. Then, listen to this, He breathed on them and He said, Receive the Holy Spirit.

[23 : 22] Do you notice that? He breathed on them. What does that remind you of? Exactly the chapter that we've just been reading where God breathes into the lifeless bodies that have come together again by the power of His Spirit.

He breathes in. It's kind of like what happens in Genesis chapter 2 where God, He forms man from the dust of the ground. The very first man, Adam, from the dust of the ground.

And once He's done that, there's a next stage in the process where we read that He breathed into him the breath of life and the man became a living being. Now He didn't do that with any of the animals.

He only did that with Adam. And what He's doing is He's saying that humankind is unique because humankind bears my image and my likeness.

And that's why there was that unique communication and fellowship between God and Adam and Eve in the garden. A fellowship that no other creature could enjoy. You notice that when God breathes into that lifeless body of Adam that He's just formed from the dust of the ground, He's taking a personal interest.

[24 : 39] He's making it His personal business to come close to Adam and breathe His own breath into them. How personal is that? And that's what's going on once again, this time between Jesus and His disciples.

You notice also, secondly, that Jesus does that just after He has risen from the dead. Note, you see what's happening.

We're not just talking about looking at dead bones here, we're talking about God actually Himself becoming dead. That's what happened when Jesus died.

God in the flesh, Jesus of Nazareth, who is God and man, He's put to death. He yields His spirit.

His body is taken down, the body that God took to be His body, and He is placed in the grave. He's dead.

[25 : 50] He's dead. He's in the place of death. In Ezekiel chapter 37, God speaks to the dead. Now God becomes death.

And you know why that was? It had to be. Because in order to release us from the power of death, from the sting, and from the judgment of death, God had to take our place, that place of punishment, and that place of wrath on the cross when He gave Himself for us.

He became dead for us. But now that the Father has raised the Son from the dead, He stands at His disciples, amongst His disciples, who themselves have come together in His name with that newness of life that Jesus has given them, and He breathes on them that life that was to empower them to go out with the word of life, with the message of life, to a lost and a dead and a hopeless and a helpless world.

They were to receive the Spirit by which they were to tell people all over the world, and so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, men and women and boys and girls would themselves come to life. and it's still happening today, 2,000 years later, as the gospel goes all over the world today. Men and women are being saved.

[27 : 31] We might, you might wonder whether I'm actually being serious about that, and the reason that you're asking these questions is because you're looking around you and you're seeing

the society in which we live in, the world in which we live in, hostile to the gospel, where very few people are coming to faith in Jesus.

But I want you to look beyond that. I want you to look to countries other than our own where people in great numbers are coming to faith in Jesus.

That's what God is doing. that's the reality of how he is fulfilling and keeping his promise that the earth one day will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. There are people all over the world being saved tonight. They're coming to faith in Jesus. God is raising them. He's performing a miracle and bringing them to life, to newness of life.

Ah, but you say, well, what about us? Well, what about us? We still have the gospel and even although it appears that the world in which you and I live in shows no interest or little interest in the gospel, should that stop us?

[29 : 07] Should that encourage us to just shut the door and not bother with evangelism and not bother with mission work or church planting or any kind? Should we just say, well, God is finished?

You know, I hear people talking about being in a post-Christian era. You ever heard that? You've heard people talking about being in a post-Christian era. Now, I know what people mean when they say that.

I think the phrase perhaps, maybe I'm wrong, I think the phrase was coined by the late Francis Schaeffer. You'll read it in some of his books, a post-Christian era. And what he means by that is that if you look back to the time of the Reformation and the impact that the Reformation had on the Western world, it was immense.

But now, there seems to have been a reversal of that impact to the extent where the gospel is on the run and where Christians are in the minority and where the influence of the Christian church is so weak and so almost nondescript where we are just a minority once again.

And people say, well, that is what it means to be in a post-Christian era. The problem that I have with using that kind of language, it kind of gives up on the gospel, doesn't it?

[30 : 26] You kind of think, well, that's God finished with us. He's got no more purpose for the world in which you are not. How do you know that? How do you know that God is not going to do something absolutely spectacular in our world, in Scotland and in England and in Ireland and Wales and Europe?

How do you know that God has given up? You have absolutely no evidence whatsoever that God has turned His back. The God that I read about in the Bible is a God of mercy and a God of power and a God who does great things and a God who will renew people and rescue people from sin and He will bless His Word.

We might never see the great things that God will do one day. It might be beyond our lifetime. But we must never conclude that God has given up on us.

Neither must we shrink back from making Jesus known in our world.

We do that individually as we live our lives and we live our ordinary lives coming into contact with all kinds of people. We do that collectively as congregations and as we believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not it's not it doesn't depend on our slick presentation of it.

[32 : 09] It depends on the power of God because only God can raise the dead and work in the hearts of men and women.

So God is calling us tonight to be faithful. He's calling us to be true to his word just like the people you know why I love the book of Nehemiah and Ezra and Haggai is because these people that were in the minority and all they had was God.

There was no evidence of what God was going to do. They didn't know what their work was going to yield. They didn't know what was going to be the result of their work. All they had was the word of God.

They knew they were in the right place and they had a job to do. So do you and so do I. We have a job to do. We leave the rest and the results to God.

The Bible is full of encouragement the greatest of course of which is the power of God. Paul said I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ because it is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes.

[33 : 28] Tonight I wonder if everyone here is a Christian. I wonder if there are one or two who perhaps haven't yet come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Perhaps I don't know what stage in your thinking you are. Perhaps you only just started to think about the Christian faith. Perhaps you know next to nothing about it. And if that is you then let me just encourage you to keep exploring and don't be put off by the doubts and the objections and the fears that you might have.

Keep exploring Jesus. Jesus. It might be for you like the disciples remember when the disciples were out on the lake of Galilee and when they saw Jesus coming to them walking in the water and they couldn't figure out what he was at first.

That might be you tonight. I can't figure out this Jesus just a mystery to me. I can hardly see him. Will you stay and you continue to explore Jesus because it's by exploring Jesus that you will then discover eventually what the Christian faith is all about.

Perhaps you know a lot about the Christian faith and perhaps you know that you need to take that step of faith in which you surrender your whole self to Jesus.

[35 : 00] I hope that you take that step. I hope that you come to God and that you ask him to bring you to that place where he wants you to be because only God can do it.

Only God can do it. You can't do it by yourself. A person comes to faith in Jesus as God leads him to that point or her to that point. Ask God to show himself to you.

Ask God to open up your heart and ask him to draw him, to draw you to him and to show you what the life of faith really is.

Let's pray together. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for your goodness and the power of your word. We pray that by that power that you will reach us and that you will continue to bring to life people who today, right now, are dead.

We thank you that you are able to amaze us by that power and we pray that you will encourage us and do great things for generations to come.

[36 : 13] For we ask in Jesus' name, Amen. Amen.