

Ezekiel 37:3

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[0 : 00] I would like this morning to direct your attention to words which are found in the first passage of Scripture, which we read in the book of Ezekiel, from the prophecy of Ezekiel, chapter 37, and to the third verse.

He asked me, Son of Man, can these bones live?

Can these bones live? Amen. During this week which has passed, I'm sure that all of us would have seen in television or read in newspapers of the visit to Passchendaele, of the Queen and the First Minister and others, to celebrate the 90th anniversary of that particular battle in the First World War. They went there to honour the memory of those who died for their country. And there's a sense in which, in this passage that we've read today, Ezekiel also visits a battlefield.

His visit is a visit, a visionary visit. It's a vision that he was given by the Lord. But he went to a battlefield.

[1 : 39] A battlefield in the desert. Probably it was situated in what today is Iraq. Where, of course, there are many deaths, sadly, today and tragically today.

And the deaths in Iraq are sadly not marked by the care and the order that the war cemeteries in Belgium and France have given to those who have died there, belonging to different countries. But Ezekiel was given this vision of a battlefield. He was taken out, out into the desert. He himself was in modern Iraq, or what is modern Iraq?

He was in Babylonia. And he was taken in this vision out into the desert. And he was taken to a valley. And this valley was, in effect, a great cemetery.

Except that the bodies had not been buried. It was apparently the scene of enormous slaughter of an army.

[2 : 46] And the bodies were left. And by the time Ezekiel saw them, they were simply bones. They were dry bones. They were long dead.

They'd been bleached by the sun. They were there. Just the remnants of a mighty army.

Those who had not died in the battle would have died from thirst, from sunstroke and exhaustion. It must have been a spine-chilling scene for Ezekiel.

Much worse than a visit to a modern war cemetery, where the neatness and the landscaping of grass and trees cushioned, to some extent, the impact of the appalling slaughter which made these war cemeteries necessary.

Ezekiel was given no such cushion. He had to absorb in his spirit the full impact of this horrendous scene which he saw.

[3 : 52] And as he slowly picked his way through the scores of skeletons in that valley, he must have been painfully impacted by the slow death that many of those whose remains were around him had suffered in that place.

Now he tells us that this was a vision given to him by God as a picture, as a picture of the plight of the exiles in Babylon.

He himself was an exile. He was there working as the Lord's prophet among the people, his own people who had been carried away captive.

He'd been trained as a priest, but he was never able to practice as a priest because in the year that he was due to be ordained as a priest, he was taken into exile. And rather than being a priest, he became a prophet.

And he fulfilled a long ministry among his people in exile. And much of his ministry was given in pictorial form, at least verbal pictorial form.

[5 : 09] He spoke in pictures. The Lord spoke to him in pictures. And he spoke to the people in pictures. And he presents one of these pictures to us in this 37th chapter of his prophecy.

And he tells us what the Lord told him, that that picture was a picture of his people. It was a picture of the collapse of Judah, a picture of the destruction of Jerusalem, a picture of the fact that that generation had no hope of returning to their homeland.

They felt devastated. They felt as if they were dead. But Ezekiel tells us that this picture is a picture not only of desolation, but also of hope.

His vision was a picture of the Lord's promise to rescue and restore his people, as he tells us in verses 4 to 6. And we see in his vision the Lord's promise being fulfilled as the bones come together and a mighty army is recreated.

Now Ezekiel gives us this vivid vision, not simply for his own generation, but he gives it to us for us today. Because we today understand the symbolism.

[6 : 30] We today know what war cemeteries are like. We today know a lot about the country in which Ezekiel was given this vision, the country of Iraq. This is a message for us today, just as much as it was a message for Ezekiel's own contemporaries.

It's a message for Scotland. It's a message for every country in the world. It's a message for every generation. Because the picture that he paints, it's a picture not only of his own generation, but a picture of us.

A picture of our plight before God. We are in a cemetery. We are dead in our trespasses and in our sins.

Our plight is like the plight of these captives in Babylon. We are hapless, hopeless and helpless. But Ezekiel gives us this vision not only to bring us to our senses and to help us to realize the plight and the danger in which we find ourselves. He gives it to us also as a message of hope.

[7 : 40] Because this message is supremely one of hope. It tells us how this cemetery became a mighty army.

He gives us in his vision a picture of the hope which the gospel brings through that consortium of word and spirit which produces a spiritual resurrection.

That spiritual resurrection to which Peter refers in the passage that we read from his first letter. So I'd like for a few moments this morning to look at this passage.

To look first of all at the people's plight and to see how this really reflects the plight that we find ourselves in. And secondly to look at the Lord's promise.

A promise which is as real today as it was then. Well first of all the people's plight. I think this is summed up in verse 11. Where we have three phrases which help us to understand what this plight is.

[8 : 46] The people say our bones are dried up, our hope is gone and we are cut off. Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone and we are cut off.

I think these three phrases indicate three things. First of all it brings home to us our haplessness, our lack of happiness. Our bones are dried up.

This is a picture of misery, it's a picture of sadness, it's a picture of unhappiness. We live in a world and we live in a society where things have gone badly wrong.

Although we live in an age in which we are told that we ought to pursue happiness, increasingly we are aware of the fact that happiness eludes us.

We fail to realize that happiness is a by-product rather than an end product. When we pursue happiness as an end in itself it eludes us. We fail to find it.

[9 : 50] Although there is a great deal of focus on entertainment, a great deal of money is spent perhaps more than any other generation in history in entertainment and in the pleasure business.

We find ourselves victims of misery and unhappiness. We are a hapless generation. We see this again and again being manifested in different ways in our society.

I read some time ago of a young woman whose parents had recently gone through divorce. This woman had attempted suicide. And what she said to those who helped her counselor was, I didn't want to die, I just wanted the pain to stop.

We live in a society that is increasingly fractured, increasingly fragmented, increasingly tortured by these strained human relationships.

We live in a society where there is widespread loneliness, where people feel increasingly lonely. More and more people are living alone.

[11 : 04] We are isolated by technology, the one from the other. I read some time ago of a student who scratched on a desk in a university.

Why am I so lonely? There are over 2,000 people here. That's the kind of society in which we live today. A society that seeks happiness but cannot find it because it seeks it as an end rather than recognizing that it is the fruit, the product of something else.

But not only are we hapless, we are also hopeless. Our hope is gone, said the people to Ezekiel. Their hope had indeed gone.

Their country had virtually collapsed. Their temple had been destroyed. A return. They were transported hundreds of miles away. A return to their homeland now seemed almost impossible. The reason for living was snatched away from them. They saw no future. We live in a society which in many ways has given up on the future.

[12 : 18] We live in a post-modern world which tells us that what matters is the present. The past doesn't matter, so history is ignored. The future doesn't matter, so people live for the now.

This is a sign of hopelessness. A sign that we've lost a sense of purpose in life. We've lost a sense of destiny.

H.G. Wells, 60, 70 years ago, wrote in one of his books, There's no way out or round or through. That is the way many people look at life. I feel that life is a puzzle without a solution. Life is absurd, as the French existentialists told us in the middle of the last century.

In fact, they used the word nauseating. Life does not make sense. Some surveys in the United States tell us that 70% of teenagers feel that the world is no future.

[13 : 32] They wonder what life is about. And this is one of the reasons why many people turn to drugs. It's an escape from the harshness of this hopelessness.

One 16-year-old, when he explained to those who were counselling and why he was in drag, said, If I can't feel significant, at least I can feel good.

We live in a society which is characterised by hopelessness. We've lost a sense of purpose, a sense of destiny.

We've lost a telos, as the Greeks would say. We've lost a point for living. But, the people were, not simply, the people to whom Ezekiel ministered were simply, not simply aware of their, of the fact that they were, they were unhappy, that they lacked hope, but there was something even more serious.

They felt cut off from God. They felt that God had forgotten them. Because they say, We are cut off, in verse 11. We are cut off.

[14 : 44] They're to be cut off, in the Old Testament. It's a technical term for excommunication.

The, the, the, the transgressors of the law, according to the book of Leviticus, would be cut off from the people of the covenant.

They would be put beyond the mercy of God. And that's what the people were beginning to, to, to, beginning to think, that they were beyond redemption. That, not only was life hopeless, but that, that, that, that their whole destiny was hopeless.

That they were cut off from God. They felt that God had washed his hands and turned his back on them. Their sins were weighing them down.

And they were wasting away because of them. As, they themselves confessed to Ezekiel in an earlier chapter. They felt spiritually dead.

They felt there was no hope. They were already in the grave. There's some people today who feel like that. Who feel that God has forgotten.

[15 : 51] That God has turned his back. And that God has given up on the human race. To quote Winston Churchill, that God has wearied of mankind.

Paul himself knew that experience. He knew what it was to enter into that sense of hopelessness. Although, once he was proud, once he was confident, once he was sure that he could make it, that he could achieve salvation, yet he came to realize that he fell short.

He was convicted by the commandment, you shall not covet. He thought he kept all the other commandments, but he knew that he couldn't keep this one.

He was covetous. He became aware of the fact that there was a great gulf between him and God. That he was sins, that this sin of covetousness had separated him from God.

[16 : 52] And he knew what it was to enter into that spirit, that experience of spiritual despair. He expresses this to us in this ledger to the Romans, in Romans chapter 7, where he says, though the will to do good is there, the deed is not.

The good which I want to do, I fail to do, but what I do is the wrong which is against my will. So there was this deep spirit of helplessness, and that is also a characteristic of many people today, that they feel helpless, that they feel that God has turned his back on them, and that they simply cannot as it were, bridge this gulf that separates them from God.

And so this is the picture that is presented here by Ezekiel, a picture of, a picture that tells us that we're hapless, that we're helpless, and hopeless.

this image, this picture of a cemetery, this picture of an army battlefield years on, with corpses strewn all over the scene, is a picture of the way many people see life today.

This image that Ezekiel paints for us in words is a reality for men and women today. But Ezekiel's vision was given to him as a vision of hope, not to deepen the despair, but to bring men and women to a new hope.

[18 : 35] God sometimes comes to us in order to deepen our despair, in order that we might find hope, in order to awaken our need for hope.

As Martin Luther said, sometimes God comes to us as adversary before he comes to us as friend. And he comes to us as adversary in order that we might recognize our need.

And he comes as he came to Paul, who was kicking against the goad, he was coming, he came to goad us, and to hurt us in that sense, and to awaken us, and to help us to recognize our need.

And that's why Ezekiel shares this vision with us, to help us to realize our need. He doesn't want us to wallow in our misery, he wants us to find new hope, new life, in the gospel of God.

And so we have in this vision of Ezekiel, not just a picture of devastation, but also a picture of new hope, a picture of new life, a picture of restoration.

[19 : 44] And at the heart of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ are the promises of God. And the promises of God are, if you like, the nerve system of the gospel. And it is through believing the promises of God that we believe the gospel.

That's what the gospel is, essentially a promise. That if we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ we will be saved. And this promise is illustrated in this pictorial picture that Ezekiel paints to us.

And so Ezekiel is here presenting to his generation and to ours the promises of God, the power of the gospel, and the possibility of salvation.

Now, Ezekiel tells us that God promises to bring peace to the hapless, peace to those who are unhappy. The exiles were unhappy because they were separated from their homeland and from their temple.

The gospel tells us that we can have peace with God. In our separation from God we can be brought back to God. Having been cut off from God by our sins we can become reunited to God through the gospel.

[21 : 06] We can be brought into a new relationship with him. As we are justified by faith we are at peace with God. We are put right with God.

The fundamental relationship with God has gone wrong because of sin. But the gospel can put it right. Jesus Christ can put it right. God has saved.

And that's I think the first point that we learn from this parable of Ezekiel that it is possible to be saved.

That there is hope in the gospel. But not only is there here an offer of peace or of shalom there is also a promise of purpose.

the Lord promises not only a restoration but also a reunification. He speaks further down in the chapter in verse 22 of the two nations of ancient Israel being brought together Israel and Judah.

[22 : 16] It's a picture of reunification of the fragmented reality of ancient Israel being restored, restored and being renewed. So God comes to us and offers to restore us.

He comes and offers to give us a purpose to enable us to live. To give us a future and to help us to understand the significance the purpose for which he has created us and for which he offers to redeem us.

that this vision is a vision not only of peace and of purpose but also it's a vision of power. The situation that Ezekiel presents to us is one that was far too drastic to be resolved by human ingenuity or by human resolution.

It's a picture that requires the power of God. God. And we see this being brought home to us very clearly in the way in which both the Word of God and the Spirit of God work together.

First of all the Word of God from Ezekiel prophesies and the bones come together. And then when he prays that the Spirit, the breath, the wind of God might come.

[23 : 45] and these bones which had been brought together become a mighty army. And the people, the dead are fully restored to life in this picture.

It's a picture not just of power but of mega power. The scattered skeletons becoming a mighty army. Now this is a very, very dramatic picture of power.

It's a picture not just of resurrection or restoration. It's a picture of much more than that. Here we see bones which were bleached, scattered and bleached, long dead, being made a mighty army. It's a picture of something which just doesn't happen. And that's what the Gospel is. The Gospel tells us that the impossible is possible. the Gospel tells us that the reality of our sin is as real as the reality of death.

We are dead in our sins. And only the power of God can resurrect us. But the message of the Gospel is that the Gospel can do that.

[25 : 00] That the Gospel can take us out of the grave. That's what he is saying here in this verse.

The Lord comes to the people and he says that he will take them out of the grave. He will open the graves. See this in verse 12. 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. And so the picture that Ezekiel paints to us here is that we in our sins are already in our graves. We are dead, we are cut off, we are in a hopeless situation. But God comes to the Gospel and he promises I will open that grave. I can open that grave. I can lift you out of it. I can restore the brokenness of death.

I can reverse that. I can bring you back into a new positive relationship with me. he can do it.

[26 : 05] That is the power of the Gospel. We see around us so often the testimony of people who simply feel they cannot do it. And that's right. It's right.

We cannot save ourselves. But the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. And the Gospel is so powerful that it can lift you from your spiritual grave and bring you into eternal life.

And that's why it's so important for us to listen to the Gospel. It was the Word of God and the Spirit of God that effected this miracle in Ezekiel's vision. And it is the Word of God and it is the Spirit of God blessing that Word today that brings new life, brings eternal life to men and women who are dead in their trespasses and in their sins.

the Gospel is the power of God. So we have here this picture not only of desolation and of death and of hopelessness but also a picture of spiritual power, a picture of eternal hope, a picture of God at work.

Now God works today through the Gospel and the Lord Jesus Christ is at work today. Whatever his word is preached and whatever his spirit is poured out, he is at work.

[27 : 34] And the question that we need to ask ourselves is whether he is at work in us, whether he is at work in us as a congregation, whether he is at work as us as individuals. Do we know the power of the Word of God?

Do we know the power of the Spirit of God in our lives? When the Spirit of God and the Word of God come together you have a spiritual dynamo that can bring spiritual resurrection into the life of men and women, into the life of communities, can bring new life and reformation and renewal into the Church of God.

Whole nations can be uplifted through this divine union, this union of divine power, the Word of God and the Spirit of God. God and that is the power that when we come together and gather around God's Word we have access to.

God has promised to be among us as we gather in his name and he is among us in order that he might reach out to us and touch us and transform us.

That power, the power that Ezekiel saw vividly demonstrated in his vision, is a power which is available today, it is available now through the Gospel.

[28 : 53] The question is have we discovered it? Do we know it? Do we want it? It is available. Let all of us seek it.

Let all of us lay hold upon it. Let all of us ask God in his mercy to intervene in our lives and to lift us from our spiritual graves and to make us part of this mighty army which is his church in the world today and in the world to come.

Let us pray. Our Heavenly Father we give you thanks again for the power of the Gospel. We pray that you will enable us to recognize that we in and of ourselves cannot, cannot do, we cannot meet the demands of your will, we cannot meet the demands of your law, but we thank you that you have given us the real word in your spirit which can enable us to do what otherwise we cannot do.

And so we pray our Heavenly Father that you will grant us this enabling which will empower us so that we may respond to your word, that we might believe and repent, that we may trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and that we may hold on to him as our Lord and as our Saviour.

We ask you Lord that you will speak to each and all of us this morning and enable us to realize that your power is being made available to us. Forgive, forbid oh Lord that we should turn our backs, that we should leave this place without availing ourselves of this opportunity and pleading with you to pour out your spirit into our hearts and to bring us to faith in the Lord Jesus.

[30 : 43] We ask this in his name and for his sake. Amen.