



# THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES: THE SECRET TO REVIVAL

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

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## Introduction

This past week our Intermediate Hebrew class at Regent College exegeted Ezekiel's Vision of the Dry Bones (Ezek 37:1-14). The vision, although addressed to the House of Israel more than 2500 years ago, has encouraged and illuminated the Church ever since. As we worked through this passage in class, the hand of the Lord came upon me and impressed on me the power of the prophet's words. Ezekiel 37:1-14:

**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?"**

**I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know."**

**Then he said to me, "Prophesy 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, "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.'" So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.**

**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.'" (NIV)**

## A. The relevance of the vision and sermon

The vision both now and then aims to revive the flag-

ging spirits of God's elect. The blight of doubt wilts and withers lives that were once lovely and fragrant as a rose. Marriages conceived in love and brought forth through faith may die in cynicism and despair. Churches that once budded and flourished in the early rains, become parched by discouragement that prevents the latter rains from reviving them. Sometimes we feel as though we are dry bones and wonder if God can revive us. This vision aims to encourage and instruct us on how God revives our churches, our homes and our lives.

## B. The vision's audience

This text is addressed to the house of Israel, the people of God. Perhaps you are asking, "Is this vision addressed to us?" To me, the answer is an absolute "Yes."

### 1. Addressed to "my people"

First, notice God addresses this prophecy to "my people." He twice repeats it: "O my people" (v. 12) and "you, my people." Whatever your situation may be, if you trust in Jesus Christ you need to hear God addressing you as part of the people of God. Hear what the apostles have to say. Paul:

**If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal 3:29).**

Peter says:

**But you are the chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Pet 2:9-10).**

### 2. Collected in the Canon of Holy Scripture

Second, to be sure, the prophecy was originally addressed to the exiles, who, having been cut off from the Lord's temple and from the promised land, questioned whether they were still the people of God. However, someone, perhaps Ezekiel himself, later collected the vision into the book bearing the prophet's name, and that in turn became incorporated into the Holy Bible. Within the canon, it functions as an encouragement and as an exemplar of how God revives his people. As such, it addresses all of God's people both in space and time. It speaks to the universal and eternal people of God.

### 3. The eternal nature of truth

Third, the truths of this prophecy are by definition universal and eternal. Paul appropriates the truths of this vision to the church at Corinth in his comment "the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6).

The prophecy has two acts: The vision (vv 1-10), and its

interpretation (vv 11-14). Each act has three scenes: the call of the prophet (vv 1-3; v 11), the command to preach (vv 4-6; v 9); and the gift of the wind/Holy Spirit (v 12; v 13); and the interpretation interprets the last two. Here I will treat the scenes of the vision and its interpretation together.

## I. Scene 1: The Valley of Dry Bones (37:1-3)

**The hand of the Lord was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and He caused me to rest in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones. And He caused me to pass among them round about, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley; and lo, they were very dry. And He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Sovereign Lord, You know."**

This features the prophet himself, the person who will speak and revive the people of God. It has three parts, the call of the prophet, the experience of the dry bones, and finally, the Lord's question, coupled with the prophet's response of faith.

### A. The call of Ezekiel (v 1a)

Ezekiel introduces his prophecy by the formula: "the hand of the Lord was upon me" (v 1). This formula is relatively common in Ezekiel, and marks off his first person accounts of his various visions. It signals that the message that follows is of divine origin and therefore of extreme importance and conviction. By calling and sending a prophet to the dry bones, God in his sovereign grace initiates Israel's revival. This intervention signals that Israel's resurrection originated with God, not with moral humanity. Likewise today, resurrection from our "graves" begins with the call of a prophet, one whom God sends and through whom he speaks. God put his hand upon Ezekiel, even as he puts his hand upon all of the prophets who are in your midst. When they stand before you on a Sunday morning, the hand of God is upon them. It is not our doing. We do not build the church. We do not have programs to make a big church. You can have a big church but you may not have a holy church, unless the Spirit of God is doing it. The hand of God was upon Ezekiel. This is where it all begins. Paul put it this way:

**How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? (Rom 10:14-15).**

God has favored this church by sending you many prophets, not just one, any one of whom is probably more gifted than the average pastor. I make my point here not because you are lacking prophets but to urge you to continue in your good way. I am reminded of Paul's words to the Thessalonians:

**Now about brotherly love we do not need to write you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more (1 Thess 4:9-10).**

### B. Experiencing the dry bones (vv 1b-2)

In the second part, the prophet has to get his belly full of death in this valley of dry bones. The NIV says, "the Spirit

of the Lord...set me." The word is very unusual. The verb literally means "to cause to rest" (it comes from the same root as the word "Noah"). It is always used of a rest in paradise, but not here. The prophet is caused to rest in the midst of dry bones. This was where he was to settle down, in the midst of a cemetery. His graphic description of his vision captures even the most phlegmatic hearer:

**"And he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and caused me to rest in the midst of the valley. Now it was full of bones. And he caused me to cross over upon them round and round. And look! Very many bones were on the surface of the valley. And look! They were very dry" (37:1-2).<sup>1</sup>**

The interpretation identifies the bones as the House of Israel, and their dryness as their loss of hope (v 11). Then God makes the prophet walk all over the dry bones until he is forced to the realization that this was impossible. And that is the point. God causes his prophet to confront the spiritual condition of his people. He is confronted with the reality, from the human perspective, that the situation is hopeless.

A church, a home, an individual may also be full of dry bones. We may be dry bone-saints who have lost hope and feel abandoned by God and other saints. Our situation seems hopeless, and salvation seems impossible. Perhaps you, too, feel as though you are in exile, hopelessly cut off from your heritage and a future. Salvation seems impossible.

### C. The Lord's question and the prophet's faith (v 3)

In the third part, the Lord stimulates faith within the prophet. He addresses him as "O Human Being" [this is the sense of the term "son of man"] to remind him that his potential and limitations are determined by the Heavenly God. No prophet can breathe spiritual life into this valley of dry bones. Only God can do that. By asking the question, "Can these bones live?" the Lord effects two virtues in Ezekiel. First, he forces him to become involved by answering the question. Second, in trying to answer the question, Ezekiel turns away from the valley of dry bones, to the Lord himself. Whereas the Lord addressed him as "O Human Being," he addresses God as "O Sovereign Covenant Keeping Lord." His answer is classic: "You alone know." His response entails that nothing is impossible with God. Your revival depends solely on God's sovereign grace (cf. Luke 5:12). According to God's sovereign grace, even a whole valley of dry bones can be resurrected to become a vast army. The first step in the resurrection of our churches, homes or individual lives occurs when we switch on the light that illuminates the sublime God and drowns out our darkness.

In sum, revival begins with a prophet who is called, confronts reality, and believes that nothing is impossible with the sovereign Lord.

## II. Scene 2: Vision of the Dry Bones Coming Together (37:4-8)

**Again He said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.' Thus says the Sovereign Lord to these bones, 'Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. And I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin, and put breath in**

**you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the Lord.” So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew, and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them.**

The second scene features the word of God, thereby giving us our second insight into revival.

#### **A. A command to preach the Word of the Lord (vv 4-5a)**

The first part underscores the importance to preach his word authoritatively by enfolded one command to preach his word within another command to preach; and finally, through the prophet, God himself addresses the dry bones. First, God speaks to his prophet and commands him to prophesy: “Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones.’” Second, he then commands the prophet to preach his word to the people and commands them to hear: “and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!’” Finally, through the prophet God now addresses the people: “‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will...’”. One and a half verses of this scene command the prophet to preach God’s word and the people to hear it. This enfolded formula, though shortened, is repeated in each scene (vv 9, 12). If a preacher hopes for revival, he must emphasize and reemphasize, however tedious, “Now hear the word of the Lord.” The prophet is merely a medium. He is the plenipotentiary from the heavenly court down to earth and he speaks to you this morning through his word, if you can hear it. The whole focus is on preaching, on the word of God.

The importance of preaching the word of the Lord for revival is also underscored by the exhaustive vocabulary for God’s authoritative word. The key word “prophesy” (i.e., to speak for God) occurs seven times, the number that signifies a completeness (vv 4, 7 [2x], 9 [2x], 10, 12). A second term is “the word of the Lord” (v 4), which signifies a prophetic word from God. This is what the Church desperately needs to hear; not sociology, not psychology, but the word of the Lord. Third, when God addresses the dead bones, he uses yet another term, “This is what the Lord says” (vv 5, 9, 12). This formula reflects the way in which political messengers used to present the words of their lords (e.g., 2 Kings 18:19). The prophets used this formula to indicate that, like messengers of a worldly king, they were messengers from the heavenly King. As the heavenly King’s plenipotentiaries, they spoke authoritatively for heaven to the earth. Finally, he draws the prophecy to conclusion with a term for the inspired word of God, “declares” (Heb. *ne’um*). *Ne’um* signifies “Spirit-filled speech.” The word occurs in Psalm 110:1 “The LORD *said* (Heb. *ne’um*) to my Lord.” Our Lord interprets it: “How is it that David, *speaking by the Spirit*, called him ‘Lord?’” This is spiritual speech.

The second step in our resurrection occurs in connection with the efficacy of God’s word. God is always present with his people in his word. God rarely appears visually, He always appears with words. The people of God are not people of the eye; they are people of the ear. We do not see God; we hear him. Theologians know that words bind people together, and God’s word binds God’s people to himself. We relate to God not through an image, but through the word. This past week on a television docu-

mentary, the presenters noted that a courtship based on letters is stronger than one based on sight. When a person speaks we hear the real person; looks can be deceiving.

#### **B. The promised power in preaching (vv 5b-6)**

God then promises Ezekiel that in his very act of preaching God’s word, God will effect the miracle of bringing the bones together. The Bible uses many metaphors to describe its efficacy: it is the hammer that breaks the rock-like heart (Jer 23:29); the sword that penetrates the totality and depth of one’s being (Heb 4:12); the lamp to the feet (Psa 119:105); the imperishable seed that endures forever (1 Pet 1:24); the heavenly rain that makes the earth bud and flourish (Isa 55:10-11); the spiritual milk that nourishes newborn babes (1 Pet 2:2), and solid food for the mature (1 Cor 3:2; Heb 5:13-14). Hear God’s word to you. His word is, “I have come that you might have life.” His word is, “I am a God of life.”

At the creation, God filled it with life so that the seed could overcome the death of winter and endure. He filled the flora and fauna with life so that despite chaos and death, they would survive. He blessed Abraham in his dead body and he became full of life. The whole purpose of God’s word to you who think you are in death is to fill you with life. It is a life-giving word, when you hear it and you receive it.

Ezekiel emphasizes the importance of preaching; Isaiah, the need of faith. Addressing the same group of people, he puts it this way:

**Why do you say, O Jacob,  
and complain, O Israel,  
“My way is hidden from the LORD;  
my cause is disregarded by my God”?  
Do you not know?  
Have you not heard?  
The LORD is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth  
He will not grow tired or weary,  
and his understanding no one can fathom.  
He gives strength to the weary,  
and increases the power of the weak.  
Even youths grow tired and weary,  
and young men stumble and fall;  
but those who hope in the LORD  
will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:27-31).**

God’s word to you this morning, when you can hear it and receive it, will fill you with life. It will take you from your valley of dry bones and bring you to the land for which you thirst.

This faith is a gift of God. How does it come besides preaching?

#### **C. Prophecy fulfilled: The dry bones reconnect (vv 7-8)**

The scene requires little comment. However, it is important to note that it has no counterpart in the interpretation, because at the time the prophecy was given and the book collected, the vision had not been fulfilled. That remained for the next generation.

### III. Scene 3: The Spirit of God (37:9-10)

Then He said to me, “Prophesy to the breath,<sup>2</sup> prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, “Thus says the Sovereign Lord, “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may come to life.”” So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life, and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

The first scene features the call the prophet; the second, the word of God, and now the third scene focuses on the Spirit of God. All three ingredients are needed for revival. This third scene also has three parts to it.

#### A. The wind/Spirit comes through preaching (v 9)

The connection between God’s word and Spirit is linked: “Prophesy to these bones...I will make breath enter you and you will come to life” (v 4). However, it becomes clear that the word alone is insufficient. The preceding scene drew to conclusion with the comment: “But there was no breath in them.” Scene 3 begins with the need of preaching to effect the gift of the Spirit (v 9). The preaching of the word was essential, but limited in its efficacy.

#### B. The wind/Spirit will enliven the dry bones (v 10)

The wind, which God equates with his Spirit in v 14, transforms the valley of dry bones into a vast and vital army. The Lord brings revival through both authoritative preaching and the giving of the Spirit. Paul says:

**For we know, brothers and sisters, loved by God, that He has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, and with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction (1 Thess 1:4-6).**

**And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe (1 Thess 2:13).**

The Scots Confession expressed this same conviction of the Reformers:

Our faith and its assurance do not proceed from flesh and blood, that is to say, from natural powers within us, but are the inspiration of the Holy Ghost..., who sanctifies us, and brings us into all truth by his own working, without whom we should remain forever enemies to God and ignorant of his son, Christ Jesus. For by nature we are so dead, blind, and perverse, that neither can we feel when we are pricked, see the light when it shines, nor assent to the will of God when it is revealed, unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus quicken that which is dead, removes the darkness from our minds, and bow our stubborn hearts to the obedience of his blessed will.

It is as the word is quickened by Spirit that as you receive it you are transformed out of the dead valley into the promised land.

When I returned to Regent College five years ago, I was assigned a course in hermeneutics (the art of interpreting the Bible). I had not taught this before. In preparation for

the course I read everything that was written during the previous ten years on interpreting the Bible. I was dissatisfied with what I read. Almost all the books said we should read the Bible as we would any other book. Then I picked up one book, by George Martin, *Reading Scripture as the Word of God*, and that was different. He said that he would read the Bible but he wouldn’t get much out of it. Then he began to pray before he read the Bible, “God, speak to me.” He said that even seemed to him to become perfunctory after a while. Then about three weeks later, suddenly, as he was reading God’s word, he said, “my heart burned within me, and I was hearing God’s word.” All God’s people have heard God’s word that way. That is how we have become the people of God, and that is how we are enlivened when we are in the valley of dry bones, how we are taken into the promised land we yearn for. Yes, there is a preacher full of Spirit and full of word; yes, there is the word, but it must be accompanied in sovereign grace by the Spirit of God.

The third step in our resurrection occurs in connection with the efficacy of God’s Spirit. We need to be in prayer for God’s Spirit. That is what Jesus said:

**“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” (Luke 4:10-13).**

#### C. The bones come to life (v 10)

Here there is no counterpart in the interpretation of the vision. As noted, the last two scenes of Word and Spirit contain partial scenes of fulfillment (vv 7-8; 10), but not the interpretation. Ezekiel and his generation of the House of Israel died before they saw the elect arise from their graves and become full of the Spirit in order to return to the holy land and settle down in it. The next generation, however, did experience it, and they knew that the Lord had done what had seemed impossible. Prophecy is delayed in part that we may have a much more sure word of prophecy. Peter drives home the relevance of this delayed fulfillment:

**We have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts (2 Pet 1:19)**

May God give us the grace to pray, “God, give us your Spirit, that your word might live, and these dry bones will live.” The Church has been here from the beginning because the word of God has been with his people, and the Spirit of God has accompanied it. And you are part of that history.

O house of Israel, hear the word of the Lord.

1. My own translation, from the Hebrew.
2. In Hebrew, the word for “breath,” “wind” and “spirit” is the same.

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