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Toward Revival

Revival meetings became popular after the Second Great Awakening (early 1800s) when a man by the name of Charles Finney, known as the “Father of Modern Revivalism,” taught that revival had very little to do with God, BUT everything to do with man. In fact, Finney claimed that given the right circumstances — like nervous pews, moving sermons, mood music, altar calls, and the like — he could create revival.

Now I have no doubt that given the right circumstances and a willing audience, we could offer a sufficiently moving experience to get people to do almost anything. Yet we would NOT consider this to be a revival. In fact, that is what Iain Murray called “revivalism.”¹

True revival on the other hand, references those times when God sends forth His Spirit and radically transforms a dead and dying church (it could be a Christian family or saved individual) into a living, thriving community where Christ is sought, worshipped, proclaimed, and enjoyed! Now the million dollar question the last 200 years is, “Is there anything we can do to hasten a revival? Can a revival be helped along by man?” This question has prompted hundreds of books on the subject.

Quite wonderfully, Ezekiel 37 answers that question in the affirmative. It details the “ordinary” precursors when it comes to the reviving of a church or a child of God. Consider its background.

It is around 575 BC which means God’s people have been in the exile anywhere from ten to thirty years (depending on which exile they were brought to Babylon). Accordingly, whatever initial hope that might have been planted when first they arrived in Babylon² has long since dried up. For those Jews in exile, the reality of their situation has finally sunk in! The destruction of their nation and their former way of living was NOT going to be a short aberration in the outworking of God’s plan — as many had hoped and believed!³ RATHER where they were most likely would be a permanent change — at least for that generation!

This reality hit God’s people hard, such that spiritually they became numb, complacent, and hopeless, which is where Ezekiel 37 puts them.

Ezekiel 37:11, “Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off.”’”

There is a word play here, the word for “bones” (עֲצָמוֹת [‘eṣem]) is derived from the word for “strength” (אֲזָמָה [‘āzōm]). Accordingly, the picture is one of “wasting away” in exile in terms of one’s strength and vitality.⁴ In fact, the last phrase, “we are completely cut off,” could be translated as “our thread of life has been removed.”

There is no question that at this time God’s people were spiritually depressed. Life had settled down for them and they did not like what they saw. When they were a nation, there always was the hope that good was just around the corner, commerce could pick up or one’s family might prosper in business! Yet no such hope could be found now!

This is where life at times can find us. As a couple you have turned too many corners and traversed too much ground for your marriage ever to return to where it once was. After the past decade, how could your walk return to what it was “in the beginning” (cf. Revelation 2:5)? Individually you’re bored with Christ, Bible Study, and the worship and the service of the Lord. Maybe God has let you down! Maybe you have let God down.

Churches can be found here as well where God’s people have done the same things over and

over and have grown bored with Kingdom Living and responsibility. The writer of Proverbs puts it this way, “A sated man loathes honey...” (Proverbs 27:7).

So the question is, is there any way to reverse the clock and return to what once was when it comes to our relationship with God? The answer most certainly is a bold “Yes”— for that is what we mean by revival. And that is what Ezekiel is all about! Consider the promise that God gave to His people through Ezekiel at this time- it is the very next verse.

Ezekiel 37:12a, “Therefore prophesy, and say to them⁵, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people...””

This is NOT talking about a literal resurrection of lost loved ones! There is no record of mass resurrections that occurred when God allowed His people to return to Palestine. In fact, when the time did come for God’s people to return, recall that the response was incredibly *underwhelming* (remember Daniel’s struggle in Daniel 10). NO! This is talking metaphorically, thus it is in reference to the reviving of the people of God, their dead heart, their lost hope, and their waning love for the Lord.

Ezekiel 37:12b, “...and I will bring you into the land of Israel.”

Consistency of interpretation means that we take this phrase the way we interpreted the preceding statement, which likewise would be metaphorically. Now we recognize that God would bring His people back to Jerusalem in 538 BC, 458 BC, and 444 BC, yet again that clearly is NOT the focus here. Throughout Redemptive History the “land of Israel” is described as a paradise, “a land flowing with milk and honey” (cf. Exodus 3:8, 17; etc.).

Now, when one looks at a picture of Palestine it is NOT very “milky” NOR is it saturated with honey. The “wettest” part of Palestine (its northern part known as the Mediterranean Zone) averages 14 inches of rainfall a year, which is akin to the rainfall of Northern California or what we see here in Colorado. Accordingly, the reference was and has always included a metaphorical description of spiritual prosperity, which clearly is the focus here!

Ezekiel 37:13-14, “Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. And I will put My Spirit within you, and you will come to life [what a glory that would be to know this renewal in our walks with God], and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken and done it,” declares the Lord.”

That is what Ezekiel 37:1-10 is all about! So, how would this reviving occur? What would be its elements as well as its precursors?! That is the question before us.

Ezekiel 37:1-2, “The hand of the Lord was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones [the

Hebrew contains an element of amazement here⁶]. 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.”

In order to understand what is going on here, note the elements of this vision. First there is the “Valley” to which Ezekiel was brought, this is the same word used in Ezekiel 3:22 for “the plain” where Ezekiel first met with God. That means where Ezekiel saw the vision of the majesty of God (cf. Ezekiel 1-2 & 3:23), he also saw the vision described in the text before us!

Now, there have been other revelations and visions recorded in this prophesy which do NOT indicate where Ezekiel was when he received God’s word (Cf. Ezekiel 6; 7; 14; 40), so why does God give us that information here? God does NOT waste space in Scripture with unnecessary verbiage (Matthew 5:18). So why the seemingly irrelevant information?

A common practice in Scripture is to give the reader a lens through which to interpret the text before us. For example, consider Psalm 3 (it has 8 verses).

- Verses 1-4 contain a prayer contrasting the THREAT of the wicked with the blessing of the child of God. Here the power of the wicked is presented as a serious threat to what we have in Christ. But then...
- Verses 7-8 contain another prayer; this time it contrasts the CURSE of the wicked with the blessing of the child of God. Here the wicked are seen for what they are!
- Why the difference? Because of vv. 5-6- which is the center point of this psalm...
- Verses 5-6: “I lay down and slept; I awoke, for the Lord sustains me. [AR...] I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me round about.”- these words were given to redirect the focus of the reader and so transform the way he views the world.

And so viewing life without the filter, we live in vv. 1-4 where the wicked are a serious threat to the well-being of the child of God regardless of what he has in Christ. But then we put the lens of vv. 5-6 on and everything changes. Viewing life with this filter, we live in vv. 7-8 where the wicked are the object of pity as they are viewed as the enemy of God (and so cursed) and our joy is the knowledge of the blessing that is on us in Christ! Orthodoxy has become Orthopraxy!

That is the role that the geography referenced here gives to this vision. Just as the majesty and glory of the God of Ezekiel 1 preceded Ezekiel’s call such that God’s greatness was the lens through which Ezekiel was to interpret everything that would happen to him as a prophet. So also the reference as to where Ezekiel received this vision of the deadness of God’s people likewise must serve as the lens through which we consider any and all struggle that confronts the child of God!

When we see that it is this God who is “with us” — the God of Ezekiel 1 — we immediately are encouraged! This God — this great and glorious God — has not nor will He let us go no matter

how cold, weak, or unresponsive we might be! Our coldness cannot separate us from “the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39)! This is a Key Element when it comes to Revival (think of Job 42:5-6)!

The vision Ezekiel saw, considering the whole of this pericope (vv. 1-10), was that of a battlefield where once a great army fought and died, obviously the dead were on the losing side of the battle. Consider from vv. 1 & 2 we know there were “many, many” bones. We are talking here about countless people! From v. 2, the bones were “very dry” indicating that they were sun bleached- which means we are talking about a large group of people who long ago suffered a catastrophe of such a nature that they were left alone to rot under the sun, and so to be scavenged by animals and birds. The Jews had strict laws regarding the treatment and burial of the dead which clearly were not followed here due to the scope of the disaster!

From v. 9, we know that they were “slain” — which denotes a conflict of sorts in which this large group of people perished. If they had been executed, there would have been an order to where the bones had fallen. The order is random which indicates a battle.

From v. 10, we discover that the fallen were an army of “soldiers of the Lord.”

With all this the vision is clear. In the very plain where he saw the majesty and glory of God, Ezekiel beheld the remains of an army of the Lord which at one point had suffered a horrible defeat! This is an apt description of what God’s people became when the Lord raised them up as a nation. Now, when God raised up His people and formed them into a nation, He gave them strict guidelines as to how they were to function. We’ve looked at these from time to time.

Leviticus 26:3-4, 14-16, 32-33, “3 If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out, then I shall give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit... 14 But if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments, if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, *and* so break My covenant, I, in turn, will do this to you: I will appoint over you a sudden terror, consumption and fever that shall waste away the eyes and cause the soul to pine away; also, you shall sow your seed uselessly, for your enemies shall eat it up [So what would be the Charge that God placed upon His people here? Holiness/being set apart unto the Lord! What would be the consequences if they obeyed or rebelled? Either great blessing in their walk or dryness in their walk! If God’s people lost their battle for holiness, what ultimately would happen? We pick it up in...]... 32 And I will make the land desolate so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled over it. You, however, I will scatter among the nations and will draw out a sword after you, as your land becomes desolate and your cities become waste.”

The call of God for His people was their holiness and so their devotion to Him. That was the Battle!

Leviticus 11:44a, “For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am holy...” (cf. also Leviticus 19:2; 20:7).

The calling and commission of God’s people as a nation was NOT to conquer the world militarily, BUT to remain a distinct, holy people unto the Lord and thereby to bring the blessings of the Covenant (the gospel) to the world. That was the Battle to which God called the nation!

Now when it came to this battle, we know that the people of God — the army referenced in the vision before us — lost, didn’t they? Rather than remain distinct, the nation devoted itself to sin and rebellion by which it lived not for the Lord, but for the passing pleasures of this life! This came to a head in the final seventy-five years of this nation. During this time, God’s people gave themselves to the service and worship of the Baals and became morally debauched!

What Ezekiel saw in this vision of the Valley of Dry Bones was that the people of God were conquered by their sin/flesh! And so, an army that had lost its battle for holiness!⁷

This is the battle to which we have been called in Christ as well.

1 Peter 1:15-16, “But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”

Titus 2:11-12, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age.”

So how goes your battle?

If we could get a look at the state of your life, what would we see? Would it be the remains of a battle lost long ago? Or would there still be an army waging THE HOLY WAR given us in Christ? The Christian in need of revival is an army who has long since been defeated! Its bleached remains dot the countryside!

From this I want you to see two dreadful elements revealed here concerning the nature of sin in the life of a believer: two important ways sin will seek to undo you.

- Sin- no matter how alluring or innocuous that it may appear- always leads to death (hence the vision)! That is its “wage” (Romans 6:23)! Oh Christian, when will we ever learn this lesson?! If you are in Christ, sin will not cost you your soul, BUT it very well could cost you its well-being. George Everard made this comment:

“A godly king, a man very dear to God, is walking in the evening upon the roof of his palace. The eye wanders, sinful passions arise. Thence comes a dark cloud of evil- murder and adultery follow close one upon the other. Two full

years pass, and that sin lies yet upon the conscience. The face of the Lord is turned away from His servant. The remainder of life is darkened by the family sorrows that arise as the bitter consequences of that single glance.” (Everard, 2017) the wages of sin is always the reaping of death in our lives!

- Sin also is of such a nature that it leads to more sin in the sinner (such a great army was not undone by one attack... its defeat came after countless attacks).

Remember the word of God to Cain.

Genesis 4:6-7, “Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not *your countenance* be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.’”

Another core element to sin is that it seeks to take over a life! As such, it is unrelenting and will never take a break!

Consider what sin did in the life of David! Nathan told the king- notice the declension:

2 Samuel 12:9, “Why have you despised the word of the Lord by doing evil in His sight? [this is where it began for David! We would imagine that he read the word of God daily as any good king was commanded (Deut. 17:18-20). Yet the chink in his armor was that he didn’t apply it! Notice the result...] You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon.”

This is what sin does in the life of a believer. Degradation in one’s walk is NOT the result of one or two faulty choices. BUT the sum total of hundreds of what may seem like insignificant choices of compromise made over time. Truly, “it is the foxes that ruin the vineyard” (Song of Solomon 2:15)!

This is what sin did to the mighty army of Israel which God raised up and established in the days of David! There was a time when it was the epitome of submission to and service of the Lord. Yet at the writing of Ezekiel 37, it was defeated, destroyed, and its people languished on the vine!

Ezekiel 37:3, “And He [God] said to me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ And I answered, ‘O Lord God, Thou knowest.’”

Ezekiel’s answer here is a non-answer. I’ve heard some sermons on this passage where the preacher says, “*What a great answer... only God can know if He can raise the dead!*” Yet I would suggest to you that this is NOT as great an answer as some would have us believe. True, it is better than Ahaz’ arrogant response to Isaiah in Isaiah 7:10-14. And so while we

might commend Ezekiel for not responding in arrogance, nevertheless Ezekiel's response is way short of the answer informed by faith, as was Abraham's:

How is it that Abraham so boldly went forward in his service of the Lord in relation to Isaac? How he raised his knife-filled-hand to plunge it into the child of promise? It was because he "...considered that God is able to raise *men* even from the dead..." (Hebrews 11:19b).

Brothers and sisters, can God transform your life, reverse the clock on sinful proclivities and practices, and so restore you from where you have fallen? That most certainly is the question!

Herein we see another very important element to revival, faith in the Lord that He can radically change your life! Where this is lacking, revival will be slow in coming! Yet sadly, it is at this point we say that the greatest assembly of Atheists in the world today is found in the church. God is able to raise the dead, restore a hand where there was none, and we settle in our walks, ministries, marriages, parenting, and church not just for second best, but for that which any man or woman of God would NOT call best at all. We have so little because we believe so little and so ask little of God!

I am NOT talking here about health and wealth, BUT our spiritual maturation and growth in grace!

Christian, do you understand that God is always at work in the life of the believer? Our call — simply — is NOT to resist the Spirit of God as He works within us (in the words of J. I. Packer, it is to "Keep In Step With The Spirit")! Yet it is here we fail as soldiers in our battle:

- We have hard hearts when it comes to the things of the Lord and so we do not believe!
- We spend so much of our lives laboring and so living for the food that perishes!
- We think that we are second class Christians — and so ones who could never serve the Lord as others whom we might admire!

Disbelief and settling are two of the most common deterrents to revival. All of this constitutes the blindness that comes upon the compromised Christian. Paul David Tripp wrote:

Sin plays havoc with our spiritual vision. Although we are able to see the sin of others with specificity and clarity, we tend to be blind to our own. And the most dangerous aspect of this already dangerous condition is that spiritually blind people tend to be blind to their blindness. (Tripp, 2012, p. 34)

We are going to consider the components to revival, yet today we already see two very important precursory elements:

- The God of Glory is the God before whom we languish. Let His greatness move you from your lethargy. For not only is He worthy of such service, BUT His love is everlasting! He will by no means cast you out!

- Revival begins in the heart and soul of the person who believes that God can and will change their current circumstances if only they would ask and so submit to the Lord and His call on their life!

Bibliography

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- Tripp, P. D. (2012). *Dangerous Calling*. Wheaton: Crossway.

End Note(s)

¹ See his book titled, “Revival and Revivalism.”

² Whether that be for a speedy return (as many of the false prophets were saying when first God’s people went into exile, cf. Ezekiel 13:7ff; Jer. 28:3, 11) or the discovery of rich and glorious blessing in Babylon.

³ See the previous endnote.

⁴ Think of Ps. 106:15 and leanness of soul.

⁵ Many commentaries suggest that this pericope is still being directed at the bones/bodies of vv. 1-10. Exegetically, this would require the reference in v. 11 of “them” to jump over the immediately preceding reference of “the house of Israel” and so modify “these bones.” That is improper. So why the exegetical leap? Most likely it is because there was no recorded resurrection that occurred at the return of the exiles which means this passage couldn’t be speaking literally and so could not be in reference to a national restoration of God’s people to Palestine. I am opting here to exegete the passage plainly, in accordance with the laws of exegesis and so have opted to take the resurrection referenced here as metaphorical of the resurrection of their spirits- and so revival!

⁶ D. I. Block wrote, “The circumstantial clause at the end of v. 1 and the phrase *wəhinnēh rabbôt mə’ōd* highlight Ezekiel’s amazement at the exceedingly high number of bones.” (*The Book of Ezekiel*, NICOT, pp. 373–374).

⁷ That means that the exile of God’s people to Babylon and so the defeat of Israel at the hands of the Babylonians was simply a picture of a what already had taken place!