

Ezekiel 37 “The Valley of Dry Bones”
Psalm 102
Matthew 23

February 6, 2011

At the end of chapter 37, God says:

I will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore.
And the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel
“when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore.”

We sometimes call this room the “sanctuary” –
and there is good reason for it!

During the middle ages the great cathedrals tried to imitate the temple,
so they divided their buildings into three parts:
the nave was where the people gathered to worship;
the chancel was for the priests and monks;
and the sanctuary was for the priest alone.

The Reformation properly insisted on the priesthood of all believers,
and therefore referred to the whole building as the “sanctuary.”

But this *proper* insistence on the priesthood of all believers
had some unintended consequences.

The danger “is that we lose the necessary sense of holiness when we gather as God’s people.
As we will see in our study of Ezekiel 40-48,
holiness is one of the dominating principles of the new temple.”
The intention of the Reformers was not to eradicate the idea of holiness,
but rather to assert the holiness of all of life.

Iain Duguid points out, though, that in practice,
“we have all too often profaned all of life instead,
leveling everything down rather than up.
Thus we may call the room in which we meet the ‘sanctuary,’
yet there is no sense of awe when we gather together as the church,
no sense that it is the almighty and holy God himself with whom we are meeting.
As a result, our individual lives are often similarly devoid of contact with the Holy One.
Because we do not recognize the meeting together of the saints as a ‘sanctuary’
in the biblical sense, we do not live the lives of sanctity that we ought.” (439)

As we gather in the sanctuary – in the heavenly holy of holies –
to hear the voice of our Savior,
and to partake of his once-for-all sacrifice,
let us not forget that we have come to meet with Jesus!

Sing Psalm 102
Read Matthew 23

1. The Resurrection of Israel (37:1-14)

a. The Setting: A Valley of Dry Bones (v1-2)

¹ *The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones.* ² *And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry.*

If you have seen Peter Jackson's "The Lord of the Rings"
you may remember the scene along the "Paths of the Dead"
where Gimli realizes that the crunching sound beneath his feet
is the sound of dry bones.

Ezekiel finds himself in a similar world of horror and fear
as he is brought by the Spirit of God into "the valley."

"The Valley" – the last time Ezekiel was here was in Ezekiel 3.
The Valley is near the Chebar Canal – not far from where the exiles live in Babylon.
But what Ezekiel sees here is all the ancient dead of Israel.

Why do I say ancient dead?
Because the bones are "very dry."
This is not the scene of some recent slaughter.

Israel is not a "fresh" corpse.
Israel is long dead.
And what is more, Israel is unburied dead!

As a priest, Ezekiel was not supposed to defile himself with the dead.
Human bones are unclean – and so Ezekiel is surrounded by death and uncleanness.
But he is not allowed to stand at a distance.
The Spirit of God leads him around the valley so that he can see very clearly
that Israel is very dead!

b. The Question: "Can These Bones Live?" (v3)

³ *And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."*

This is not a question regarding the possibility of the resurrection.
This is not an abstract question about the end of history.
This is very specific question about a very specific collection of dry bones.

"Can *these* bones live?"
Ezekiel clearly understands that he is seeing the house of Israel here.
Can Israel live again?

And Ezekiel gives the only answer that faith can yield:
"O Lord Yahweh, you know."
The answer lies in your freedom – in your sovereign hand – and your sovereign word.
You know.

c. The Prophecy: Breath Will Return to the Dry Bones (v4-10)

⁴Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.

There are two parts to verses 4-10 –
the prophesy over the bones (verses 4-8)
and the prophecy to the breath (verses 9-10).

This is a two-stage recreation of Israel –
parallel to the two-stage creation of Adam in Genesis 2.
God had formed Adam's body from dust.
Then he breathed the breath of life into his nostrils.

Now, the Word of the LORD will recreate his people in a similar manner.

It is true that there are bones in your ears –
but bones do not have ears!

Ezekiel is called to preach to the dead!
If you think preaching to hard-hearted people is difficult,
try preaching to dry bones!
Try preaching to those who are incapable of hearing or responding to the word!

You see, this is God's point.
Israel is dead.
Israel is incapable of hearing or responding to the word!

But the word of the LORD is powerful.
And his word will accomplish his purpose:

⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD."

When we went through the book of Kings,
we saw that Kings was relentlessly driving us to the conclusion that Israel must die.
And indeed, Israel's only hope was *not* that they could escape death and exile and judgment,
but that God would raise the dead!

And so Ezekiel did as he was commanded:

⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them.

We have moved from dry bones to dead corpses –
not exactly a great improvement!
Because there is no breath.

There is a double-meaning woven into the text here.

Ezekiel uses ruach 10 times in this passage.

Every time you see the word “breath” or “wind” or “Spirit” in these verses
it is the same Hebrew word.

But this same Hebrew word has different meanings!

In verse 1 it plainly meant Spirit –

as the Spirit of the LORD lifted him and set him in the valley.

It has been used in verses 4-7 to mean breath – the basic sign of life.

And in verse 9 it will mean “wind” – the breath that blows through creation.

The Ruach of God must blow in order for Israel to live.

Now, there are other Hebrew words that can be used for breath or wind,
so the connection here is intentional.

God could have used the word neshamah – the word used in Genesis 2:7
when God breathed into Adam the breath of life.

But he uses ruach in order to make a point.

Ezekiel is saying that the resurrection of Israel is a new creation –
and that the new creation requires *more* than just a repeat of Genesis 2.
It is not enough for the second Adam to have the “breath of life.”
He must have the Spirit of God!

I would suggest that Paul is reflecting on this in 1 Corinthians 15,
when Paul says that the first Adam became a living soul,
but the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

The breath of life in the first creation was *not* the *ruach* – the Spirit of God –
but the breath of life in the new creation is.

⁹Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

The LORD calls for the breath to come from the four winds –
for the ruach to come from the four ruachs!

The four winds – the four ruachot – refer to the four corners of the world,
the winds that blow from various directions.

In other words, the breath – the spirit that will come upon Israel –
is the breath of the whole world.
And the breath that blows throughout the whole world will now give life to Israel.

Throughout Ezekiel you get these tantalizing clues that hint at the salvation of the nations –
but Ezekiel's point remains focused on the salvation of Israel.

But at the same time, the new creation language that is used here
suggests that the resurrection of Israel will be nothing less than a new humanity.

And of course, when our Lord Jesus was raised from the dead,
that new humanity had begun –
and when he sent forth his Spirit,
the new creation began to spread to the four corners of the earth!

d. The Resurrection of Israel (v11-14)

¹¹Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel.

We are not just talking about the exiles in Babylon.
We are not just talking about the tribe of Judah.
This is the whole house of Israel!

The northern kingdom had been exiled 150 years before –
scattered among the nations.
But God knows those who are his!
And the God who brought the four winds together to breathe life into his people
will search out and save his people from the uttermost ends of the earth.

Israel's lament is found at the end of verse 11:

Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.'

And so God responds to their lament:

*¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel.
¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD."*

The resurrection of Israel here in Ezekiel 37
is not exactly the same as the NT doctrine of the resurrection.
After all, the restoration in view here is not the resurrection of Abraham, Moses, and David,
but the restoration of the people of Israel to the promised land.

The “resurrection” here is not really about the resurrection of the body –
but is rather about how God will restore your descendants,
and therefore you will live forever.

I like how Christopher Wright puts it:

“there is no doubt that Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones and their revival
functions as a very important link in a theological chain
to which the full biblical hope of resurrection is anchored.
At one end is the connection we have already noted
between Ezekiel’s vision of God breathing life into the lifeless bodies
of Ezekiel’s defunct army
and the Genesis tradition of God breathing the breath of life into the
human-shaped pile of dust that then became a living human being....
What God was about to do for Israel would be...
the first act in the renewal of humanity as a whole.”
Israel’s “election and redemption were for the sake of the rest of humanity.” (310)

In short, Israel’s resurrection would be the firstfruits of the resurrection of humanity.

And of course, that is what we have in Jesus!

Jesus is the firstfruits from the dead!

He is the Israel that was raised up and seated at the right hand of the Father.

And in John 20:22 the resurrected Jesus reenacts the valley of dry bones,
when *he* – the Word of God incarnate –
breathes on the disciples and says, “receive the Holy Spirit.”

“So the resurrection of Jesus *did* fulfill the vision of Ezekiel
through his personal embodiment of the restoration of Israel.” (Wright 310)

As Paul puts it:

“For if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you,
he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies
through his Spirit, who lives in you.” (Romans 8:11)

2. The Unity of Israel (37:15-28)

If God is going to raise Israel from the dead,

the question naturally follows, “which Israel?”

Israel had divided after the days of Solomon

(indeed, in the 800-900 years since the Exodus,

there is only evidence for about 100 years of a united Israel!).

But God promises that he will restore the divided house of Jacob.

The movement in this passage is from the word “one” (used 8 times in verses 15-24)
to the word “forever” (used five times in verses 24-28).

The point is clear: God's purpose is to produce one unified people forever!

a. One Stick (v15-19)

¹⁵The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁶"Son of man, take a stick and write on it, 'For Judah, and the people of Israel associated with him'; then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with him.' ¹⁷And join them one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand. ¹⁸And when your people say to you, 'Will you not tell us what you mean by these?' ¹⁹say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I am about to take the stick of Joseph (that is in the hand of Ephraim) and the tribes of Israel associated with him. And I will join with it the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, that they may be one in my hand.

God tells Ezekiel to enact one last visual sign.

Take a stick and inscribe on it "For Judah"

And take another stick and inscribe on it, "For Joseph."

But the *people* in both instances are called "Israel."

God is saying that he has never accepted the idea that there are "two" nations.

The division of Israel was a temporary judgment, not a permanent separation.

And while Ezekiel never says this explicitly,

I think that Paul's discussion of Jew and Gentile is bound up in Ezekiel's vision.

After all, if Jesus is the new Adam – the one who receives all that was promised to Israel – then what can be the result for the Gentiles, but life from the dead?

When Paul deals with this in Romans 11:15, he says that if the rejection of the Jews

"means the reconciliation of the world,

what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?"

(and then he launches into a discussion of grafted olive branches, reminiscent of Ezekiel's cedar).

b. One Nation (v20-23)

²⁰When the sticks on which you write are in your hand before their eyes, ²¹then say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from all around, and bring them to their own land. ²²And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. And one king shall be king over them all, and they shall be no longer two nations, and no longer divided into two kingdoms. ²³They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. But I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

Never again will they be two people – two kingdoms.

Never again will they defile themselves with their "dung pellets" – their idols and their detestable things.

But Israel will become *one* nation.
I will bring them back from exile.
I will restore them to their own land.
One king shall rule them.
And they will worship one God.

As Ezekiel had taken the sticks, Yahweh will take Israel.
While the ten tribes had been scattered by the Assyrians,
God says that he will bring them back.
The resurrection that God promises will raise up Joseph as well as Judah.
Land – seed – king – worship –
all will be restored and remade.

And I will save them.
Usually the idea of salvation in the OT focuses on salvation from enemies.
But Israel's worst enemy is himself!
And so "I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned!"
God will save his people from themselves!
And he will cleanse them.

We saw this clearly in chapter 36 as God spoke of cleansing Israel
like a woman in her menstrual impurity.

But when God cleanses Israel of all their abominations,
then he will restore their covenant relationship:

And when God makes them one nation,
"they shall be my people, and I will be their God."

c. One Shepherd (v24-25)

²⁴"My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. ²⁵They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever.

"My servant David" shall be king.
This reminds us of Ezekiel 34 – the oracle against the shepherds –
which spoke of the restoration of David.

The disintegration of Israel came about when Israel's king failed to be a servant leader.
Rehoboam insisted on tyranny – and so he lost 10 tribes!
But now David, my servant, shall be the shepherd king
who will lead and feed God's people in faithfulness.

And when God restores David as king,
then Israel will have a king who leads them in doing what is right in God's eyes.

“They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes.”

This is at the heart of the prophetic statement of the new covenant:

that when God restores his people, they will be careful to obey him!

The language here borrows from Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 31-33.

They will follow my laws, observe my decrees, and put them into practice.

And they will live in Jacob’s land.

They and their children and their grandchildren shall dwell there forever.

This is the first usage of “olam” in this passage.

The one people of God will dwell in the land *forever*.

In other words, what happened in 587 with the destruction of Jerusalem
will never happen again.

And David will be prince forever.

Earlier Ezekiel used the word “melek” – “king”.

But now he returns to his preferred word “prince” (nasi)

This will set up the “prince” of Ezekiel 40-48 in the coming weeks!

We need to remember that Jesus is King – he is the prince, the lord and head of his church.

Church unity does not come from a mandate from General Assemblies or committees.

Neither does it come from a grass-roots fellowship at the local level.

Church unity comes from King Jesus.

He is head of his church.

And when the church submits to her king, she will be one.

Jesus is the center of the unity of the church.

Christ has only one church!

But that one church has rarely been one in organization!

In all the history of the people of God from Joseph to Samuel,
you can only find two generations (Moses and Joshua)
where the people of God were one.

And after the three generations of Saul, David, and Solomon –
which were rather contentious and divided until the last 50 years! –
you cannot find another united generation until the apostles!

And not a full century has passed since then

that did not see anathemas and divisions in the church!

And that is why verses 26-28 are so important for us:

d. An Everlasting Covenant (v26-28)

²⁶ *I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst*

forevermore. ²⁷ My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ²⁸ Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore."

And when God dwells with his people,
"I will be their God, and they shall be my people" –
the same language as verse 23.

We are told that this is a covenant of peace –
an everlasting covenant.

But which covenant is in view?

Is this the Abrahamic covenant?

The Mosaic covenant?

The Davidic covenant?

The New Covenant?

In a word, yes!

It does not appear that the biblical authors made sharp distinctions between these covenants.
Certainly Ezekiel does not!

Look at how he describes the everlasting covenant:

a covenant of peace with them

this language is drawn from Ezekiel 34:25-31

which spoke of the restoration of the covenant
as described in Leviticus 26.

In Ezekiel 34 the covenant of peace is definitely
the restored Mosaic covenant.

an everlasting covenant with them.

The covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David
all are called "everlasting"

And I will set them in their land and multiply them,

This clearly reflects the Abrahamic promise,
fulfilled through Moses in the Exodus.

and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore.

This could refer to either the Mosaic or Davidic covenants.

My dwelling place shall be with them,

and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

This uses language of all the covenants!

So Ezekiel sees the covenant of peace as the fulfillment of all the covenants.

As Daniel Block puts it,

"Built into the original Mosaic covenant was the prospect
that Yahweh would not forever reject his people.

Indeed, the present complex of promises bears a striking resemblance
to Lev. 26:1-13, a text that has figured often in Ezekiel's oracles." (420)
Israel's hope is that Yahweh will be faithful to his promises.

Of course, the problem is that God *did* reject Israel again!
The restoration of Israel in 515 BC did not result in the covenant of peace!

Jesus came to Jerusalem 600 years after Ezekiel
and gave the same message!
You are no better than your fathers.

In other words, even as Ezekiel's oracle of resurrection
was not fulfilled until Jesus rose from the dead;
even so Ezekiel's oracle of the one people of God
was not fulfilled until the Spirit was poured out upon the nations.

Indeed, the apostolic mission in the book of Acts draws heavily on Ezekiel's vision:
"you shall receive power from on high,
and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria
and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

I don't think that it is an overstatement at all to say that Ezekiel's message
is powerfully influential in how the apostles' articulate
their understanding of Jew and Gentile.

What Ezekiel had said regarding the whole house of Israel
is now applied to all humanity.

Paul will say in Ephesians –
you were dead in your transgressions and sins (2:1)
you were dry bones!

And in Colossians 2:13
"When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh,
God made you alive with Christ"

The new creation has already begun *in Christ*.

While outwardly we still live in Babylon,
by faith we are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem.
And so "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you,
he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies
through his Spirit who dwells in you." (Romans 8:11)
And therefore "if you live according the flesh you will die,
but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." (8:13)
The coming of the Holy Spirit gives life and strength to God's people
to put to death the old ways, and to walk in newness of life.