

Can These Bones Live?/January 1, 2017/ Ezekiel 36:16-37:14 (ESV¹)

We will look this morning at the glory of the Gospel in a portion of Ezekiel. Please open your Bibles to Ezekiel 36, where we will begin at verse 16 and carry on through verse 14 of Chapter 37. First let me give a bit of historical context for this passage, then I'll read it aloud, and pray, and then we'll work through the text small sections at a time, and close with some applications.

The background here is that Ezekiel is in Babylon with the second wave of exiles from Judah. It's 586 BC or a bit later. Israel is off the scene, destroyed some 134 years before by Assyria after a long run of evil rulers and apostasy. Now Babylon has conquered Judah and in chapter 33 of Ezekiel, word has come of the final destruction of Jerusalem. The mood among God's people has to be one of terrible despair. The exiles with Ezekiel in Babylon had perhaps held out hope that soon things would get better and they'd be able to go home again. Now there was literally no home to go home to. The city and the temple have been destroyed. As we break into the text at verse 16 of Chapter 36, God reviews with Ezekiel how His people have gotten to where they are.

Read the text.

Ezekiel 36:16 The word of the LORD came to me:

17"Son of man, when the house of Israel lived in their own land, they defiled it by their ways and their deeds. Their ways before me were like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual impurity.

18So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed in the land, for the idols with which they had defiled it.

Evil actions and idolatry go together. There was improper conduct toward others and toward God. Idolatry reveals a low view of the one true God, and that will have implications in barbaric behavior towards other people. Israel and Judah were guilty on these accounts and that had to bring God's judgment against them.

19I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries. In accordance with their ways and their deeds I judged them.

In both verses 17 and 19 it is "ways and deeds." God judges what His people have done. He judges what is overt, observable, evident. As punishment, the nation has been driven from the land, has been cast out of the land that God promised Abraham, has seemingly lost its inheritance.

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20But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, 'These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land.'

The standard interpretation of the day was that if a nation lost in battle (and certainly if it was driven from its land) the national god was weaker than the national god of its foes. That's what the pagan nations were thinking about Judah. Of course, nothing could have been further from the truth. Instead, the only real God in the universe was judging His people and ultimately revealing His Gospel plan of redemption.

Pay attention to the word "profaned" in verse 20. The meaning is to make or count as ordinary, the opposite of to count as set apart, separate, holy. Any people whose god didn't look out for them couldn't have much of a god, surely not One like Yahweh really is. Observe that the fault when God is profaned is not with those ignorant of who He is, but with His own people, whose actions aren't consistent with the truth about Him.

21But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

22"Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.

This jars the sensibility of a man-centered sub-Christian religiosity. God is going to intervene and His intervention WILL most graciously benefit His people. What He's going to do will simultaneously vindicate His righteous judgment on sin and provide redemption for His people. But ultimately it is HIS honor that is at stake, and it is He not we, who is at the center of the universe. All is well in existence only when its Maker and Sustainer is revered and loved and hallowed.

23And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.

This has never changed. God, from the beginning of time purposed to have a people who will be His and show forth His glory. That was His purpose in Israel, that's His purpose in the Christian church. As regards Judah, God promises Ezekiel that He will act in two steps ...

24I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land.

In the first place, God promises to bring the people back to the land. Do we understand, by the way, that this is by all reasonable standards impossible? Babylon was the world power, and had no reason whatsoever let Judah go. The Medes weren't much of anything and Cyrus, who sent the Jews home was almost surely only a kid when this prophecy came. How could a return happen?

Second, He promises to purify the people, and even more ... genuinely change them. That is, He promises to not only make them ritually clean but right in essence.

25I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

26And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

27And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

It is God who is acting here. I (God) will sprinkle, I will cleanse, I will give, I will remove, I will put. It is God who is sovereign and working for any and all good. It is not humans who decide to do good and succeed in producing a righteousness of works.

At this point in history, hundreds of years of Jewish history built on the gracious promises and revelation of God have utterly failed to produce the kind of heart God promises here, one that loves Him and His ways. Both the blessings and the curses of God's law are true and eternal. Humans desperately need and desire the blessings and always deserve the curses.

In retrospect, these wonderful verses tell us that the complete fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy awaits the New Testament and the salvation work of Jesus. Who will save us? It must be Christ. Someone of infinite worth must perfectly please the Father, bear the just wrath of the Father for the sins of the world, and somehow transfer His perfect righteousness to God's people. God Himself must save if there is to be redemption.

The Bible is consistent that man's condition has cosmic implications. In the beginning, when man was in right relationship to God, the physical universe was right. With man in rebellion, the universe is physically out of kilter. Ezekiel is promised a time when God's people will again be in right relationship with Him and all will be right.

28You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

29And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you.

30I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant, that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations.

31Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations.

32It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel.

Here is more strong language. Loathe yourselves and be ashamed. This is not meant to send God's people into an emotional black funk, but rather to cause us to think constantly of the astonishing kindness God shows us in Christ. Every sin of every believing person past, present, and future is under the blood of the Lamb, not remembered by God. God has sprinkled His own with clean water ... and that work ought *never* be treated as ordinary. If we never recall or mourn over our sin, we will soon treat Christ's work as practically inconsequential and grace as cheap. We must remember and loathe our sin.

33"Thus says the Lord GOD: On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the cities to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt.

34And the land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by.

35And they will say, 'This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden, and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are now fortified and inhabited.'

36Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I am the LORD; I have rebuilt the ruined places and replanted that which was desolate. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it.

37"Thus says the Lord GOD: This also I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them: to increase their people like a flock.

38Like the flock for sacrifices, like the flock at Jerusalem during her appointed feasts, so shall the waste cities be filled with flocks of people. Then they will know that I am the LORD."

Again, there is blessing for God's people, and the fundamental end here is God's own glory, that all people and all creatures in the universe will recognize His greatness and live in harmony with His perfect character. In the short run, God is promising that He's not

done with His people Judah. Despite how utterly dark and hopeless things seem, release is coming. The same God who redeemed Israel from Egypt, will bring Judah back from the Babylonian captivity. In the long run, history is linear. It began with God's creation of a perfect world, was broken and made miserable through the fall, and at the time Ezekiel speaks, creation has been groaning and aching for a Deliverer for thousands of years. Ezekiel is promised that the story isn't over, that redemption is coming, that figuratively there will be a return to Eden.

Now God gives Ezekiel a striking vision of what He will do, of what He plans for the nation of Israel and what ultimately He plans for all believers of all time.

37:1 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.

Ezekiel is in a valley. The word here is the same as the one translated "plain" in **3:22**. It's possible/probable that Ezekiel is in the same place he was when God's word of judgment on Judah first came to him. This scene is ghastly. It looks as if there had been some ancient battle here and the dead bodies of the fallen have decomposed and been ripped apart by scavengers. Ezekiel is surrounded by piles of body parts.

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.

There were very many. There are lots of dead folks represented here. And they're real dead, not just mostly dead, all dead. The bones were very dry. There is complete desolation here. The whole of Judah/Israel here is without hope. All humanity is without hope, slain by sin and torn apart ... except for God's grace in Christ Jesus.

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

Can these bones live? The obvious answer would be "no." Humanly speaking, the situation of Israel/Judah, the situation of all men and women ever born, the situation of these bones is hopeless. These bones cannot live. Ezekiel is both humble and honest here. He doesn't have all the answers. He knows that God is sovereign over life and death and it is only God who knows most things. He doesn't presume to say they will live, but implicitly testifies that they could live.

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

Ezekiel is to speak to the bones, to speak to them the word of the LORD. From a natural point of view he's been told to do something pretty silly. But God asks obedience and

Ezekiel does his part as a servant of God.

⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.

The word translated "breath" here by ESV is the Hebrew word "ruah" which can mean breath/Spirit/wind. It is the same word that is used twice in **Genesis 2:7 then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.** This same word appears repeatedly in the next few verses, and gets translated by the ESV in different ways at those appearances. But underneath breath/Spirit/wind are all the same Hebrew, "ruah."

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."

And you shall know that I am the LORD (I am the I AM). The object/end of all human existence is that we know that the LORD is God and that we know Him, that we are loved by and love Him. Again, the chief end of the restoration that God is sending is that He be honored.

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.

This is a wild scene, something that today we'd expect to be cooked up through computer-generated special effects ... dry bones flying together, sinews and flesh appearing out of nowhere ... called into existence by the Creator of the universe. But there was no breath in them. Much as at creation, where God formed Adam from the dust, when there was no life/breath/spirit in him until God breathed it into him. We're seeing pictured here the creation of new humans ... humans with hearts for God! And the starting point is not completely new material, but dry dead bones. He could begin afresh, but He does not. He begins with the wreckage of ruined humanity. There are two stages. In this first, God has made bodies from dead bones. But there is no breath in them.

⁹Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, 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."

Prophesy to the breath/wind/spirit, son of man, and say to it, "**Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath ...**" There's a lot of air needed here and God sends

it rushing in from all directions. There is an abundance ... and where God's breath is sent, there is life. The lifeless human forms live. We ought to be reminded here of the rushing wind on the day of Pentecost. This is a prefiguring of that great act that inaugurated and empowered the Christian church.

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.

They came to life and stood up on their feet--a vast army. A few moments ago, this was a bunch of dead dry bones. Then there were bodies without any real life. Now there is a something worthy to be called an army, a vast army at that, through the work of the breath/spirit/wind of God.

English theologian John B. Taylor said about this scene, "What is the significance of the two stages? The difference between them is surely to be found in the *direction* of Ezekiel's prophesying; first to the bones, telling them to hear, and secondly to the Spirit, invoking its inspiration. The first must have seemed to Ezekiel very much like his professional occupation, exhorting lifeless people to listen to God's word. The effect was limited: true, something remarkable happened, but the hearers were still dead men. The second action was praying, as Ezekiel besought the Spirit of God to effect the miracle of re-creation, to breathe into man's nostrils the breath of life (cf. **Genesis. 2:7**). This time the effect was devastating. What preaching by itself failed to achieve, prayer made a reality."²

¹¹Then 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 is lost; we are clean cut off.'

Ezekiel isn't left guessing here about the short term meaning of what he's been shown. The northern kingdom is gone and Jerusalem has fallen. What's left of the nation is in captivity and as good as dead. As far as the captives can see there's no hope left. But that's not what God says. Instead, says the I AM, there waits for them a future restoration where the nation will be a vast army dedicated to God.

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.

The figure changes somewhat from dried bones to a graveyard, but the promise remains that God is not done with His people Israel.

¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you

² John B. Taylor, (1969). *Ezekiel*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Inter-Varsity Press, Downer's Grove, IL, p. 235.

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."

Paul tells us plainly in Romans that God is not yet finished with physical Israel, that in the end the Jewish people will turn to Christ, their Messiah. They will come to eternal life and the end of such restoration will be the glory of God. All the world will know and honor His greatness.

As we begin 2017, some 2600 years or so since these wonderful prophecies came through Ezekiel, what applications can we draw from the passage? Here are a few that occur to me. I am sure the same Spirit that gave life to the bodies in the valley will bring others to your minds as well, as you dwell on this Word this week.

First, let us constantly remind ourselves of what really matters. It is the honor of God that is at the center of this passage. It is the honor of God that is at the center of existence. Let us meditate on the truth that there is real horror and misery when our actions profane His name, make Him out to be ordinary, portray Him as anything less than of supreme worth.

Second, let us always live profoundly grateful for the Gospel. Let us see ourselves as formerly dead and dry bones on the valley floor slain by sin and without hope. As we abhor our remaining sin, let us wonder at Christ who bore the wrath of God in our place and by His Spirit gives us pardon and real life. Let us fill our minds and hearts with Christ and His matchless grace.

Third, let us always take heart and remind ourselves that no matter how bleak any circumstance in this life, the God of the Bible makes dry bones live. Let us live cheerful lives, full of the promise of a blessed eternity in the presence of the Giver of life. He orders existence. He works only for real good. Let us rest in Him.

Finally, in our evangelism, in our declaration of the Gospel of Christ, let us keep the vision of Ezekiel before us. Let us be realistic about the real situation as we interact with neighbors and coworkers and family. We walk about among dead bones. There is no real life at all in those with hearts hard towards Christ. And no amount of strategy or formula or cleverness or organization on our part can replace a single heart of stone with one of flesh, none of these can make the bones live. That transformation depends rather upon two: the Word of God and the Spirit of God. In all humility and gentleness, let us therefore tell people the truth about Christ and let us plead for their souls in prayer. Like Ezekiel, may we speak to the bones and plead with the Spirit/breath/wind.

Thanks be to God for His gracious Word and the work of His Spirit. Let's pray.