

REACHING OUT TO THE DEAD

Ezekiel 37:1-14....

Background: Ezekiel was a 25 year old priest when he, along with the king and 10,000 Jews were taken to Babylon in 598 BC. Ezekiel's name means "Strengthened By God," and there can be little doubt that the visions he was given during his 20 plus years of faithful ministry were used to challenge and strengthen his fellow exiles. During his early years Ezekiel had experienced many of the horrors and calamities of war; and this seems to have affected him in such a way that his prophecies, more than those of any other prophet, are full of images and visions of dreadful things. In this passage we have the description of a vision which, for grandeur and terrible sublimity, is perhaps unequalled in any other part of the Bible.

In the vision, Ezekiel describes himself as having been set down by God in the middle of a valley that was full of bones. It seemed as if he were stationed in the midst of some vast battlefield where tens of thousands had been killed, and no one was around to bury them. Over time, all that remained of these slain people was their bones! The winds and rain had bleached them and made them bare; and many a summer sun had whitened and dried the bones. As the prophet wondered around to view this dismal scene, these two thoughts arose in his mind: "**Behold, (a) there were very many in the open valley; and (b) indeed they were very dry.**" Notice, when Ezekiel received this vision, he found himself in an open valley surrounded by the innumerable bones of those that had perished. Wherever he looked he saw dead people. Nevertheless, he was commanded to preach to them; and he was commanded to pray over them. And after he obeyed the Lord's commands, Ezekiel saw those who had experienced death brought back to life. What an astonishing vision!

Like Ezekiel, we are surrounded by the dead. Everywhere we look there is evidence of the spiritual death. And like Ezekiel, we have been sent out to tell the dead that they can live. From where Ezekiel stood that day, his task must have seemed impossible. Yet, in spite of that, he obeyed God and the Lord blessed his efforts. From where we stand today, the task of reaching those who are dead in sin also seems like an impossible task. But if we will do as the Lord has commanded us, we will also see Him miraculously bless our efforts. Remember, when the prophet witnessed this gruesome scene, his reaction was. ***“Behold, there were very many; and indeed they were very dry.”*** The bones were very many and they were not normal looking, they were extremely dry! So what does this statement signify?

(a) They were not pleasant to look at. Without Christ we all look like that! At first, man was made perfect in beauty; for he was made in the image of God who is perfect loveliness. But a fallen, unconverted soul has no beauty - it is like a magnificent statue that has been defaced.

(b) They are without any marrow or spirit. Man was made to be a habitation of God through the Spirit; and it is only when we are led by the Spirit that we are ‘alive’ unto God. Therefore, the unconverted soul is void of the life of God and without spiritual substance.

(c) They have no activity or motion. Dry bones have no ears and no heart. So if we preach the Word to them, they have no way to respond to the things which are spoken. Nothing moves them - they can neither flee from God or embrace Him. They are trapped in a motionless world.

The question we should all ask ourselves is this... Can we bear to see these dry bones and do nothing about it? I’m sure most of us think this is an impossible mission. However, the same God who promised to bring life back to those dry bones is willing to do the same today!

Seriously consider these three truths:

(1) A SHOCKING REVELATION

If we are going to sense the great needs of the world around us, we must have a true grasp of the condition in which it finds itself. The vision Ezekiel saw was of a valley full of dry, scattered bones. It depicted the desolation, destitution, and devastation of Israel. Until we have a similar vision of the world in which we live we will not be stirred to action. We need to see what Ezekiel saw when he looked out over that valley of dry bones. So I ask you; “what do you see when you look at the world around you?”

Although the people around us may be living their lives, working their jobs, enjoying their hobbies, raising their families; while they may be charming, intellectual, reasonable, and apparently fit; if they do not know Jesus Christ they are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1). This can be true of your husband, your wife, your parents, your children, your friends, your neighbours, or your coworkers. While they may be full of life physically they can also be dead spiritually. We need to see the “cosmos” as it really is.

The Bible describes the lost around us as “*having no hope and without God*” (Ephesians 2:12). The hopelessness in the world is easy to see. The restlessness of the nations, the upheavals in our culture, the terrible condition of our economy, and the constant threat of war, all speak of the fact that people feel hopeless. When there is peace in the heart of man, there is rest in the life of man. However, when peace is missing, hopelessness reigns. Again, we need to ask the Lord to help us see the hopelessness of the lost who live around us. I pray that we will all come to the place where we will go to them and tell them about the only true source of hope. The author of salvation Jesus Christ.

(2) A SOLEMN RESPONSIBILITY

As Ezekiel looked out over that valley of dry bones, God spoke to the prophet and told him what to do. Ezekiel was shown that he had a 'personal responsibility' to that valley of dead, dry bones. I want you to see this because the same responsibility that rested on Ezekiel's shoulders rests on us today. Ezekiel was commanded to preach (prophecy) to a valley filled with skeletons! Nothing could be more foolish or ridiculous than to preach to a bunch of bones. But when God, in verse 3, asked the question, "*Son of man, can these bones live?*" Ezekiel's answer was "*O Lord God, You know.*" You can almost hear the hesitation on the part of the prophet as he considered the utter futility of his assignment. There can be little doubt that Ezekiel was overwhelmed by the sight of all the death, the devastation and the defeat he saw represented by those dry bones. Yet, he was told to speak to them, and that's exactly what he did! Have you got the courage to preach to the dead?

In verse 9 Ezekiel was commanded to pray, "*Breathe upon these slain, that they may live.*" With the preaching there may be a noise, a shaking, a coming together of bone to bone, and even the appearance of sinews and skin, but the Word says, "*...There was no breath in them*" (verse 8). Ezekiel had preached the Word of God to the bones. They had the appearance of life, but they were still dead. They needed a touch of God before they could live. He was commanded to pray that the Lord would breath on them and make them live. Through preaching people may be convinced of truth, but they will remain mere corpses until the Spirit of God breathes life into them. This is still God's divine method. Therefore, it is our obligation to see that we not only preach with divine urgency, but pray with divine fervency. We must be satisfied with nothing less than the outpouring of the Spirit of God. For the Lord promised that He will pour out His Spirit on all flesh! (Joel 2:28)

(3) A SUPERNATURAL RESURRECTION

In response to the *preaching* and *praying* of Ezekiel, the Lord moves in power and might. Several amazing things take place when God brings the dead bones to life. We read that; “they lived.” Those corpses were animated, energised, brought back to life. As the astonished prophet watched, a valley filled with the dead came to life. The same thing can happen today as we share the gospel in the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus assured us that, *“It is the Spirit that quickens; the flesh profits nothing: the words that I speak to you, they are spirit, and they are life”* (John 6:63). The gospel message has (‘zoe’) life!

Notice how they *“...stood up upon their feet.”* God brought them to life, then He caused them to stand before Him. While we should have a burden to see dead men and women quickened to life, we should also be concerned that they are strengthened and energised to stand before Christ. Paul expresses this burden when writing to the Ephesians. He says, *“I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, **to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man**; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love”* (Ephesians 3:14-17).

Next comes the most astonishing part ... They are then transformed into *“an exceedingly great army.”* One moment they are dead bones scattered across a valley, the next they are a mighty, living army, ready for the Lord’s use. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to transform individual units into a “whole” for service unto God. The Lord brings people out of the deadness of sin into a “new life in Christ Jesus.” He saves them, gives them spiritual gifts, and then places them in a local church where they can work as one body (a fighting unit that is part of a great army).

Finally, an assurance is given, “*And I shall put My spirit in you, and you shall live, and I shall place you in your own land.*” This is a promise to the nation of Israel that they will be restored to their land, and that they will receive His blessings again (as part of the Abrahamic Covenant). The same is true for the church. The days of God’s blessings are not over. We have a new and better covenant! The times of refreshing have not passed us by forever. God is still the same God He has always been, and He is still working in supernatural, sovereign ways to accomplish His will. We need to seek the Lord today, to ask Him to give us a vision of the lost as they really are, to give us a burden to reach them with the Gospel. And to fill us with His Spirit, then send us out into the world to tell them about Jesus Christ. God will honour His Word, and we will see the greatest outpouring of His Spirit the world has ever known!

The church can only be revived as it revives the lost! We have been looking for revival in all the wrong places! Revival comes as the Holy Spirit pours Himself out upon all flesh.

***Arise, shine;
For your light has come!
And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you.
For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth,
And deep darkness the people;
But the Lord will arise over you,
And His glory will be seen upon you.
The Gentiles shall come to your light,
And kings to the brightness of your rising.
Lift up your eyes all around, and see:
They all gather together, they come to you;
(Isaiah 60:1-4)***