

“New Life From Dry Bones”

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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If I were to hand you a personal letter from a stranger or even a sermon from a minister or priest back in history, among the first things you would want to determine is what can be known about the author and what was going on in the lives of the persons for whom the author was writing. Without those things, the letter or document would not be as interesting and your insight, into what was being said, would be considerably limited. This is why we must first say a few things about Ezekiel and what had been happening in the lives of his readers.

We know little about the prophet Ezekiel.¹ He was the son of a priest, brought up being well familiar with the religion of their times. He was married but his wife had suddenly died in the midst of a war.

Ezekiel had seen the best and the worst years of the history of Israel. The nation had prospered in the first half of the 8th century B.C.E.² and during this period, they were free from invading nations. The national economic prosperity was limited, however, to a relatively small segment of the population – the well-to-do merchants and landowners who enriched themselves at the expense of the peasants. Landowners who had formerly farmed their own

¹ **Ezekiel 1-32** contains warnings of judgment. Ezekiel is a priest who is among those taken into exile in 597 BC, a decade before the Babylonians finally destroyed Jerusalem. His prophecies are given from Babylonia. The first part of the book contains oracles and actions of Ezekiel from his call in 593 BC until the fall of Jerusalem in 587. Ezekiel begins to prophesy after a vision in which he saw God’s throne chariot and was given a scroll to eat (Ezek 1-3). He has visions of idolatrous worship in the Temple and of God’s glory departing from Jerusalem (Ezek 8-11). He calls people to turn from sin. When his wife dies he bears it silently, as the people will have to bear the loss of Jerusalem.

Ezekiel 33-45 contains promises of restoration. After the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, the prophet promises that God will shepherd his people (Ezek 34) and restore them, like dry bones coming back to life (Ezek 37). A vision of a restored city and sanctuary concludes the book.

² Before the common era (before Christ)



El Greco’s
“Pentecost”
1596-1600



property were now serfs on sprawling estates owned by the wealthy.

The good times ended when the Assyrians stormed the northern part of Palestine (Israel) around 721³ and deported most of the survivors, with other captured foreigners, to Samaria. For us, this would be equivalent to all of us, living in the sates north of the Mason-Dixon line, being captured by a violent army and the survivors imprisoned in penal colonies somewhere in western Canada. From then on, Israel’s rulers were mostly puppet kings – ruling on behalf of the super-powers. Their culture was totally controlled by the Assyrians, then later by Egypt and then the Babylonians and the Persians.

Ezekiel lived and worked in the south, the section called Judah with its capital being Jerusalem. During his life, about 600 years before Christ, he was warning the people of their social injustices and their lack of ethical attentiveness to God’s instructions on how to live their lives. He often spoke of the judgment that would come upon Jerusalem because of their casual disregard for what God had been trying to tell them. Throughout his writings are sermons and visions of judgments and predictions of doom and sorrow.

He also spoke of hope. Ezekiel had gathered together the years of his sermons and poetry, shortly before his death. His writings were finally contained in this one volume that we call the book of Ezekiel.

Ezekiel regularly spoke of the glaring irregularities in the temple cult and as a priest’s son,

³ B.C.E.

he particularly believed that God's presence had departed from the temple because of the corruption of the priests. Just as Zeke had seen the Northern Kingdom of Israel fall, and its survivors carted off to exile, he predicted the same for Judah.

“You people think you're going to end your days peacefully in the 'burbs' as you play cards, go bowling and putter around in your yard.

Well think again. Instead, think about war, suffering, misery and death. And don't call me gloomy – you brought it on yourselves because you lived out your whole life as *takers* – instead of being *sharers* like God outright told you.”⁴

Ezekiel often spoke in allegories and occasionally he spoke of Jerusalem as a city that is like a useless vine or an unfaithful spouse. As often as he spoke of impending judgment, he said it wasn't too late to repent and do the right thing. If they did, better times would come. He spoke of wicked shepherds who were leading them but he also pointed to the future when a Good Shepherd would bring salvation to the people.

Toward the end of this book is a declaration of hope for the last days with a vision of a new temple. In this vision of the temple, there was a natural spring mysteriously flowing out of it – turning into a larger river which runs through the entire country and heals the land. This new city, in the vision, has the name “Yahweh is there.” Imagine changing the name of Buffalo to “God is there.”

During Ezekiel's days of teaching and lecturing about warnings, hope and possible restoration, the people (to whom he spoke) were going through the hell of war. The puppet politics, the small revolts and greedy political manipulation had left Jerusalem with no economic, social or military security. Nebuchadnezzar the 2nd finally marched in and took complete control of the Palestinian land routes from Africa to Asia.⁵

⁴ Obviously a paraphrase of the gist of his typical exhortations

⁵ Nebuchadnezzar, the second king of Babylon of that name, is best known as the king who conquered Judah, destroyed Jerusalem and carried the people of the Jews captive to Babylon. Of all the heathen monarchs mentioned by name in the

In the year 605,⁶ Nebuchadnezzar took over Judah once and for all. In March of 597, all the soldiers defending Jerusalem had been killed and Zedekiah was set up as a puppet governor. Ten years later, when surviving Jews tried to revolt,⁷ the city was again besieged, overtaken and this time the city was reduced to ashes and rubble. It was then that Ezekiel and other surviving inhabitants were chained and carted off to exile in Babylon.

This book by Ezekiel was addressed to surviving exiles, probably within a year or so from their having lost everything. Those survivors had lost their families, their friends, all their possessions, their land and their culture. Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones was an image that was expressive of what those people had already seen.

No other Old Testament vision had such dramatic visual images as is contained in chapter 17. The terrifying picture of a field of corpses was reminiscent of the sieges and lost battles they had already experienced. They had seen fields full of long-abandoned bodies of those who had gone out beyond the city walls and fought in vain – their bodies finally left to deteriorate because the few survivors had to stay back within the fortress. They had seen mass death and had lived, for some time, starving as they watched one another become gaunt and diseased from the siege of the city.

The words “Our bones are dried up, our hope is blighted and we are cut down” are the memories they had as they survived in exile. They were in a period of profound resignation to fate and despair. All they felt was dark depression and helplessness.

Scriptures, Nebuchadnezzar is the most prominent and the most important. The prophecies of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, and the last chapters of Kings and Chronicles centered about his life and he stands preeminent, along with the Pharaohs of the oppression and the exodus, among the foes of the kingdom of God. The documents which have been discovered in Babylon and elsewhere within the last 75 years have added much to our knowledge of this monarch, and have in general confirmed the Biblical accounts concerning him.

⁶ B.C.E.

⁷ 587 B.C.E.

But to their feelings of hopelessness, Ezekiel spoke of hope. In verses 12 & 14, he talked of their coming back to a promised land. And he talked of resurrection, of new life from the deadness they so emphatically felt.

His vision moves from the coming alive of dry bones to the image of people resurrected from graves. His detailed description of how the bones are turned to life shows an advanced anatomical knowledge.⁸

The aim of this vision was to bring hope to the exiled community, who shortly after 587,⁹ felt utterly hopeless. They felt as despairing as a field of bleached bones. Ezekiel knew of their bitterness, since they were a people who had, in their own generation, known something of hope from their years of national prosperity. For years, though, Ezekiel had been warning them of how they were ignoring God and how there would be an ugly result of their selfishness. So now that the prophet found himself exiled, with these same people, he had a new message of hope. He wanted to bring them a vision of God's mighty powers to bring new life – despite their present despair.

There were many ways people took his message. Some may have seen his vision as referring to the resurrection of prophecy and how God's word would come to them in a fresh way. Others picked up on his reference to a return to their homeland – their release from exile.¹⁰

The early Church interpreted the resurrection imagery as a direct reference to the final resurrection of the dead at the end of human history. The church usually thought that the prophets were referring to

⁸ Ezekiel and his contemporaries probably received their knowledge of human anatomy from the Egyptians. The Egyptians, for a time, had been their allies in the wars against the Assyrians and they had pioneered in the field of medicine because of their dissection of sacred animals and embalming rituals. Ezekiel's discussion about these bones coming to life is also similar to the creation narratives. There, you recall, the body was created, followed by the gift of the breath of life into the body. And similarly, his description of those resurrected from the graves was a vision of God's ability to create newness, despite humanity's condition.

⁹ B.C.E.

¹⁰ which eventually came

something in the far future – the end times when restoration would take place.

When we are mindful of all that life brings, we know there is an aspect of despair to life. But as Christians, we try to remember the hope we have from our faith in the power and love of our God.

These Biblical images of destruction and desolation are frighteningly near to what we perceive would be the result of the use of nuclear weapons and it causes all of us to shutter. We could get a little nervous when we remember that the United States is not unlike Jerusalem – with our disproportionate consumption of the world's resources, . . . with most of our resources in the hands of relatively few people.

But we have hope because as Christians, we have seen the power of God to bring about new life, even in circumstances that seemed beyond hope. We have seen individuals find new life – those who were once so emotionally “shelled out” that they took from others more than they could ever give. We have sometimes seen people who have been transformed to new life, having lived years being lost in the maze of their own self-centeredness and depression. We've seen people without hope obtain a sense of joy and a sense of purpose for life because of the newly realized presence of God's Spirit in their lives and in the lives of those around them. New life from old bones. Perhaps every time you've been surprised at a good outcome to your health or that of a loved one, it was God – all along – trying to get your attention.

Ezekiel's vision speaks to us today in saying that our God is all-powerful and is not limited to the predictable limits of the human condition. And while you and I are only renting these bodies, we are using in this life, God brings to us a newness and seems to keep showing us transformations in all aspects of life.

Some time ago, I was talking to a woman in her eighth decade who was hospitalized and knew her diagnosis predicted only a few months to live. Most of the people, who had come to visit her, were trying not to face the intensity of her coming death, so they kept saying how she should be thankful for her having her share of years. But she was personally trying to face the present and the near future and not just reminisce

through the past. So I said to her, “Well, what are you going to do with the rest of your life?”

After what looked like a moment of relief and reflection, she began to describe how she would be spending her coming days with loved ones, do some traveling and continue on with many of the things she had enjoyed for the years past. Though her days were numbered, she was going to live every one of those days.



In a similar way I ask, what are *you* going to do for the rest of your life? What is it that *you* hope to bring about for your life in your years ahead? Do you have any vision of your future? What are your dreams?

You know, the human mind is more advanced than we are often willing to allow. People who have studied dreams have concluded that the human mind is able to think not only faster, but in ways beyond what we can verbally express. It is, for instance, *not* that we can not remember the things about which we’ve dreamt. The reason why we usually can’t tell someone else a dream we’ve had, even though the dream was vivid, is because our minds can think in more dimensions and perhaps (as some think) go outside of time in order to work on things.

Remember those dreams where you were in two time periods at once? Because of this extraordinary, almost boundless ability, we are not able to communicate all that had been going on in our dreams. Our language abilities aren’t as sophisticated as our minds.

You might try to become more aware of your dreams by writing them down. Some of you keep a journal. Others meditate, becoming more aware of your inner thoughts and the directions of where your hope seems to be taking you. But what are you hoping for to come about in your life? If you have no dreams and no hope, you have no future.



Secondly, in reflecting about your personal future, what does God have to do with it? Where is God, now, in your life? As you’re sitting here on this

Sunday morning, with the joys and clutter of the ever-changing schedules before you, where is God? How aware are you of God’s marvelous presence in your life – at this very moment?

It’s easy to vaguely think about how we will live with God in eternity – once we cross over into the dimension of God’s fully-realized presence after this brief time on earth. But if all of the splendor and magnificence of that eternal life is a reality, certainly our present lives are not a mere chance happening. Because Christ walked among us in our human experiences, certainly life (despite its limitations), must be meaningfully linked with the eternity ahead of us.

Perhaps we should think of the little resurrections and transformations we experience now as the buds of the Spring of eternity ahead of us. Be open for more awareness of God’s actual presence in your life. We are often too focused on the dry bones of our busyness to see and feel the breath of new life blowing in our lives.

God is here and is constantly creating new from the old. Rejoice in God’s power, as Scripture says: “If any one is in Christ, she or he is a new creation – for the old has passed away, behold the new has come.”¹¹



¹¹ 2nd Corinthians 5:17