

## **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

### **Valley of dry bones**

The name Ezekiel means “God strengthens”; and he certainly needed God’s strength for 3 reasons:

- Ezekiel belonged to a defeated people. The Israelites were, when Ezekiel was probably a young adult, conquered and taken off to Babylon. You can imagine the despair of the people who believed God’s promise to Abraham that they would possess the land of Israel “for ever” (God’s words to Abraham in Genesis 13:15).
- Ezekiel was called by God to deliver a message of judgement because the people had rebelled against God. He had to tell the people that, no, God did not owe them anything and was not duty-bound to rescue them from exile in Babylon. As you can guess, this message did not go down well

- Ezekiel found himself constantly opposed by false prophets, those who claimed to speak on behalf of God but whose visions came only from their own imaginations.

However, after 32 chapters of God’s judgements, in chapter 33 the prophet moves on to a very different theme: the people who have been broken and expelled from their land are promised healing, restoration and return to the land of their ancestors.

This morning I would like us to look at this ancient and well-known story and see first of all what it said to the people of the time. After all, it is clear from verses 11-14 that the valley of dry bones for them would be a picture of Jerusalem after it had been conquered. The bones were “very dry”, a reminder that at the time of writing Israel had been in exile for over 10 years and whatever hope they had had was now gone.

Ezekiel begins by telling us that “*the hand of the Lord was upon me*”. God was giving him a vision, and it was a shocking sight; not only

because of the numbers of human bones, but because he was a priest and contact with human bones would make him ceremonially unclean.

God asks the prophet a question (verse 3):

*“Son of man, can these bones live?”*

The title Son of Man can be a bit confusing in the Bible because it is used in different ways.

However in this case it is quite clear: it is a reminder to Ezekiel of what he is – a mortal man standing in the presence of God.

And Ezekiel thought to himself “This is a trick question. If I say yes, I’m being presumptuous, if I say no I am limiting God’s power.” So he answers God very wisely:

*“O sovereign Lord, you alone know.”*

His humble response leads to God’s next command. He says to Ezekiel:

*“Prophesy to these bones and say to them, Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!”*

Is it just me or can you hear in your head the tune: “Them bones, them bones, them dry bones, now hear the word of the Lord”

Ezekiel is to contribute to the revival of the bones by following God’s command.

Remember that this is a vision, a dream.

Ezekiel does not understand what he is doing, he simply follows God’s command – and what a result! He just spoke aloud with ordinary words. No magic. No secret incantations. No conjuring tricks with waving bones around. Just the living power of the word of the living God invading the valley of the shadow of death as the bones come together and are covered with flesh. But still the breath of life was not in them.

A word of explanation. The word Spirit in the Hebrew and Greek languages is a picture word. It pictures breath being breathed out as when you blow out candles on a birthday cake or puff and pant as you run. Spirit, as one writer puts it, is what the big bad wolf was threatening the little pigs with when he told them: “I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down!” The picture is of air moving vigorously, energy let loose

And just as the wind is invisible, so the Spirit is invisible; but just as we see the effects of the wind blowing through the trees, we also see the results of the Spirit at work.

Here in Ezekiel 37 the word spirit is used to mean breath, wind and the Holy Spirit in quick succession. It is meant to signal, as it evidently did to Hebrew believers, that the work of God's Spirit is visible.

It would also have reminded Hebrew readers of the picture story of creation which we read in Genesis 2:7:

*“The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”*

We are not left to guess at the meaning of the story for the prophet. In verses 11-14 God himself explains the vision:

*“Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel”*

The exiles felt themselves to be as useless as hopeless and as lifeless as dried bones. Just as

Ezekiel prophesied to the bones in the vision, so he is to prophesy to his people. They should not think of themselves as dead and buried, because the Lord says:

*“O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel.” (37:12)*

The same Spirit which had given the prophet the vision will settle the people in their own land.

The story concludes with the familiar Bible phrase:

*“Then you will know that I am the Lord.”*

When God acts, whether in creation of humanity or the re-creation of Israel, there is no doubt that it is God who is at work, because both things are beyond the power of mere mortals.

**How do these bones live again?**

God uses 3 means to achieve his purpose.

**The preaching of the word**

Ezekiel is told to *prophecy* (37:4).

Unfortunately when we hear this word we tend to think of somebody foretelling the future. But in fact the literal translation is *preach God's word*.

### **The prayer of God's servant**

God urges Ezekiel to call upon the breath to come and breathe into the dead bodies. As we have seen, the passage uses the words breath, wind and spirit interchangeably. What I would like you to notice however is that, although God has promised something, he links the promise with the prayers of his people.

### **The power of the Holy Spirit**

It is only the power of the Spirit which can bring about this change. It must have been difficult for the Israelites to believe that they could be a nation again. Other nations had been conquered, absorbed into the Babylonian Empire and simply disappeared. No doubt many Israelites were resigned to the same thing happening to them. But they were wrong. God had a purpose with his people; he was going to

bring them back to the promised land; more than that, through them, he was going to send his Son.

Whenever God brings about a **revival**, there are these 3 ingredients: his word, the prayers of his people and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Think of the series we are doing on Nehemiah. You will remember that when the impossible actually happened and God brought his people back from exile some years later, it was partly through Nehemiah.

What did Nehemiah do when the walls were completed?

He gathered the people together to hear the word of God.

What had Nehemiah done right at the start of his work when he heard about the troubles of the people in Jerusalem?

He prayed before the God of heaven

Who does Nehemiah say (chapter 9) is the guide of the people?

The Spirit of God

Next Sunday is Pentecost, the celebration of the coming of the Spirit on the early church. The book of Acts makes it clear that when 3000 people came to faith in one day it was the result of preaching, prayer and the powerful work of the Holy Spirit.

But there is one other thing which is incredibly important, but would be easy to overlook. It is something to do with the way God works, not only in Ezekiel's vision, but in our world.

Why does God bother to show Ezekiel this vision in the first place? Why is it that in the vision, God repeatedly looks for Ezekiel to respond, to obey, to work with Him? Would it not be easier for God just to do the whole thing himself? Why does he ask Ezekiel to respond and to work with him?

The answer lies in Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3:9:

*"We are God's fellow-workers."*

One of the most amazing themes of the Bible is that God's way to achieve his purposes in the world is to work with flawed human beings.

If you think for a moment of some of the best-known heroes of the Bible, they were all flawed individuals. There was Abraham, the great man of faith, who was also capable of embarrassing lies about his wife being his sister; David, a Man after God's own heart, but sinking to adultery and murder; Peter, who swore he would never disown Jesus, but when the moment came 3 times denied ever knowing him.

But God persists, even when his people let him down. Occasionally he acts in spectacular ways, but even in OT times these miracles are the exception rather than the rule. The miracles are the stories we remember, of course, God appears to Moses in a burning bush; Elijah prays and fire burns up the offering. There are few episodes like these over a period of many centuries. In the main, God works quietly, choosing people to work with him and changing the world slowly, much more slowly than we would like.

Even Jesus did not see miracles as a cure-all, but rather as signs of God's kingdom and God's love for all people, no matter how undeserving. In fact he resisted all temptation to use miracles for his own comfort or to show off to a sceptical world.

And while he could heal the sick – instantly – it took him 3 years to work with his disciples to get them to be his fellow-workers. He loved this group of men and women who followed him who progressed by fits and starts, sometimes seemed to be learning but would then let him down again – but still he persisted with them. It would have been so much easier for Jesus to achieve changed lives instantly and by force, but he never did that.

And when his work on earth was near its end, he explained to his disciples that although he was about to depart, the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, would come to teach them God's will. Like Jesus, he would not work by giving orders and imposing changes, but by working on the inside.

The Holy Spirit is still at work bringing new life to dead bones. He works quietly in our lives to make us more like Jesus; feeding ideas into our minds; bringing to our attention ways in which we have hurt other people; helping us to make wise decisions; bringing us to repentance; teaching us what the Bible means; making us aware of other people's needs.

This is partnership, God at work in our lives as we pray and live out our lives for him.. The apostle Paul tries to explain it like this:

*“Work out your salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”*  
(Philippians 2:12)

And again in 1 Corinthians 15:10:

*“I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of god that was with me.”*

The partnership binds so tight that it is difficult to distinguish who is doing what, God or the human partner. God has come that close.

It is however not a relationship of equals. In his book on prayer, Philip Yancey tells the story of

his pastor who was spending a day of hard labour installing stone steps in his back yard. The stones were heavy and it took all of his strength to manoeuvre them into place. His five-year-old daughter Becky begged to help. He told her that she could help by singing and that would encourage him. No, came the reply, I want to help. And so, carefully, when it would not endanger her, he let her place her hands on the rocks as he moved them. The pastor admitted later that Becky's assistance actually complicated the job. He could have done the task in less time without her help. But at the end of the day he not only had new steps but a new aspect to his relationship with his daughter. "Me and dad made steps" she announced at dinner. And he would be the first to agree.

When, in the nineteenth century, William Carey announced his call from God to take the gospel message to India, pastors scoffed at the idea.

"Young man", he was told, "If God had wanted to save the heathen in India, he could certainly do it without the likes of you or us."

They missed the point of partnership. God does very little on earth without you or us.

To return to the valley of dry bones. Ezekiel could not bring life to dry bones. But God called him into a partnership where Ezekiel had to pass on God's word, have a relationship with God in prayer and rely on the Holy Spirit to bring about the change which Ezekiel could not.

Many of us long for revival in our community and in our nation. This of course is impossible, at least in human terms. This morning we are reminded of 2 things: firstly we are called into partnership with God; and secondly the only organiser of revival is the Holy Spirit.