

Part 1: An Overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament

E. The Continuity of Scripture

15. God's Continuing Work with Dry Bones

I've titled this lecture "God's Continuing Work with Dry Bones." You may recognize in that title the allusion to Ezekiel 37, which speaks of an important vision Ezekiel had. First though, a little background: Ezekiel was the son of a priest and a member of Jerusalem's aristocracy who lived in a very turbulent time in Jewish history, viz. the time of the exile. When he was 25 years old, the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem and took many of the Jewish people into exile; Ezekiel was one of them. It was the second deportation of Jews into Babylon. The first one had taken place about 7 or 8 years before; that was the one in which Daniel and his friends had been taken to Nebuchadnezzar's court.

When Ezekiel arrived in Babylon and saw the physical, emotional, and spiritual condition of his fellow Jews, he merely sat for seven days, overwhelmed by what he saw (Ezek 3:15). It was during this time that the Lord called Ezekiel to be a prophet to the exiles. He had a two-part message from the Lord. Part One was letting the people know that their suffering was the judgment of God for their sin in refusing to be the people he had called them to be. And Part Two was more hopeful; he told them that after judgment God would restore his people.

The restoration was not to come quickly, however. Ten years after Ezekiel had been taken to Babylon, the exiles were given the report that Jerusalem itself, along with the temple, had been completely destroyed. So then, the mood among the exiles was that of discouragement, dejection, helplessness, and hopelessness.

That's when God set Ezekiel down in the middle of a graveyard. It wasn't a well-treed, grassy-meadowed, headstone-marked cemetery, but a desolate valley full of the dry bones of the dead. It was a mass grave; the dead lay where they had fallen. Their flesh had been eaten by scavengers and their bones scoured by the wind and rain and bleached by the hot sun. Ezekiel probably understood right away at least part of the message God was giving him. That valley of dry bones was a good illustration, a visual metaphor of the condition of the people of God. In fact, God said as much to Ezekiel: ¹¹*Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.'*

The people were in a state of spiritual stagnation, even despair. They felt spiritually and emotionally dry, and they doubted that anything would or could be done about it. Though they recognized their spiritual need, it was as if they were dead to any hope of spiritual vitality. They (Ezekiel included) certainly knew that there was nothing they could do about it. But God asks Ezekiel an interesting question (v.3): *Son of man, can these bones live?*

The obvious answer is "No; no way." How could lifeless, gnawed on, mixed up bones find their mates and reattach, with the vertebrae finding their proper place with cartilage between, the ball of the femur not only fitting into the socket of the right pelvis, but reattaching with ligaments; and on the other end, matching up with the right tibia and fibula, and growing hamstrings and quadriceps, along with nerves, and with food and oxygen supplying blood vessels? They couldn't. And more to the point, there's no earthly way that the people of God, either dead or in exile – with their government, their holy city, their temple, their civilization destroyed – no earthly way they could live again.

Except that with God all things are possible. So Ezekiel says, *Oh Sovereign Lord, you alone know.* Who is he to say that the Lord cannot make dry bones live. It is not exactly a statement of faith that the Lord will do this, but a cautious, albeit reverent confession that only the Lord knows what he is able and willing to do.

And with that comes God's command to Ezekiel: *Prophecy to these bones.* "Speak the word of the Lord to these bones." For that's what 'prophecy' means. Previously, Ezekiel had prophesied to mountains and forests at God's command; now, he prophesies to the dry bones in the valley. *Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! The Sovereign Lord says, I will make breath enter you ... and attach tendons...and make flesh... and cover you with skin...and you will come to life.*

Is God's Word really that powerful? It would be one thing if God himself stood in that valley, and in a sort of reenactment of the creation story said, *Dry bones, come to life!* But how can a mere mortal like Ezekiel speak with the same effect? But look, the bones are moving, coming together; they're forming into skeletons, and even now the bones are becoming covered over with flesh and skin; the Word of God is really that powerful.

As yet, however, the re-formed bodies are still lifeless, without the breath of life. But God is imitating his original creation of man (Ge 2:7), when he first formed man out of the dust of the earth, and then blew into his nostrils the breath of life. So God says that the next step for Ezekiel in this recreation, is to prophesy to the breath. And when Ezekiel prophesies to the breath, the fleshed-over bones become alive and re-creation is completed. It's a symbolic message from God to illustrate the Word that he is giving his desperate people (*Ezek 37:12, 14*): *O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them... I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it...*

This prophecy was fulfilled, in an initial way at least, after 70 years, when some of the exiles were allowed to return home. That's when Israel came back to life as a nation. Some people today think that a similar, but more complete fulfillment happened in 1948 when the nation of Israel was reconstituted again. And they think, moreover, that Revelation predicts an important role for Israel in the end times, something about which other Christians are more skeptical.

Yet, to this day, Israel's glory days have not returned. It is possible, I suppose, that such a day could still be coming for Israel as a nation, when, as God says in v. 23, *They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.*

But actually, the message to Ezekiel has already been fulfilled in a more complete way in Jesus Christ. When Christ came, the life and hope of the Jewish people was as dead as it had been in the exile. Nor did many have an eye for the self-sacrificing and humble Messiah that God was sending; that's why they, with the help of their Gentile masters, ended up killing Jesus on a cross. But it was that very murder, and God's reversal of it on Easter, by which God has given, and continues to give, life to people who are the spiritual equivalent of old, dried-out bones. And it's these people, born-again Jews and Gentiles alike, who make up spiritual Israel.

Even so, those who have put their trust for life and death in their Savior Jesus Christ may sometimes still feel like old, dried-out bones. We all see a fair amount of suffering close to home, personally, or in those we care about, and that takes its toll. Besides that, we live, as they say, in the information age, which means we have more access than we can sometimes handle to sad stories featuring one or another variety of suffering, each of which might remind us of Ezekiel's bone graveyard –

- people living under strict dictatorships, especially those who dissent civilly or religiously,
- people in every country who have become victims of fraud or violent crime,
- accident victims,
- those who have become welfare-dependent as well as those who can't make ends meet for themselves and their families,
- those who have been hurt emotionally by other people, and especially by those they love – through abuse, separation, infidelity, divorce, etc.
- There are lots of people who feel like dried or drying bones, and some too, though they may not recognize it, who have lost their way, and who either can't or don't want to find their way out of the deceit of sin.

So what does all this mean? And where do you find yourself in this story of old bones. Are you more like the pile of old bones Ezekiel saw at the beginning, or like the bones put back together, and covered with flesh, and made alive by the Spirit of God?

It's not easy to tell sometimes is it? There are people who are something like corpses; they look right, but have no spirit and life; maybe they don't even know they're dead. There are others who appear to be in worse shape, rather like piles of old bones are in worse shape than those with flesh on them. Ironically, however, it's probably the latter who are the closest to help, those who say "My hope in what I can do, is gone; I've made a mess of things. I need the supernatural help of God to rebuild my life."

The end of self-reliance is the first step to new life. The people of Israel had been in terrible trouble long before Ezekiel was brought by the Lord into the valley of dry bones. They were spiritually dead a long time before they came to the realization - in exile - that their bones were dried up and their hope gone. But that realization was the context in which God gave them his message of hope. That is always as it is; God's message of hope cannot be heard by those who are full of themselves, but only by those who have the honesty to admit they're dead without him. And then, even a little faith will be enough.

Ezekiel didn't give a ringing testimony of faith in God's intentions; he simply acknowledged that the Lord was sovereign and able to do the impossible. And everyone who hears Ezekiel's message can do the same, whether in a troubled marriage or family where hope has died. And whether vocationally frustrated, emotionally depressed, financially exhausted, physically handicapped, or politically oppressed. Whatever the problem, the Sovereign Lord, the one who made heaven and earth, can address our needs.

In the first place, God has given us Jesus to answer all our needs, and by that gift, he teaches us, moreover, that His consistent character is to be loving and helpful; he is always interested in reaffirming his original creative impulse. His Spirit is available and powerful to fix what's wrong and restore life.

This may not happen according to the timetable or in the manner we prefer. But what Ezekiel did with the bones - speaking the word of God to them – every child of God can do with every need. God's Word brings spirit and life. Through his word God himself comes into our troubles to fully revive us no matter what our needs.

Revival is not all glorious life and hope, but glorious life and hope against the backdrop of need and death and loneliness and poverty and hopelessness. We help keep our faith alive by constantly reviewing the whole story, and most notably, what God did on Easter when he made Jesus' drying bones alive and thus opened the door to life for all who are dead in sin.

Nor should we forget that all who are so regenerated and revived are part of one community. God works with a people; that's more than one set of revived bones. As important as individual revival is, the much bigger theme in Ezekiel's experience is the revival of the people of God as a whole. All who have found life by Christ's sacrificial death, resurrection, and ascension, are the new house of Israel, in whom the Spirit lives today.

The book of Acts is nothing less than the story of God putting flesh on dry bones and then breathing life into them, and doing it all over the then civilized world. And the continuing spread of the gospel today, into new language and people groups, is the same thing, a fulfillment of Ezekiel 37. Wherever people come to the end of themselves, look to God for help, and receive his Spirit, is where dry bones become living souls, and souls in community with each other.

But there's a danger in this beautiful picture; it's that some such communities apparently think that once dry bones become living souls, the pleasing of their Reviver, God, continues automatically. It's not so. Long before Ezekiel's time, God had 'created' Israel as his special people; he had taken them out of Egyptian slavery and given them life in the promised land. But through their disobedience, they lost their life and became a pile of dry bones.

You see, revival must be ongoing. Life is a moment by moment affair. Physically speaking, if our bodies stop breathing and performing the other functions of life for only a few moments, they die. Spiritually speaking, if there's any point in which we do not depend on God's Spirit, we begin to die. Our God is a gracious God, a patient God; he certainly was with Israel. But what is the point at which we become dry bones again?

We believe that God will preserve those who are truly his. And yet there is also the truth that all around us are individuals and churches which we thought were alive, which now seem to be little more than dry bones, or maybe corpses, but without life. "There are churches who meet and conduct business, and everyone thinks they're a success... But they're never heard talking about what God is doing in the lives of people.

That secularized, compromised version of the church is not what God has in mind. He wants His church filled with His spirit, evidencing the fruit of the Spirit, following the words inspired by His Spirit." God's church, and all the branches of it, is in need of a continuing renewal to sustain and develop the life God has given us.

'You can learn a lot in a graveyard—that God can change everything: despair into hope, doubt into faith, and even spiritual death into spiritual life.'

That happens when we reach the end of ourselves, look to God, and receive his Spirit - all, on a continuing basis. God has made a way to revive us, and it should be no surprise that he wants all his revived people to stay revived, and not to become like dry bones again. That is a life and death matter for ourselves, but also for our world. For right now God is working, and calling for co-workers, to transform the spiritual graveyards of our world into places teeming with life. That's how it was in the beginning; that's what Jesus did with his life; and that's the kind of community God calls his people to be right now. And one more thing: that's how it will be at the end of time. How long that will be, we have to confess with Ezekiel, "Only you know Lord; only you know."

Let me conclude with a song based on Ezekiel's vision. I found one – "Dry Bones" with lyrics by Phillip Doddridge, and revised by Rev Brian L. Penney, that I thought I'd like to use. However, the more I looked at it, the more I thought I wanted to do some more revising. And so what I'm giving you is this song "Dry Bones" with a couple verses as I found them, one more that I revised somewhat, and three more that I added. It can be sung, if desired, to the tune of "Just As I Am."

~ **Dry Bones** ~ (tune: Just As I Am)

Look down, O Lord, with gracious eye,
See Adam's race in ruin lie;
Sin spreads its mis'ry all around
And dead men's bones pollute the ground.

O, can these dead become alive?
And can these sun-parched bones revive?
That, sovereign Lord, to You is known,
That wondrous work is all Your own.

But by your word these bones aren't done
You give them flesh and make them one
Dry bones obey Your mighty voice,-
They move, they waken, they rejoice!

These bones, they stand for Israel,
held captive since the nation fell;
Though life was hard and hope was spent,
God brought them home with hearts content.

But this return was just a taste
of what would come through Jesus' grace.
His sacrifice has conquered death,
and offers all new life and breath.

He is our home; with him we'll stay,
and share the news of endless day,
Where he will be by all adored;
All glory to our Sovereign Lord.