



God Pursues Us with New Life

THEOLOGICAL THEME: The only hope for those who are spiritually dead is God's resurrection power.

The Atacama Desert, which spans the countries of Chile, Peru, Bolivia, and Argentina in South America, is a considerably desolate place. The average rainfall in this 40,000-square-mile region is 15 millimeters per year (a little more than half an inch!). Because of the climate, the soil has actually been compared to that of the Planet Mars. There is no thriving wildlife. There are no lush forests. There are few signs of anything living at all. Absolute desolation. If a living thing stayed there for very long, you can bet that it would not remain a living thing.

Can you imagine spending much time in a place like that? If you can get a picture of that in your mind, then you're moving toward picturing the scene in the prophet Ezekiel's vision recorded in Ezekiel 37.



What is the most desolate place you've ever been?



Why might God choose such a setting for Ezekiel's vision?

In this session, we encounter a scene from Ezekiel that is full of both despair and hope. The Lord brought His prophet to a valley full of dry bones to show him the hopelessness of life in exile—but also the power of God to raise the dead and restore His people. The vision gave hope to the people in Ezekiel’s day that God would bring them back to their land. It also gives us hope by reminding us that the Word of God has resurrection power that makes us alive and restores our relationship to God.



Voices from Church History

“Let us look to Him who will at last open our graves, and bring us forth to judgment, that He may now deliver us from sin, and put his Spirit within us, and keep us by his power, through faith, unto salvation.”¹

—Matthew Henry (1662-1714)

1. God’s people are spiritually dead and scattered in exile (Ezek. 37:1-3).

In the year 586 B.C., the Babylonians came and ransacked God’s chosen people. They destroyed the temple and took captive the Jews. The land was gone. The temple was gone. The priesthood was gone. The monarchy was gone. Every mark of favor that the Lord had given to His people was removed.

In this dire situation, God called Ezekiel to prophesy. Ezekiel was 30 years old, and only five years had passed from the time Ezekiel was deported along with his people to Babylon. The setting of the vision recorded in Ezekiel 37 is vividly descriptive of the state of the people during that time:

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

To the people of God living in exile, with their former way of life destroyed, this scene was eerily reminiscent of their current existence. Like this valley, the physical and spiritual life of God’s people was lifeless. For years, the people’s commitment to the Lord had been in decay. In a sense, the destruction of the city of Jerusalem was simply the inevitable end to generations of idolatry. Their city, their homeland, and their temple now resembled the state of their hearts.



In what ways does Israel’s exile and the picture of this desolate valley resemble the original exile of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden? In what ways is it different?

This valley of desolation represented Israel in exile. It also reminds us of what our hearts are like before we trust in Christ. We are in exile from God our Creator, dead in our sin, separated from Him (Eph. 2:1-3).

Of course, we don’t realize just how bad the situation is when we are in it. Some even point to this lack of realization as evidence of the absence of such danger, thinking: *I don’t feel like I’m in danger. My life seems to be going just fine.* But the lack of awareness of our hopeless reality doesn’t make the situation any less dangerous; in fact, it makes it more so.



Voices from Church History

“This vision may be looked upon as descriptive of a state of lukewarmness and spiritual lethargy in a Church when the question may be sorrowfully asked—‘Can these bones live?’”²

—Charles Spurgeon
(1834-1892)



What value is there in recognizing the danger you were in before you became a Christian?



How does knowing that danger change the way you look at the gospel?

The Lord asked Ezekiel a simple question when confronted with this scene: “Can these bones live?” When Ezekiel saw the picture of death, he knew the only way the bones could live was if God did something miraculous. No matter how much those bones might have wanted to live, they were powerless to change their situation. Can these dry bones live? You alone know, Lord. And you alone can do it.



Why do you think Ezekiel responded the way he did to God’s question?

2. God’s Word is powerful enough to bring life out of death (Ezek. 37:4-10).



⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ And 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.”

⁷ So 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. ⁸ And 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. ⁹ Then 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.” ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

It is significant that life came into the valley as a result of the word of the Lord. God's word is filled with power. At the very beginning of time, it was the word of God that brought something out of nothing. Everything that is—everything we see—is a result of God's creative word.

Ezekiel's people had failed to heed the word of God when it came to them through the prophets. Here, though, Ezekiel saw the power of God's word to restore life.



Why is it important that Ezekiel spoke the word of God over the dry bones before they started to live?

Can you imagine how the scene began to change? First was the noise. Only a slight rumble initially, but the rumble grew to a roar. There was the clacking of bone on bone as these once-dry bones suddenly began to form into recognizable shapes. Then there was the slapping of skin as the newly formed skeletons were covered. And then came the breath of life, blowing like the wind into the valley.

What did this vision represent? The restoration of the people of God. But the hope of restoration does not belong only to the exiles living in Babylon. We claim the same hope of experiencing restoration—the restoration that comes through Jesus Christ. How are we made alive?

In the New Testament, Paul said that it's through hearing and believing the Word of God that we are spiritually resurrected: "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17).

We hear the word of the gospel spoken, and something begins to happen inside of us. Our hearts, long petrified into stone because of our sin, suddenly begin to soften until we too are standing anew before God.

Christianity is about resurrection—first with Jesus and then with all those who believe in Him. When we believe the gospel, the Holy Spirit blows into our lives and gives us spiritual breath (John 3:8). Like the valley of dry bones, once hopeless and dead, we find that through the powerful Word of God, we too can live again.

God’s Word is powerful enough to bring life out of death. But notice that God didn’t speak directly to the bones; instead, He commanded Ezekiel to do it. Ezekiel, then, became the mechanism that God used to bring life from death. The prophet, in turn, had the amazing privilege of seeing it happen before his very eyes.

We can have a similar experience when we freely share the good news of the gospel. Like the prophet speaking over a valley of dry bones, we have been commanded to speak the words of life to those who are dead in sin (Rom. 10:14-15). We know, looking out at the landscape before us, that on our own we can do nothing to change the scene of desolation and death. But we are not speaking on our own; rather, we are speaking the very words of God. In turn, we have the amazing privilege of seeing God powerfully resurrect those who believe the message of the gospel.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

96. Resurrection

Both the Old and New Testaments teach that one day believers will experience a resurrection of the body from the dead (Isa. 26:19; Ezek. 37:12-14; John 11). The promise of the resurrection is found in the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and it will take place at the future return of Christ. Because Christ was the firstfruits of the resurrection, Christians can be assured that their resurrection will be similar in nature, meaning it will be both bodily and glorious (Phil. 3:20-21; Rom. 8:22-23). The hope of the future resurrection gives Christians confidence that death has been defeated in the death and resurrection of Christ.



How does it change our perspective on the gospel by seeing ourselves as coming alive at the Word of God?

3. God's love and power are displayed in restoring His people (Ezek. 37:11-14).

¹¹ Then 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 indeed cut off.'
¹² Therefore 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. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ And 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."

No doubt the nation, or what was left of it, felt like a valley of dry bones. They no longer had their homeland. Their capital city had been destroyed. Worst of all, the temple—the sign of God's abiding presence—was gone. Though the nation was in shambles physically, can you imagine the questions the people must have been asking of a spiritual nature?

They must have wondered if God had abandoned His promise. Perhaps He had. Maybe He had withdrawn His presence once and for all, and there would be no reprieve this time. Maybe there would be no deliverer as there had been in the days of Moses.



How would this vision have given Ezekiel's people hope?

One of the things this vision told the people was that God keeps His promises. He had promised that someday His patience would run out. Centuries earlier, recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy, He had promised that if His people fell into idolatry, then He would act decisively (Deut. 28:32-33).

In a strange way, the exile was not just evidence of God's judgment; it was evidence of His faithfulness. If God had not kept His promise of judgment, then perhaps He would not keep His other promises either. But because God kept His Word, doing exactly what He said He would do, the people could look to this vision and know that God still keeps His promises. Here, He renewed His promise that the exile was not the end.

He had not abandoned them; in fact, He would bring them back. There was no promise for ease or comfort or even that the exile would be short-lived, but there was a promise that after a time, the dry bones would live again, and they would live in the land that God had promised to their father Abraham. If God was powerful enough to bring about judgment, powerful enough to bring dry bones to life, then He was certainly powerful enough to bring them back again in restoration.



In what ways does God's promise to restore Israel give us confidence in God's faithfulness?

Conclusion

God raised up the Assyrian and Babylonian armies because Israel and Judah had refused to obey God in faithfulness. They had turned to the gods of pagan nations and had spurned the prophets' warnings. But even in the midst of their exile—God's discipline of His people—we see God faithful to keep a remnant of Abraham's children. He continued to be faithful to His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses, and David.



Voices from Church History

"The root of all good works is the hope of the Resurrection; for the expectation of the recompense nerves the soul to good works."³

—Cyril of Jerusalem
(circa 310-386)

"God the Pursuer" would even enter the valley of dry bones—the valley of death and spiritual desolation—and bring new life to His chosen people. By sending His Son to the valley of death, God made the way for an army of people to be raised to new life, commissioned with His gospel, and empowered for His mission. The kingdom of resurrection power would triumph even over the grave.

CHRIST CONNECTION: God showed Ezekiel a valley of dry bones, which reminds us what we are like in our sinful condition. God gave Ezekiel a vision of the power of God bringing life out of death, a power on display most fully in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.



HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God promised to raise and restore His people, a vast army who will know God and make Him known.

1. How should recognizing the destruction of sin change the way you share the gospel of Jesus Christ with others?

2. Since it is the Word of God that God uses to bring us to life spiritually, how can we be more intentional about using the Word in our mission?

3. What steps of obedience is God calling you to in light of His ongoing work of restoration in your life through the Holy Spirit?
