

Introduction:

- A. Perhaps Ezekiel was so deep in his praying that he was in a kind of spiritual trance with Yahweh seemed to lift him up and then set him down in the middle of a broad flat plain surrounded by hills. It was a Death Valley, for “it was full of bones” – human remains. Nothing left but skeletons – skulls, spines, sternums, ribs, femurs and phalanges. Thousands of bodies reduced to bones. Tens of thousands. As if the ghastly sight of it all wasn’t enough, the LORD led Ezekiel back and forth among them; back and forth, as if a cemetery had been upended, and all the time, the silence was as heavy as death itself. Not a breath of breeze.
- B. Israel was a people who didn’t know their own God, Yahweh. That isn’t so surprising, sadly. There are countless people this morning who say they believe in God, perhaps are even singing songs to him in church, but who do not know who Yahweh, the LORD, really is. It was the God-given task of the prophet Ezekiel to remedy that.
- C. It was about 575 years before Christ. The nation of Israel was no more. The land was abandoned. The population decimated, with most of the nation dead and the rest as good as dead – exiled to Babylon, 1000 miles from their home, subjects of a pagan king, with no prospects of ever returning. Worst of all, they were God-less. **They did not know their own God, Yahweh,** because they had stopped listening to him long ago. **When it comes to the LORD, sin leads to hearing loss, and hearing loss leads to death.**
- D. Sometime before one lone survivor of Jerusalem made it to the Jewish community in Babylon with news of the utter destruction. On that day Ezekiel began to deliver prophecies from God. But they were no longer fierce and

frightening. They were promises of hope and a future, each one revealing another aspect of the ways of the LORD Yahweh. They learned that he was the Shepherd they'd never really known; that he was their Avenger, sure to bring destruction on the enemies; that he loved their sacred land and that he was the God who cleansed and saved his people. **Then came this vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37.** Turn there.

- E. So Ezekiel found himself the only living soul among acres of human bones. I think he knew what this vision meant. He'd heard the Jewish exiles saying, *"Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off."* Now, here before his eyes, he saw them as they were. He knew he was seeing the very people to whom he prophesied. He knew he had been preaching to the dead-hearted all along.
- F. What had happened here? This was no holocaust where Israelites had been the victims of a brutal dictator. Nor was this the abandoned battlefield of a massacre by a more powerful army. These people now reduced to dry bones were the victims of ... themselves. **They had sentenced themselves to death by their own willful, relentless sin;** their violence, their immorality, their disdain for God's prophets. Their nation had, in effect, been put to death by God himself. The LORD said in **Deut. 32:39**, *"See now that I myself am he! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand."*
- G. Then God asked Ezekiel a question: "Son of man, can these bones live." I think Ezekiel knew that God meant: *"Can this dead and decayed nation ever live again?"* The question carried the hint of hope, coming from Lord Yahweh as it did. Ezekiel replied, *"Sovereign LORD, you*

alone know.” The issue wasn’t if it was possible, but if Yahweh willed it to be.

H. **V.4**, “Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones.’”

What a strange scene! But in a way, Ezekiel was used to this. He’d been preaching to these people for years and always sensed that they were spiritually as dead as doornails, even when they liked his sermons. So, as always, the prophet listened to God’s message: *“Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.”* Of course, it must have felt rather pointless, but there stood Ezekiel, voice raised, preaching to the deadest congregation any preacher has ever faced.

Notice that God expected nothing of the bones. No more pleas for them to reform, to turn from their wicked ways. They were dead in their sin, as helpless as scattered skeletons. They couldn’t reform any more than those bones could dance.

But then Ezekiel tells us what happened next in **vv.7-8**, *“So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, [the word can also mean earthquake!] and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.”* The bones were miraculously embodied. It was an astonishing miracle of re-creation, a sight to behold! **But when it was all said and done, they were still lifeless.** If the field of bones had been a weird sight, this might have been even stranger. Thousands of human beings, fully

formed bodies, but not one pulse or breath or twitching muscle in all that vast, eerie scene. Once the bones had stopped rattling together and the bodies had been reknit, all was once again as silent as death.

- I. If it had seemed strange to prophesy to the bones, God's next command was even stranger: v.9, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" So Ezekiel lifted his head and shouted to the still sky, "*Come, breath! Come wind! Come Spirit.*" For the one word he used, *ruach*, meant all those things at once. And, as if God's breathing Spirit had been hovering just over the hills, there was a mighty wind coming from every direction at once, as if Yahweh himself exhaled, and those bodies began to gasp as newborns do. They inhaled. They breathed deeply. Color came to their skin. Their eyes fluttered open. Their bodies stirred and stretched and rose to their feet, looking at themselves in wonder. And where there had been only dry bones there now stood a vast and formidable army—the revived nation of Israel.
- J. So what does all this mean? What did it mean to Ezekiel and the Jews in exile to whom he preached? What does it mean to us? God had said in v.6, "*I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.*" **Only when Yahweh gives us breath can we know him.**

I. PEOPLE WHO ARE ISOLATED FROM GOD DRY UP AND DIE

- A. Adam and Eve succumbed to the serpent's temptation because they believed his lie, "If you disobey God you will **not** surely die as he told you." But the moment they

doubted and disobeyed God, death settled into their bones, and it was only a matter of time till their bodies were as dead as their souls. So it was with Israel. They had arrogantly and stubbornly resisted God for so long that they were dead and decayed. They couldn't reform. They couldn't restart their faith. They were "*dead in their transgressions and sins.*"

- B. They captured in their own words the spiritual sense of their death in v.11, "*Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off*" i.e., *cut off* from life. They said this because they were exiled from their God-given land and their Temple in Jerusalem. But their death ran deeper than that. Death was in them. Remember what David wrote in **Ps. 32:3-4**: *When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.*" I think the Jews felt this before they understood it. At first, the exiles had been cavalier about their condition. They didn't even weep at Jerusalem's destruction at first, but then the weight of it all, the toxicity of their sin, the heavy, hot hand of God finally brought them low. They, too, knew they were nothing but dry bones.
- C. What is your quality of spiritual life? I'm not asking if your faith is orthodox, but are you alive inwardly? Do you thrive on obeying God? Are you eager to draw close to him? Do you pray as one beloved of God? Is the fruit of God's Spirit—the Christian virtues—growing in you? If you're dying inwardly, what can you do about it? **There's not much that bones can do.** I cannot resuscitate myself. For many years I've had the words of two old prayer-hymns in the back of my Bible. One says, "*Pass me not, O gentle*

Savior. ... While on others thou art calling, do not pass me by." The other prayer is this.

*I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasies,
No sudden rending of the veil of clay,
No angel visitant, no opening skies:
But take the dimness of my soul away.*

There is considerable discussion among Bible students as to just what to make of Ezekiel's vision. To the exiled Jews who first heard it, it was God's promise of a hope and a future. They *did* return to their land beginning in 539 B.C. They rebuilt their temple and their walls. In time, their land did flourish. They never again succumbed to idolatry, but neither were they consistently a holy people. Read Malachi, the last book of the OT, to see that. Yet God had given them this amazing and wonderful promise in **vv.12-14**:

*"Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: 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. **Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I 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, declares the LORD.**'"*

II. KNOWING YAHWEH MEANS KNOWING HE CAN REVIVE HIS PEOPLE

A. You might think that this would be a good Easter text, a stirring picture of the resurrection to come. But that's not really the point here. **The point of this passage isn't God's promise of bodily resurrection but his promise of spiritual revival.** When the Jews returned to Jerusalem there *was* a spiritual revival among them. God did breathe life into them. But generally in the 500 years that followed

they remained a **bony** people. **I think perhaps they were like the people in the vision who were recreated but breath-less.** The real fulfillment of this promise came after Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. It came to pass on the Day of Pentecost. Acts 2 describes what happened:

*When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. **Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.** They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. **All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit** and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. **When they heard this sound,** a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.*

Peter preached and **v.41 says**, “*Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about 3000 were added to their number that day.*” Those were all Jews whom God had promised, “***I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.***” Not a resurrection story but a revival story. Soon, God would expand the population of his people by adding Gentiles who put their faith in Israel’s Messiah and became part of that new nation. But it always happened through the proclamation of the good news of new life purchased by Christ and given by God’s own Spirit.

Illus.: **Dr. Erwin Lutzer** used to take his preaching students at Trinity on a little field trip. He’d take them to a cemetery over in Deerfield, have them gather around a grave, and then tell one of them to preach to the guy lying

there, six feet under. “*Preach the gospel to Mr. Sherman here!*” he’d say. It was tougher than a lab, I heard. Then he’d remind those preachers that sometimes they’d preach to the dead, and only the Holy Spirit can bring them to life.

- B. Remember how in v.10 said that the revived people were “a vast army”? Implicit in the Hebrew word is not only that the army was vast but also formidable. An *army* suggests a mission. Israel did not need to become a mighty army in order to defeat their enemies. God had already made clear *he* would do that singlehandedly. So why “a vast army”? **What could a vast army of men and women, boys and girls, do if they were alive with God’s own Breath, God’s own Spirit?** What mission might Yahweh give them? Jesus said, “*You are the salt of the earth.*” Jesus said, “*You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*” An angel told disciples, “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*”

Jesus said, “*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*”

- C. This prophecy ends in v.14, “*Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.*” All that happens in this astonishing vision as well as in its eventual fulfillment happens because “*the LORD has spoken.*” What God speaks God does. To know the LORD, Yahweh, is to know that in his great mercy and love he revives those who are spiritually dead with a word.

Conclusion

Those people, finally humbled under God's heavy hand, had nothing left but a lifeless prayer, "*Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone.*" Till Israel came to that place God could only press harder and harder upon them. God will only dwell among those "who are lowly and contrite in heart." It seems in such times that we are farthest from help, that hope *is gone*. But Jesus said, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*"

Ezekiel's vision brought hope to the Jewish exiles. They were no more alive than a field of dry bones but Yahweh would revive them. **That's what Yahweh is like. To know him is to know that he both raises the dead and revives the dead-hearted.**

Perhaps you know that feeling. Perhaps that is your condition. Then ask God to revive you. Ask the LORD to revive *us*.

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart:

Wean it from earth, through all its pulses move.

Stoop to my weakness, mighty as Thou art,

And make me love Thee as I ought to love.

Breathe on me, Breath of God,

fill me with life anew,

that I may love the way you love,

and do what you would do.