

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: I read a very poignant Buddhist poem written in the 12th century by Saigyo Hoshi after he visited a Shinto Grand Temple:

*Gods here?
Who can know?
Not I.
Yet I sigh
and tears flow
tear on tear.*

- B. Ezekiel was God's prophet to people who must have felt like that. Psalm 137 captures their sorrow:

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?*

Ezekiel had heard them say, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off."

- C. The Jews exiled to Babylon had reason to think that God was no longer listening to their prayers. They had sinned against God so persistently and deeply that he had banished them from his land and given his temple over to destruction. I've learned that when God's people persist in sinning their capacity to trust God dissipates. It evaporates. That had happened to the Jews long before and now *they sighed and tears flowed, tear on tear.*
- D. But God's constant message in Ezekiel is the phrase, "then you will know that I am the LORD YAHWEH." That phrase, in one form or another occurs 75 times in Ezekiel. We have been studying Ezekiel's prophecies in chapters 33-37, a section that can be called the **Gospel of Ezekiel**. **They schooled God's people in how unique YAHWEH is.**

Turn to Ezek 36. In **36:24-38** YAHWEH promised that he would wash them clean. He would replace their stone-cold hearts with soft and responsive hearts. He would breathe his own Spirit into them. And they would become his obedient, loving, trusting people, and he would be glad to be their God. **Do you know of other gods or religions offer such cleansing or life as YAHWEH? So he says, “Then you will know that I am YAHWEH—THE LORD.”**

In **37:1-14** the LORD showed Ezekiel a vision of a valley of dry bones—a vivid image of the condition of Israel. But at God’s command, Ezekiel prophesied to the bones, “*Hear the word of the LORD,*” and with a great rattling, the bones came together and were wrapped in sinews and muscles and skin. Then, again at God’s command, Ezekiel prophesied to the wind: “*Come, wind, breath, Spirit.*” And those bodies inhaled the Spirit of God and stood to life, “*a vast army.*” **Have you ever heard of any other gods or religions who offer such restoration and revival as YAHWEH? So he says again, “Then you will know that I am YAHWEH—THE LORD.”**

- E. Now we come to the last part of this “Gospel of Ezekiel,” one more striking prophecy in **Ezek 37:15-28**. The issue addressed here is that the nation of Israel had long been irreparably divided. Some 350 years before, right after the death of King Solomon, the nation had split into the north and the south. The northern tribes retained the name Israel, (sometimes called Ephraim) while the southern tribes and the city of Jerusalem were called Judah. The northern kingdom was completely faithless. Nineteen kings and every one of them wicked. Never a revival of any kind. These two were not only divided, they were enemies.

Finally, in 722 BC the northern tribes were conquered by the ruthless Assyrians, and carried off into captivity, never to return again to their land. Those people are sometimes called the ten lost tribes of Israel. About 150 years later Judah was also conquered, its people either killed or banished. For all intents and purposes, the nation of Israel was no more. They were all but extinct.

- F. But then God told Ezekiel to give the exiles there in Babylon an object lesson: vv.15-22... There stood Ezekiel before the ragtag remnant of the once proud and God-blessed nation of Israel with these two sticks, joined in the palm of his hand, and telling them that God was going to unite their peoples once again just like those sticks held in his hand! *“They will become one in my hand,”* God said.
- G. By way of background, the Hebrew word for one appears 11 times in vv.15-24, more times than are obvious in English. Take **v.17** for example. It reads literally, *“Combine them one to one into one wood so that they become one in your hand.”* God was making explicitly clear that this is all about **oneness**.
- H. That’s an interesting object lesson with the two sticks. The thing is, those sticks weren’t really joined together, were they? There was no glue. Ezekiel didn’t bind them somehow. He just held them, end to end perhaps, in his hand. If he let go they wouldn’t be together any more. But this was about the LORD. Here’s what I’d like you to remember from this text: **God unifies the people he holds in his hand.** He unifies his people—us included—in several ways detailed in these verses:

I. GOD UNIFIES HIS PEOPLE BY GATHERING THEM FROM THE NATIONS TO THE LAND HE PROMISED

- A. Again and again, God promises the exiles he will gather them back to their God-given land. In **v.21** God says, *“Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from all around, and bring them to their own land.”* And **v.25**, *“They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children’s children shall dwell there forever...”*
- B. The Jews did return to their land, but they were a relatively small number and there’s no mention that their northern cousins joined them. What’s more, in 70 AD Jerusalem was destroyed again, this time by the Romans, and the Jews were once again slaughtered or scattered. Jews only returned to their land in large numbers beginning with the establishment of the modern nation of Israel in 1948. Some would see that as fulfillment of Ezekiel’s prophecy, but Israel is hostile to Christ as Messiah. I believe the fulfillment of this prophecy lies out ahead of us in Christ’s millennial kingdom and in the new heaven and new earth when we will all be gathered together in the Lord’s land.

II. GOD UNIFIES HIS PEOPLE UNDER HIS SHEPHERD KING, HIS SECOND DAVID, THE MESSIAH

- A. **V.22** says, *“There will be one king over all of them,”* and **v.24** says, *“my servant David will be king over them and they will all have one shepherd.”* There would be no uniting of Israel till the Messiah came. Only then would it begin. Then the people of God would no longer be identified by their bloodline but by their faith in the God of Abraham.

- B. Do you remember how Acts 2 details who was in Jerusalem on the day the Holy Spirit breathed life into God's people?

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

It meant that God was unifying his people under his Shepherd King, Jesus the Messiah!

- C. If it seemed almost unbelievable that the Jewish nation could be reunified, what God actually did was even more incredible. Jesus said in **John 10:16**, *"I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."* He was talking about Gentiles whom God would bring into his flock. Later, **Paul** explained to the Ephesian church that the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles had been torn down in Christ, making us one new nation, God's living temple. In his vision of the future **John** reported, *"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every*

nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands...” **No other god or religion is ever portrayed as doing such a thing as the living God, YAHWEH, will do through Jesus Christ.** “*Then you will know that I am the LORD.*”

III. GOD UNIFIES HIS SINFUL PEOPLE BY CLEANSING AND SAVING THEM, THEN GIVING THEM HIS OWN SPIRIT.

A. The Beatles sang,

Imagine there's no countries

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion too

Imagine all the people

Living life in peace...

Sweet idea, but ridiculous, because people can't behave themselves. We can't help making borders and walls. We will always find something to kill or die for. We can't live in peace. And living *without* religion is certainly no more successful than living with it.

B. But look at Yahweh's solution in v.23, “*They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. But I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.*” God will close the doors on all our old haunts where we were trapped in sin. He will wash us clean, inside and out, so that sin no longer holds appeal nor power. Sinless people get along famously! Cleansed people love one another unhindered. Especially when we are bound up with the YAHWEH our God. Unity in holiness.

C. *Illus.*: My all-time favorite experience of Christian unity happened 25 years ago in our previous church when I directed a concert on the theme of Christian unity. At our Saturday night performance, we had invited people from many other churches along with their pastors. At one point all the pastors served Communion to our combined congregations while the choir sang, “*How beautiful is the body of Christ.*”

If you want to imagine something, imagine that elevated to heavenly life. All God’s people, thoroughly Christlike, gathered as Christ’s bride at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb of God, “*a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.*”

Let’s recap: The point of this sermon is that **God unifies the people he holds in his hand**. He unifies his people in four ways.

1. By unifies his people by gathering them from the nations to the land he promised.
2. God unifies his people under his Shepherd King, the Messiah.
3. God unifies his people by cleansing and saving them, then giving his own Spirit.

Now finally...

IV. GOD UNIFIES HIS PEOPLE IN THE CULMINATION OF ALL HIS COVENANTS

A. In the Old Testament God made several covenants. In **vv.24-25** God refers to the fulfillment of the three most significant ones. “*My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd.*” That fulfills the covenant God made with King David.

“*They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes.*” That fulfills the covenant God made with Moses

and the people of Israel. By obeying God, they would be positioned forever for the peace of the God-blessed life.

“They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children’s children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever.” That fulfills the covenant God made with Abraham that God would give his descendants their land and that all nations would be blessed through the offspring of Abraham.

B. Now in vv.26-28 God refers to one overarching covenant—the Covenant of Peace.

*“I will make a **covenant of peace** with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore.”*

Not all Christians agree on just what this Covenant of Peace is or when it will be completely fulfilled. My view is that this is describing the 1000-year reign of Christ on earth after his Second Coming. But however we understand it, God’s people will be covered once and for all by his peace—his *shalom*. Look at the blessings:

1. They will be safely established in their own land and multiply there. When Ezekiel spoke of this in **ch.34**, he painted a picture of a land at peace. No dangers, adequate rains, fruitful trees. He uses the wonderful phrase, *“showers of blessing.”* He says, *“They shall be safe in their land; and they shall know that I am the LORD.... They shall no longer be prey for the nations...*

no one shall make them afraid... I will raise up for them a garden of renown...”

2. God will set his sanctuary—his temple—in their midst forevermore. God had abandoned his temple in Jerusalem, and then it had been destroyed. God was no longer in their midst as he had been for centuries. But this means that his dwelling place—his home—shall be with them forevermore. Right where they could see it!
3. The relationships in God’s kingdom will be perfectly balanced as God has always intended: *“I will be their God and they will be my people.”* And all’s right with the world!
4. “Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore.” Do you remember how back in **ch.36** Israel *profaned* God’s name among the nations because their exile seemed to prove that God was weak. But God said he would vindicate his name *through* his people. (That was the most surprising thing I read in these chapters!) Well, here that comes to pass. The nations—the Gentile world—will *not* know this by looking in begrudgingly from afar but by being included, thanks to the far-reaching good news of Jesus Christ, for the gospel will reach people *“from all tribes and peoples and languages.”* **Rev. 21:26** says of the New Jerusalem, *“By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.”* *“Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies—makes holy—Israel.”*

Conclusion

God's goal in making all these promises to Israel, and to us who put our faith in Jesus, Israel's Messiah, is that we "*will know that I am the LORD; I am YAHWEH.*" No other gods, religions or philosophies can imagine, or offer, let alone accomplish, what the LORD promises and does for his people.

And in all this, we offer *nothing*. We contribute *nothing*. Neither Jews nor gentiles. *Nothing*. God *Yahweh* does it all, in spite of our sin and rebellion. Because he is the Sovereign LORD.