*Can These Bones Live?*

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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If you have sat under my preaching for every long, you have heard me use the phrase: *the Spirit of God uses the Word of God to do the work of God in the people of God.* That is not original to me. I use it regularly because it communicates a biblical principle on how God ministers of His grace. The Scriptures teach that salvation is entirely a work of His grace. That does not mean we are roboticly disengaged. It is simply the recognition that God’s grace is already working on us before we reach the moment of belief. I love this phrase because it reminds us of our need for God’s Spirit to work in us through His word. Knowing our vital need for the Spirit to illumine the Scriptures and empower us to obey them should cause us to seek Him through the word and prayer.

What I want to do over the next few weeks is demonstrate the biblical basis for the statement *the Spirit of God uses the word of God to do the work of God in the people of God.* We begin with Ezekiel 37, where the Spirit uses God’s word to bring life to spiritually dead people.

Ezekiel was a prophet during Judah’s exile in Babylon. God called him to minister during a challenging season. The promised land had been laid waste, while most of God’s people had either died from war or famine or had been carried captive to Babylon. The temple was destroyed, and the people were in despair. God had some hard things for Ezekiel to say and some hard things for him to do. Yet the book of Ezekiel also provides hope for salvation. God was not done with His people. He would renew them, give them a new heart and cause His Spirit to dwell in them. Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones tells us how God works this renewal.

The vision opens with a scene of despair, as the Spirit places Ezekiel in a valley. Normally, scenes of triumph take place on mountain tops. Moses met with God on Mount Sinai. Elijah defeated the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. Temple was built on a mountain in Jerusalem. The OT describes people *going up to Jerusalem* to meet with God. Conversely, valleys are places of despair. Hence, David’s description of the valley of the shadow of death. We use this same expression today when we talk about mountaintop or valley experiences. One is positive, the other is negative.

Not only are valleys symbolic of despair, but this particular valley is a place of death, as it is strewn with bones. There were very many of them, and they were very dry. The picture is not intact skeletons lying around. Rather, the bones are all disjointed from one another in a jumbled mess, strewn helter-skelter everywhere. There is a massive quantity of them, and they are so dry that they are on the brink of turning to dust. Any vestiges of life are gone. It is a bleak picture.

Vs. 11 tells us that these bones represent the house of Israel. They had forsaken God; so, God disciplined them. They were kicked out of the land, and the land was laid waste. The destruction of the land was so complete and the nation so dismantled, that hope of restoration and rebuilding was completely gone. They were a spiritual wasteland, with no sign of life anywhere.

Against this backdrop, God asked Ezekiel *can these bones live.* From a human perspective, the answer is no. There is no hope of life returning to such a scene. Vs. 11 makes it clear that Israel felt this hopelessness. Their sin had led to the death of their nation and the destruction of their lives. Sin does this to our souls, corrupting us completely and killing our relationship with God to such an extent that there is nothing we can do to bring life to our souls. Spiritually, we look just like the valley of Ezekiel’s vision.

Yet Ezekiel had been a prophet for many years. He knew the character of God, so he knew that God disciplines so that He might restore. Rather than answering the question, he acknowledges that only God knows what can and cannot be done. The situation was hopeless, but he had hope in the power of God.

God responded to Ezekiel’s wise reply by telling him to prophesy to the bones. This is a fool’s errand. They are bones bleaching in the sun. They cannot hear; and they certainly cannot respond. Yet God told Ezekiel to preach anyway: read vs. 4-6. Notice three things about God’s message. First, notice who is doing the work. Three times in vs. 5&6 God says *I will. I will cause breath to enter you. I will lay sinews on you. I will cause flesh to come upon you.* Second, notice what God will do. He is going to bring life to the dead. Israel was physically alive, but spiritually dead. Yet God says I am going to work a miracle in your dead souls, bringing life to you. Third, notice why God does what He does: *you shall know that I am the Lord.* God works salvation so that people will see who He is, recognize that He alone is God, and worship Him in the way that only He deserves. Through Ezekiel, God declared that He was going to do the impossible: raise a people for Himself from the dead.

Like a good prophet, Ezekiel declares the message God gave him. It seems foolish to preach to dismantled bones; but he preaches anyway because God told him to. As he preached, *there was a sound, and behold a rattling.* Ever heard antlers rattle against one another? It would be that sound at a deafening level as the bones began to move. First skeletons began to form; then the ligaments; finally, flesh covered them. Yet a problem remained. There was no breath. Life was absent.

I do not want to press this point too far, but I think it is worth observing that it is possible for us to hear the word of God and to conform the outward appearance of our lives to His standards, while still being dead in our sin. Judas spent 3 years following Jesus. He looked and acted the part so well that when Jesus said one of His disciples was to betray Him, no one could figure out who the traitor was. Yet Judas was still dead in his sin. It isn’t enough to be associated with Jesus or to conform the outward actions of our lives to the standards of His word. It is possible to make ourselves a beautiful corpse while remaining a corpse.

This is what Nicodemus learned. He was a religious man, well versed in the Scriptures. He was respected and influential among the religious elite. He even recognized that Jesus was from God; yet Jesus tells him that he was not right with God. He needed to be born again through a work of God’s grace. In the same way we cannot cause our natural birth but rather must have it done to us by another, we cannot cause our spiritual birth either. It is a work the Holy Spirit does within us. In the same way a woman cannot give birth to a child without an agent supplying life to the egg withing her, the Spirit cannot work the miracle of salvation without an agent through whom salvation comes. That agent is Jesus. That is why Jesus told Nicodemus *as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.* Jesus pointed Nicodemus to the cross, where He would accomplish salvation. The Spirit takes the life He purchased for us and applies it to our souls, bringing life.

So, the corpses of Ezekiel’s vision are still lifeless. Perhaps for a feeling moment Ezekiel though *maybe the task was too hard for even God*. But God is not done. In vs. 9, God tells Ezekiel to keep preaching, calling on the breath to infuse the corpses with life. Again, the text tells us that Ezekiel proclaimed the word of God. This time, breath came, and the corpses came to life and stood on their feet, an exceeding great army.

The imagery of breath is important. It draws our minds to when God fashioned Adam from the dust of the earth. The specimen He sculpted was lifeless until God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and Adam became a living being (Gen. 2:7). Only then was Adam able to do what God intended. Yet shortly after this, Adam and Eve would sin, bringing the curse of death upon humanity. Yes, this would lead to their eventual death physically, but it brought a more immediate death. Sin killed their souls. Fellowship with God was severed, demonstrated by them fleeing His presence in the garden. Every human since that day has been born spiritually death. Eph. 2:1 says we are born in trespasses and sin. In this condition, there is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good not even one (Ro. 3:10-12). The Bible paints the same picture of our spiritual condition as we are given in this text. We can no more ability to save ourselves than these bones could collect themselves into bodies and cause themselves to come to life. Rightly did the disciples reply to Jesus’ statement *it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God* by saying *who then can be saved?* Jesus replied *with man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.*

In vs. 11ff, God interprets the vision for us. The vision was a play on Israel’s despair, for they said *our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; indeed, we are cut off.* They thought God had broken His covenant with them and there was no way out of the circumstance. But God had a third message for Ezekiel to preach. There was no way for Israel to escape the death of their sin. But they did not have to, for God would do it for them. God said *I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O My people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you from your graves, O My people. And I will put My Spirit within you, and You shall live, and I will place you in your own land.* What we cannot do, God does. He does it because He is a God of salvation. He allows sin and its consequences to be seen and felt so that He can demonstrate His greatness in overcoming it through a salvation only He can provide. He did this through His Son. Jesus lived the sinless life we failed to live, died the death we deserve, absorbed the wrath of God that abided upon us, and ultimately rose from the dead, conquering sin and death. He promises eternal life to all who believe. The Spirit takes this work and applies it to God’s people according to the mysterious and sovereign working of God’s gracious will.

Why does God do this? The text answers that question. *You shall know that I am the Lord* (vs. 6). *You shall know that I am the Lord* (vs. 13). *Then you will know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord* (vs. 14)*.* God ministers His grace so that we will say *only God can do this. And He has done it, according to His word!* God saves people so they will know, not only that He is God, but that He is a God of salvation who is slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and truth, giving grace to the humble and mercy to the undeserving as He forgives sinners of their trespasses. He is the God of all grace, working to save sinners from their self-destruction, that we might stand before Him alive in Christ, an army ready to do His will.

There are three principles in this text that we want to apply to our lives. First, salvation is a work of God alone, not the result of many efforts we make. God describes how He works salvation more extensively in Ezekiel 36 (read 22-36). Despite their sin and constant straying from God, God will remove the hearts of stone from His people, give them a heart of flesh, cleanse them of their sin, and place His Spirit on them so that they can finally keep His commandments. This text that rests behind Jesus’ discussion about the new birth with Nicodemus in John 3. Jesus responds to his questions about the new birth by saying: *Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.* Like many today who struggle with God administering His grace according to the kind intentions of His will, Nicodemus asked in dismay, *how can these things be?* He struggled because he thought there was something he must do to trigger salvation. Jesus’ reply was no, it is done to you by the Spirit. He answered him *are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?* God made it clear in Ezekiel 36&37 that He initiates salvation. We are simply respondents to the work of His grace.

Beloved, I do not pretend to understand the mystery between God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility in salvation. Nor can I solve the tension that arises in our hearts when we consider these things. Yet the Scriptures are clear that God, in His goodness, administers His grace according to the kind intentions of His will. We sing of this mystery when we say *I know not how the Spirit moves, convincing men of sin; revealing Jesus through the Word, creating faith in Him. But I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day.* If the Spirit of God is tugging on your heart, revealing your sin, and showing you how Christ is a willing Savior, it is your duty to turn from your sin and believe in Christ. But as you bow the knees of your soul to God through faith in Jesus Christ, understand that it is God doing spiritual heart surgery on you, removing your heart of stone and giving you a heart for Him. He alone deserves the credit for our salvation.

Knowing that salvation is a work of God should embolden our witness. God is the God who said *I have spoken, and I will do it.* He declared that He would populate His kingdom with people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. His plans and purposes cannot be stopped. Jesus said I will build My church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. We can share our faith with a confidence that, as we sow the seed of God’s word, the Spirit will do exactly what God said He would do: cause people to be born again. And we can share our faith with a sense of freedom, knowing that the results do not lay with us, but with God. When people respond positively, we do not claim credit for it; and when people reject, we do not carry a sense of guilt, for we have left the working of His grace to our good God who always gets it right. His word will not return to Him void. It will accomplish the purpose for which He sent it.

Now, God’s sovereignty over this process does not liberate us from engaging in the means that God uses to accomplish His will. God declares His salvation through His word, which is our second principle. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word concerning Christ (Ro. 10:17). The bones of Ezekiel’s vision came to life through the preaching of God’s word. The message was God’s, but the mouthpiece was a man. 1 Cor. 1:21 tells us that God is *well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.* Ezekiel was engaged in a foolish task… preaching God’s word to a bunch of dry bones. Yet God took His word and used it to form a people who were alive in Him. The Spirit uses the word to do God’s work. Beloved, we are to be the mouthpieces through which His word is declared.

There were two great revivals recorded in the OT. The first was in Josiah’s day, when the book of the Law was rediscovered in the temple. As it was read, the people were convicted of their sin, repented, and returned to the Lord. The second was in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. We are told that Ezra *read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.* As the Scriptures were read and expounded, the people were convicted of their sin, sought the Lord’s forgiveness, and were restored, just as God said He would do in Ezekiel. Every great revival that has taken place in the history of the church follows this pattern. Faithful ministers proclaim God’s word. The Spirit takes this message and causes it to come alive in God’s people. This is true revival, for which I pray.

This principle should cause us to do four things. First, we should expose ourselves to God’s word as often as we can, for it is the tool the Spirit uses to do His work in us. If the Spirit of God uses the word of God to do the work of God, we must seek the word as much as we can.

Second, we should seek preachers whose message is bound by the text of God’s word. Ezekiel only said what God told him to say, which brought astounding results. We do not need pithy antidotes, jokes, stories, dramas, productions, smoke machines, or any of the other things our culture seeks to build the church around. We need the whole counsel of God proclaimed by men who have an unshakable confidence that this book is the living, active, sufficient, unerring word of God that contains the words of life. They preach it not as men pleasers but seeking to please God. Find such men and feed on their teaching, for the Spirit will use them in your life.

Third, apply this same principle to your gospel witness. Our job is to sow the seed of God’s word in our community. Tell people the way of salvation and to call them to believe. Do this with confidence, knowing that this is how the Spirit draws people to salvation.

Finally, pray that God would work a great revival through the proclamation of His word. Pray that His word would be effective your own life, and in the lives of those around you, for that is a prayer God will delight to answer.

Finally, let us remember that God’s salvation purposes are so much greater than us. In Ezekiel 36 God said His name was being profaned because of the wickedness of His people. God said He will intervene, not for their sake, but for the sake of His name, that the nations will know that He is the Lord. By working salvation, God demonstrates the greatness of who He is through His ability to do the impossible. He does this so that His people might praise Him for the glory of His grace. And He does this as a witness to the nations, that they too will know that He alone is the Lord (36:23, 36). Salvation is about more than you. It is to be a witness to the world, that they too might be saved, for God does not delight in the destruction of the wicked. He wants everyone to turn from their wicked way to trust in Him. If that feels like a tension with what I declared earlier about God’s sovereignty in salvation, that is because it is. It is not a tension in God’s character or actions; but it is a tension in our frail, fleshly minds that are unable to search out the greatness of God. But ultimately, salvation is about God revealing who He is.

This should empower two things. 1) knowing that God is a saving God who does not delight in the destruction of the wicked, we should declare His salvation among the nations because we want everyone to know about the greatness of our God. 2) we should engage in unceasing worship for the greatness of the glory of His grace. May the Spirit of God work a great revival in our midst, all to the praise of His glorious grace.