

Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14 (ESV)

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." [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.

[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 clean 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."

Introduction

The Raising of Lazarus

A few minutes ago we read the account of the resuscitation of Lazarus. If there ever was what seemed like an irreversible set of circumstances, this was it. His life was over. Dead and gone. Lazarus had fallen ill and succumbed to his disease. When our Lord came upon the scene of death and discouragement, Lazarus had already been dead for some time. Jesus sought out the tomb. He stood there in front of the grave. Our Lord stared directly into the face of death and told his old nemesis he would not have the last word. Though overcome with grief, Jesus commanded Lazarus to "Come forth!"

Sin & Death

Death is the result of the Fall and the introduction of sin into our world (Gen. 2:16, Rom. 5:12). As Paul reminds us, "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Death is the just punishment we deserve because of Adam's sin, our own sinful nature, and the actual transgressions we commit. God has promised us, as he did Adam in the Garden of Eden, that if we are disobedient to him, if we are sinful, death will be the consequence. There is no getting around the fact that death follows sin like night follows day. Even the people of God were not spared this result when they disobeyed God. The children of Israel were God's chosen people. If anyone could get away with sin, it would seem to be Israel. And yet, this was not at all the case. Because of years stacked upon years of continued disobedience, Israel was first divided. Then it was conquered. The northern kingdom of Israel was carried off into captivity by Assyria never to return to the Promised Land or to be heard from again. Now the southern kingdom of Judah found itself overrun by Babylon.

Reference to Scripture

In this morning's Scripture lesson we read about the vision the prophet Ezekiel had concerning the valley of dry bones. The larger context of this passage is the period of captivity. God had used the pagan nation of Babylon to capture and destroy Jerusalem and to carry off the very best of the very best of Judah to a foreign land. Ezekiel was a priest who found himself far away from home in Babylon. He daily faced the results of the sin of his people. They were being punished by God and thought of themselves as good as dead. They were experiencing God's judgment. The wages of sin really is death.

But we know that death does not have the last word. Sin is not allowed to have its way. Even though the children of Israel were sinful and disobedient, they were part of God's plan to address sin and death. Even though the children of Israel felt cut off from their God, from their ancestral homeland, from others of their people, God was not ignorant of their situation. However, the children of Israel were not in a position to correct the problem themselves. Like the dead man Lazarus, the children of Israel needed a divine miracle to rescue them. They needed the Word and Spirit. And we sinners are in the same predicament. While we may not find ourselves taken from our homeland and families, we are just as sinful and just as dead and, apart from the grace of Christ, just as much under the curse of God.

Thesis & Outline

It would take a mighty act of God to reverse the situation in which the children of Israel find themselves. It is just as true for us. This morning I want to first take us through the experience of the valley of dry bones. Then, second, I want us to consider our own sin and death. Third and finally, I want us to concentrate on our Lord's life, death, burial, and resurrection as the answer to our own sentence of judgement and death. Jesus is the only way for us to experience a miracle like Ezekiel witnessed in the valley of dry bones. Only the supernatural Word and Spirit of God can reverse the effects of the divine death sentence. Can these bones live? With man it is impossible. But with God all things are possible!

I. Ezekiel & the Valley of Dry Bones

Exile

Ezekiel and his compatriots found themselves in a foreign land. Far away from the holy city and Solomon's temple and all that was near and dear. So this is what happens to those who are disobedient to God and his law?! The children of Israel really should not have been surprised about this situation in which they found themselves. After all, God had prophesied many years in advance that they would be sinful and disobedient. He spoke through Moses concerning this problem (Deut. 27 & 28, 30:1-10) and Solomon also spoke to the issue in his prayer of dedication for the temple in Jerusalem (2nd Chron. 6:24-31, 36-42). Sin has consequences. Israel, like Adam, had been warned.

When Ezekiel had been deported to Babylon, not all of his countrymen were taken with him. The deportation occurred in stages. But while he suffered in exile, his fellow Israelites back home continued to sin against God with all kinds of idolatry and disobedience. The book can be very discouraging. The folks back home got so bad that God withdrew his very presence from the temple. The glory had departed (Ezek. 10).

Judgment

God's people stood under the Damacles sword of God's judgment. They were not the accidental victims of circumstance. Judah was in captivity because of her sinful disobedience. She saw herself as dead. She was cut off from her homeland and God. Israel experienced true alienation. She was cut off from all that was holy. All that seemed to matter. She was cursed. It seemed like her situation was as permanent as can be. Her situation was irreversible.

Whats worse. She did not apparently have any understanding of the cause of her consternation. The children of Israel were as dense as could be. They were not only separated from God geographically. More importantly, they were cut off spiritually. They were as good as dead. It was no far fetched fantasy to think of themselves as a pile of dry bones.

Vision

As sometimes happened to Ezekiel in those days, in a vision God transported him away from the rivers of Babylon to a valley in which he found piles upon piles of dry bones. Not a stitch of life left in them. These bones were parched. They were bleached. They were good for nothing. These bones represented Israel. God had a motive in bringing Ezekiel to this seemingly hopeless scene. God asks Ezekiel a question to which God already knew the answer. "Son of man, can these bones live?" Ezekiel wisely answers, "O Lord God, you know."

Indeed the Lord did know. He commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones and with that they came to life. Sinews and muscles and flesh grew upon the dry, lifeless bones. The impossible happened. The irreversible was reversed. Life returned where there was death. But not all at once. While where there was once piles of dry bones there now were flesh and bone, they still had not come to life. God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy and he did so and breath came into the lifeless bodies. The dead came back to life. Ezekiel understood that he had just witnessed a truly amazing miracle. God intended for this to be a living illustration of salvation. Israel had no claim on God. They had forfeited their right to God's promises. They had squandered their birthright for a mess of idolatrous "pottage."

Restoration

After all that disobedience God promised restoration. There was the possibility of forgiveness. But not one of those dry, lifeless, bleached, and parched bones had asked to be resurrected and forgiven. That would have been an impossibility. The dead can't do anything. These bones had not somehow worked up the energy to renew themselves. Not a chance. The bones in the vision of the valley had to be brought back to life by the miraculous word of our almighty God. Only God could reverse the irreversible.

Transition...

We find ourselves in the same condition. While we may not be found on the valley floor parched from the heat of the sun, we are just as dead and lifeless from our sin. We are just as helpless. We are just as much in need of God's miraculous word. We are just as much in need of God breathing the breath of life in us as those bones. We cannot save ourselves. Nor do we want to.

God has taken the initiative. And that brings us to the story of our own dreadful condition...

II. We Are Dead In Our Sins

Scriptural Witness

It goes without saying that the clear teaching of Scripture is that we are dead in our sins. The children of Israel are not some unusual occurrence in an otherwise peaceful world of bliss. No, the Holy Bible gives us a different picture. As Jonathan Edwards has noted, sin is both prevalent and universal. That is, we find it at all times and in every place. Paul gives us a litany of Scripture quotations in Romans 3:9-20 that leaves us no avenue of escape. We have been disobedient to God and stand under God's judgement. In Ephesians 2:1-4 we are told that prior to faith we were dead in our sins. Not just sick. Not just a little under the weather. But dead. How did we get this way?

Adam's Sin

First, we are guilty of Adam's sin. That is, Adam served as our divinely appointed representative in the Garden of Eden. When he disobeyed God he did so as a public person. His sin not only backfired on himself but on the rest of us as well. So we are guilty of Adam's sin.

Corruption

But this turn of events yielded further damage. We also suffer as damaged goods. We now lack the righteousness that Adam originally had when he and Eve were created and placed in the garden. We all know this right well. We all know that we lack the holy character that Adam had when he came fresh from the hand of God. Not only do we lack righteousness, but we are positively corrupt. Our hearts only seek to do evil. Now, because of God's common grace, we are not as bad as we could be. But there is no part of us that is not effected by sin. As Jeremiah says, our hearts are "desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9)

Actual Transgressions

All of this sets us up for committing sins of various kinds. We sin in thought, word, and deed (WSC Q & A 82). We sin by thinking what we think about. Think of what Jesus said about lust in Matthew (5:27-30). Whoever looks upon a woman in lust has already committed adultery in his heart. We sin by the words we speak. As James tells us, we have tamed all sorts of animals but the taming of our tongues has alluded us (James 3:1-12). And, quite obviously we sin in deed. Our thoughts sometimes stay inside our minds. I suspect all of us here are glad the contents of our minds have not been divulged. And sometimes our words go unheard. But sin extends itself through our actions as well. We do things we know we shouldn't do. And we don't do things we know we should. All of us are intimately familiar with the sin condition.

Like Israel

Like the children of Israel we have sinned and find ourselves a pile of dry bones on the hot desert floor baking under the righteous indignation of the divine "sun." We have been weighed in the balances and found wanting (Dan. 5:24-28). We are in deep trouble. God commanded Adam and Eve to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and when he did that he warned them that in the day they ate of that tree they would "surely die" (Gen. 2:16). God had warned, as I pointed out earlier, that if the children of Israel broke his law and disobeyed him, they would die. Their situation was seemingly hopeless. The ax was

laid to the root. The deal was done. Ezekiel's vision of the valley describes our own condition and experience just as well as it does the condition and experience of Israel. Our sinful situation is hopeless without a supernatural intervention by God. In other words, left to ourselves, we will just bake in the sun. Without the salvation of our God we would be bound for an eternity of a God-forsaken hell.

Transition...

But there is one who has experienced his own valley of dry bones for us...

III. Jesus Christ, Living, Dead, Buried...And Raised

Jesus the Exception

There is a single exception to the prevalence and universality of sin. While the Bible does contain stories of a few individuals who get no bad press (like Daniel), we know all too well that even our favorite heroes were all too sinful. Abraham, the father of the faithful tried to pass his wife off as his sister twice. Joseph bragged about his dreams too much, and got himself sold into slavery. David, the apple of God's eye, committed adultery and murder. Solomon, the wisest man that ever lived, committed idolatry. The disciples deserted our Lord in his most trying hour. And before his conversion, the Apostle Paul was a murderous persecutor of the church. While our Bible heroes are all too sinful, the Lord Jesus Christ is the one exception.

Ironically it was the only perfect human being that ever lived who was hung upon a tree, was cursed by God, and died (Deut. 21:23, Gal. 3:13). It was only our glorious Savior who was buried. It was the God-man Jesus who suffered for sin. It was the only sinless man who became sin for us. He became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in him (2nd Cor. 5:21). Jesus, in whom there was not even a hint of sin (Heb. 4:15), was crucified before a watching world. The only son who perfectly obeyed his father obeyed him to the point of death (Phil. 2:8).

Prior to his atoning death, Jesus lived a holy life in perfect obedience to the Father. He was able to do what Adam and Eve failed to do. He was able to do what Israel failed to do. He was obedient. But amazingly he also took upon himself what he had no obligation to take. He took upon himself our sin. In other words, the story we know of the passion week that culminated in Christ's death was no mere happenstance. It was no accident. Jesus was not the unwitting victim of circumstances. Yes, indeed. He was a victim. But he was the designated victim. When his cousin John the Baptist came upon him he declared that Jesus was the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). But he was no victim of the mere evil conniving of wicked men. As Peter told the Pentecost crowd, Christ was handed over to death by wicked men AND the set purpose and plan of the Father (Acts 2:23). What looked like a convoluted set of circumstances that culminated in Jesus' death was in fact planned in the mists of eternity past.

Our Punishment

Jesus took upon himself the punishment you and I so richly deserve. Think about that. That is amazing grace. He was cursed for you and me so that we wouldn't have to experience the curse for ourselves. He became the valley of dry bones in himself so that we could experience new sinews and muscles and flesh. He became parched and bleached for us under the

scorching rays of God's just judgment. He had done no wrong himself. And yet he it was who was put to death. He was taken down from the tree and buried in a borrowed tomb. If there was ever a hopeless situation this was it. Remember the condition of the disheartened disciples the risen Lord found on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24)? This was an irreversible situation. There was no apparent way out of the tomb. Not only was he buried. He was shut up with a rock and that rock was sealed. And the sealed rock was guarded. There was no happy ending to this story. Jesus was as dead as the bones in the valley of Ezekiel's vision.

The Great Reversal

However, that was not the end of the story. That was Friday night. But soon to come was Sunday morning! God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones and they grew sinews and muscle and flesh. He prophesied again and breath came back into their lifeless corpses. On the third day Jesus didn't just lay around. He was raised by the glory of the Father, indeed by the Holy Spirit. He was brought back to life. But this was better than Ezekiel's valley of dry bones. This was not just a prophetic vision. This was the real thing. Jesus was raised and he was raised for us and for our salvation.

Trust in Christ

However, if we fail to put our faith in Jesus, what he has done is of no value for us. If we fail to see our condition as akin to that of the children of Israel pictured in Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones, we can in no way experience new sinews, muscles, and flesh or the breath of the Spirit. If we trust in Christ. If we see that he is our perfect representative and that the obedience he rendered to the Father was for us and the death he died was for our sins, then we should trust in him. Otherwise we will not experience the benefits of Christ's resurrection. If we trust in Christ we have the breath that filled the lungs of the bodies in the valley of dry bones. If we trust in Christ we have been united to him in his death and have been raised to new life by the same Holy Spirit who raised Christ from the dead (Rom. 6:1-14).

Conclusion:

Can these bones live? Can life be breathed back into parched and bleached bones? Could Jesus raise Lazarus to life? Could the Father raise Jesus from death by his Holy Spirit? A resounding yes! Like the dry bones in the valley of vision, like the dead man Lazarus, like Jesus himself, new life can be breathed back into our lives. But like these instances, we need the supernatural Word and Spirit of God to reverse the seemingly irreversible. Do you want to breathe the breath of life or bake in the sun? Turn to Christ. Can these bones live? With men this is impossible. But with God it is indeed very possible.