

# **EZEKIEL'S VISION OF THE RESURRECTION**

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I had never visited Death Valley, California, and in our trip east last summer, I decided to drive there. It was already a hot July day on the flats of Nevada, but as we descended into this depression in the earth the temperature raised to 119 degrees. I turned up the car air conditioner to full tilt. As I stopped to take a picture of an elevation sign posted by the road commission, 239 feet below sea level, I observed foot runners jogging down the road. I had to ask one, Where are you going. He responded, Oh, we're running the Death Valley to Mount Whitney annual marathon from the lowest sea level to the highest elevation on the continental U. S. I couldn't imagine running 167 miles in that heat and enjoying it, but there they were, all flush-faced, with water bottles in hand, reveling in the furnace-like temperatures.

In our study of Ezekiel chapter 37 we are taken with him to "Death Valley." It is a grizzly sight: "The hand of the LORD was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones." Eze. 37:1. Ezekiel has the spirit of prophecy. In vision he is transported to a broad valley in which he observes dried, bleached, bones in the desert.

When you visit Cairo, Egypt, you can drive past what they call the City of the Dead. It is said that there are millions more in this city of the dead than are currently alive in all of Cairo. Beneath Paris, in the cave systems that interlace the underground, one encounters room after room of piled up human bones. When the ground-level cemeteries were filled to capacity, the tombs were opened and the bones taken to the underground in order to make more room for the current dying population to be initially buried there.

"And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry." Eze. 37:2.

Imagine yourselves walking through human remains of femurs, skeletons, skulls, pelvic, ribs, feet—all without tissue. What stories could those bones tell? What lives had they lived. What history of wars and famines, families and abandonment, poverty and fortunes won, could they tell?

These bones were not clothed with flesh, juicy, and full of marrow, which had been more easily raised to life if so: but they were dry, all the moisture was out of them; they had lain long, for seventy years, in that condition, and were almost become earth.

In the churches of today, we will discover seven “spiritual bones:”

1. There are the “lazy bones”! These are the “church folks” who do nothing in the church; but, only occupy a pew—who give no financial support to the church; yet, complain the most when there are no funds to do what they would like for the church to do!

2. There are the “jawbones”! These are the “church folks” who have a telephone ministry—the “gossipers”—the ones who “talk too much and worry you to death”—the ones who sit in judgment in their pews; when the Word of God goes forth; the ones whose body parts, with the exception of their mouths, see very little action!

3. There are the “wishbones”! These are the “church folks” who wish they had done this or wish they had done that, who wish they could help; but, find nothing helpful to do; the ones who like to do all of the thinking and planning for the church; but, never seem able to do any of the work associated with the church needs!

4. There are the “skull bones”! These are the hard-headed, stubborn, self-willed “church folks”! The ones who are most likely to resist anything that the church desires to do; the ones most likely to say, “We’ve never done it that way before; we’ve always done it this way”! The ones who seem to relish their “comfort zones;” never willing to take a chance and step out on faith for the Lord!

5. There are the “knuckle bones”! These are the “church folks” who love to tear others down! Nobody can ever do anything right but themselves! These are the ones who love to sit in judgment on every issue; acting like they are “all of that” with a “bag of chips” to boot! They think that, by tearing down others, they are enhancing or edifying themselves; when they are merely demonstrating their ignorance concerning Almighty God; and, showing off their disobedience to Him!

6. There are the “worn bones”! These are the “church folks” who have retired from their duties and responsibilities by saying, “I’ve done this or I’ve done that for all these years; and, now, I am tired! Let somebody else do this job! I have no more to give; I’m too weak. I’m too “burned out” to go on any more; when they could still do the work, if, they wanted to!

7. Finally, there are the “back bones”! These are the born-again, spirit-filled, Doers of the Word; and, not hearers only!” These are the faithful supporters; the one’s who, with Almighty God’s help, follow the Good Shepherd; the Head of the Church, Jesus! The ones who not only know about Almighty God; but, in a very personal way actually know Him in the power of his love, grace and mercy; as their personal Lord and Saviour; the ones whom Almighty God knows by name as well!

If ever a man was made to look upon an impossible situation, it was Ezekiel. Scripture records that the hand of the Lord was upon Ezekiel, carrying him out and setting him down in the midst of a valley which was full of bones. He was taken to the graveyard! Regarding this passage of Scripture, Leonard Ravenhill asks: “Does history. . .offer a more ridiculous picture than this? Here is hopelessness incarnate. Who ever had such a dumb audience? Preachers deal with possibilities, prophets with impossibilities. Isaiah had seen this nation full of wounds and putrefying sores; but disease had galloped on to death, death to disintegration, and now these disjointed bones spell out despair. Written over the whole situation in large letters is I-M-P-O-S-S-I-B-I-L-I-T-Y” (*Why Revival Tarries*, p. 45)

Not only was this graveyard filled with bones, it was filled with dry bones. Not only were the bones dry, scripture graphically portrays them as very dry. These corpses had undoubtedly been dead a long while. If Ezekiel had been taken to a valley filled with people who were dying there would have been a glimmer of hope. Perhaps some would be healed and survive. If the valley had been filled with the corpses of people who had just died, there would have been the possibility of a mass resurrection. Even if the valley had been filled with complete skeletons, there would be some hope. But this valley was filled with very dry, scattered bones. This points to the absolute hopelessness of the situation. There is only a remnant left of what once was! We realize that this vision given by God was to show the spiritual state of His people.

The same could be applied to the Church. That which once marched triumphantly under the leadership of the Holy Spirit can now be seen sitting on the sidelines passively awaiting the end of the battle. Much of the Church has gone from the overflowing rivers of life in the Spirit to the very dry boneyard of contentment. Maybe this is exactly how you feel this evening. You remember the refreshing experience you once had with Christ. You remember how you once were consumed

with Him. He was your joy, and the Rock of your salvation. But now you feel so very far away from the refreshing waters of His presence. You are languishing—dying in a dry valley. You wonder if there will ever be any hope for you!

The Lord desires a dialogue with the prophet. Ezekiel has had a full view of the bones. He has seen how dry they are. He has observed in what condition they lie. And now the Lord desires to know the mind of Ezekiel, What is your thoughts about the bones? What is your judgment? “And He said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest.” Eze. 37:3. The Lord asks him, Do you have any art, skill, or power to quicken them? or, do you know any creature that has power to bring these bones alive?

Ezekiel's answer is suitable for the Lord's question. He confesses his ignorance. I do not know, O Lord, what your pleasure is. You are able to put life into these dry bones in a moment. Neither myself nor any other creature can do it. Our power is finite. Your power is infinite, and you can do whatever you please. But your pleasure is withheld from me, therefore, “O Lord God, you know.”

Can these bones live again? Yes, indeed they can. But how? God has a two-fold plan! Listen to God's response to Ezekiel: (v 4) “Then he told me to speak to the bones and say: 'O dry bones, listen to the words of God.'” That's plan #1—The Word of God. Life comes through His Word! His Word will bring a change in the life of an individual, a church, a community! His Word is life! “Again He said unto me, Prophecy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.” Eze. 37:4. This seems an absurd thing, that the prophet should prophesy unto creatures insensible, unintelligible, void of life; it was as if God should bid a man preach unto a heap of stones, or dry chips, which are incapable of hearing. But though these bones were incapable of hearing Ezekiel's voice, yet they were not incapable of hearing God's voice, for all creatures, even the most senseless, hear the Lord when he speaks.

When speaking to some congregations you never know who is going to hear and who is not going to hear. After speaking at a church this past Sabbath, we were invited to eat at the home of a very hospitable elderly woman at her country home. She invited another elderly couple along with us. We had just come from the worship service at church and you would think that the conversation would focus upon God and His great love. But that did not enter their

thoughts. In fact, the blessings of the service never came up. It's as if Jesus had been lost. The bones were dead and dry.

I said God had a two-fold plan. The first ingredient is His Word, the second is found in verse 9: "Then he told me to call to the wind and say: 'The Lord God says: Come from the four winds, O Spirit, (KJV: "O, wind") and breathe upon these slain bodies, that they might live."

Listen to me this evening, my friends: By our own strength and wisdom crowds can be gathered—our advertising and marketing strategy can accomplish this. By our own strength and wisdom we can devise programs that will be enticing to the world. By our own strength and wisdom our church can grow. By our own strength and wisdom we can touch people's minds. But neighbor, make no mistake about it—if our goal is to see the spiritually dead raised to life in Christ, it will take a divine initiative of the Holy Spirit! He must come and "breathe" on them!

This is what Ezekiel is trying to tell us. You see, in verses 7, 8 we read: ". . . Suddenly there was a rattling noise from all across the valley, and the bones of each body came together and attached to each other as they used to be. Then, as I watched, the muscles and flesh formed over the bones, and skin covered them, but the bodies had no breath." They looked alive, but they were not. It reminds me of those spoken of as ". . . having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof." These were still only bodies—they were not living beings. There was a multitude there in the valley, but they were still dead! And they stayed that way until touched by the Spirit of God.

All our efforts are lifeless and powerless without the touch of the Spirit upon them. All our programs; all our projects; all our promotions; all our prodding; all our proclamations; though they might be many, they are dead until energized by the Spirit of God! Of a certainty we can sing:

Come, Holy Spirit we need thee  
Come, sweet Spirit I pray  
Come in thy strength and thy power  
Come in thine own special way!

The blessedness of the plan is found in the Word of God and the Spirit of God. These two work in tandem to bring life out of death—victory out of defeat! The very dry bones found scattered upon the valley floor have been miraculously returned to life by the Word and the Spirit! And my prayer this evening is: "Do it again, Lord!"

“Thus saith the Lord GOD unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live.” Eze. 37:5. These words prevent an objection which the prophet might have made, saying, It is in vain for me to prophesy to these dry bones; whatever I shall say over them, or unto them, will come to nothing, and prove ridiculous if any take notice thereof. No, says the Lord, it shall not be so; for, “Behold, I bring upon you the Spirit of life.”

“And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the LORD.” Eze. 37:6. Overlaying the bare bones is the muscle tissue interlaced with nerves and senses connected to the brain which controls the whole body system. The outer skin holds the inner structure together and presents the visual picture of the person. God would cause flesh to grow up and ascend out of those dry bones. It would be unsightly to behold naked, raw flesh. God would clothe them with a garment by covering them with skin.

Nothing could be more emphatic than that the agency for effecting the purpose of God in the resurrection of the nation was the powerful word of God. The bringing of the dead bones to life by two separate acts was reminiscent of the creation of man in Genesis 2. Breath was mentioned in verse 5 because it was the most important element in the transaction. With the breath of life infused into them, the dry bones would live. Every operation set forth in verse 6 was so that the lifeless and useless bones might again live as human beings.

“So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone.” Eze. 37:7. As he was prophesying, before he had uttered what was commissioned him, “there was a noise,” not of thunder, or of angels, or of an earthquake, but of the bones themselves. There were so many dry bones stirring that they could not but make a great noise. This noise was an evident demonstration of the divine presence and power, put forth in this miraculous work. These dead bones began to stir and shake. As timber in a house, so are bones in the body, they are the strength and support of the structure. These bones came together, not promiscuously, the bones of one man or woman to the bones of another man or woman, but bone to his bone, that is, bone of the same man to its right place, and every bone of the same woman to its right place; the rib-bones, thigh-

bones, and ankle-bones came together in its proper place, and so united together.

“And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them.” Eze. 37:8. Here was a strange sight, to see dry bones come creeping together, every one to coalesce and join in his proper place, making up a perfect skeleton; and out of that sinews, flesh, and skin, to ascend: this was such a sight that neither Ezekiel, nor any man, had ever seen before.

Here were human bodies, as if they had been newly dead, or newly formed out of the earth, as Adam’s: but there was yet no life in them, they were no other than dead carcasses. The coalition of the bones, the ascension of sinews, flesh, and skin upon them, had no life in them, but divine power acting to bring order out of death and chaos.

How shall these bones live? “Then said he unto me, Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” Eze. 37:9. The means by which that regeneration is brought about is through an infusion of the Spirit in response to the prophetic word. Thus, Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the bones and require them to listen to the word of the Lord; in response, the Lord will make breath (*ruah*) enter them and bring them back to life, not as ghostly skeletons but as living flesh (37:5, 6). Then the bones will know God’s lordship.

“So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army.” Eze. 37:10. The prophet obediently speaks the word and sees the power of God instantly unleashed. Like the creation of the first Adam in Gen. 2, which was a two-stage process involving first his formation and then his filling with the breath of life, so the re-creation of this mighty army is a two-stage process of forming and filling. This underlines the difficulty of the re-creation process and the central role of the Spirit in bringing new life to the restored people.

“Then he said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts.” Eze. 37:11.

“Therefore prophesy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. And ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O

my people, and brought you up out of your graves, and shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the LORD have spoken it, and performed it, saith the LORD.” Eze. 37:12-14.

This is nothing less than a prophecy of the resurrection of the righteous at the second coming of Christ. But the Lord continues the interpretation thus:—

“Thus saith the Lord God: Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land.” Verse 20.

No one can deny that the gathering of Israel of which Ezekiel speaks, is the same gathering that is spoken of by the other prophets. It is evident that the words, “Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and *bring them into their own land*,” is the same promise that the Lord made to David, through the prophet Nathan, when he said (2 Sam. 7:10), “Moreover I will appoint a place for My people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more; neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them any more, as beforetime.” And this gathering of the children of Israel into their own land is accomplished only by opening their graves and bringing them up out of their graves. In this prophecy of Ezekiel, therefore, we have the most positive assurance that the promises to Israel never contemplated anything else but an eternal inheritance; their own land is the earth made new.

What Israel faced was not a “near-death” experience, but a “total-death” experience. It was not simply that their heart had stopped beating for a few moments and their brain waves had ceased; they had died and decomposed; their flesh had disintegrated, leaving only bones behind; and then those bones themselves had been left out in the sun to bleach. They were as dead as it was possible to be—and that while physically still alive, for they themselves said, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off” (37:11). They knew themselves to be dead while they lived, for they were cut off from the life-giving presence of the living God and therefore without hope.

That is a spiritual condition that by nature we all share. Paul reminds the Ephesians, and along with them all of us, “You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Eph. 2:1, 2). By nature, we are all cut off from God’s life-giving presence.



Subjectively, we may or may not be aware of that fact. We may feel that we are on top of the world and that life couldn't possibly be better, or we may despair of making any sense of the world in which we live. Objectively, however, we are equally dead, no matter how we fell.

Can such dead people live? Is it possible, not merely theoretically but actually, for people like us to be resuscitated and brought back to life toward God? That question cannot be answered, "Of course!" as if it were a trivial matter. Because of our sin we are dead spiritually and physically. Can God in general raise dead people to life? Will he raise rebels like us to life? Thanks be to God, the answer for us is positive, as it was for Israel. Thus Paul tells the Colossians, "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ." Col. 2:13. In Christ, there is life for the spiritually dead.

How, then, is this new life received? It is received through union with Christ. In the preceding verse (Col. 2:12), Paul talks about how as Christians we have been buried with Christ in baptism and raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead. In other words, it is as we share an experience that Christ first experienced for us that we are brought from death to life. For Ezekiel, what happened to the bones had first happened to him. So it is with us: What God does for the Christian, he has first of all done for Jesus.

Jesus took on Himself our death. The death that he died on the cross was no mere accident, nor even a means of demonstrating graphically the extent of his love for humanity. There on the cross, He took on Himself the sins of His people and was cut off for them. The Lord of life was laid in the tomb; the body of the one who created the universe was laid alongside the bones of those whom He had made. Why? It is because Divine justice demanded that a penalty be paid for sin. God could not simply wave a magic wand and make sin disappear. Sin had to be paid for. In order to accomplish that, Jesus was, as it were, laid among the dry bones of the valley for my sake. So now my baptism is a burial with Him in that death, an identification with His death in my place.

But just as the dry bones in Ezekiel did not remain dead, so also Christ did not remain in the tomb! He burst forth with resurrection power, raised from the dead by God! Just as surely, if we have been truly buried with Him in baptism, receiving the reality as well as the signs, we also are made alive in Christ. Our sins are forgiven. We are

not dry bones any longer, but living, breathing, Spirit-infused children of God. What Ezekiel saw in visionary form has now become a reality!

Even now we are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ who is at work in us, changing us into what we ought to be (Rom. 8:11). Since we are indwelt by the Spirit, we should walk according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:4, 12). Ezekiel was filled with the Spirit in Ezekiel 2-3 to equip him for his task; likewise, when the resuscitated bones came together, they became an army, not a debating club or a beach party. They were raised for a purpose. In a similar way, we as Christians have been regenerated and Spirit-filled in order that we too may serve, equipped by the gifts of the Spirit and dressed in the armor of God so that we may do His bidding in the world. We were re-created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph. 2:10). In the appropriately martial imagery of Charles Wesley's hymn, our commission is as follows:

Soldiers of Christ, arise and put your armor on,  
Strong in the strength which God supplies, through his eternal Son.  
Strong in the Lord of Hosts, and in His mighty power,  
Who in the strength of Jesus trusts is more than conqueror.  
Stand, then, in His great might, with all His strength endued.  
And take to arm you for the first, the panoply of God.  
That, having all things done and all your conflicts past,  
Ye may o'ercome through Christ alone and stand complete at last.  
Leave no unguarded place, no weakness of the soul;  
Take every virtue, every grace and fortify the whole.  
From strength to strength go on; wrestle and fight and pray;  
Tread all the powers of darkness down and win the well-fought day.