



Reading: Ezekiel 37:1-17

The valley of dry bones

1 The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. **2** He led me to and fro among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. **3** He asked me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?'

I said, 'Sovereign Lord, you alone know.'

4 Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones and say to them, "Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! **5** This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. **6** 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.'"'

7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. **8** I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin 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 it, "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" **10** So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army.

11 Then he said to me: 'Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off." **12** 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. **13** Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. **14** 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.'"'

One nation under one king

15 The word of the Lord came to me: **16** 'Son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it, "Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him." Then take another stick of wood, and write on it, "Belonging to Joseph (that is, to Ephraim) and all the Israelites associated with him."

17 Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand.

'SON OF MAN, CAN THESE BONES LIVE?' (V.3)

This question drives the vision and has something to reveal to us today ...

Let us note

- The Lord never asks a question for lack of the answer. The questions of God nearly always reveal a lack within us – e.g. His question to Adam and Eve in the Garden (Genesis 3), 'Where are you?' was not because God could not find them – rather, it was an invitation to acknowledge the consequence of their disobedience and rebellion ...
- 'Oh my soul, be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions' (T.S. Eliot)
- The answer already given by the people:

11 Then he said to me: 'Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off."

- The answer given by the 'leadership' as represented by Ezekiel

3 He asked me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' I said, 'Sovereign Lord, you alone know.'

- In other words, Ezekiel has sufficient theology (i.e. that formed by education, learning, head knowledge) not to deny that the Lord is Sovereign – "well of course, God could do it if he wanted" ... but insufficient faith (i.e. that formed by encounter and experience) to believe that anything will actually happen (does that sound even remotely familiar ...?)

When it comes to living a powerful spiritual life in the kingdom of God, Education will never outweigh Encounter; and Information will never beat Revelation.

Matt Redman, Mirror Ball

Ezekiel's response is hardly surprising when we consider his experience. Dragged from family and homeland with no hope of return, he's been called by God to speak a great deal of judgment against the People ... For the last few chapters, as we have seen in previous weeks, his Spirit-led focus is now directed to prophecy about their restoration.

It may be that Ezekiel himself is not convinced that such a miracle is possible ...

Consider what the Lord does in this vision

1 The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 He led me to and fro among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. 3 He asked me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?'

- 'led me to and fro'
- 'bones that were very dry'

This reminded me of the film 'The Killing Fields', and the scene where the Cambodian Dith Pran, walks through what looks very like a valley of bones ...

Imagine that ... the experience of desolation, decay, defeat and death mean that every fibre of Ezekiel's rational being is demanding the answer ... 'No, they cannot.'

Has that not been the reality of the church – people and leaders – for far too long?

- *Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off ...*
- *Sovereign Lord, you alone know ...*

I know how easily it can be my response when I hear prophetic words about revival, about the Kingdom of God being established in living reality in Bristol ... I know how easily it can be my response when I sense the Lord prompting me to approach a stranger, or (far worse), someone I know, with a prophetic word, or to pray for healing ...

So what does Ezekiel's experience teach us?

1 OUR UTTER DEPENDENCE ON THE SPIRIT

1 *The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.*

Without the hand of the Lord upon us, we cannot so much as *move* in the things of God; without the work of the Spirit of the Lord, we cannot begin to see the spiritual realities and possibilities around us ...

His use of one Hebrew word emphasises the whole of creation's utter dependence on the Spirit:

- 'Spirit' in vv 1 & 14
- 'breath' in vv 5, 6, 8, 9 (twice) & 10
- 'winds' in v 9

1 *The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2* *He led me to and fro among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. 3* *He asked me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' I said, 'Sovereign Lord, you alone know.'*

4 *Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones and say to them, "Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! 5 This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. 6 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."'*

7 *So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. 8* *I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.*

9 *Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, 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."' 10* *So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army.*

11 *Then he said to me: 'Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off." 12* *Therefore prophecy 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. 13* *Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. 14* *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.'"*

In each case, the Hebrew word = 'ruach' (wind, breath, Spirit)

The Word of God is telling us that, from the natural order represented by the wind to the very breath taken by every human during the entirety of their lives – all is dependent on the Spirit of God.

- In Genesis 1:1, the cosmos is created by a prophetic word of life
- In Genesis 2:7, man is brought to life by this 'ruach', the wind, the breath, the Spirit of God.
- In John 20:22, Jesus 'breathed on them [his disciples] and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit"

This must have decisive consequences for a Word and Spirit people

- in our gatherings, on Sundays and during the week – how much of our corporate time is spent on human constructs rather than pursuing the Presence of God in the person of Jesus through the ministry of his Spirit?
- as a leadership – how much of our leading is based on discerning the leading of the Spirit and how much on our own human wisdom?

- as individuals seeking to be ambassadors for Jesus this time tomorrow – how much of our daily devotional life is spent in mechanical observance, and how much seeking the presence, guidance and direction of the Spirit?

2 OUR INVITATION TO BECOME GOD’S PARTNERS IN THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT

What theologians call the divine / human co-operative ...

Note that God doesn’t invite Ezekiel to sit back and watch him revive the bones ... rather, he commands Ezekiel to play his part:

4 Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones and say to them, “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! 5 This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. 6 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.”’ 7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. 8 I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin 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 it, “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.”’ 10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army.

Now, it’s an interesting question as to what would have happened had Ezekiel declined ...

Theologians have argued since theology began the extent to which God needs us ... and we can probably state an apparent paradox by way of reply

- God’s omnipotence and sovereignty and power: he could bring these bones to life without any help from Ezekiel. Likewise, he could bring people to faith today, heal them of their diseases, bring transformation of culture to a parish, a community, a city, a nation without any assistance from us
- ... but the consistent message of Scripture is that he delights to enlist our partnership and co-operation in seeing his Kingdom come.

So we might say that God could be God without making use of us ... but that he could not be the God scripture reveals him to be without choosing to do so ...

Could there be anything more exciting, rewarding, life-defining, fulfilling, worthy of the gift of our service, time, talents, money, lives?

In Ezekiel 37, we are given an insight into the role prophecy plays in the life of God’s people.

If you missed Wednesday night’s teaching by Kate Meathrel on prophecy as part of our Kingdom Living Course, please do listen online and read her notes: <http://www.ccweb.org.uk/Media/AllMedia.aspx>

So, just a couple of extra things from me about prophecy:

- prophecy brings life!

... the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort ... 1 Corinthians 14:3

- prophecy works as we step out in faith ... in other words, prophecy is effective ...

7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone.

Many other examples in scripture:

Could God have parted the Red Sea without any help from Moses? Answer – Yes.

Did God in fact part the Red Sea? Answer – Yes.

But he chose to do it only when Moses stretched out his hand and staff over the Sea (Exodus 14:21)

Could Jesus have fed the 5000 without any help from the disciples? Answer – Yes.

Did Jesus in fact feed the 5000? Answer – Yes.

But he chose to do it only when the disciples began to hand out the loaves and fish (Matthew 14:19)

Now, as Kate said on Wednesday, we can all make mistakes in this area, and we can't 'make it happen' every single time. If you were present on Wednesday, you'll remember that we had two opportunities to practice. The first involved reading through 16 scriptures in pairs, and asking the Lord to highlight one of them for the other person. I was with David Daniels and got ... a big fat nothing! [The Lord clearly knew this was going to happen as he'd already told David the scripture he the Lord was highlighting to David was for both of us ...]

And there will be times when we believe we hear from the Lord and speak it out only to find we've got it wrong. So we always speak humbly, and offer what we think we've heard or seen rather than imposing it ...

But it's really important to remember that, to the Lord, success looks far more like obedience than it does success ...

[Additional teaching not included in the talk:

When in receipt of what we believe to be a word of prophecy (either directly from the Lord or through someone else), we can deploy the following checks (known as the 5 'CSs')

1. *commanding scripture – God's 'now' word can never contradict his 'always' Word*
2. *compelling spirit – that inner resonance which comes as we learn to discern the voice of the Shepherd*
3. *common sense – the life of the Spirit does not mean abandoning our brains (although we must beware the power of fallen reason and our tendency to prefer what appears rational!)*
4. *counsel of the saints – ask those you trust to advise you and pray for you*
5. *circumstantial signs*

I'd also add the Lord's Iteration – it's extraordinary how many times (both in scripture e.g. Luke 11:9-13) the Lord repeats things 3 times ...]

3 A PRACTICAL OUTWORKING ...?

The final part of the sermon was a prophetic enactment: please listen ...

Questions

1. Are we 'prepared for him who knows how to ask questions' (T.S. Eliot)?
2. How do we deal with the questions God asks? With honesty or deflection?
Do you or have you ever felt like the people of Israel: "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off"?

- Do you or have you ever caught yourself doing what Ezekiel did in response to the Lord's question: "Sovereign Lord, you alone know"? In other words, we have sufficient theology (i.e. that formed by education, learning, head knowledge) not to deny that the Lord is Sovereign – "well of course, God could do it if he wanted" ... but insufficient faith (i.e. that formed by encounter and experience) to commit ourselves to the belief that anything will actually happen
- 3. "When it comes to living a powerful spiritual life in the kingdom of God, Education will never outweigh Encounter; and information will never beat revelation." (Matt Redman, Mirror Ball). Discuss.
- 4. Do you or have you ever felt you are being led to and fro in lifeless places where the 'bones are very dry'?
- 5. Have you grasped the fundamental truth of our utter dependence on the Spirit of God? Have you accepted that without the hand of the Lord upon us, we cannot so much as *move* in the things of God; without the work of the Spirit of the Lord, we cannot begin to *see* the spiritual realities and possibilities around us ...?
- 6. What necessary consequences are there for a Word and Spirit people
 - in our gatherings, on Sundays and during the week – how much of our corporate time is spent on human constructs rather than pursuing the Presence of God in the person of Jesus through the ministry of his Spirit?
 - as a leadership – how much of our leading is based on discerning the leading of the Spirit and how much on our own human wisdom?
 - as individuals seeking to be ambassadors for Jesus this time tomorrow – how much of our daily devotional life is spent in mechanical observance, and how much seeking the presence, guidance and direction of the Spirit?
- 7. Have you grasped the exhilarating fact that the Sovereign Lord delights to enlist our co-operation and partnership in the ministry of the Spirit in the work of bringing people to faith today, healing them of their diseases, & bringing transformation of culture to a parish, a community, a city, a nation ...
- 8. Could there be anything more exciting, rewarding, life-defining, fulfilling, worthy of the gift of our service, time, talents, money, lives?
- 9. Share your experiences of when
 - Prophecy brought life
 - You or someone you know took the step of faith to exercise prophesy and spoke out what they believed the Lord was saying – what happened?
- 10. Do you understand that success to the Lord looks like obedience and not success?
- 11. What do you believe happened in the final part of my message at the 10?

Paul Langham, April 2017