



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for March 22, 2009
Released on Wednesday, March 18, 2009

"A Vision of New Life"

Devotional Reading: Romans 6:1–14

Background Scripture: Ezekiel 37

Lesson Text: Ezekiel 37:1–14

Ezekiel 37:1–14

1 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,
2 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.
3 And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest.
4 Again he said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.
5 Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live:
6 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.
7 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.
8 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.
9 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.
10 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.
11 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.
12 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.
13 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,
14 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.

LESSON AIMS:

Facts: to show what Ezekiel saw in the valley of dry bones.

Principle: to affirm that God can take what is dead and decaying and give new life through His Spirit.

Application: to realize that when we let God's Spirit into our lives, He gives us a new start.

INTRODUCTION:

The word *dry* means different things in different contexts. If we are told that something is "dry," that may refer to infrequent rain, to a certain type of humor, or to a prohibition against the sale of alcoholic beverages.

If we speak of going through a *dry time* spiritually, however, the meaning is quickly grasped. Who hasn't had such a period, a time of discouragement when one's relationship with God seems to have grown stale? This can be brief, or it can grow deeper into a "dark night of the soul" experience, a time of depression without relief. These are dry times.

David hinted at having such a time in Psalm 63. That psalm relates his emotions while hiding in a wilderness area to escape an enemy. David wrote of his hiding places as a "dry and thirsty land" (Psalm 63:1). His life was at risk, and he had been driven away from his home. He longed to be back in Jerusalem to worship God in the sanctuary. Yet he met this dry time with a response that can teach us much. He did not wallow in discouragement but recalled that God had never abandoned him, that he had been in the shadow of God's protective wings (Psalm 63:7).

LESSON BACKGROUND:

Time: about 586 - 585 B.C.

Place: Babylon

The book of Ezekiel is known for its fabulous visual descriptions of the prophet's unique experiences. The opening scene of the book is the incredible vision of the fiery four living creatures accompanied by the famous "wheel in the middle of a wheel." This has been interpreted variously as an ancient account of visitation by aliens in a flying saucer, a description of a gigantic, heavenly war chariot, even as a metaphor of the relationship between faith and grace ("big wheel run by faith, little wheel run by de grace of God"). The book ends with a colossal vision of the new temple (Ezekiel 40:2 and following). Many elements of the visions of Ezekiel reappear later in the Bible's final book, Revelation.

Ezekiel is also known for his experiences with the Spirit of God. At times, the Spirit seemed to possess him, causing him to stand and speak (see Ezekiel 2:2). At other times the Spirit transported Ezekiel to new locations. In one case the prophet experienced this as being lifted by the hair and flown cross-country from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezekiel 8:3).

These profound visions and deep experiences of the Spirit intersect dramatically in chapter 37, the focus of today's lesson. Here, Ezekiel is transported (physically? spiritually?) to a place he has never been and does not recognize. It is a valley, but not a lush river valley of verdant pastures and crops. It is, rather, a valley characterized by an extreme lack of moisture and by death. It has no living residents, only piles of dry bones. This is the horrifying setting for one of the Bible's greatest one-chapter dramas: a vision that continues to give hope to those who find themselves "in a dry and thirsty" land (Ezekiel 19:13).

Today's lesson occurs in or after the year 586 BC, since Ezekiel and the exiles already had received the devastating news of Jerusalem's desolation (Ezekiel 33:21).

In the aftermath of this emotional knockout blow, Ezekiel began to give prophecies of a more hopeful nature. He ended chapter 36 with a promise that the future land of Israel would be as fertile and green as "the garden of Eden" (Ezekiel 36:35). Then Ezekiel experienced a land as far from the ideal of that garden as could be imagined, a true Death Valley.

THE CHALLENGE OBSERVED (Ezekiel 37:1-6)

1. How do we know that what Ezekiel saw was a vision, not a literal occurrence (Ezekiel 37:1)?

Our passage this week, like those in our previous lessons, was intended to convey hope to Israelites in captivity.

The introductory statement to our text makes it clear that what is recorded was not a literal occurrence but a vision. Ezekiel uses the expression "the hand of the Lord was upon me" to convey the impression that God has taken complete control of him (compare Ezekiel 1:3; 3:14, 22; 33:22; 40:1). Whether he feels excitement or dread at these times, he does not say. He apparently offers no resistance, and another visionary experience is under way. This one includes being transported to a locale of God's choosing, in the middle of a valley. This valley was unique in that it was covered with human bones, as if left from the carnage of some great battle.

2. What two facts impressed Ezekiel about the bones he saw (v. 2)?

The Spirit of God led Ezekiel around the valley among these bones. One thing that impressed Ezekiel as he was led about was the sheer number of the bones - they were "very many" (v. 2). Evidently they were scattered widely so that they covered the surface of the entire valley.

The other thing that impressed him was that the bones were very dry. Apparently, they had lain there for a long time. All flesh was gone from them, and no evidence of life remained. No thought of reviving them could possibly have entered Ezekiel's mind.

3. By what title did God call Ezekiel? What did this signify?

God referred to Ezekiel by the title of "Son of man." This was God's usual designation for Ezekiel and occurs ninety-three times throughout the book. Though it can sometimes be used to depict a human being in his frailty, it can also stress the dignity of someone God calls to represent other human beings (Cooper, *Ezekiel*, Broadman & Holman). This is its apparent connotation for Ezekiel (cf. 2:3, 6, 8).

4. What question did God ask Ezekiel? How did he answer?

The *Lord* offers no explanation for the cause of the bone valley, and Ezekiel does not ask for one. Instead, *God* puts a question to the prophet: *Can these bones live?* The prophet might well have answered the question by saying that it was impossible, for by natural standards it surely was.

Ezekiel, however, already has been through some extraordinary experiences via the hand of God. He therefore does not exhibit any impulse to say "of course not." Rather, he replied, "O Lord God, thou knowest." He lets the Lord proceed with the experience, for Ezekiel trusts God and knows that there is a lesson in this bonefield.

Ezekiel's patience is rewarded, as God shows him that the situation isn't as hopeless as it looks. But before Ezekiel receives that revelation, he is asked to perform an act of faith (next verse).

5. In responding to God's question "can these bones live?" Ezekiel showed wisdom in allowing God to provide the answer. What can we learn from Ezekiel's example as we face life's (seemingly) hopeless situations?

Ezekiel believed in God's power to do whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3), so he didn't jump to any conclusions. When we find ourselves discouraged with the way life is going, we should not automatically assume that we know how things will turn out. Instead, we can ask God for solutions to our problems, and He will give us the answers (James 1:5, 6). We remind ourselves that God can bring good out of the worst situations (Romans 8:28).

6. What was Ezekiel's role in the resurrection of the bones (v. 4)?

The Lord answered the question He had posed for Ezekiel by giving him further instructions. He would include the prophet himself in demonstrating that these bones would indeed live again. He was to "prophesy upon these bones" (v. 4). This meant he was to proclaim over them God's life-giving word. He was to say to them what he would have said to any living audience: Hear the word of the Lord." But in doing so, he was also to recognize their utter inability to hear - "O ye dry bones."

Obviously, this required a miracle, and the miracle would come through the power of the divine words themselves. But the marvel is that God chose to use a human being as a spokesman to work this miracle. Truly His prophets were a privileged group! But this is not unlike what God still does through our Christian witness. He uses us to convey a life-giving message to spiritually dead people. The miracle of regeneration is wrought through the Word and the Spirit who inspired it (cf. Jas. 1:18; Titus 3:5).

7. What words was Ezekiel to speak to the bones (vs. 5, 6)?

The words Ezekiel was to speak to the dry bones now are given. "Thus saith the Lord God" conveys the authority and accuracy of the message. The restoration of life was not merely being promised by Ezekiel; it was being guaranteed by the Lord God Himself.

The message is simple: the dead will *live*. This is pictured as a reversal of the process of decay. The *sinews* will be reconstituted on the framework of the dry *bones*. These are the tendons and cartilages of the body. Other than the bones, these are the parts that resist decay the longest. Next, the *flesh* is to return. This is comprised of the muscles and internal organs of the body. Following that, the body will be recovered with protective *skin*. As the outer layer of any corpse, the skin is the first part to decompose.

The purpose for this miraculous restoration was so that "ye shall know that I am the Lord [Yahweh]" (Ezek. 37:6). Those restored to life would understand the nature of their covenant God—the eternally existing One, all-powerful, ever faithful, and lovingly concerned for His called people, even in their hopeless state.

It is worth noting that whenever God does a mighty work, He does so to call attention to Himself, for He alone deserves glory. He may make use of intermediaries such as prophets or preachers, but they are called to direct attention to Him, not themselves. God refuses to share His glory with anyone else (c.f. Isa. 42:8; 48:11; 1 Cor. 1:26-31; 3:5-7).

THE BONES RESURRECTED (Ezekiel 37:7-10)

8. By what stages did the Lord bring the bones back to life (vs. 7, 8)?

Ezekiel prophesied as commanded, and the living word of God had an immediate and remarkable effect. "There was a noise, and behold a shaking."

We are prone to forget that biblical visions are not just "video." They often contain an "audio" track. At this point Ezekiel just watches and listens. He sees the scattered *bones* reorder themselves and come into alignment. They make an enormous clatter

as they reassemble, perhaps like a thousand xylophones played at once. The bones are not moving from some inner bone intelligence. It is obvious to the prophet that the hand of God is causing all this to happen.

Everything is reconstituted and the decay of the corpses is completely reversed (v. 8), but there everything stops. There is still *no breath* of life *in them*. It may seem to Ezekiel as if the old, dry field of battle has become simply a fresh site of carnage and death with newly dead bodies lying everywhere, ready to begin decaying again. There is one more act in God's drama of restoration, but it again requires that Ezekiel act in faith to God's command.

9. What roles do God's word and His Spirit have in giving life (vs. 9,10)?

Once reassembled, the bodies still lacked the breath of life. To overcome this fundamental deficiency, the Lord ordered Ezekiel to "prophesy unto the wind," calling for it to come from all directions to provide breath for the dead. The Hebrew word can be translated "wind," "breath," and "spirit." So this is a call for the spirit, or breath, of life to come and restore the dead to new life.

The four winds are probably symbolic of the fullness of the divine breath provided, which was not limited in any way. God Himself would orchestrate breathes into these bodies, just as He had done in the original creation of Adam (Gen. 2:7).

Ezekiel prophesied as directed, and the breath of life entered these prostrate bodies (Ezek. 37:10). As evidence of their new life, they stood on their feet. The valley that once had been covered with dry bones now accommodated "an exceeding great army." What a transformation! Those depicted as previously "slain" (v. 9) now lived again, ready to do battle where they once had fallen.

Let us remind ourselves that what Ezekiel saw was but a vision, not a historical event. But the very fact that God chose resurrection to illustrate how He would revive and restore Israel demonstrates the unlimited power inherent in His word.

Jesus later pictured a similar scene in which He would call forth from their graves all who had died. He claimed the same life-giving power His Father had (John 5:21), for He, like the Father, had "life in himself" (v. 26). He would grant this life spiritually to all who believed in Him (vs. 24,25). But He also foretold a future hour when "all that are in the graves shall hear his voice and shall come forth" (vs. 28,29). The righteous will rise to life, but the wicked to damnation.

THE VISION INTERPRETED (Ezekiel 37:11-14)

10. What did the bones in Ezekiel's vision represent (v. 11)?

The Lord now gave Ezekiel the key to understanding the vision: "these bones are the whole house of Israel." Two facts predominate in this explanation. First, the vision was not portraying the bodily resurrection of individuals but the restoration of a national entity. Second, it portrayed the restoration of the *whole* nation, both Israel (Ephraim) and Judah. This second fact is further elaborated in the latter part of the chapter (vs. 15-28).

The nation is portrayed as lamenting its present condition: "Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts" (Ezek. 37:11). The dryness of the bones indicates the length of time Israel experienced the loss of its national identity.

The Israelites were once a united body, but that body has been *cut* to pieces. Even the most optimistic among the Israelites has no rational basis for *hope*. Nothing in their present condition could have aroused hope for restoration.

11. What message for Israel's future was conveyed through the vision of the bones (v. 12)?

Yet *Israel* is not dead or forgotten in God's eyes. He still has plans for the nation and intends that the nation be restored.

To these exiles Ezekiel was to prophesy a message of unbelievable encouragement. First, the Lord told them, "I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel." The Lord now changed the illustration from dry bones in a valley to corpses in graves. The graves may signify all the foreign lands into which they had been forced to go. There they had intermingled with their captors, and their national identity had been buried from human sight.

From these "graves" the Lord promised to bring them again into their own land (Ezek. 37:12; cf. 36:24). A partial fulfillment of this promise occurred under Zerubbabel and Ezra. However, Israel will reach its final destiny only when a greater dispersed number are restored - not from the Near East alone, but from all nations of the world.

12. What will Israel's restoration teach that nation about God (vs. 13, 14)?

Again, God's ultimate purpose in doing this is not merely to reestablish Israel as a political entity; it is to glorify His own name (cf. Ezek. 36:22-24, 32). Twice He refers to Israel as "my people" (37:12-13), and He wants them to again recognize Him as their God. All the evidence for His identity will be there: "And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves... and brought you up out of your graves" (v. 13). In addition, He promised to put His Spirit in them to make them live, and to place them in their own land (v. 14). The physical restoration to their land will be accompanied with a spiritual revival.

At that time God's people will recognize Him as the source of all their miraculous blessings. They would know without doubt that it had been spoken and performed by the Lord Himself.

Although this passage was recorded to encourage Israel in captivity, it has much to teach us as well. Our sovereign God is not deterred by death - physical, national, or spiritual. His life-giving Spirit is at work today, breathing spiritual life into *those who are dead in trespasses and sin*. And He does it on the basis of a life-giving message. We, like Ezekiel, have the privilege of proclaiming it and then marveling as God uses it to transform lives.

PRACTICAL POINTS:

- 1.** The hand of the Lord is always upon His children, accomplishing His purposes and plan (Ezek. 37:1-2).
- 2.** Wise is the one who distinguishes between what he knows and what God knows (Ezek. 37:3; cf. Deut. 29:29).
- 3.** A message's power is not in the messenger but in the promise and Person of God who sends it (Ezek. 37:4-6).
- 4.** Those who obey God expect God to do as He has promised (vs. 7,8).
- 5.** New life can come only by the will and work of God (vs. 9,10).
- 6.** Nothing is so hopeless that God cannot intervene and rescue (Ezek. 37:11-12; Matt. 19:26).
- 7.** God's blessings should drive us to know, love, and serve Him (Ezek. 37:13-14).

CONCLUSION:

This week's lesson is a source of great hope for us. First, we have learned that God is there even in our most hopeless situations. Second, He has answers for us that work. Third, He answers by giving us the power of His Spirit living within us who will never leave us in any situation. When God's Holy Spirit comes to live within us, we too will experience His new life daily.

A great example of this is Fannie Crosby, who began life with personal tragedy. At age six months she was made blind as a result of incompetent treatment for an eye infection. When just a year old, her father died and left her mother as a 21-year-old widow with four little children. Despite Fannie's disability and disadvantages, she

grew to be a woman of strong faith. She excelled in music, learning to play several instruments and to sing. Yet tragedy continued to follow her. She married, but her only child died in infancy.

Fannie dedicated herself to writing songs and hymns that would praise God and touch lives. She wrote over 9,000 hymns in her lifetime, some of which are still sung in churches today. Yet we can imagine that there were dry times for this marvelous Christian woman too. Did she ever question why God had allowed her to lose her sight? Why had she been assigned the lot of poverty as a child? How could God let her only child die?

Fannie Crosby answers these sorts of questions many places in her songs. One such place is drawn from Exodus 33:22, but seems to fit the story of Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones too. In the song, "He Hideth My Soul," Fannie wrote, *He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock, that shadows a dry, thirsty land*. In this context, to hide means to protect. Even in the scorching, arid deserts of our lives, we are protected by God.

There are people in our churches with many stories to tell of these desert experiences. How do we negotiate our way through the figurative valley of death? We do so only because we know that God is with us (Psalm 23:4). Otherwise, we are ultimately alone in the world, without hope of restoration (compare Ecclesiastes 12:1). When those days threaten, we can recall one of the greatest of Jesus' many promises to His followers: "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20). He will never abandon us. He gives us hope day by day, a hope that brings life from death.

PRAYER:

O God, we are so often parched and dry. Our souls falter. Sometimes doubts creep in. It seems that evil is winning and our efforts to serve You are ineffective. Give us a new empowerment from Your Spirit, a spiritual downpour for the soul. May our doubt be transformed into faith. May we, like the dry bones, hear Your Word and be encouraged. We pray this in the name of Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER:

God defeats the dry times.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON:

Next week's lesson is "[The Water of Life](#)" and will show us the source of true healing in the picture of a flowing river that comes straight from the presence of God Himself – a river that will never run dry. Study Ezekiel 47:1-12.

LESSON SUMMARIZED BY:

Renee Little
Jesus Is All Ministries
www.jesusisall.com

WORKS CITED

Summary and commentary derived from Standard Lesson Commentary Copyright© 2009 by permission of Standard Publishing.

Reprinted by permission of The Incorporated Trustees of the Gospel Worker Society, Union Gospel Press, P.O. Box 6059, Cleveland, Ohio 44101. (Web site: <http://www.uniongospelpress.com/>)

The Pulpit Commentary, Spence-Jones, H. D. M. (Hrsg.), Bellingham, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc.

The KJV Parallel Bible Commentary, by Nelson Books.