

THE END TIMES

Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones Ezekiel 37:1-14

An article appeared this past Tuesday in the *Portland Tribune* entitled "In humans they trust." It's about a group of local nonbelievers who place their faith in one another. They gather weekly, just like believers do, to celebrate their humanistic belief in what the human race can do. For one of the members of the group, there is too much living yet to do to worry about what happens after this life. "I don't worry about that," she says, "I think that when you die, that's it. I just live my life the best I can and do what I can for the Earth" (with a capital "E").¹

The Bible, of course, gives us quite a different perspective, consistently warning us that this life *is not* all there is. Today, we're going to look at a prophecy found in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, chapter 37, verses 1-14. Remember, last week we looked at the amazing prophecy of Seventy Sevens taken from Daniel 9. Both Daniel and Ezekiel prophesied at about the same time in history and from the same place, Babylon. Both had been taken captive into Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar and his armies. And both are giving specific prophecies that relate to the future of the Jewish nation, Israel.

Let me remind you of the "big picture" that Daniel outlines for us in Daniel 9. (For those of you who weren't with us last week, I encourage you to get the message off the web or order the CD/DVD at the front information desk). In Daniel 9, the prophet outlines for us the past and future of the nation of Israel, God's chosen people in the Old Testament.

Daniel so accurately states that from the decree to rebuild the city and walls of Jerusalem, given on March 5, 444 B.C., to the coming of the Anointed One, the Messiah, there would be 483 "biblical" years, or exactly 173,880 days. And that is precisely what took place. On March 30, A.D. 33, Jesus the Messiah presented himself to the nation of Israel as he rode through gates of the city on a donkey (Luke 19:28-40).

Today, however, we live in what we call the "Church Age" or as it is sometimes called in the Bible, the "times of the Gentiles." The Old Testament prophets say very little, if anything at all, about this period of time. And the reason is this. Prophets like Ezekiel and Daniel saw future events like the tops of mountains in the distance. When I'm on the top of the ski slope on Mount Hood, I can look out and see Mt. St. Helens, Mt. Adams and sometimes even Mt. Jefferson. But I can't really see what lies in the valley between these mountains. In fact, sometimes all I see is the cloud cover between the mountains. It was this way with the Old Testament prophets. They saw first their own time. Then they saw the return to the Promised Land under such leaders as Nehemiah. Then they saw further into the future, predicting the first coming of the Messiah, the Christ. And finally they saw, far off in the distant future, the future reestablishment of Israel in the land and the coming of Christ's Kingdom to earth.

With this in mind, let's look at what the prophet Ezekiel has to say about the future of the nation of Israel and the relevance of this for you and me today. I'll begin reading in verse 1.

¹ The hand of the LORD was upon 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 back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry.

Some of you might remember the old spiritual, “Dem Bones.” But I bet you didn’t know where that song came from. Ezekiel, the prophet, is taken by the Spirit of God to a valley.ⁱⁱ Whether he was literally taken there or simply by way of a vision, we’re not told. But what he sees sounds like it’s taken from some modern-day horror film or maybe the latest novel in the Harry Potter series! It’s a valley full of human remains, human bones. And as if it were not enough for Ezekiel to see these skeletal remains from a distance, he is led back and forth *among* the bones to be sure he gets an up-close view of the scene.

I had an experience like that while visiting Rwanda in 2006. We visited a church where, on the premises, over 10,000 people had been massacred during the 1994 genocide. They now have a burial ground on that church property for the victims. But it’s not like our cemeteries. Rather, all the bones of those killed in the slaughter have been gathered together and laid out in plain sight for all to see. There are skulls, leg bones, hip bones, ribs and finger bones. They are dry, brittle and serve as an ongoing memorial to that awful, tragic massacre the world will never forget.

In ancient Israel, the dead were actually buried twice. When an individual died, his body was first placed in an individual chamber in the wall of a large family tomb. This tomb was typically cut out of rock. The tomb would be sealed up and left alone. However, this individual chamber was not the final burial place. At a later time, as when someone else in the family would die, they would reenter the tomb, and extract the body of the previous family member who had died. By this time, it was probably decomposed, dried up with the skin and flesh long gone. In other words, it was only a skeleton. The skeletal remains would then be taken from the wall chamber and placed in a communal bone coffin typically found in the middle of the tomb. This was the second burial of the individual. This communal coffin was called an ossuary. It held the bones of many people from the same family. The bones would often be separated from one another in order to make the storage more compact. For example, the bones of a rib cage might be placed next to a foot, and so forth. The purpose of this ossuary was to group all the family members together as they awaited the day of resurrection.ⁱⁱⁱ

This helps us to understand what Ezekiel was seeing here in this vision. The nation of Israel is viewed as one large family buried in a gigantic ossuary. Everyone, now long dead, is buried together. It looks as if the army of a great nation has been slain on the battlefield and nothing is left but the skeletal remains.

Verse 11 identifies exactly who these bones represent and the state of despair that these bones describe:

Then he said to me: “Son of man, *these bones are the whole house of Israel*. They say, ‘*Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.*’

It’s always best to let the Bible interpret itself. This verse says that these bones speak, not of you and me – believers who make up the Church. No, these skeletal remains represent the nation of

Israel. And their dryness speaks of the absence of life and the lack of hope that characterized the nation as a whole at the time that Ezekiel was writing. It's the Jewish nation that was saying: "Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, we are cut off!" They viewed themselves as being politically, socially and religiously dead and buried. And they were. Remember, they were now in Babylon, having been taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar. And they were there for seventy years. And that's why God asks Ezekiel a question (verse 3):

He asked me, "*Son of man, can these bones live?*" I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know."

"Looks pretty impossible to me," Ezekiel was probably thinking. "But God, you're sovereign, and you know!" And that is the very reason this prophecy is given...to instill hope! God is saying through both Ezekiel and Daniel that God is not finished with his people Israel. These bones, that represent the nation of Israel, *will* live again! And in verses 4-8 we see just how this will happen:

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,

God asked Ezekiel to do a crazy thing. He is told to "prophesy to these bones." He was to preach to the deadest congregation in history! Now that doesn't sound very exciting. Who wants to preach to a bunch of dead people? Maybe Ezekiel at this point started to give excuses:

"Lord, how about a choir? After all, great music can liven people up!"

"No, preach to these people," the Lord says.

"Or maybe I need to study these bones first. How about if I present a paper on paleontology?"

"No, Ezekiel, don't study them, just give them my Word."

"Or how about if we form a bone reassembly committee? Hey, that's a great idea!"

"Again, Ezekiel, just give them my Word."

To prophesy doesn't always mean in the Bible to *foretell* the future. It can also mean (as here) to *forth tell* (or to *tell forth*) God's Word. And that's exactly what Ezekiel does. And the result is awesome and rather scary! There's a rattling sound, and the very bones that are dried up and scattered across the valley floor, suddenly begin to come together – just like in the song, "Dem Bones," a toe bone to a foot bone, a foot bone to an ankle bone, an ankle bone to a leg bone, and

so forth. And then on top of that, tendons and flesh appear on the skeletal structures. Think about it, if you were Ezekiel, you would be freaked out, wouldn't you?

This verse tells me something extremely important about how God brings about spiritual renewal in our lives. It starts with God's Word. Maybe you feel dead, dried up, hopeless and worthless. God's Word to you today is this: "Dry bones, here the word of the Lord!" You see, God's Word brings life. God's Word is living and powerful and can take that which is dead and dried up and restore it to vibrant life. That's why the writer to the Hebrews says,

For the word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, butting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are.
Hebrews 4:12 NLT

Ezekiel speaks God's Word and suddenly these dry, scattered bones attach themselves and are covered with muscle and skin! The meaning of what Ezekiel sees is found in verse 12.

¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O 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.

Ezekiel is *not* talking here about physical *resurrection* as much as national *restoration*. The Bible elsewhere talks about the resurrection of our bodies. But here the prophet is talking about the *national restoration* of the nation of Israel to the Promised Land. As we saw last week, that began to take place late in the 6th Century B.C. when Israel was allowed to return to their land from captivity in Babylon. But the prophecy of Ezekiel goes far beyond this return to the land, envisioning Jews from all over the world returning to their homeland and being once again established as a nation.

Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth—
Isaiah 43:5-6

Israel ceased to be a nation in A.D. 70 when Titus and his Roman armies besieged and destroyed Jerusalem. And over the last 1900 years, between A.D. 70 and May 14, 1948, those bones of Israel have grown very dry! What happened on May 14, 1948 at 4:32 pm? The rebirth of national, political Israel officially took place. Today, Israel has a flag, a constitution, a prime minister, a police force, a powerful military and capital, the city of Jerusalem. What is the significance of this?

Let me take you to the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:32-35:

³² "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. ³³ Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. ³⁴ I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly

not pass away until all these things have happened.³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Jesus disciples had just asked him an important question and one that we are asking today. It's found in verse 3: "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Jesus then proceeds to list many of these "signs" in the following verses, including false christs, wars and rumors of wars, famine, earthquakes and martyrdom. But there is also, as we have seen from Ezekiel and Daniel, the sign of Israel once again being established in the Promised Land as a national entity.

The Bible nowhere teaches that the establishment of Israel as a State in 1948 or the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem in 1967 indicates that we are definitely living in the last generation before the return of Christ.^{iv} However, the many prophecies of the Bible about the end times *presuppose* the presence of Israel in the land and *presuppose* the existence of a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. The most we can say is that the "fig tree is budding," and that Israel's presence in their land today is *preparatory* to the fulfillment of the many prophecies concerning Christ's return.

More specifically, what *is* happening today in Israel that is preparing the way for Daniel's "seventieth week" and Christ's return? Not only is Israel reestablished as a nation in the land, but there is also today a rebirth of the Jewish Sanhedrin. This took place on October 13, 2004 for the first time in 1600 years. What is the Sanhedrin? It is the Jewish tribunal that served as the supreme court and legislative body among the Jews.^v At the February meeting of the Sanhedrin this past year, they heard testimony concerning just where the Temple originally stood on Mt. Moriah.^{vi} One of the most publicized groups that focuses on the rebuilding of the Temple and the reinstatement of its sacrifices is The Temple Institute lead by Rabbi Israel Ariel. Another group is called The Temple Mount Faithful. In fact, this group has cut two cornerstones for the future temple, each weighing 6.5 tons and they have repeatedly tried to take them up to the Temple Mount.^{vii}

Of course, there is one major obstacle to any rebuilding of the Jewish Temple on the site believed to be the place of the original Temple. Today, it is home to the Mosque of Omar, also called the Dome of the Rock. Mosque of Omar was built in the late 600's, about 600 years after the Romans destroyed the temple. Omar was the caliph-successor of Muhammad who captured Jerusalem from the Eastern Roman Empire. It's believed that the dome stands over the rock where the sacrificial altar of the temple once stood.

How and when this Jewish Temple will be rebuilt, we don't know. But we know it will, just as certainly as Israel has once again been established in her land in fulfillment of prophecy written centuries ago. But not only do the prophets Daniel and Ezekiel foresee the return of the Jews to their homeland, and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, but they also foresee a time of national revival in the Jewish nation that only the Spirit of God can accomplish.

When Israel returns to the land in the End Times, they will still be unconverted, lifeless. That is why Israel is willing to make a covenant with the Anti-Christ as we saw last week. That also explains why in Ezekiel's vision these skeletal remains come together, and the bodies even have flesh. But there is as yet no *life*. There is as yet no *breath*.

^{8b}...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 from the four winds, O breath, 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.

And then notice verse 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.^{viii}

Whether it’s Israel returning to the Land or Christians returning to church, it’s possible to go through all types of religious ritual and yet be totally empty of authentic life that only the Spirit of God can bring. Israel today is in the Land and there are many orthodox Jews who are desirous in reinstating all the ritualistic traditions of the past. But as of yet it is totally void of God’s Spirit.

In John 3 Jesus is conversing with one of these orthodox Jews of his own day, a rabbi named Nicodemus. Jesus tells him: “I assure you. No one can enter the Kingdom of God,” Jesus tells him, “without being born of water and the Spirit.” He goes on to explain:

Humans can produce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don’t be surprised when I say, “You must be born again.” The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit. (John 4:6-8 NLT).^{ix}

Are you “born of the Spirit?” Some of you here today may be like Nicodemus: outwardly religious, but inwardly and spiritually dead. The Good News is that, just as literally as God gave you physical life through your natural birth, he can breathe upon you giving you spiritual life through the new birth.

Or maybe you already possess God’s Spirit, but somehow you *feel* more dead than alive. Maybe you feel like these dried up bones that Ezekiel sees. Maybe the harsh circumstances of life have brought about a numbing deadness that won’t go away. God’s Spirit, the life-giving spirit, is there for you.

ⁱ *Portland Tribune*, section “Portland Life,” Tuesday, August 21, 2007, B3.

ⁱⁱ This may have been the same plain mentioned in Ezekiel 3:22-23, “The hand of the LORD was upon me there, and he said to me, “Get up and go out to the plain, and there I will speak to you.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Douglas Stuart, *Ezekiel* in *The Communicators Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 342-343.

^{iv} In fact, when Jesus says, “*this generation* that sees these sign will not pass away until all these things have happened,” he is actually speaking of his own generation

^v The Jewish Sanhedrin continued to meet after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. up until 425 A.D.

^{vi} David R. Reagan “Rebirth of the Sanhedrin,” in *Lamplighter* (July – August, 2005, Vol. XXVI), 14-16. The Bible also *presupposes* a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. Daniel speaks of it in Daniel 9:27, Jesus speaks of it in Matthew 24:15, Paul writes about it in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 and John mentions it in Revelation 11:1.

^{vii} Reagan, 16.

^{viii} Cf. Ezekiel 36:26-27 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

^{ix} The Spirit of God moves like a wind, giving life. Paul says, “And because you belong to him, the *power of the life-giving Spirit* has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death” (Romans 8:2).