

EZEKIEL 37:1-14 DRY BONES

Ezekiel was placed in a valley that was full of dry bones which were probably the bones of an army. He must have wondered what was going on and why the Lord had placed him there. Presumably he had no idea what was happening and what the Lord was going to say or do. The connection is something we see later in the passage:

Ezekiel 37:11(NIV)

¹¹Then 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.’”

Ezekiel didn't know this for the first two parts of his prophecy so when God said that to Ezekiel I can just picture him saying something like, “Ah! So that's what this is all about!”

The land of Israel had been decimated and the people had been carted off into exile in Babylon. As far as they were concerned, that was the end of their nation. They felt as though their bones had dried up and they had been completely cut off from their land, their worship and their God and so had no hope at all. But God heard the cries of the people. In his grace had not forgotten them or his covenant with them. He was about to act and this prophecy told the people about it and gave them hope. Ezekiel gave three prophecies.

EZEKIEL'S PROPHECY

Prophecy to the Bones [4]

It's a bit hard to imagine what it must have been like for Ezekiel standing in the middle of all those bones, but at the very least it must have been discouraging and depressing. So what did he think and feel when God asked him whether or not the dry bones could live again? Could these bodies be resurrected? Was there hope for these bones? The implication in the question is that, in the normal run of things, the answer was no, they can't. I reckon Ezekiel should have been a politician because he very neatly sidestepped giving God a direct answer! He didn't stick his neck out and say yes, because that would have been a pretty big thing. Bleached and dry bones don't normally come back to life. On the other hand he didn't give a direct no either. He'd already seen God do some pretty amazing things and he would have known something of God's actions within the history of Israel. So no would have been a bit risky too. So he covered both bases by throwing it back on God: you alone know.

God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, which must have felt a bit strange in itself. But imagine his surprise when the bones started rattling, coming together. It must have been a cacophony of sound. Skeletons formed and then tendons, muscles and skin were added. But the problem was that even though they were now fully formed bodies, they had no breath in them. They had no Spirit. Presumably at this point they were fully formed bodies still lying lifeless on the ground.

Prophecy to the Breath [9]

So God commanded him to prophesy to the breath. Breath is one of the key words in this passage. The Hebrew word is *ruah/ruach* which is translated as Spirit in verses 1 & 14, breath in 5, 6, 8, 9 & 10 and winds in 9. It's the same Hebrew word used in each instance.

Two things are significant about its use in this chapter:

- The frequency of use is significant. While I've not checked it out to make 100% sure I'm correct, I doubt that there would be too many other chapters in any of the other books in the Bible that have this many occurrences of the word in one chapter. That says something about its importance in what God was saying and doing.
- It's significant that the word is translated as both breath and Spirit because that tells us something about the nature of what God was doing.

God commanded Ezekiel to call on the winds to come from the four corners of the earth and give the bodies breath. Isn't that a dramatic picture!

‘GOD, the Master, says, Come from the four winds. Come, breath. Breathe on these slain bodies. Breathe life!’ (The Message)

Breath entered them and they came to life and stood up so that a vast army of people stood before Ezekiel.

The word describes the blowing of the wind, breathing life itself into something that was without life. Where one minute there had been death and hopelessness, in the next there was life and hope. This was more than just blowing something up like we might a balloon. It was even more than causing something simply to breathe. This was taking something that was dead and giving it life and Spirit. This is reminiscent of the very act of creation itself where God formed humanity from the ground of the earth and then breathed into them the life of the Spirit. What Ezekiel saw was God's creative power at work bringing life out of death by the Spirit of God.

Prophecy to the People [12]

The dry bones were symbolic of Israel because that's how they were feeling. This was a message of hope to the people of Israel who were saying their bones had dried up, their hope was gone and they were cut off. In other words, they had no hope of ever being a nation again. As far as they were concerned, Israel was dead and, in the normal run of things, that would have been a reasonable conclusion. But that wasn't accounting for the life-giving Spirit who was about to breathe life into what was dead and literally bring them up out of the grave. This was a resurrection! God would put his Spirit within them and they would live—in every sense of the word! Once again we see what all this is about: then my people will know that I am the Lord [13].

As I was preparing this sermon this week, I couldn't help but reflect into our situation here at GBC. I'm not suggesting that we're dead, in need of being brought back to life! One of the phrases that struck me as I read the passage was "I will put my Spirit in you and you will live", especially the "you will live" part. That's more than just being alive in the sense of breathing and being an animated body.

- To live is to live life to the full as God intended for us through Jesus and the Spirit.
- It's to live in the life, ministry and power of the kingdom.
- It's to live a rich and full life that's lived to serve God and others.

Sometimes it's possible to exist without being fully alive.

GBC has been travelling quite comfortably—apart from occasional hiccups—for many decades. In general terms, most people would describe this as a good and healthy church that is hopefully welcoming and where there are signs of life. But sometimes I wonder if we are too secure and too comfortable and are at risk of treading on as we have always done, at risk of more of the same. I feel as though we need the fresh wind of the Spirit blowing into us in order to experience new life. That's not a matter of rising up out of the grave because we've been dead but a matter of reinvigorating by the Spirit. I think that's part of what this stirring about relocation is all about. While there are some very practical reasons for considering it, the far more important reasons are to do with life and mission. I have the feeling that while we are here in the comfort and security of our own building, whatever happens is going to be limited—not just because of physical constraints but more because of spiritual constraints. Instead of a sense of life and the feeling that things are on the move we are more at risk of simply falling into more of the same. I have no idea if it's going to be possible for us to make a move as big as it might need to be. The thought of it is scary and fraught with risk. But what could be even scarier is the alternative of just treading on as we have always done. At the same time it doesn't have to be that way even if we stay here, but it seems to me we will be at far greater risk of it being like that if we do. The church has been tossing this whole idea around now for 30 years. It's time for it to end one way or the other.