

July 26, 2009

Ezekiel: Finding Hope Beyond Despair

Purpose: To help us celebrate God's power to renew and restore

Key Bible reference: Ezekiel 37.1-14

Key Verse: Ezekiel 37.14

Biblical Interpretation

Read Ezekiel 33:1-48 to get a feeling for the change in tone and message from despair to hope in Ezekiel's preaching.

Ezekiel 37:1 is not the only place Ezekiel speaks of hope and the possibilities for restoration. Chapters 1-32 have one basic theme: gloom and doom. Judah, like Israel, has sinned and refuses to repent. So, God's judgment is coming. And it did come. But Chapters 33-39 give a very different message—one of encouragement, of looking to and planning for the future, of hope for restoration. And Chapters 40-48 even convey hope about the rebuilding of the Temple. It is difficult for us to comprehend how much this message of hope meant to the people who were in exile in Babylonia. The message must have sounded too good to be true for many. But what Ezekiel had said about judgment came true, so why not what he was now saying about restoration? In time his message must have started to get through, if only to some.

Verses 1-10 describe the vivid and powerful vision Ezekiel had. Verses 11-14 interpret that vision.

Ezekiel 37:1. Some scholars note that the abrupt way this verse begins in Hebrew (an unusual use of verb form) strongly suggests that at one time there was a date here. As you recall, the descriptions of Ezekiel's visions sometimes begin with a date (1:1; 20:1; and so

forth). We have no indication here, however, of what the date was.

Whenever Ezekiel says, "The hand of the Lord came upon me," we know that something spectacular is about to follow. Recall that Ezekiel says this is in 3:22 where he sees the very glory of God and receives one of his commissions as a prophet. Ezekiel 8:1 tells of a time when God's hand was upon Ezekiel and he had several astounding visions in the Temple. Ezekiel 33:21-22 reports another episode when God's hand was upon him.

"The hand of God" is a way of saying, "I had the profound sense of God's presence with me. It was as if I could feel the very hand of God on my shoulder, guiding me, taking me where God wanted me to go." This is made even clearer when Ezekiel says that he was "brought...out by the spirit of the Lord."

Where did God take Ezekiel this time? God took him to the "middle of a valley" or "plain." Some have suggested that it is the same one as in Ezekiel 3:22. This was probably the plain in which the people had settled in Babylon. Perhaps this upset Ezekiel at first. After all, the first time he was taken here it was to receive a message of doom for his people. He did not know at this point that the message would be one of hope. Other scholars conjecture that perhaps in this vision Ezekiel is taken back to Judah or to Jerusalem itself. That would fit in well with what follows.

What does Ezekiel see here? He beholds a terrifying sight. He sees bones, skeletons, everywhere. And he is in the midst of them, although he does not seem concerned about how such contact would make him unclean (see Numbers 19:16-18).

Verse 2. There are not just a few human remains here; the valley is full of them! What Ezekiel appears to be seeing is either a graveyard in which the remains have been disinterred or, more likely, an old battleground where the bodies were simply never buried but left to the wild animals and the elements. And God takes Ezekiel on a tour of this place, that is, "all around them." God wants Ezekiel to get a good look. What does Ezekiel see? He sees that the bones are extremely dry. In other words, they have been there for years.

Verse 3. When this grim tour is over, God asks Ezekiel a question: "Mortal, can these bones live?" We can only imagine what was going through Ezekiel's mind. Who, standing over a valley full of bones, could believe life could come into them again? Was this a trick question? But Ezekiel quickly remembers just who is asking this question. So, he replies to God, "O Lord God, you know"; that is, "Lord, you're the only one who knows that." That remark is not a strong expression of belief that the bones can live again, but it is a faithful response.

Ezekiel knows that God is the source of life. And perhaps he began to remember the stories in his heritage about God's power to restore to life (see 1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37). But it is quite doubtful that Ezekiel had a concept of resurrection as we find it in the New Testament. One searches in vain for a fully developed doctrine of the resurrection of the individual in the Old Testament; here in Ezekiel the focus is

on the restoration of the community. The doctrine of bodily resurrection of the person came later. But what we do have here is a profound faith in God's power to restore what seems beyond restoration. This faith became a foundation upon which the belief in resurrection was built.

Verses 4-6. God had asked Ezekiel to do many different things in the past: to speak to a nation of rebels who would not listen, to eat scrolls, to shut himself up in his house, to make a scale model of Jerusalem, to lie on his side for days, to make and eat strange meals, to chop off his beard and hair, and much more. But now God asks him to speak to these dry bones. Ezekiel had already spoken to the mountains (see Chapters 6 and 36). So speaking to inanimate objects was not something new to him. But now he is commanded to speak to that valley of dry bones, to tell them that God was going to put the flesh back on them again and breathe into them the breath of life.

The image here is a powerful one. It recalls Genesis 2:7 when God created man from the dust of the earth and breathed into him the *ruah* (in Hebrew) or the breath of life or what could be called the "life force." It is as if God is starting the creation again, for what is about to happen is every bit as astounding as that first creative act.

"You shall know that I am the Lord" (37:6). The people had doubted that God was still with them and that God could help them in the present situation. But such an act would demonstrate to them once again God's power, presence, and concern. For the act that was to follow could not be attributed to any human power.

Verses 7-8. There is no indication here that Ezekiel protested or even had any doubts about this whole matter. He stands over the bones and speaks to them the message God gave him. And what he first notices is a very loud and disturbing sound.

What Ezekiel hears is the sound of a valley full of scattered bones coming back together! Some scholars believe that this was accompanied by an earthquake, or at least so it seemed as the bones sprang up from the sand and dirt. It was truly an amazing scene; for not only did the bones come back together to form skeletons, flesh began to form on those bones. But Ezekiel then notices that they are just zombie-like bodies, not yet alive.

Verses 9-10. So God commands Ezekiel to preach again, this time to the "breath," to command the four winds to come and breathe into the dead bodies and give them life. The winds are often seen as the instruments or servants of God (see Psalm 104:4 and Jeremiah 49:36). The Hebrew word *ruah*, used so often in this chapter, can be translated as "spirit," "wind," or "breath." The *ruah* is the animating, life-giving power that only God can give (as in Genesis 2:7) or take away (Genesis 6:17). In the ancient Hebrew mind this was surely connected with the physiological act of breathing. People noticed that when a child was born, it did not begin to live until breath came into its body. They also noticed that when a person stopped breathing, that person died. This breath represented life, life that only God could give or take. Barely a moment after Ezekiel spoke, the bodies began to breathe and stood on their feet, filling the valley.

Verse 11. In the verses that follow, God explains to Ezekiel and to everyone who will hear this account exactly what it all means. God does not

want there to be any misunderstanding. The people had sunk into utter despair. They felt as lifeless and without hope or a future as a valley full of skeletons. Indeed, they had felt they were under a sentence of death, condemned to die; and they had in fact died! The valley of bones is Judah. (Ezekiel was not the first to use this image of bones for Judah; see Jeremiah 8:1-2.)

But there is an interesting and somewhat confusing phrase here. God says that the bones in the valley "are the whole house of Israel." Is this a reference to both Judah and Israel, that is, to the whole kingdom? Or is it just to Judah or just to Israel? We know that "Israel" is a term used in the Bible as a political designation for the Northern Kingdom. However, in a religious sense it is also used to refer to the "children of Israel," that is, to any or all of the descendants of Israel (who was first named Jacob). So we do not know exactly what Ezekiel has in mind. However, it does seem that he is referring to both Israel and Judah.

The problem comes in that the Northern Kingdom (Israel) had long since disappeared (about 721 B.C.). Indeed, they were like a long forgotten graveyard or an ancient battlefield of dry bones. And as we see from Ezekiel 37:15-28 and elsewhere, Ezekiel hoped for a reunited kingdom; that is, he apparently hoped that Israel as a whole would be brought back together under a king in the Davidic line. How he thought this could happen in light of the fate of the ten northern tribes (they were largely absorbed into other populations under Assyrian rule) is not clear. But the theological meaning here is clear: Somehow all God's people, scattered as they are, will participate in the restoration God will make.

Some modern-day writers have proclaimed that such reunification took place in our own century when Israel became a nation. That is, at best, a highly questionable use of Ezekiel. For this passage, we are on more solid ground when we affirm that God is at work in our world to bring restoration and that God's will and plan is for unity, reunification, and reconciliation.

Verses 12-14. Ezekiel is to proclaim the same message to his people that he proclaimed to the valley of dry bones. His people are in every way like the slain on a battlefield. It seemed to them that they had as much chance of being a people again and returning to the Promised Land as the members of a long slain army or the bodies in a cemetery had of coming back to life. But God proclaims to them through Ezekiel that this is exactly what is going to happen. And in fact, some forty years in the future, about 538/537 B.C., they would be released; and some would return and rebuild.