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Ezekiel 37:1–14, ESV, abbreviated

37 *The LORD brought me out in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. God said to me, “Can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.”⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.⁶ And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.”*

⁷*So I prophesied as I was commanded. There was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.⁸ And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them.⁹ Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on 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 on their feet, an exceedingly great army.*

¹¹*Then God said to me, “These bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them: I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel.¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people.¹⁴ I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land.”*

Our bones can live.

I met a man recently who was living in a tunnel. He was a homeless man who happened to be in the ER getting an infection dealt with. He said he had the great gifts of being “anti-claustrophobic” and having “tunnel vision”. He said that his

tunnel was under a building, and that it was long, narrow, and low-ceilinged. It had no light, but that was no problem, because there were no wrong turns in his tunnel. You just entered, and without any possible left or right turns, you kept going until you reached the end. It was cool in the summer and warm in the winter. He said he felt the best just as he was entering it – because it meant that he was leaving the chaos and the pain of the outside world, where he didn't know where to turn or where to go. He said that at the end of the tunnel he was always calm. It was beautiful to leave the confusion and just walk toward the end.

I'm going to talk today about one of my favorite Old Testament passages. It is something that I often think about when I am feeling depressed, if I have failed at something, or when I realize that something has ended and something new must begin. Ezekiel was a prophet. The Book of Ezekiel is organized around his visions of God, and it tells us about God's attempt to gain the loyalty of God's people, despite the rebellious and often ungodly behavior of God's Chosen People. Much of the book surrounds the reign of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, the destruction of Jerusalem in 588 to 586 B.C., and the accompanying exile of many of Israel's finest to Babylonia. King Nebuchadnezzar has been extending his gigantic empire to the east and the west: his goal is to control trade routes to Egypt. That is when he encounters the people of Judah, the

southern part of Israel that included Jerusalem. By the way, I often make remarks about various Old Testament stories possibly not being fully factual – but excavations have revealed lists of Babylonian prisoners and cuneiform inscriptions detailing Judean prisoners working in Babylonia. These people helped feed the Babylonian people deep in the urban part of Babylonia. After the capture and destruction of Jerusalem, the young Ezekiel, who has been training to be a temple priest, finds himself transported, along with 8,000 others, deep into Babylon. There, the Chosen People live somewhat independently, and Ezekiel rises to the status of a great prophet. He fights for the detached fragment of the Chosen People to live by God’s laws, despite being embedded in a pagan culture. But the people to whom he is serving as an intermediary to God are not listening to him. In our passage, Ezekiel is experiencing a vision from God, one meant to give hope to the isolated, enslaved, dispirited people of God - people who are losing faith.

The People of God do understand that the destruction of Jerusalem and their exile is a judgement from God. God’s promise of land was not unconditional. Back in Deuteronomy, long before, Moses said this to the people:

⁵⁸ “If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, ⁵⁹ then the LORD will bring on you and your offspring afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting. ⁶⁰ And he will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were afraid, and they shall cling to you. ⁶¹ Every

sickness also and every affliction the LORD will bring upon you, until you are destroyed. ⁶² Whereas you were as numerous as the stars of heaven, you shall be left few in number, because you did not obey the voice of the LORD your God. ⁶³ And as the LORD took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the LORD will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you. And you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

⁶⁴ “And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone.

God had made it clear that in order to receive the three promises made under the Old Covenant, the one passed to God’s people through Moses, of land, children, and God’s blessing, they had to remain faithful to the laws of God. The Book of 2nd Chronicles, which overlaps in timeframe with the Book of Ezekiel, tells us this:

¹⁴ All the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations. They kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people. ¹⁷ Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who had no compassion on young man or woman, old man or aged. ¹⁸ And all the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king, all these he brought to Babylon. ¹⁹ They burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. ²⁰ He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword.

We see that the conquering of Judah by the Babylonians (often referred to as Chaldeans by people of the day) was indeed a punishment from God.

Then we come to our passage and the magnificent metaphor of bones. Bones are used in the Bible to represent spiritual death. Ezekiel’s vision from God

stands out as the most stunning use of this metaphor. He has been taken by God to a valley strewn with dry, disarticulated bones. Ezekiel says this:

37 The LORD brought me out in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. God said to me, "Can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.

Ezekiel asks if God's people can rise, if they can regain God's graces, if they can leave their lives of exile, and if Jerusalem can once again become a magnificent city of God. It turns out that the answer from God is yes, and Ezekiel says this:

There was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.⁸ And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them.⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on 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 on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

The dry bones lying in the valley are the bones of soldiers who have been killed in battle. They have been killed by the Babylonians, in other words, by their sins.

Now, the bones are rising, sinews connecting them, and flesh growing on them.

The breath of God brings them to their feet – alive and prepared to defend themselves against their worldly enemies and to once again follow the laws of God.

God tells Ezekiel that the people have learned their lesson and God is going to restore them, once again, giving them their homeland again, children to replace all

those slaughtered by the Babylonians, and of course, God's great blessing. God makes it clear that if the people keep their side of the covenant, then God will keep God's side. This is a cycle that is repeated over and over in the Old Testament. Once again, God makes the great promise:

¹¹ "These bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them: I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land."

The exile lasted for seventy years. After this, a new generation returned to Jerusalem. There were many people who were born, lived their lives, and died in exile. But the People of God are indeed restored. Notice that this story reinforces a key distinction between the Old and the New Testament: in the Old, God's focus is on the People of God as a whole; in the New, God focuses on the individual.

Here is why this passage means so much to me. First, it is a reminder that for us, God, through the Holy Spirit, lives within each of us. This results from Jesus' symbolic act of offering his earthly life to guarantee us forgiveness and an eternal life. God transitions from being an outside force, one of laws, punishments, and restorations that impact all people to a God who walks with each of us every day. God is not going to send an army to destroy God's people again. Second, this story

tells me that no matter how low I get, my dry bones can always rise and become alive again - and walk through the Kingdom of God here on Earth.

But there is a third point, as well, that this story brings home for me. We will always be recreated when we are lost - if we turn to God. We will also be recreated one last time when we die. Just as God's breath brought the dead in the valley alive, God's breath will give us life. We are never going to be left as dry bones lying in a valley of death for eternity. Some people have looked at this passage from Ezekiel and seen in it a sort of reenactment of creation. Remember this from Genesis: *"Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature."*

Here is a vision I would like to leave you with: In the Old Testament, the prophets worked in a long, narrow tunnel, much like the tunnel that homeless man lived in. The prophets acted within their individual lifetimes. They acted in the context of the events immediately surrounding their lives. They often battled with their own people, cajoling them. They could see, through visions from God, the light at the end of the tunnel, which was the return of God's people to the ways of God. Remember that they were surrounded by pagan societies who worshipped multiple gods, and a key problem faced by the prophets was simply getting their people to acknowledge that there is only one God, the creator of us all. The

prophets told their people that they didn't live under the control of a suite of gods, each one in charge of some aspect of our lives, and each of them fallible, vain, human-like, fighting with each other, and capable of being bribed or intimidated into granting earthly wishes. But the people kept forgetting this. The prophets were trapped in a long, dark tunnel, with a world of monotheism at the end of the tunnel. They had to get their people to understand that not only is there just one God, but there is a God who has radically higher standards for us than the pagan gods worshipped by the peoples who often swept in and conquered Israel.

On the other hand, we do not live in a tunnel. We're not battling paganism, with the singular goal of searching out that one, great God. We have a far wider perspective, with greater peripheral vision. Starting with the Gospels and the letters of Paul, we learned that all people are offered a place in the Kingdom of God. We have a far more sophisticated view of our place in the world and what it means to follow the laws of God. God doesn't give us land and descendants and a blessing: God gives us a purpose here on Earth. That purpose means that we treat others as we would want to be treated, and in return, we live in the Kingdom of God. We don't have prophets today because we are no longer being led through a long, dark tunnel. We are living in a brilliant world, and we can see all that goes on around us. We can rise above the hedonistic goals of leaders, celebrities, and

wealthy individuals who see themselves as gods. We treat all people as being made in God's image and we pass on the grace and forgiveness that God gives us.

In the Old Testament, God's people were sent into a pagan area, Canaan, to take over the land and turn it into Israel. According to the story, they were to massacre the Canaanites so that the Chosen People would not be tempted to absorb their paganism. There is a lot to be said about whether this story is literally true – but one thing is very true. We are not commissioned by God to go clear the land of paganism. We are also far surer of ourselves when it comes to how we should treat all other humans. That man who was living in a tunnel couldn't handle the frightening, chaotic world around him. But because God walks beside us, we can live in an ungodly world, and yet live in joy and freedom. God leads us directly. We don't see through the limited eyes of prophets who protect and guide us. We see with our own eyes, and we can see so much. We see God's forgiveness. We know that there are many times in our lives when we are dry bones, and with the grace of God guiding us personally, we can rise and live again. Please pray with me.

God, let us never forget that you will never go back on the promise that you have made to all people on this planet. You will always forgive us. You will regenerate our spirits and let us rise from the valley of death, our dry bones coming alive again. We thank you for the great vision you give us. Amen.