

Ezekiel 37:1-14 Evangelism & the Valley of Dry Bones

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] Well, for a short while this morning I'd like us to turn back to the passage that we read in Ezekiel chapter 37 and we're going, as I said, to be looking at the first half from verse 1 to 14, but we can just read again the first three verses.

The hand of the Lord was upon me and He brought me out in the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley. It was full of bones and He led me around among them and behold there were very many on the surface of the valley and behold they were very dry and He said to me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, you know.

Ezekiel is one of the longest books in the Bible. In fact, only Genesis, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Psalms have got more chapters than this book and yet even though it's a really, really big book, for many of us it's a fairly unfamiliar book. It's not one that we maybe preach on that often, it's not one that we maybe read all that often. But Ezekiel is an absolutely amazing book and one of the reasons why it's such a remarkable book is because it was written and Ezekiel prophesied at a crucial period in the history of God's people in the Old Testament. If we look at this sub slide, there's a list of, if you like, the main events that take place in the Old Testament. It starts with creation and then we have the fall where Adam and Eve sinned, that's Genesis chapter 3, then come to Genesis 7, 8, 9 where we have the flood, God's covenant with Noah, then Genesis 12 onwards, covenant with Abraham,

Isaac and Jacob. That takes us through towards the end of Genesis which eventually results in Jacob's children moving to Egypt where they end up in slavery. Next big moment is the Exodus where God draws his people out of Egypt and at the heart of that is a covenant made with Moses or through Moses. Then Joshua judges, entry into the promised land followed by the establishment of the monarchy and there God enters a covenant with David and that's really in many ways a high point in the history of Israel. After that things kind of go down and when David's grandson Rehoboam becomes king, Israel splits in two into a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom. About 200 years later in 722 BC the northern kingdom fell, conquered by the Assyrians and then about 120, 130 years later the southern kingdom falls and the people are taken into exile in Babylon and then last of all a few of them return which is the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and prophecies of Malachi. So that's the main events. Where's Ezekiel in all of that? Where does Ezekiel come in? Ezekiel is near the end. Ezekiel was a prophet when the southern kingdom fell and the people were taken into

Babylon. In fact Ezekiel prophesied in Babylon. Now Babylon is really the area that we call Iraq today. So Ezekiel was there in Iraq prophesying to a people who had been taken into exile.

[3 : 39] And that's what Ezekiel's book starts with. In the 13th year, the fourth month, on the 50th month, I was among the exiles by the Hebar Canal. The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. Then he gives the exact time. On the 50th day of the month, it was the 50th year of the exile of King Jehoiakim. The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel, the priest. Now Jehoiakim was exiled in 598 and so we can be fairly certain that this was the year 593 BC. And the vital point to note is that Ezekiel was a prophet. Not when Ezekiel was doing well, not at a time of national prosperity and spiritual health. Ezekiel was a prophet to a nation that was in the process of being brutally conquered and was now exiled while their homeland lay in ruins. You think of the people today, maybe in Northern Iraq, who were driven out by ISIS and have flooded into refugee camps, taken away from their homes and their home cities have been destroyed. That's really the situation that the Israelites were in when Ezekiel was a prophet. Everything was at rock bottom. So that's what Ezekiel was prophesying into. That's the situation he was prophesying into. And part of his message was to explain what had happened. And a really important chapter is Ezekiel chapter 16. And we'll read a few verses from that. Here Ezekiel explains why all this has happened. And to do that he portrays Israel as an adulterous wife. He says, Thus says the Lord God, because your lust was poured out and your nakedness uncovered in your hoarings with your lovers and with all your abominable idols. And because of the blood of your children that you gave to them, therefore behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure and all those you loved and all those you hated, I will gather them against you from every side and will uncover your nakedness to them that they may see all your nakedness. And I will judge you as a woman who committed adultery and shed blood, are judged and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy. Now that's imagery to describe the fact that Israel was looking at all the other nations, looking at all the false gods that they worshiped and they were following right after them. And instead of remaining loyal to God, as a wife should remain loyal to their husband, they were unfaithful and they turned away from the Lord. And despite all of God's warnings, they would not listen. And eventually they were judged. And so in many ways it's a sort of very, very solemn message in Ezekiel 16.

But in the very same chapter, God also uses Ezekiel to bring an amazing message of hope. And so we can read that at the end from verse 58. He says, you bear the penalty of your lewdness and your abominations, declares the Lord, for thus says the Lord, I will deal with you as you have done, you have despised the oath and breaking the covenant. And then he says this, yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant. Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you take your sisters, both your elder and your younger, and I give them to you as daughters, but on no account of the covenant with you. I will establish my covenant with you. You shall know that I am the Lord, that you may remember and be confounded and never open your mouth again because of your shame. When I atone for you, for all that you have done, declares the Lord. And so in the midst of all the chaos and difficulty, yes, Ezekiel brings a message of judgment, but also an amazing hope of salvation. And that's emphasised throughout this book, but perhaps the place where we see it most vividly is in Ezekiel chapter 37. Here God shows Ezekiel a vision of a valley of dry bones. And although we've probably never seen a thing like that ourselves, it's not hard to imagine. Picture yourself in a valley and all around is just bones, skeletons. It's a picture of total devastation, of barrenness and of death, and it all seems so hopeless. And yet as you read through Ezekiel chapter 37, you read of this amazing work that God does and he brings the dry bones to life.

Now in the immediate context of Ezekiel's time, this vision was pointing towards the fact that Israel was going to be restored. And in a small way that was fulfilled when a remnant returned. You read Ezra and Nehemiah, people came back from Babylon. They went back to Jerusalem and they started to rebuild the city and to rebuild the temple. But the ultimate fulfillment of all that Ezekiel prophesies was not in the return of the remnant. The ultimate fulfillment is in the coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the kingdom of God, the new Israel, the true Israel. God's people were going to be restored from this devastation and built up into a people that would cover the whole of the earth. And all you have to do today is look at the church of Jesus Christ across the world to see that that's exactly what has happened. And we have been reminded that at the lowest point of Israel's history, and really this was the lowest point, God is showing Ezekiel that he has not given up.

And that's a vital lesson that we must never ever forget. God has not given up on humanity.

God has not given up on us, even though people turn away from God, even though people make desperate mistakes, even though the world can look like such a mess, God has not given up on humanity.

[9 : 53] And of course that means that God has not given up on you. And sometimes people will say, well, my chance has gone, or my time has passed, once upon a time I was interested in the gospel, and things seem to be coming together, and then I missed my chance. People say that, people think like that, and I tell you it is never true. Because God's not given up on you.

And God's love for you is so great. His commitment to you is so strong. And God will never give up on you, while you have breath in your lungs. And so always, always remember that.

God has not given up on us. God is giving us an amazing message of hope. There are so many things that we could look at in this passage, because it's just a full, rich, wonderful passage. But I want us today to focus on one area in particular. And I want us to ask the question, what does this passage teach us about evangelism? That's our great goal as a church. We want to reach out to people. We want to see people come to faith in Jesus Christ.

That's one of the main priorities that we have. And this passage has got a lot it can teach us about that work of sharing the gospel. And I want us to ask three questions in particular. I think I put them on the screen actually. Here's our three questions. What kind of people can be evangelized?

So in other words, who's the gospel for? What kind of people is God wanting to tell the good news of Jesus? That's our first question. Second question is, how does it work? How does evangelism work?

[11 : 42] And thirdly, what is the outcome of that work of evangelism? So that's our three questions. We'll get through them together in the next few minutes. So first of all, what kind of people can be evangelized? Well, verse one and two gives us a description of the scene that lay before Ezekiel.

The hand of the Lord was upon me and he brought me up out in the spirit of the Lord, set me down in the middle of a valley. It was full of bones. And that's pretty much as bleak an image as we could possibly have. The valley is full of dead bodies and they have just become nothing but skeletons. If you look at verse two, there's a statement regarding the quantity of them.

There were very many. So it really is just a vast scene of devastation. And then we're told something about the condition. It says at the very end, they were very dry. That's basically telling us that these bones have been there a long, long time. And so the multitude that surrounds Ezekiel is dead. And they have been dead a long time. It's a bleak, barren, lifeless, hopeless scene. And the key point that's been taught us here is the fact that the starting point for God's mission work, the starting point for God's great plan of restoration is with a people who are totally lifeless, totally hopeless, totally uninterested and totally unresponsive. And if we were to think about the spiritual state of the world around us, we would say that it's like a valley of dry bones. People have no interest in the gospel. They are deaf. People are unresponsive to the gospel. They are lifeless. And if anything, our country seems to be becoming more and more and more indifferent or even hostile towards the good news of Jesus Christ. I saw on the BBC News website this morning, it said, I didn't even bother reading the article because it sounded depressing, but the headline was majority of Scots people are not religious, was what it was saying.

So it's basically saying that Christianity is now a minority religion in Scotland. And like the valley of dry bones, there are many, many, many people who seem to have no interest in the gospel. And they've been like that for a long, long time. And it's really easy to be discouraged by that. We can look around us in Carlyway and see dozens and dozens and dozens of homes who seem to show no interest in the gospel. And it can just, the likelihood of their conversion can seem miles away, can't it? We can all think of people think, well, we'll never see them come to faith. It's so easy to think like that. The whole thing can seem so hopeless. And we can feel like we just don't know where to start. And then we come back to Ezekiel 37 and God asks a question. In verse three, he says to Ezekiel, son of man, can these bones live? And that question, I think is just brilliant.

It is an amazing question because at one level, it seems absolutely impossible because dry bones can't live. Very dry bones definitely can't live. And yet at another level, the very fact that it is God asking this question means that there's a whole other dimension as to what is impossible or not.

[15 : 22] And I think Ezekiel's answer reflects this. Imagine being Ezekiel. Imagine you heard that question. There must have been part of Ezekiel who thought, well, no, not a chance. Can these bones live?

And yet another part of it must have thought, well, with God, all things are possible. And I can imagine him thinking, well, I don't know. But then he comes to the better answer, which acknowledges the fact that God is sovereign. And he says, Oh, Lord God, you know. And Ezekiel is a great example to us because although he's aware of how helpless he is, he is looking and depending upon God.

And I don't ever want to put words into God's mouth, but I just cannot stop myself from imagining that if God had replied to Ezekiel's answer, he would have said, you bet your life they can.

And all of it is a reminder that a valley of dry bones is not a bleak and hopeless valley in God's eyes. In God's eyes, a valley of dry bones is a mission field ready for harvest. And that is a vital reminder to us that as we look around our community, our island, our country, we see people who are utterly unresponsive to the good news of Jesus Christ. God is reminding us that these people are exactly the kind of people that he wants us to evangelize. So you think of the people you work with, you think of the people who live near you, the people you meet in the community, the people who you hardly ever see at church and ask yourself, can these dry bones live? Who right they can?

You bet your life they can. And that's exactly who God wants us to reach out to. Because if you are in a valley of dry bones, where do you start? You just start with the dry bones as Ezekiel did.

[17 : 33] These are the kind of people that we are here to reach out to with the gospel. A reminder that God wants every single person in Carlyway and on the West Side and in Lewis, every single person to come to him in faith. Nobody is excluded. Nobody is beyond God's reach. Nobody, nobody has lost their chance. God is saying to us all, you come to me and trust in me. And I will give you eternal life. This message is for us all. That brings us to our second question. How does evangelism work?

We want to reach out to everybody, but how does it work? Well, if we look at verses 4 to 10, the passage gives us some really, really amazing teaching about how evangelism works. And as we read through these verses, there's two essential elements that are needed. I hope you can see that. Okay, we'll just read it through slowly. See if you can pick out the two key things that need to be there, because there's two of them. Then he said to me, prophesy over these bones and say to them, oh dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord, God to these bones, behold, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live. And I will lay sin news 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. So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound and behold, a rattling and the bones came together, bone to its bone.

And I looked and behold, there were sin news on them and flesh had come upon them and skin had covered them, but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, prophesy to the breath, prophesy son of man and say to the breath, thus says the Lord, God, come from the forewinds, oh breath and breathe on these slain that they may live. So I prophesied as he commanded me and the breath came into them and they lived and stood in their feet and exceeding great army. What are the two things that we need? We need God's word and God's breath. Now the Hebrew word for breath is exactly the same word as the word for spirit. And that is what we are being pointed towards here.

When it's talking about the breath coming into these bones, it is talking about the Holy Spirit doing our work, which is made explicit in verse 14. It says, I will put my spirit within you and you shall live. So the two things that we need are God's word and God's spirit. That's how God accomplishes his purposes. In fact, if you look throughout the Bible, you see this again and again and again, the word of God and the spirit of God hand in hand. Go back to the very, very beginning of the Bible. What do you see? This is at the start of creation. The spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters and God said, of course, that word said is introducing the word of the Lord. Word and spirit hand in hand. We see the same thing in the ministry of prophets. The Holy Spirit anointed people to speak the very words of God. Ezekiel's a great example. He spoke to me, as he spoke to me, the spirit entered into me and set me on my feet and I heard him speaking to me.

[21 : 05] God's word, God's spirit. And even Jesus himself said, the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he's anointed me to do what? To proclaim good news to the poor, to speak the words of God.

God accomplishes his purposes through word and spirit and that is reminding us of some vital truths regarding evangelism. In fact, two vital things. First, it shows us that evangelism cannot happen without God. It is his word, his spirit. A church can't grow. People cannot come to faith.

A work of revival cannot happen without God. And that seems so obvious and it is, but it's something that we must never, ever, ever forget because whenever we seek to share the Gospel with anybody, when we seek to reach out as a church, we do that in complete dependence on God.

It's not about me or about anybody else. It's not about the things that we do or don't do or whatever. It is only God who can bring these bones to life. And that's reminding us that we are to be dependent on God, but also that we are to be confident in God because God wants to bring us to life. God wants to bring people to faith and he has promised to build his church. And so the work of evangelism is God's work and whatever we do, whatever you do as a Christian, what we do as a church is done in total and utter dependence on God. That's lesson number one. Evangelism cannot happen without God. But the second thing that this passage shows is this. Evangelism cannot happen without us. That's a vital point that's reinforced in this passage. It is God's word, it is God's spirit, but who is the one doing the talking? It's Ezekiel. Look at verse four.

But then he said to me, prophesy over these bones and say to them, oh dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. See the same thing in verse seven. I prophesied as I was commanded and as I prophesied there was a sound and behold a rattling and the bones came to its together bone to bone. It's the word of the Lord that has been spoken, but it's Ezekiel who's been used to communicate that message.

[23 : 44] And as he spoke, a transformation began and Ezekiel played a vital role in accomplishing God's purposes. And the same pattern can be seen throughout the Old Testament.

God establishes a covenant and Abraham is essential to that taking place. God gives his law and Moses plays a crucial role. God establishes a monarchy and David has a vital part in that process. God builds a temple. He uses Solomon to make it happen. And when God wants to talk to his people, he raises up prophets like Ezekiel to do that work. And that principle sets out how the Church of Jesus Christ works in the New Testament, where God's people play an essential role in God's mission, which is one of the most amazing things about being a Christian, the fact that God uses you to accomplish his purposes. And all of this is being reinforced by the words of Jesus in Matthew chapter nine where he says, he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Now, please notice carefully what that is saying. Jesus doesn't say the field is ready for harvest. We need the word. Nor does he say the field is ready for harvest. We need the spirit.

He says the field is ready. We need laborers. And that's reminding us about a vital point concerning evangelism. If we were asked to the question, what is evangelism first and foremost about? What would you say? What's evangelism first and foremost about? Maybe we'd say conversions, maybe we'd say growth, maybe we'd even say revival.

And those things are all amazing. But do you know the truth is this? Evangelism is first and foremost about obedience. Ezekiel was given a command. He simply obeyed and God did the rest.

And the same truth applies to us. Jesus said, go and make disciples and believe me, Jesus can use every single one of you, every single one of you, Jesus can use. Whether you're an elder in this church, a deacon in this church, a member in this church, or maybe not yet to profess faith in Jesus Christ, God can do amazing things through you if we listen to his voice and follow him. Jesus said, go and make disciples and our response is to obey that great commandment that he has given to us. It's a reminder when it comes to God building his church, we are not spectators. We are co-workers. And you can all play your part in that work. And we are being taught so many wonderful truths regarding our work as a church. Two important practical points arise. First of all, in all of our work as a church, our great goal is to bring people into contact with God's word. When Jesus gave the great commission, he said, go and make disciples, teaching them to observe all that I've commanded you. So teaching people God's words, exposing them to God's word is a vital part of what we try to do. And there's loads of ways we can do that. The most obvious is to bring people to church because here we focus on trying to hear what God is saying through his word. But there's lots of other ways too. You can invite somebody to a Bible study, such as the Ladies Bible Study we've just started or YF Sunday School, any of these things. You can take some along to these things. You can give someone a book.

[27 : 48] You can talk about how the Bible has encouraged you or helped you in your life. And you don't need to go into huge detail, but you can just, if something happens in life, maybe you can say, well, that reminds me of a version of the Bible that I have found so helpful. You can meet up with somebody and talk about the Bible, read the Bible together. And as a church, we engage in all sorts of activities to build up contact with the community around us. That's why things like top thoughts are so important because it's connecting the church with the community. And that's also why it's so important that we as Christians are involved in the community. Notice Ezekiel was among the dry bones. He wasn't up on a hill watching them from afar. He was right in the middle of and our great desire is that through contact with people, we'll grow closer to them and by God's grace, we'll bring them into contact with the word of God. So first and foremost, we want people to hear the voice of God in his word. And of course, that's a reminder that just read your Bible, read even just if it's just a wee bit a day, read your Bible.

But secondly, we need to plead with God that his word will be accompanied by his spirit.

Because both of them are essential to evangelism. And so in practical terms, this week for all of you who are following Jesus Christ on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, you need to go to work, go to school, go to choir, go to the bazaar, go to sunshiners, go to wherever it is that the dry bones are and bit by bit build up contact with these people. And then on Thursday night, we all come back here together so that we can pray and pray and pray and pray that God would do a work in our midst through word and spirit. And always remember that that might take a long time.

Even in this chapter, there was a gradual process involved. See that in these verses seven to 10, Ezekiel started prophesying there was a rattling and a coming together slowly but surely.

We don't actually know how long that took, maybe five minutes, maybe five hours, we don't know how long it took, but it was certainly gradual. And it's a reminder that in the work of evangelism, we are to be patient, but we are to be obedient. We reach out as best we can, and we leave the Lord to do the rest. And the reason I want to say that is as a congregation, don't ever be discouraged.

[30 : 47] Because God is on your side, and God is doing his work. Don't ever be discouraged by the fact that people don't come to church. They can start. Don't ever be discouraged that we're waiting for new members in God's time they will come. We are here to do God's work and God is able.

Always remember this. When was it that Ezekiel began speaking? It was when the bones were still very dry.

Our last question is this. What is the outcome of evangelism? We've seen that God wants to evangelize dry bones. Nobody is excluded, even the people who seem most uninterested. They are the ones that God is looking for. People who are maybe unresponsive, uninterested, yet God is calling these people to himself. And that work of evangelism relies completely on the power of God, the power of his word and the power of his spirit. We play a vital role as avenues through which God's word is spread, but we do that independence upon the spirit of God. But what's the outcome?

What happens when God's word and spirit are at work? Well, I started thinking about this when I was preparing this sermon. And I was just about to write down and say, well, hopefully people will respond. That was what I thought to myself. Well, when God's spirit and God's word come together, we hope that people might respond. And then I realized that I was completely wrong.

Because the incredible truth is not that people might respond to word and spirit. The truth is that when God's word and God's spirit are at work, then people will definitely respond.

[33 : 10] That's what verse 10 to 14 says. So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood in their feet and exceedingly great army. Then he said to me, son of man, 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. Therefore prophesy and say to them, thus says the Lord God, behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my spirit within you. And you shall live.

And I will place you in your land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord. I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord. God says, I have spoken, and I will do it. A vital reminder that God's word will never return unto him void, and God's spirit will always accomplish his purposes.

When word and spirit come together, there is no maybe. Instead, there is an unstoppable work of regeneration where God brings the dead to life. And maybe you are here today and you know exactly what that is like. You know that God is drawing you, that God is speaking to you. And bit by bit, you are realizing that more than anything else, you need Jesus in your life. And it's almost like you just cannot but be drawn to him. You know that you need him. And bit by bit, God is bringing you to himself. If that is your experience today, then just run to Jesus and lean on him and trust in him. And for generation after generation,

God has been bringing dry bones to life. That's why the Church of Jesus Christ is such an amazing encouragement for us. Because do you know the amazing thing about the Church? Every single generation, the Church of Jesus Christ starts with nothing. People aren't born Christians.

Every generation, the Church of Jesus Christ starts with nothing. And yet God is working, and he has been working through his word and spirit to raise a people for himself under generation is raised up and brings the Gospel to a generation that will follow. And a generation is taken home while a new generation is being raised up. But here in our midst, God is raising up another generation of believers calling all of you, all of you to himself. And I just hope that you are all seeing that God just wants you as his generation, as his people, as the ones who are going to stand up for Jesus. And I suppose that's really just the vital question that we have to ask as we go through life. Do we want to be a generation that just lives for nothing?

[36 : 35] Or do we want to be a people who live for Jesus? Because that's what matters more than anything else. And as God raises up, he raises up a people who can serve him because notice that these dry bones were raised up and they became a great army. And that's exactly what you are as Christians, an army of believers who can go out with this Gospel message. And believe me, you can join that army today. You can join that army today. God is calling you. God is waiting for you. We long to see people come to faith in Jesus Christ. We, nothing will be just more amazing to see all of you and people who aren't here coming to trust in Jesus. And to do that, we need to go out with God's Word and we need God to come with us. Isn't that true? We need God's Word and we need God to come with us.

And of course, that's exactly what Jesus has promised. Because he said, go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

And behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. So as you leave here today, as we go into a new week tomorrow, a new working week tomorrow, Jesus is with you and we are living for him. Let's pray.

Father, we pray that you would speak to us all through your Word and that we will be encouraged by the fact that we are not here to do our work. We are not here to accomplish our purposes. And we are not here relying on our own strength. But we are working for you and we are working with you.

And Lord, we are totally dependent on you, but we just thank you so much that you've not forgotten us, not abandoned us. Instead, you've promised that you'll always be with us. And we pray, Lord, that we would all just look to you, that each one of us here would have our trust firmly in Jesus Christ and that you would then use us to go and bring the good news of Jesus to others, because we know and we realise, maybe even more than ever, that we need you in our lives.

[39 : 39] And so have mercy on us and be at work in earnest. In Jesus' name, amen.