



## Week 7: Stones, Bones, and Thrones

### Week 7, Day 1 – Read Ezekiel 36:8-15

#### Understanding the Passage

How sweet this sermon would have sounded to the ears of the exiles! They have been kicked out of their homes, their family lands burned and wasted, their capital city has been reduced to ash, and more Jerusalem refugees are trickling into Babylon by the day. Will their homeland ever be restored? Will they ever go home? The answer is, yes! And the land will be better than ever before.

There are a couple of important points to note from this passage and the verses before it:

1. The nation of Edom was located to the south of Judah in present-day Jordan and the southern part of Israel. Edom is remembered in the Bible as the land where Esau settled. Esau was the brother of Jacob, who was the father of the Israelites. Therefore, Edom and Judah are like sister nations. Their close tribal relationship going back to a common ancestor, Isaac. This should have solidified a close political relationship, making them trusted allies like the U.S. and the U.K. But, when the Babylonians came to beat down Jerusalem's door, Edom was nowhere to be found. Even worse, after Jerusalem fell and the people were driven from their land, the Edomites claimed the now vacant land as their own. They became squatters on the precious land that God had promised to the descendants of Jacob, not Esau. God will not allow this to stand.
2. Ezekiel is prophesying – not to the exiles, but to the land. “But you, *O mountains of Israel...*” The land is the audience, because it is the land that is receiving a blessing. God is blessing the land to be fruitful again, indeed more fruitful than before, so that when the exiles return home, the land will yield more food than ever. Remember that the Babylonians would have burned as much farmland as they could, leaving charred wastelands. But with God's blessing, the land will be resurrected, able to bear new life out of soil that once was dead.

#### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. What are the “lands” that your family holds dear? Has anyone ever threatened those “lands?”
3. God says to the land, “I am for you.” When in your life have you felt beyond doubt that God was for you?
4. Look at verse 13. Why would people of neighboring nations say that Judah's land “devours people” and bereaves the nation of children? Why would Judah's land have a bad reputation?

### Week 7, Day 2 – Read Ezekiel 36:22-36

#### Understanding the Passage

Whereas yesterday's passage was about the blessing of Israel's land, today's passage is about the renewal of Israel's hearts. God will provide for the external needs of the people when they return from exile, giving them

good soil and abundant harvests. He will also work internal change, giving them hearts good for knowing God again.

Yet again, Ezekiel uses one of his favorite sermon illustrations: a heart of stone versus a heart of flesh. Too long have the people kept a heart of stone. A heart that, like rock, is not permeable to God's word, making the people resistant to change and growth. God will remove their stone-hearts and exchange them for flesh-hearts. These are hearts that accept God's word like soil accepts water. These are hearts that thirst for God's word to soak in and cause a change in the people's lives from the inside out.

God will also put a new spirit within the people. Readers of the New Testament will read this as the Holy Spirit, the same one that Jesus predicts in John 14 and sends to the early church in Acts 2. It is clear that Ezekiel believes in God's presence as an invisible spirit among and in the people. The spirit being *in* the people would be a new concept to Ezekiel's audience. Remember, God's dwelling place on earth was the Holy of Holies in the Temple. That was supposed to be *the* location of God's invisible presence. But now God's presence has left the Temple and gone into the people. This means Ezekiel is calling for a new brand of Jewish faith. Sure, God will rebuild the Temple when the exiles return, but they are not to limit God's presence to the Temple. Now God dwells within each of them.

We should also note God's reason for acting in these new ways. It is not for the sake of the people. It is for the sake of God's name. Ezekiel needs the exiles to understand that they have done nothing to deserve God's presence in their lives. To the contrary, their actions should have pushed God away permanently. But, for the sake of God's own goodness and reputation, God will give the people new hearts and bring them home.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. Where else has Ezekiel employed the image of hearts of stone versus hearts of flesh? (Find the chapter and verse!)
3. Do you think Ezekiel believed in the Holy Spirit? Or at least something resembling the Holy Spirit?
4. Why is God wanting to dwell in the hearts of the people a new concept to the exiles?
5. What do you make of God acting for the sake of God's reputation? Does it make God out to be arrogant? Does God have a huge ego? Or is it something else?

### **Week 7, Day 3 – Read Ezekiel 37:1-14**

#### **Understanding the Passage**

Here it is, Ezekiel's signature story. It is the story many Christians and Jews think of when they think of Ezekiel.

The Valley of Dry Bones is a vision, the third of four visions in the book (see chapters 1, 8-11, and 40-48). The second and fourth visions deal with the Temple. In the prior, Ezekiel sees God's presence leave the Temple. In the latter, Ezekiel sees God's presence enter a reconstructed Temple. The first and third visions deal with Ezekiel's calling as a prophet. In the first vision, he is commanded to preach God's word and at all other times he is not preaching, he is to remain silent. In the third vision, he is told to preach to the dead, and his words bring resurrection.

The Spirit transports Ezekiel to a valley, probably the valley in Babylon where the exiles were forced to settle, and the valley is littered with desiccated bare bones. The scene resembles a battlefield strewn with the bodies of fallen soldiers that have been left above ground for many years. Their skeletons have been picked clean by scavengers and the bones are scattered across the valley. The bones represent the physical and spiritual death of the exiles. Physically, many of the exiles have already died in Babylon, leaving meager hope that their children will one day return home. Spiritually, the faith of the exiles is dead. They have abandoned God because they have abandoned hope.

Ezekiel is told to preach to the above-ground dead, and as he does so, the scattered jigsaw puzzle of dry bones begins to move and reassemble. Bone attaches to bone, reforming the skeletons. Muscle and tissue grow instantly. Now there are bodies, or cadavers. Thus, the vision unfolds in two acts: in act one, the bones reassemble and form bodies, almost alive; in act two, breath enters the bodies, and now they are fully alive.

Ezekiel uses the Hebrew word *ruah* eleven times in these fourteen verses. *Ruah* may be translated 'spirit', 'wind', or 'breath'; all three are used in the passage. It is the same word the authors of Genesis use in the first creation story: "the *ruah* of God hovered over the waters." Only when the *ruah* enters the bodies do they live and stand upright. It is the spirit of God that makes the difference between almost alive and fully alive. Without God's spirit, we are zombies at best. Only with God's spirit are we fully human.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. What English words are used for the Hebrew word *ruah* in this passage? How are the English words similar?
3. Summarize the four visions of Ezekiel in your own few words.
4. What is the scene after act one of the story?
5. What is the scene after act two of the story?
6. What are the similarities between this vision and the Easter story?

### **Week 7, Day 4 – Read Ezekiel 37:15-23**

#### **Understanding the Passage**

Ezekiel loves his sermon illustrations. Have you ever seen a preacher hold up an object as a tangible example in the sermon? Maybe it was a bottle of detergent as an illustration of God's cleaning power, or a box fan for the invisible movement of the Spirit. Here, Ezekiel uses two sticks, or twigs, and holds them up in front of his congregation, the exiles, as an image of what God will do when the exiles one day return home.

The sticks represent the two kingdoms of Israel: the Kingdom of Judah (where Ezekiel and the exiles come from, with Jerusalem as its capitol) and the Kingdom of Israel. There was a golden age when the two kingdoms were one, the United Kingdom of Israel, under the reign of Kings Saul, David, and Solomon. But around 930 BC, the kingdoms split in two, with Solomon's sons on two different thrones. The HBO series *Game of Thrones* is an accurate depiction of this piece of Israel's history. It was bloody and as dramatic as any Shakespeare play, family fighting against family. Judah encompassed the territories of the ancient tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The Kingdom of Israel claimed the lands of the tribe of Ephraim, who was one of Joseph's sons. Occasionally, the prophets will call the two kingdoms by the shorthand "Judah and Ephraim" or "Judah and Joseph," in memory of their namesakes.

Ezekiel sees a time when the two kingdoms become one again under one king and one throne. The new golden age will be in the land God had promised to Jacob's descendants forever, meaning the land that Israel and Judah were forced to vacate. In the Old Testament, land is always tied up in God's covenant with the people. You could say that God's covenant with Jacob had three parties: God, Jacob, and the land. Christians, however, will read this passage as a foreshadowing of Christ, a new kind of king who will rule over a new kind of kingdom, and his land will be all creation.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. What are the most vivid sermon illustrations you remember? What impact did those illustrations have on your faith?
3. Who were the three kings of the original United Kingdom of Israel?
4. Who was Ephraim, and why does Ezekiel use his name in this prophecy?

5. Why is it important that Israel be unified? Why does this prophecy matter?
6. Why is it important that the new Israel be in the old Promised Land?

### **Week 7, Day 5 – Read Ezekiel 37:24-28**

#### **Understanding the Passage**

Think back to yesterday's passage, Ezekiel 37:15-23, or simply read it again. That passage and today's, should be read as one unit because together they are one prophecy.

A prophecy is a forecast of the future based on events in the present. Little separates Ezekiel from a meteorologist. He takes a hard look at the truth staring him in the face – like a harsh cold front others may deny is coming, but it is his job to confirm regardless of the people's liking it – and then he speaks a prognosis of what the coming days will look like based on the data presented to him. Ezekiel is a weatherman doomed to forecast bad news because of the weather patterns of the people. They created this cold front, and he is the truth-teller who must remind them that the cold is coming.

But not today. Today Ezekiel is a truth-teller who reminds the people that spring is coming. Yes, they are in the middle of winter, the coldest one on record. Yes, they are in exile, and as far as they can see, exile will continue. But no, it will not last forever. Ezekiel sees a warm front coming! Spring is on the way! Ezekiel sees data that no one else sees, because he, for better or for worse, is God's mouthpiece. God has shown him new signs of the times, new patterns in the folds of history, and they point the way home, the way back to the Promised Land.

The exiles will return to the land God promised to their ancestor, Jacob. God will reaffirm the covenant that he made with King David, that David's reign would have no end. A descendant of David will sit on a new throne over the new United Kingdom of Israel. And even more, the Temple will be rebuilt so all the world may see that God has a dwelling place on earth. Finally, Ezekiel can deliver good news! Christians will see even better news, that a descendant of David is coming, and his kingdom shall have no end.

#### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. Which verse(s) in this passage speak to you the most and why?
2. How is a prophet like a meteorologist?
3. Why must Ezekiel tell the people bad news all the time?
4. Summarize the good news of this prophecy.
5. Why is it important that a descendant of David rule over the new Israel?
6. Why is it important that the Temple will be rebuilt?

#### **Week 7: Questions for Weekly Discussion (based on video lesson, daily readings and reflections, and weekly sermon):**

1. Of the daily Bible readings and reflections from this week, which one hit home for you, or provoked the most thoughts and questions?
2. Why does God have a change of heart regarding Judah's future? What led to this pivot in God's tone?
3. What are the four components, or the four things God will do before Judah returns to the land?
4. Ezekiel spoke several times this week about the Promised Land, its renewal, the exiles return to it, and its importance to Israel. Why is land, and particularly the Promised Land, so essential to Israel?
5. Why is the Spirit being within the people's hearts a new concept for the exiles?
6. Name the four visions Ezekiel has in the book.
7. What is the importance of the Hebrew word *ruah* in Ezekiel 37? Discuss times when God's *ruah* came into your life and raised you up.
8. What does each stick in Ezekiel 37 symbolize? What does their coming together represent?