



Can Dead

As a premillennialist, I believe that Ezekiel's intriguing vision of the valley of dry bones has a future realization in the conversion of national Israel. When Christ returns, the nation will look in saving faith on Him whom they had pierced, and all Israel will be saved. But I also believe in an everlasting gospel whose message and terms will be the same in that future day as they were in the Old Testament dispensation and as they are now. No one enters the kingdom of God without being born again. The first birth, which determines our race and nationality, is never and will never be sufficient for citizenship in God's kingdom. This text, which has prophetic application to Israel, therefore has gospel application for sinners in every age and of every race. The dead must be brought to life by divine intervention or else there is no hope.

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is a picture of redemption and restoration—a picture of spiritual conversion and transformation. It is a picture of the gospel's power to give life to the dead. "When we were dead in sins," God "quickened us [made us alive] together with Christ" (Ephesians 2:5). What Paul expressed in theological proposition, Ezekiel proclaimed with prophetic symbolism. They both preached the gospel—a message of life from death. This text illustrates two essential truths that reveal God as the solution to the sinner's need.

The first lesson is that *sinners are spiritually dead*. Death is a desperate condition. Ezekiel's vision could not have

been a more vivid. As the prophet scanned this valley of death, he did not see corpses, but rather he saw dry and scattered bones—bones that had been picked clean by buzzards and bleached by the sun. This was an eerie scene of utter death: the bones were inactive, insensitive, and unresponsive to any stimuli. Death is not pretty. By showing Ezekiel this ghastly scene of physical death, God was revealing how sin-deadened humanity appeared before Him. By birth and by behavior, men are dead in sin. Sin is both the cause of spiritual death and the sphere of the sinner's corruption. The effect of spiritual death is spiritual inactivity and insensitivity. Sinners are blind and cold—oblivious to the things of God.

Death presents a hopeless prospect; it appears to be irreversible. Yet God asked the prophet, "Can these bones live?" What a question that was! These disjointed bones were so far from life that recovery seemed out of the question. Human reason would demand the answer "No" if anyone other than God had asked the question. What an answer the prophet gave, "O Lord God, thou knowest." The prophet knew that what was humanly impossible was divinely possible. Ezekiel's response of faith was a transition to hope and parallels Paul's remarkable declaration: "But God, who is rich in mercy... even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened up together with Christ" (Ephesians 2:4-5).

This prospect of hope suggests the second lesson: *God imparts spiritual life*. Verses 4-10 focus on both the means and

Bones Live?

Ezekiel 37:1-10

the end of God's gracious provision of life for sinners (regeneration) and establish two important principles. The first principle is that evangelism precedes regeneration. Romans 10 sets the order clearly: faith comes by hearing the word of God and hearing requires the evangelist (see verses 11-17). This is the general call of the gospel. God commanded Ezekiel to preach to the dry bones. Ezekiel had done some strange things in his preaching career, but this perhaps was the strangest. If men are dead and incapable of hearing, why preach? The simple reason is that God has commanded the preaching of the gospel as part of the means whereby He will do His work in saving sinners. There ought not to be any more fervent evangelists than those who believe that God is the sole giver of life. What a privilege it is to be part of the means leading to God's certain purpose. What Ezekiel preached is also instructive. He did not preach a maybe gospel of positive thinking, self-determination, or personal effort; he preached the good news that God would do for dead sinners what they cannot do for themselves (verses 5-6). God's imparting life is always successful and irresistible.

The Lord gave the prophet a sobering, yet encouraging reminder where the real power in preaching derives. When Ezekiel preached, things began to happen. The bones began to move, and they fitted themselves together. Flesh appeared. Preaching was able to make a difference on the outside, but not on the inside. The disjointed skeletons looked better. Now

they were corpses—they were still dead (verses 7-8). It is sobering to realize that preachers by the power of logic or presentation may motivate reform in sinners, but they cannot implant life. It is encouraging to preach with the assurance that the inner work belongs to the Lord.

The second key principle is that the Holy Spirit accomplishes regeneration. Whereas preachers issue the general call of the gospel, the Spirit of God applies the effectual call by implanting life in the sinner enabling him to believe and repent. Ezekiel preached to the wind (the word for Spirit), and when the Spirit accompanied the word applying it to the corpses, life ensued. The corpses stood up as a great army, full of vigor and life. That's what happens every time the Holy Spirit breathes spiritual life into dead sinners. The work of regeneration never fails.

The application of the valley of dry bones is full of hope. Dead bones *can* live when God takes hold of them. Sinners, therefore, should take hope. They do not need to despair of having to work up that which is impossible for them; they have only to come to Christ. Coming to Christ is the sure evidence of the Spirit's giving life. Saints, therefore, should eagerly tell sinners of this good news and pray that the Holy Spirit will accompany the Word and move sinners to salvation. We should pray that the valley of dry bones will be transformed to the valley of life. ■

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