

“Resurrection Power Now”
Ezekiel 37:1-14
April 20, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

Our focus on Easter Sunday is often on the future implications of the resurrection of Jesus. Those implications are many, and they are wonderful. Because Jesus has been raised from the dead, the bodies of all who follow him will also be raised into immortality. We will live with material bodies in a material world, a new earth liberated from the curse that came with Adam’s sin. We will have the same identity as we do now, but we will also be radically different. We will become what God had in mind all along when he made humanity—those who love God supremely and those who love one another easily and naturally. And we will live in community with all those who have followed Jesus, including friends and loved ones who have died before us and who we miss so much.

As wonderful as these future implications of Jesus’ resurrection are, they are not the full story. The resurrection of Jesus also makes a difference in our present lives. The power that raised Jesus from the dead starts the process of new life now. Hearts that were dead to God and filled with despair and hopelessness are given new life. The new life of Jesus starts now, not just at some point in the future. Have you experienced anything of that new life?

This is easily the most well-known passage in Ezekiel. On the surface, it’s an easy passage to understand. In a vision, Ezekiel is shown a valley filled with dry bones. God tells him to preach to the bones, and he begins immediately to hear the bones come together, with flesh and skin added. He is told to preach again, this time to the breath or wind instead of the bones, and the corpses come to life as a great army. But this is just a description of what happens, and leaves unaddressed the more significant question of what these events mean. But the text itself, in verses 11-14, is quick to interpret the vision. The bones represent **“the whole house of Israel”** (v. 11). Because of their sin, they are in exile in Babylon. But God promises, **“I will bring you into the land of Israel”** (v. 12).

These events happened over 2600 years ago. What possible relevance could they have to us? The relevance lies in seeing exile as a common result of sin. The Babylonian exile of Israel and Judah was clearly a result of their sin. Exile or banishment is older than that. After the sin of Adam and Eve, they were expelled from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:24), which brought the entire human race into exile from its original home. Sin takes us into exile, and this passage unveils God’s plan for taking us home. In essence, it requires a new birth.

I. The Necessity of New Birth

In his vision, God takes Ezekiel by the hand, and the two of them go on a walk through a valley filled with human bones. It is a scene of unimaginable devastation, and would have been particularly disturbing to Ezekiel. He was a priest, and priests were not allowed even to touch a human corpse. There are three things Ezekiel noted about these bones. First, there were very many of them. An entire valley was full of bones, and I don't think we make a mistake in inferring from the text that it took Ezekiel some time just to walk around them so as to grasp how extensive this pile of bones really was. Second, he says that they were very dry. The scavenging animals such as the hyenas and vultures long ago completed their work of eating any of the soft tissue remaining on the corpses. Now the sun has bleached them to a state of complete dryness. The result of this would be that the human skeletons were no longer intact. This is just an immense pile of human bones, about as far from being in recognizable human form as imaginable. The third thing Ezekiel notices was probably the most alarming to him, though it is easily missed by modern readers. He notices that the bones were on the "surface" of the valley. In other words, they had not been properly buried. Here's what Christopher Wright says about this.

Proper burial was of paramount importance in ancient near-eastern cultures—not just for the sake of the bereaved..., but for the sake of the deceased also. To be deprived of burial was the final insult, the ultimate degradation. To be unburied meant the perpetuation of suffering into the afterlife. It was a destiny fit only for the truly cursed. Indeed, it was one aspect of the fate decreed for Israel under the covenant curses. These bones, then, are not just evidence of death, but of death under curse. These bones proclaim that their 'owners' had been the victims not only of battle, but also of divine judgment (p. 304).

This is the condition of Israel in exile, and it is also our natural condition as sinners. It is the consistent testimony of Scripture that in our natural state we are all just like this valley of dry bones. Paul says it like this: **"You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked"** (Eph. 2:1-2). Jesus taught the same thing, as indicated by a conversation he had one day with one of Israel's most religious men, a man named Nicodemus. **"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God"** (John 3:3). His problem was such that nothing less radical than a new birth was needed. As Ezekiel testified, only God can bring such life. When God asked him if the bones could live, he could only answer, **"O Lord God, you know."**

There is no help for any of us until we accept this diagnosis of our sinful condition. The natural state into which each of us is born is that of spiritual death. In our natural state, we are like the tin man in *The Wizard of Oz*. The movie was based on a book by L. Frank Baum entitled *The Wonderful Wizard of*

Oz. If you've seen the movie, you remember the tin man who had no heart. But the movie leaves out how he came to have no heart. The Tin Woodman had once been a real man who was in love with the beautiful Munchkin maiden. His dream was to make her his wife, which he planned on doing as soon as he could earn enough money to build a cottage in the woods. But the Wicked Witch hated his love and cast a spell upon him that made him injure himself with his ax. One by one he lost his limbs to his cursed ax. But whenever he did, the skilled tinner would make him an artificial limb. At first, that seemed to be a good thing, because it allowed him to work more quickly and earn more money. He was half machine and half human. He had a heart of deep love for the Munchkin maiden and arms and legs that could work tirelessly.

I thought I had beaten the Wicked Witch then, and I worked harder than ever; but I little knew how cruel my enemy could be. She thought of a new way to kill my love for the beautiful Munchkin maiden, and made my axe slip again, so that it cut right through my body, splitting it into two halves. Once more the tinner came to my help and made me a body of tin. Fastening my tin arms and legs and head to it, by means of joints, so that I could move around as well as ever. But alas! I now had no heart, so that I lost all my love for the Munchkin girl, and did not care whether I married her or not.

Once he lost his heart to love, he became proud of the way he could chop wood and the way his tin gleamed brightly in the sun. The only problem he had was the danger of rust. One day, he forgot to carry his oil can with him and he was caught in a rain storm and soon rusted so thoroughly that he became frozen until Dorothy and the scarecrow found him. He had been rusted for a year, and said that during that time, he had the opportunity to think deeply about his life. He realized that the greatest loss he had experienced was the loss of his heart, and now he wanted a new heart.

Can you accept that your heart is just like these dry bones? Perhaps you're thinking, "It's not as bad as that. Sure, I have my problems and challenges in life, but I'm not so bad off as a pile of dry bones." So let me ask you, is there any love for God in your heart? If your heart is dead to God, you have been cut off from the source of all life. Like a branch that's been severed from the tree, you may still look like you're alive, but the severing will progressively make itself known in dryness, rot and disintegration. Such is our natural state.

II. The Means of New Birth

God doesn't show Ezekiel this devastating scene of judgment and destruction in order to leave him in despair. Rather, he is preparing to address the situation by bringing life to these dead bones. God asked Ezekiel to preach to the bones. He was to say, **"O 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” (v. 5). That’s it? No wild histrionics or secret incantations? Ezekiel did as he was told, with the result that the bones began to stir. There was movement among the bones as they began to reconnect to a human skeletal form. And connecting tissue was added to them, followed by flesh and skin. Who could have predicted that preaching should have such an effect?

The situation has progressed from a pile of unconnected bones to full human-like bodies. But notice that they are still nothing but corpses lying on the ground. It looks like another round of feasting for the vultures and hyenas. But God is not yet done, and Ezekiel is not yet done. He is told next to preach again, this time to the wind or breath, commanding it to hear God’s word to come and breathe on the corpses that they might live. He does so, and they become living creatures once again.

What is the significance of these events? I think it is twofold. First, this two-stage process of coming to life is intended to imitate the Genesis account of the creation of humanity. We read in Genesis 2 that God first formed the man and then breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. The two-stage process in Ezekiel 37 is intended to be a rerun of the original creation because God is saying that he is creating a new humanity through a second creation. It is a new birth.

The second significance of this is to suggest the manner of this new birth. It is accomplished by the word of God, by prayer and most significantly, by the Holy Spirit. There is one Hebrew word in our passage that translates three English words: spirit, wind and breath. It is the Hebrew word for the Holy Spirit and is a picture word. It is the word *ruah*, a word that pictures air moving vigorously, even violently. It is a picture word because the pronunciation of the word requires a massive exhaling of one’s breath. The “u” vowel requires more breath than any other vowel. The Holy Spirit comes as God’s wind to accomplish the miracle of new birth, in accompaniment with God’s word and with prayer.

It is the word of God and the Spirit of God that is used of God today to bring life where there was deadness. The word of God today says, **“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved”** (Acts 16:31). When we come to Jesus, the Spirit of God comes and brings life where there was death. I heard this week the story of Brian Welch, formerly the lead guitarist for a band known as Korn. He told how his band had achieved the success he thought he always wanted. He had all the money and fame he wanted. But he also had a drug problem with crystal meth. His wife had died of a drug overdose, and he had said that he couldn’t understand how she could let that happen. But then the drug took control of him. He had a young daughter whom he loved, and for her sake he wanted to overcome his drug addiction. One day his real estate agent asked him if he had ever heard of Matthew 11:28. **“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”** He thought a lot about the

verse and two weeks later agreed to go with his real estate agent to church. The pastor there told him that he needed to receive Jesus, and he went home and did just that. When he did so, he felt for the first time the love of God, and he realized that everything he had always wanted was found in Jesus, not in fame, drugs, money or sex. He was a new creature, throwing away all his drugs and then quitting his band so he could stay home and raise his daughter.

III. The Result of New Birth

Did you notice that when these bones come to life that they form an army (v. 10)? They don't become a social club or a debating club, but an army. One result of the new birth is that you're either a soldier in the army or a corpse. This army is to march back to Jerusalem with a mission, and their mission is to be that of extending this new creation, the new birth, to all the nations. This is clearly taught in the New Testament. So when the resurrected Jesus comes to his disciples in a locked room, we read that Jesus breathed on them and said, **"Receive the Holy Spirit"** (John 20:22). They were then empowered as this army to go forth and bring new life by the ministry of the word, prayer, and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

This miracle of bringing life out of dry bones has continued to occur throughout history. Let me tell you the story of one of these new births. On a September evening in 1931, C. S. Lewis had a discussion with his friend, J. R. R. Tolkien (author of *The Lord of the Rings*), about Christianity. Lewis was not yet a follower of Christ, though he had been wrestling for quite some time with Christianity. On the next day after his discussion with Tolkien, God would grant him the miracle of new birth. He was riding a bus on the way to the zoo. Here's how Lewis described what happened.

I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven into Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. And yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion. "Emotional" is perhaps the last word we can apply to some of the most important events. It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with a simple application from John 1:12-13. **"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."**