

Sermon Series: Breath and Living Water

#1 Life-giving God Ezekiel 37:1-14

Are you someone who likes watching Horror Movies? I'm a bit strange, I think. I like a good horror movie. I even like a *bad* horror movie. I even like watching them on my own, on a dark windy, stormy night.

When I was younger, I was very easily spooked. I couldn't watch such movies without hiding behind my hands. But some scientists suggest that watching a scary movie can be good for you. Dr Paul Barry says, "A **certain degree of fear is good** for you because it helps us to survive. Horror movies are satisfying because they're **fictional** - we distance ourselves from the events and can build resilience for when real scares come along in life.

Well, I don't know about that! But I do know that, as in our reading from The Book of Ezekiel chapter 37 today, the prophet's horror story was designed to **wake up his audience** with vivid language fit for a screenplay in a **scary cinema**. In verses 1 and 2 we read:

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley¹; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. (Ezek. 37:1-2)

Ezekiel was a captive along with other exiled Jews in the 6th C BC, under the superpower Babylon. Israel and Judah were both now decimated. The temple itself, in Jerusalem, was destroyed, and the land overtaken by invaders. God's people of the promise,² God's covenant people now **appeared completely crushed, beyond repair, and everyone knew it**: The Israelites knew it. The Babylonians knew it. Other enemies of Israel, such as those later to be known

¹ Literally, a "plain". Was it the same plain of Ezekiel's first vision?

² God's promise to Abram marks the origins of the people that would be known as Israel (Genesis 12)

as "Samaritans" and the ancient Egyptians knew too that Israel was as good as dead. Even Ezekiel himself must have thought the same.³

The vision God gave the prophet **must have scared the life out of him!**

Erin Lyyc, writing recently of a visit to an archaeological site in Peru noted how on approaching the site from the air, "against the parched Andean earth she could see **flecks of brilliant white.**" Upon drawing closer she saw what looked like thousands of **white pebbles.** Woven among them were what looked like **scraps of cotton** bleached by decades of blinding sun, and piles of what appeared to be "broken sticks". After landing, and finally walking across the plain, she was horrified to discover that the white shards getting caught in her sandals were **bones** lying in one of the largest graveyards in Latin America.⁴

God gave Ezekiel a **shocking vision** to share with his own people. He was surrounded by **signs of death**, in fact, people **long dead.** Verse 2 says, "their bones were very dry" (Ezek. 37:2).

Verses 3-6 reveal Ezekiel's conversation with God...

He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you [alone] know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on 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" (Ezek. 37:3-6)

Another prophet, **Jeremiah**, a contemporary of Ezekiel, had declared that when Babylon invaded Judah it would **be a time when they would "bring out the bones"** of all the Israelites (Jer. 8:1-2) and a time when those bones would be strewn out in the sun (Jer. 7:9,31-33).

³ Remember that in this part of history we read of nations that have died: The Canaanites, the Midianites, the Philistines, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, these nations that no longer exist. Ezekiel must have been thinking that Israel was going to face a similar fate?

⁴ Chauchilla Cemetery, Peru

It was a humiliating thing for the body of an ancient Hebrew person not to be washed, wrapped, and buried with dignity. To be left lying on a battlefield as food for vultures, left to bleach in the sun was truly horrific.

God had warned Israel over and over that such a shameful demise lay ahead of them should they continue their **self-centred** and **idolatrous journey**, despite all God's goodness to them.⁵

When I was young, I loved to watch "Epic Theatre" on Sunday afternoons on TV. My favourite movie was **Jason and the Argonauts**. This ancient Greek road movie thrilled and scared the audience – and I most remember those pre-CGI, **stop-motion skeletons** coming to life and jerkily chasing down the hero with that terrifying noise of **rattling bones** and **chattering teeth**.

But, unlike so many horror movies, see how the **story in Ezekiel turns quickly to hope**. In vss. 7 – 10 we read...

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.

The Bible is not trying to compete with today's popular Zombie movies. It's not the living dead that God has in mind here. Note the **second stage** that Ezekiel is told is essential to God's plan... In vss. 9&10 we read of **God's Spirit** at work:

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: 'Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.'" I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

The "four winds" mentioned in verse 9, like our saying of the four corners of the earth, points to **new life** in the old dry bones as being God's work **in**

⁵ Deut. 28:15, 25-26

totality – from **beginning to end**. God is the **life-giver**. God’s Spirit is the divine **agent of life where there was once only death**.

Behind the English words: “breath”, “breathe”, “wind”, and (in verses 1 and 14) “spirit”, lies just the **one Hebrew word *ruah***.

Likewise, in the New Testament, the ancient Greek word ***pneuma*** used by Jesus has similar flexible range when describing the work of God’s Holy Spirit.

Jesus said to the teacher named Nicodemus in John 3:8, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

The idea of God’s Spirit, **active and bringing and sustaining new life** where there was once death, **unseen**, yet powerful is **not a new invention** of Jesus.

Jesus emphasised the essential new life of the Spirit, when in John 20:22 it says he **breathed** on his disciples and said, “receive the Holy Spirit.” Not very Covid-safe in our time, but you get the idea!

In the same way, the rather **shocking images** used by the Apostle Paul about being **dead in our transgressions** but **made alive** in Christ⁶ are **not his own inventions** but rooted in the prophecies of Scripture long ago.

How should you and I respond to Ezekiel’s vision? I’m not keen for you to watch horror movies, really! As Shirley Straughan once rightly pointed out, Horror Movie (is) right there on my TV. We see enough evidence of human sin, of the living dead on our news feeds. The need for **new life** and **hope** is equally before us day by day.

Verses 11-14 of Ezekiel 37 make it clear that the immediate goal of the prophecy was to see ancient Israel’s southern and northern kingdoms **united, restored and made alive again**.⁷ But while Jerusalem was later partially restored in a physical sense, no evidence of spiritual life and renewal can be

⁶ E.g. Ephesians 2:1-6

⁷ At the time of Ezekiel’s prophecy, a small group had returned to the land, and later a larger remnant would do so too.

found. Not until a day long after Israel's further demise, when Jesus Christ appeared on the scene, did the world see in Him the fulfilment of prophet's words in an ultimate sense, and the presence of God's life-giving Spirit among all the people, raising them up.⁸

Our response should be to **connect the dots** between Ezekiel's prophecy and the hope we have in Jesus Christ today. We should **gladly welcome** the Spirit of God into these bodies of flesh and bones to generate in our lives hope, to express through us God's love for others, and in the end, to raise us up with Christ to eternal life.

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⁸ See Acts chapter 2

Biblical Text

37 The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it **was full of bones**. ² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³ He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” ⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath^[a] to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath^[b] in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ I looked, and 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, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath:^[c] Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath,^[d] and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” ¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹ Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ ¹² Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.”

Comment

We see here in Ezekiel 37 three **identifying marks** of a true **prophet** that we also witness in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth:

1. Ezekiel **demonstrates faith in God** in the **face of great adversity**. He says to God, "you alone know" (vs. 3, compare Matt. 26:39)
2. A second identifying mark of the true prophet is **declaring the Word of God** with authority to the people, saying, "Hear the word of the Lord" (vs. 7, compare Luke 4:18)
3. Thirdly, a true prophet's word **comes to pass**⁹ (vs. 10, compare Luke 4:18)

Ezekiel's vision in 37:1-14 even "proves" the authenticity of another prophet, Jeremiah, who described what would happen to God's people when Babylon invaded as a time when they "shall bring out the bones" of all the Israelites (Jer. 8:1-2) which shall be strewn out in the sun (Jer. 7:9,31-33).

⁹ E.g. Deut. 18:22