

The Book of Ezekiel: Introduction

Sometimes, we might feel like our old testament prophet, Ezekiel. Here he was ready to serve. Before this chapter, Ezekiel predicted that God would give judgment on God's people. There was a battle being waged and Ezekiel was taken hostage into the land of Babylon.¹ This is the setting that the book opens in is important to remember as we read this section of scripture.

The people in captivity, Ezekiel included, would have felt abandoned and out of breath. Earlier in the Book of Ezekiel, he had been given a dream that came true: the defeat of Israel. When the reading takes place, Ezekiel likely feels out of breath. As though his world has been turned upside down. This is a relatable feeling.

Back to Ezekiel

The Prophet Ezekiel also had plans in his life, It is easy to empathize with this prophet: he is far away and on the day that would have been his priestly ordination he is left without much hope. The vision that Ezekiel recalls seems to have almost a feeling of lost to the point where what is depicted in Ezekiel's vision is nothing short of a horrific battlefield scene where Ezekiel witnessed the leftovers from a defeat, "a great many bones on the floor of the valley."² God brought Ezekiel to the point of destruction: to the lowest valley possible. God did not lead God's people to destruction, rather God was going to show Ezekiel what happened at his lowest point. Here, as God and Ezekiel stand together, they witness what we would intellectually assume is impossible.³ Ezekiel is not witnessing merely corpses, instead he is seeing raw bones. This moment feels without redemption. What possible next step could Ezekiel take?

However, this book is not one where all is lost. It is important to remember that where God exists there is nothing that cannot be overcome.

God can show us the good even in the deepest valley and the lowest moments of life. God is hope.

On this important date, when Ezekiel should be a priest in a temple that lays in ruins, God has given a vision to Ezekiel to give him hope. While Ezekiel is enmeshed in his vision he hears God command him to prophesy to the bones. My friends in Christ, what is the point of this exercise? I have heard preachers describe preaching to congregations that do not respond, however, those parishioners were not actually dead. God is using a metaphor with Ezekiel in this moment and telling him that just as he brings the bones to life so will God breathe new life into Israel. There has certainly been a break between God and God's people. The break was something that Ezekiel could not understand.

The difficulty that Ezekiel finds himself in is clear: he must preach to a crowd that could not understand him. As the tie begins to turn, Ezekiel recognizes how each part of each bone comes together as his prophecy begins. God is using God's prophet to bring new life into what feels as though it is dead. This is a bit of foreshadowing for us as Christians as well, when the resurrection of the dead takes place, we too shall come together in a way that seems unimaginable. Then and now God through Ezekiel is bringing hope to the hopeless.⁴

That word, breath, can also be translated as Spirit. Listening to God at the beginning of the text, we see that God can see new life even through the anger God feels at the betrayal of God's people. They had abandoned God's temple long before God. Still, God wants to be gentle

¹ Bible Project. Ezekiel Part One. <https://youtu.be/R-CIPu1nko8>

² Ezekiel 37:2

³ Hilber, J. (2019). *Ezekiel: A Focused Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*. Eugene: Cascade Books.

⁴ Ezekiel: Explanatory Notes & Commentary

through all of the difficulty. In reading the passage the two verses that are parallel to each other stand out: “Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live....O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil...”⁵ Friends, it is impossible to live without God’s breath; God’s Spirit. God is telling Ezekiel that not all is lost. On what should have been his ordination as a priest, there is still hope for Israel. This message carries on today. For me, as a Christian, that hope was fulfilled in the message of Jesus.

Gospel tie in

In the same way that our Old Testament Prophet was hopeless, so were the women in our New Testament. Their brother had recently died. They knew destruction and death was upon them.

All that hope that they had put in Jesus had been dismantled. Jesus has of course given them six signs before Lazarus’ resurrection paired with statements about who Jesus is to all of them, yet still doubt remains. It feels as though with the loss of Lazarus those in Jesus’ camp feel hopeless.⁶ They are looking for a new breath as well. A new Spirit. This passage in the Gospel where new life is being breathed into Lazarus reminds Christians that we can find new life where things have begun to decay and decompose to the point of stinking.

Prayer as tool

There is still a point where we must do our diligent work as Christians though, we are not able to simply abandon our life to God. Sometimes as parishioners, our church life feels as though there is no hope. The obstacles in our place seem too big. We might lack the words we need to find life in Christ. It is at this moment that we invite God into our lives so that we may honestly unburden the self before the Lord.⁷ These moments allow God’s gentle Spirit an easier time of taking hold so that new life can begin.

What to do next

God has given a gift through the first reading and Gospel text this morning: a promise of a new life. In horrific detail the dead were described to the point of smell. These details left the hearers with no question of what point was being made: the only hope can be found in God alone. Also, the point was clear that it was not merit based.

God is merciful. Jesus did not just breathe new life into his friend, Lazarus. Long before that, God breathed new life into those who fought on the wrong side, those who fought well, those who fought poorly. Grace is not merit based; it is open to all who love God.⁸ This message brings us to our days when being afraid and lost feels second nature. Rather than relying on God it is easy to turn to despair. Yet, in this text there is an invitation to always search for Jesus. Whenever you feel as though you are at the lowest point, alone and abandoned, or feeling as though decaying our hope can be found in Christ alone. Amen.

⁵ Ezekiel 37: 5, 14

⁶ Bashaw, J.B. (2023) <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-111-45-7>

⁷ McCauley, E. (2018). *Lent: The Season of Repentance and Renewal*. Westmont: InterVarsity Press.

⁸ Carvalho, C. (2023). <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/vigil-of-easter-2/commentary-on-ezekiel-371-14-8>