

**Ezekiel**  
Week 19  
*Resurrection of Dry Bones*  
Chapter 37

**Valley of Dry Bones (37:1-14)**

This is not the first time that the Spirit has led him out into “a valley” (37:1); this location also provided the backdrop for the prophet’s vision of God’s glory in 3:22. However, this time the sight that greets him is a scene of total desolation: The valley is full of bones, bones that are many in number and very dry in nature (37:2). But even “Death Valley” must be swallowed up in victory as Ezekiel sees the Lord fulfill in visionary form the promise of 36:27 to put his vivifying Spirit within his people.

The statement that “the hand of the Lord was upon me” (v. 1) links this vision together with the prophet’s other visions (1:3; 3:14; 8:1; 40:1), inviting us to view this scene in their light. In the light of 3:22–23, it becomes clear that the valley was not just a random geographical location but a valley in exile. Yet, viewing the vision in the light of chapters 40–48 suggests the significance of the fact that it is a *valley*: The valley in exile forms the ultimate contrast to the “very high mountain” within the land of Israel (40:2). It is the place of death, from which Israel must be delivered before they can be brought into the land of life. This contrast is underlined by the verbs of motion by which the prophet is transported: He is “brought out” (Hiphil of *yāšā*) to the valley of death in 37:1 but “brought in” (Hiphil of *bō*) to the land of life in 40:2.<sup>1</sup>

The valley of dry bones was emblematic of an old battlefield where the slain soldiers were left on the field where they fell. After years of scavenger animals, decay, and the bleaching action of the sun, all that now remains are bleached white bones scattered across the field. The point is that these people are really, really dead.<sup>2</sup>

The Lord’s question to the prophet, “Son of man, can these bones live?” (Ezek. 37:3a), seems redundant. Certainly, by the power of God corpses have been resuscitated before this in Israel, but only shortly after death, before decomposition occurred (1 Kings 17:17–24; 2 Kings 4:18–37; 13:21). It seems as if the prophet’s earlier question, “Will you completely destroy the remnant of Israel?” (Ezek. 11:13), has now been answered in the affirmative. God’s people have been utterly destroyed for their sin. The covenant curses have been executed and the corpses of the slain left unburied. No life remains in the bones. End of story.

Recognizing the sovereign power of God, however, the prophet is unwilling to give a negative answer. Rather, he turns the question back to God: “O Sovereign Lord, you alone

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<sup>1</sup> Duguid, I. M. (1999). *Ezekiel* (p. 426). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>2</sup> Hays, J. D. (2010). *Message of the prophets: a survey of the prophetic and apocalyptic books of the Old Testament* (p. 225). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

know” (37:3b). In view of the overwhelming outpouring of God’s wrath, he cannot answer, “Of course, Lord.” Since the destruction of Jerusalem, which was the just judgment on her sins, there can be no “of course.” God certainly has the power to bring the dry bones back to life; the question remains as to whether it is his will to do so. That question is swiftly answered in the affirmative: God wills that the dry bones shall indeed live.

The second question to be answered is then, “How shall these bones live?” The means by which that regeneration is brought about is through an infusion of the Spirit (*rûah*) in response to the prophetic word. Thus, Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the bones and require them to listen to the word of the Lord; in response, the Lord will make breath (*rûah*) enter them and bring them back to life, not as ghostly skeletons but as living flesh (37:5–6). Then the bones will know God’s lordship.<sup>3</sup>

Here Ezekiel promises his brothers, rendered hopeless by the misfortunes of Judah (v 11), a renewal as extraordinary as it was unexpected (vv 1, 10, 11, 14): out of bones from which all life has disappeared, God’s spirit creates an immense army! This is not an instance of a resurrection, as later Jewish (Pharisaic) and Christian traditions would envision it, but rather a case of Ezekiel, unlike Hosea’s contemporaries, describing an event which he had witnessed in his vision, grounded not in a naturalistic kind of mysticism but in the traditional Yahwistic teaching as this stands out in bold relief from Gen 2:7 on (Isa 42:5; Ps 104:29–30; Job 33:4). As was the case with man’s creation, so the resurrection would take place in two stages: the scattered bones are first brought back together and then flesh and skin are added to the skeletons to form bodies, which lack only the breath of life (vv 7–8; cf. Gen 2:7a); then, at the summons of the “spirit” or of “the breath,” the dead rise up, like an acted-out parable, to testify to the renovation of Israel (vv 9, 10, and 14).<sup>4</sup>

The word *rûah* occurs ten times in Ezek. 37:1–14, a fact obscured by the necessity of using three different English words to translate it (wind/spirit/breath), and reference to *rûah* in verses 1 and 14 form an *inclusio*.<sup>5</sup>

Like the creation of the first *’ādām* in Genesis 2, which was a two-stage process involving first his formation and then his filling with the breath of life, so the re-creation of this mighty army is a two-stage process of forming and filling.

In summary, then, this passage is about the divine work of re-creating Israel through the prophetic word and Spirit. Though God’s people have been justly judged and handed over into the realm of death for their sins, so that, humanly speaking, there is now no hope for them, yet God can bring life out of death. Because of his wrath, their death is real; because of his grace and his sovereign will to have a people of his own, however, their future prospect of life may be equally real.

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<sup>3</sup> Duguid. 426-427

<sup>4</sup> Martin-Achard, R. (1992). *Resurrection: Old Testament*. In D. N. Freedman (Ed.), T. Prendergast (Trans.), *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (Vol. 5, p. 682). New York: Doubleday.

<sup>5</sup> Duguid.

For what is in view here, as the connections back to Ezek. 36:24–38 make clear, is something more than political autonomy for the descendants of Abraham. It is nothing short of the fulfillment of all Old Testament anticipations of eschatological fullness, all of which are fulfilled in Christ. It is in him that the new Spirit-filled Israel of God takes shape, an identity that is no longer governed by ethnic origins and circumcision, as the old Israel was, but rather by faith in the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:12–16).<sup>6</sup>

It is our teaching, faith, and confession that in spiritual matters man's understanding and reason are blind and that he understands nothing by his own powers, as it is written in 1 Cor. 2:14, "The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them" when he is examined concerning spiritual things.

Likewise we believe, teach, and confess that man's unregenerated will is not only turned away from God, but has also become an enemy of God, so that he desires and wills only that which is evil and opposed to God, as it is written, "The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." Likewise, "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot."<sup>4</sup> As little as a corpse can quicken itself to bodily, earthly life, so little can man who through sin is spiritually dead raise himself to spiritual life, as it is written, "When we were dead through our trespasses, he made us alive together with Christ." Therefore we are not of ourselves "sufficient to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God" (2 Cor. 3:5).

God the Holy Spirit, however, does not effect conversion without means; he employs to this end the preaching and the hearing of God's Word, as it is written that the Gospel is a "power of God" for salvation; likewise, that faith comes from the hearing of God's Word (Rom. 10:17). It is God's will that men should hear his Word and not stop their ears. The Holy Spirit is present with this Word and opens hearts so that, like Lydia in Acts 16:14, they heed it and thus are converted solely through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, for man's conversion is the Spirit's work alone.<sup>7</sup> (FC.I.II)

### **A Reunified Kingdom (37:15-28)**

The sign-act involves the prophet's taking two sticks, each of which he is to inscribe with a name (37:16). One is to be designated "Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him" (i.e., the southern kingdom), while the other is to bear the message, "Ephraim's stick, belonging to Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him" (i.e., the northern kingdom). Strictly speaking, the two rivals for first place among Jacob's sons are Judah and Joseph; hence the proper designation of the sticks as "Belonging to Judah/belonging to Joseph." Historically, however, the rivalry had become essentially a struggle between (the tribes of) Judah and Ephraim, who was Joseph's younger son and the dominant tribe in the northern part of Israel. For that reason, after the schism at the time of Rehoboam, the northern kingdom based in Samaria is frequently referred to as "Ephraim." This historical reality is reflected in the description of the second stick as "Ephraim's stick."

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<sup>6</sup> Duguid. 430

<sup>7</sup> Tappert, T. G. (Ed.). (1959). *The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (p. 470). Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press.

Not only will the events of recent history be reversed, as has been the focus of Ezekiel 34–37 so far; in addition, the events of much earlier history will be undone. The divided kingdom will once again be undivided. The key word in this section is the word “one” (*’eḥād*), which occurs ten times. Unlike chapter 34, then, the mention of “my servant David” focuses not so much on the nature of the leader as on his significance as the foundation of unity. Just as David had earlier welded the disparate tribes into a united kingdom, so this new David will bring about renewed unity: one kingdom under one king (37:22).

Because the work of purification and reunification is the Lord’s, so also the glory will be his. Just as the destruction of the temple and the scattering of the people led to the Lord’s name being profaned among the nations, so also the permanent restoration of the sanctuary to Israel’s midst will result in the nations’ recognizing that the Lord has endowed his people with a new level of holiness (37:28). The significance of the temple’s restoration as crowning blessing, then, is this: It is objective evidence of the successful completion of the Lord’s purposes to make for himself a holy people, a purpose announced already in 36:27 as the expected result of the outpouring of the Lord’s Spirit. The enduring existence of the temple is a marker of that transforming work, for the sanctuary can only exist securely forever in the midst of a thoroughly sanctified community.<sup>8</sup>

This chapter (and with it the section comprising chs. 34–37) closes with the prospect of renewed Israel’s living at peace within their own land (37:26). This is the necessary precondition for the final onslaught of the forces of evil in chapters 38–39, in which God will demonstrate his power and commitment to his people by decisively rescuing them from their enemies. However, it is also the necessary prerequisite for the temple building plan of chapters 40–48.

In Deuteronomy 12:10, the Lord promised to give rest to his people from their enemies all around them in the land, after which it would be time to build the central sanctuary. In accordance with that command, “after the Lord had given [David] rest”, he started to think about building a temple for the Lord in Jerusalem. Similarly, once the new, united Israel has been settled (Hiphil of *nwh*) in the land (Ezek. 37:14) and is at peace, then the nation’s thoughts will naturally turn to temple building. Thus the promise of the Lord’s sanctuary in the midst of his settled people is a fitting capstone to the prophecies of restoration. Though her enemies will once more descend on her (chs. 38–39), it is so that they may be defeated by the Lord, who will then establish his final temple (chs. 40–48).

Ezekiel’s vision of God’s presence in the midst of his people is different from both the Tabernacle of Moses or the Temple of Solomon: It revolves around the establishment of a *sanctuary* (*miqdāš*), a place where they experience and respect God’s holiness. It is the symbol of a holy God living in the midst of a holy people. This theme will emerge more clearly in the detailed description of the temple in Ezekiel 40–48, but it is adumbrated already in 37:28, where it is announced that the nations will come to recognize that the Lord sanctifies (*m<sup>e</sup>qaddēš*) Israel when his sanctuary (*miqdāš*) is among them forever.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Duguid. 436–437

<sup>9</sup> Duguid. 438