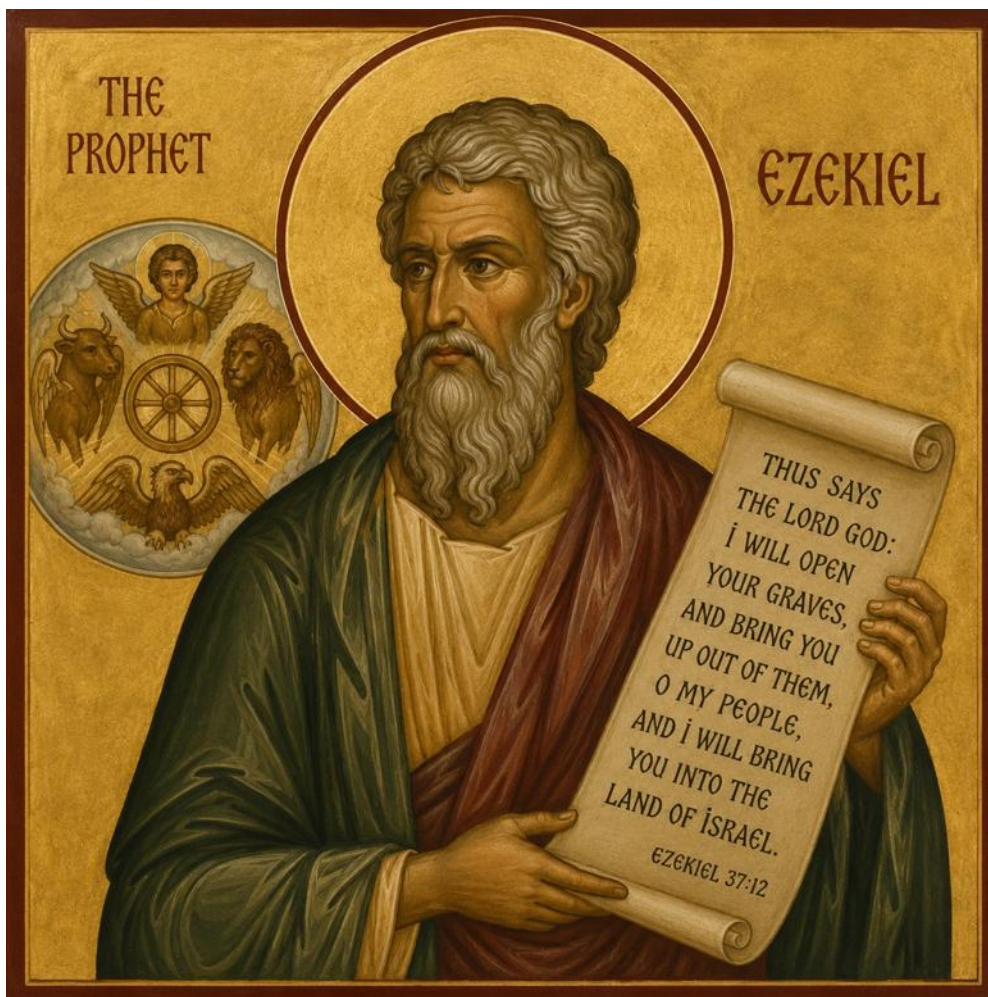




Holy Disruption: Ancient Prophets for Modern Times—Ezekiel
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; July 26, 2026
 Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:17-27

Ezekiel, a priest, was among the first Judeans carried into exile in Babylon after Jerusalem's initial capture in 598 BCE. Living with the exiles along the banks of the Chebar River, twelve years later news came that Jerusalem had been completely destroyed by the Babylonians, and the Temple reduced to rubble. In the shadow of these twin catastrophes—deportation and the loss of the Temple—God called Ezekiel to be a prophet to the exiles. Around him were people traumatized by war, the loss of loved ones, and the destruction of everything they believed would last forever. Like so many refugees around the world today, they were left wondering, "How do we go on? How do we rebuild a life when everything familiar has been taken away?"

In his role as a prophet between the exile and the utter fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel challenged the people to distinguish between the false prophets who proclaimed peace when there was no

peace—and the hard truth of God's judgment, which was the first step on the journey toward repentance and healing. To get their attention, he performed a series of startling symbolic actions. He shaved his head and beard, then burned and scattered the hair as a sign of Jerusalem's coming destruction. He lay on his side for many days, bearing the weight of the people's sin. He ate meager meals cooked over cow dung to portray the hardship of exile. He dug through the wall of his house and carried his belongings into the night like someone being led away into captivity. These dramatic acts were not meant simply to shock. They were God's urgent plea to a people who refused to listen. Repeatedly, Ezekiel warned that idolatry and injustice would have consequences, yet the people remained convinced that Jerusalem could never fall and that the Temple guaranteed their security.

Then, of course, the unthinkable happens. The city is destroyed. The Temple is reduced to rubble, and everything Ezekiel has proclaimed comes to pass. For a time, the prophet falls silent, and so does God—it seems. When God finally calls Ezekiel to speak again, after the reality of God's judgment has settled in, Ezekiel's task is to help a broken people discover that although they have lost the Temple, they haven't lost God.

Ezekiel seems to be the most imaginative of all the prophets. Again and again, God teaches Ezekiel—and through him, God's people—by means of vivid metaphors. At times they are strange, even unsettling, but each one reveals something essential about God's presence and purpose for a people whose world has been turned upside down. We don't have time to explore them all this morning, but I would like us to linger with three. The first comes at the very beginning of Ezekiel's call. God places a scroll before him and gives him an astonishing command: "Eat this scroll." Before Ezekiel ever speaks to the people, God's word first shapes the prophet himself. The message is not merely to be read or recited; it is to be taken into his very being until it becomes part of who he is. Only then can he speak—not from memory or obligation, but from the deepest place within him. We are told that the scroll tastes "as sweet as honey," a reminder that even hard truth becomes life-giving when it comes from God.

And that remains true for us. Scripture is not given simply to inform our opinions or furnish us with Bible verses to quote. It's meant to nourish us, challenge us, and transform us from the inside out until our lives begin to reflect the story we've received. Because whether we realize it or not, we are always being formed by something. Fear forms us. Anxiety forms us. The endless stream of opinions and outrage that surrounds us forms us. But grace and gratitude also form us—as do wisdom, courage, faith and love. So, the question is not whether we are being formed. The question is: "By what are we being formed?" Ezekiel reminds us that before we can faithfully share God's love in the world, we must first allow God's Word to take root within us—not merely as something we know, but as something we embody.

The second image appears near the end of Ezekiel's prophecy. After years of judgment and loss, God gives him a vision of a restored Temple—not just a rebuilt building, but a sign that God's

presence has returned to dwell among the people. From beneath the Temple, Ezekiel sees water begin to flow. At first, it's only a trickle, but as it moves outward, it grows deeper and wider until it becomes a mighty river. When the river reaches the sea—likely the body of water we know today as the Dead Sea, famous for its lifeless, salt-filled waters—it is transformed. Fresh water flows. Fish return. Life appears where there has been only death. It's a vision of the abundance of God's grace. It reveals God's life cannot be contained—not in a city—not in a Temple. God's love cannot be restricted. God's healing presence is always moving outward.

The river reminds us that faith is not meant to be a reservoir for grace to be stored safely away. It's meant to be a river through which God's life flows to a thirsty world. Every act of kindness, every moment of compassion, every word that restores rather than wounds, every effort toward justice and reconciliation becomes a place where God's river reaches another dry, weary place. As Richard Foster writes, "The river of God is flowing today. No one can stop it, and no one can contain it. It is a deep river of divine intimacy, a powerful river of holy living, a dancing river of jubilation in the spirit, and a wide river of unconditional love for all peoples. And the promise is that everything the river touches will live!"ⁱ

But before Ezekiel reaches the vision of flowing water, he must first stand in a valley—and this is the third image for us to ponder—the image Ezekiel is best remembered for—the valley of dry bones. Ezekiel stands in a valley scattered with bones—bones that have been there so long that all hope has been lost. The question God asks Ezekiel seems impossible: "Mortal, can these bones live?" It is a question that reaches beyond the valley. It reaches into every place where people have lost hope. Can this relationship be healed? Can this grief ever loosen its grip? Can this church discover new life? Can we imagine a future when the present feels so uncertain? If we answer only from what we can see, we might say no. Experience tells us no. History tells us no. The world around us tells us no. But Ezekiel's answer is not based on what he sees. It's based on who God is, so he responds, "O Lord God, you know."

Again, God speaks and bones come together. Tendons and flesh appear but they are still not alive until the breath of God enters them. The Hebrew word is *ruach*—the same word that means breath, wind, and Spirit. The God who breathed life into creation in the beginning breathes again. The God who carried Israel through the wilderness breathes again. The God who accompanied them into exile breathes again. And the bones live. This vision is a word of hope for a people who believe their story is over. The exiles see themselves in that valley. They are the dry bones. They are the ones who wonder if Yahweh has forgotten them.

I wonder what valley of dry bones you carried into worship with you this morning. Perhaps it is a personal valley—the grief of someone you love, a diagnosis you didn't expect, a dream that didn't unfold as you hoped, a burden you've carried quietly for a long time. Maybe it's a family valley—a relationship that feels broken, a distance that seems impossible to cross, a wound that has

never fully healed. It might be a community valley—the divisions that have grown so deep in our nation, the suffering we see around the world, the uncertainty many churches face as we wonder what faithfulness looks like in these rapidly changing times. Perhaps it's simply the weariness of looking at the world and wondering, "Where is God in all of this?"

Ezekiel reminds us that God's word is sweet as honey—a life-giving gift not merely to be read, but to be consumed, to become part of us, shaping our hearts and our daily lives. He reminds us that the river of God cannot be contained—not by a Temple, a faith tradition, or even a church. It's a river of divine intimacy, a river of holy living, a river that dances with joy, and a river of boundless love flowing toward all peoples. And wherever that river flows, life springs forth. Finally, Ezekiel reminds us that God is not frightened by valleys filled with dry bones. The question is not whether the bones are dry. They are. The question is whether the breath of God still moves where all hope seems lost. Ezekiel doesn't answer that question with an argument. He answers it with a vision. Bone comes to bone. Sinew and flesh appear. Breath enters what had been lifeless. And a people who believed their story was over stand once again on their feet. That is Ezekiel's promise to every generation: no valley is so barren that the Spirit cannot enter it, no life so broken that grace cannot find it, no future so empty that God cannot call forth something new. For wherever the breath of God still blows, there is life. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Edwin Searcy, Commentary in The Life with God Bible, NRSV.