Ezekiel 37:1-14 *Legendary 2: Ezekiel: Bones into Armies*

***The Sequel***Last summer we did a series of sermons that we called **“Legendary.”** The idea was to play off the summer blockbuster—and in particular the popularity of comic book movies—and take a look at some of the heroes from the Old Testament. I said that these were some of the first and greatest adventure stories in the history of the world. Kind of like ancient comic book characters.

We looked at stories such **as Rahab helping the spies, Daniel and the Lions Den, and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego** surviving the fiery furnace. We thought it was a fun summer series--a way to keep adults and children alike engaged –and we got a lot of positive feedback.

Now, as we began thinking about our series for this summer, we’ve been thinking about last summer and we’ve asked: what does every good comic book movie need? And the answer is: a sequel!

Today we are going to start a series we are calling **“Legendary 2.”** We didn’t come up with a catchy sub-title, but we could call it “Even more Heroes of the Bible!” There are plenty of Bible characters whose stories we didn’t tell last summer. And this year, especially as we deal with all the uncertainty and changes brought about by the coronavirus, we thought it would be fun to dive into more of these true story adventures. This year we’re going to tell the stories of Noah and Gideon and Jonah. We’re even going to dip our toe into the New Testament and tell the story of Paul’s conversion and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Our hope is that as you deal with the distractions that are inherent to watching church at home or in the parking lot and even some of the changes as we gradually begin to re-gather in the building, these stories will be a fun way stay engaged and be reminded that our God is still in control. Because one point we’ll be making throughout is that while we call these characters Biblical heroes, the true Hero in every one of these stories is Jesus.

***The Prophet of Visions***The story we are going to start with this year is the story **of Ezekiel preaching to the Valley of Dry Bones.**

Let me tell you a little about Ezekiel: Ezekiel was a priest living in Jerusalem during the first Babylonian attack on the city. Even though the Babylonians did not destroy the city at that time, they did carry-off a number of citizens as captives. Ezekiel was in that group.

The book actually begins 5 years after that, as Ezekiel is sitting on the banks of an irrigation canal in Babylon**. It’s called the Kebar river.** It’s his 30th birthday, no less, the year that, under normal circumstances, he would have been installed as a priest in the temple. And all of a sudden Ezekiel begins to have these visions. **He sees a storm cloud and fantastic beasts** and a chariot and a figure sitting upon that chariot that can only be described as the glory of the LORD. Ezekiel is a very visual writer, and his book is filled with images and ideas that form much of the background for the New Testament book of Revelation.

And the idea is that God is giving these visions to Ezekiel to help the people interpret what is happening. During Ezekiel’s ministry more and more people enter into exile from Judah to Babylon. Eventually, the Babylonians go back and tear down Jerusalem’s walls and destroy the temple. The first 33 chapters or so of Ezekiel’s book it is Ezekiel’s job to help the people understand that this is part of God’s judgment, that the Glory of the LORD has indeed left them, and that they were foolish not to heed the many warnings they were given.

There are a bunch of interesting scenes in Ezekiel. He is a very creative communicator. At one point he cuts off all of his hair with a sword and then chops it up. **At another time, he builds a model of Jerusalem**—almost like sand castles—and then stages an attack on it to predict its destruction. Probably the most extreme thing he does is tie himself up with ropes and lie on his side in front of his house for over a year—one day for every year of Israel’s national sin—and then eat bread that he cooks over a fire made with cow chips—as a symbol of the siege rations the people of the city will have to eat.

What I’m trying to say is: we might find the book of Ezekiel to be long and kind of hard to understand, but it is definitely not a boring book!

But Ezekiel is not all doom and gloom. Even as he is given the task of making the people understand God’s judgment, he is also given a message of hope. There are predictions of revival and renewal. That’s what the second half of the book is mostly about: Predictions that God’s glory will return; predictions that people will find a new relationship with God—not based merely on religious ritual and rule keeping but on transformed hearts; predictions that God can bring life even when things seem dead.

That’s the point of the most famous story in Ezekiel. The one told in Ezekiel 37.

***Death Valley***Here’s the story. **Ezekiel 37, verse 1:**

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.

It is important for us to understand that this is a vision. This didn’t actually happen to Ezekiel. It’s a cool story, and a powerful, powerful lesson about God. But there never was a time that God re-assembled a bunch of skeletons and raised up a zombie army. That sounds like a comic book, for sure. But as we’re going to see, the point is not to raise up an army of the undead to conquer the Babylonians, but the spiritual awakening and eventual resurrection God is capable of bringing about in your life and mine. **Verse 2:**

He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry.

This is a literal valley of death. It is probably meant to represent a battlefield where the armies of Israel have been defeated. And the implication is that the defeat was so complete that there was nobody left to gather the bodies up and give them a proper burial. Soldiers have simply been left to rot where they fell. So Ezekiel sees a skull here, a rib cage over there, pelvises and femurs and spines.

And not just a few, a “great many.” They’re all around as God leads Ezekiel back and forth among them. It’s a guided tour of death. Death, death, death. Everywhere.

And the thing that strikes Ezekiel is that these bones are “very dry.” These are not the bones of the recently fallen. They’re bleached and brittle under the Middle Eastern sun. They’ve been there a while. They’re as dead as dead gets.

So why is God showing this to Ezekiel? **Let’s skip ahead to verse 11** for a moment to get the explanation:

**11**Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ ’

This is the picture of the hopelessness the people were feeling. Disciplined and exiled and left to make a living in Babylonia, they felt completely cut off from God. They were like a great many bones drying out under the baking sun. There was nothing to look forward to. They were feeling spiritually dead.

Have you ever felt that way in your relationship with God? Like all the life has been taken out of it? Like it’s been as good as it is ever gonna get, and now you’re just playing out the string?

Right now, I think, it’s pretty easy to feel that way. Most of us have never seen anything like our current situation: a virus that nobody has ever encountered before; 1 out of every 5 people out of work; worries about disruptions in our food chain; schools closed and churches meeting online and in parking lots and nothing but guesses and conjecture about what will be coming next.

It’s pretty easy to feel hopeless. It’s pretty easy to feel like we have been cut off. But if that’s how you feel, this passage has hope for you.

***The Question, and Its Answer*Verse 3:**

He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I said, “O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”

It is a very strange question: “Can these bones live?” The obvious answer is: “Of course not!” These are bones. Very dry bones. Of course they can’t live. They’re as dead as dead gets.

But, at the same time, Ezekiel is very aware of who is talking to Him. This is God, the Sovereign LORD.

He’s Yahweh, the LORD. He’s Israel’s Master who keeps His covenant with His people to the thousandth generation.

And He’s Sovereign. Nobody out-sizes Him, nobody out-smarts Him, nobody out-toughs Him.

If anybody can bring hope to a hopeless situation, God can. And so, Ezekiel hedges. He’s not ready to commit to a mighty resurrection, but neither is he going to put it past God. “O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”

Our God delights to do the impossible. What we could never hope to do, God is more than capable of doing. He’s in the business of opening graves.

Skip ahead again**, to verse 12.** Here’s more of God’s explanation of the vision**:**

This is what the Sovereign Lord says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel.

The people were hopeless. They were full of doubt and despair. They were spiritually dead, dry and dusty bones. “But our barrenness does not stop God. When we have nothing left to offer, he is able to impart to us fresh life out of his limitless all-sufficiency” (Ortlund, 104). Where God is, there is always hope. He’s not done with His people yet.

And the same thing must be said today—to dry people and to dry churches: God is not done with us yet. He’s in the business of opening graves.

***Ezekiel’s Task***But, of course, Ezekiel doesn’t know all of this yet. He doesn’t know how this is all going to end. And so, God’s next command must have taken Him off guard. **Verse 4:**

**4**Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!

Essentially, God tells Ezekiel to preach to the bones. “Prophesy…say…’hear the word of the LORD!’”

The last two months I’ve learned a lot about preaching without an audience. It’s tough. Preaching to a camera is not the same as having people sitting in the pews. Preaching to windshields is kind of like preaching into the black void of space. If I make a joke about somebody’s favorite football team—if I say, for example**, that Green Bay Packer fans** have a strange sense of entitlement based on questionable traditions and even more questionable headwear—I really have no idea how it is going over.

It’s hard to read the room, is what I’m trying to say.

But preaching to an audience of bones? I can’t even imagine.

But God said it, so Ezekiel did it. Here’s what he preached. **Verses 5 and 6:**

**5**This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. **6**I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.’”

Let’s be very clear on one thing: It is not Ezekiel’s preaching that makes these bones reassemble. It is not Ezekiel’s preaching that brings them back to life. God makes that clear in the message itself. The Sovereign LORD says: “I will make breath enter you…I will attach tendons to you…I will make flesh come upon you…I will cover you with skin…” God revives, not Ezekiel. God doesn’t need help.

Even more unbelievable than the idea of bones reassembling and flesh spontaneously reappearing is what it is supposed to symbolize. Again, we can skip ahead to see the meaning. **Verse 13:**

**13**Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them.

What we need to remember is that the valley of dry bones didn’t just represent how the people saw themselves, it also represents how God saw them. The deadness they were feeling, the sense of being cut off, that didn’t happen by accident. Their exile to Babylon was the direct result of God’s judgment against them. He put them there.

The idea that the same God who disciplined them is now the same God offering to revive them is an incredible miracle of grace. In everything God does, He’s calling people to trust in Him. He may have brought them into this time of deadness, but He will also lead them out. He’s the God who opens graves.

***There Was No Breath In Them***In **verses 7 and 8** Ezekiel gives us a picture of the bones coming together:

**7**So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. **8**I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

This is incredibly descriptive language. I love the detail of a “rattling sound.” You can picture in your mind bones vibrating and moving: tibias and fibias reconnecting with femurs; spines realigning with pelvises and skulls.

And then, even more amazing, tendons and muscles and skin began to reappear. The valley is transformed from a boneyard into a morgue. Suddenly, there are fresh corpses everywhere.

But there was one problem: “There was no breath in them.” The bodies were there, but they were not yet alive. So God gives further instruction. **Verses 9-10:**

**9**Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” **10**So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

In Genesis 2, the story is told of God forming Adam. It says that God formed him from the dust of the earth. But once he had created his body, he was still lifeless. It wasn’t until God put his spirit into him by breathing into his nostrils that he came to life. The Hebrew word for spirit and breath is the same word. And it also just happens to be the same word for “wind”.

So, once again Ezekiel preaches and this time there is a great rush of air as the four winds rush in to blow over and into all these bodies. And as the wind hits them—you can almost picture it—their eyes snap open and they spring to their feet and join ranks. The valley which was once littered with bones is now carpeted by a vast, mighty army of the Living God.

And, again, there is no doubt but that this is a sheer act of God. Ezekiel preaches as he’s told, but it is the outpouring of the Spirit that revives. The difference between life and death is the presence of the Spirit of the living God. **Verse 14** drives the point home:

**14**I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.’”

This promise includes a restoration to the Promised Land—that was part of God’s plan for the eventual arrival of his Son. But don’t get too caught up in geography. The heart of the promise is this: “I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.” Where they were hopeless, they will now have hope. Where they were dead, they will have life.

***A Picture of What God Can Do***Ultimately, I think that’s why I love this passage so much. It’s a powerful picture of what God can do. It speaks to the life-giving potential of His Spirit-empowered Word. Where God’s message is proclaimed, and the wind of the Spirit blows, there is always life.

Let’s move to application. How does this story change us? What does God want to do in our lives through this passage of scripture? I have two things:

Firstwe need to know that **God is a resurrection God**.

The first fulfilment of this prophetic vision came about 70 years after Ezekiel shared it, as people began to trickle back into the Promised Land. Eventually the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt and a new temple was constructed. The national identity of Israel was revived. Though they never quite got back to the grand visions Ezekiel described at the end of the book, the stage was set for the arrival of Jesus.

Another, obvious fulfillment came some 600 years later at a garden tomb in Jerusalem. The resurrection Ezekiel saw in a dream happened quite literally as Jesus was raised from the dead. This is a picture of the “incomparably great power” and the “mighty strength” of God (Ephesians 1:19). This is the power that God wants to display in our lives. This is the strength that God takes to our problems and challenges.

The ultimate fulfillment--the vast army of revived bodies--is yet to come. We’ll see the fullest and most literal fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision on the day Jesus comes again and summons to His side all those who have ever believed in Him. At that point we will see graves opened and skeletons reassembled as the heavenly hosts rally to join the King of Kings in his victory parade (1 Thess. 4:16; Rev. 19:14).

The principle that is illustrated here holds true through all of time: God is a God of revival. He brings life in the midst of death. He turns mourning into dancing. He brings beauty out of ashes. He turns graves into gardens. He has the power of resurrection.

Which means, second: We find **hope for hopeless people.**

Sometimes we go through dry periods in our lives. Times when we feel disconnected and distant from God. Sometimes it is our own sinfulness that puts us in such a position. Sometimes God is teaching us something through that. Sometimes in our spiritual lives, or in our life as a community of believers, we can feel hopeless.

Right now, things can feel pretty dark. Whether we’re talking about the immediate future of our nation; a summer at church where we are pretty much week by week in trying to decide what sorts of gatherings are safe; or even personal circumstances—it’s easy to get discouraged.

Right now, it’s easy to feel like we are in a valley of dry bones.

But the Sovereign Lord does not design to leave us there. God delights in pouring out His blessing. This story is intended to fill us with hope. It is meant to create in us a hunger for a revival to echo the one described in Ezekiel’s vision. It’s meant to reassure us that your lowest moments don’t need to be the end of your story.

Our God is able to restore anything that He wants to. When He asks you if your dry bones can live again; before you turn away in disbelief, remind yourself of who is doing the asking. There’s nothing that our God can’t do!