

# Flesh and Bones

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Columbus, Ohio  
March 16, 2008*

## **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

*In a shocking, though foreseen, development, Babylonian forces overran Jerusalem. They broke down the city wall, destroyed the temple of the Lord, and carried away the sacred implements and a notable portion of the population to Babylon itself, to exile. To the people, this destruction, this exile, was death. And there was no recovering from death. Or was there? In the city of exile itself, the priest and prophet Ezekiel had a vision.*

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he led me out in the spirit of the Lord and he put me in the middle of a plain, and it was full of bones. And he led me all around them — so many of them on the surface of the plain! And so dry! And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live again?” And I answered, “Lord God, it’s you who know.” And he said to me, “Prophecy over these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!’ This is what the Lord God says to these bones: ‘I will send breath to you, and you will live again. I will put tendons on you and I will add flesh to you and I will stretch skin over you and I will put breath in you, and you will live again. And you will know that I am the Lord.’”

And I prophesied as I was commanded. And while I was prophesying, there was a noise, a clattering. And the bones came together, each bone to its matching bone. And I saw tendons on them, and flesh added to them, and skin stretched over them. But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath. Prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘This is what the Lord God says: Come from the four winds, breath, and blow into these slaughtered ones, and let them live again.’”

And I prophesied as he commanded me. And the breath entered them, and they lived again and they stood up on their feet, many and strong. And he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel, who say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost, and we are completely cut off.’ Therefore prophecy and say to them: ‘This is what the Lord God says: I will open your graves and I will raise you from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to the land of Israel. And you will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and when I raise you from your graves, my people. And I will put my breath – my Spirit – in you, and you will live again. And I will put you in your own land. And you will know that I the Lord have spoken and I have done it, declares the Lord.’”

## **Sermon**

The final chapter of the story had been written. A few details had to be worked out – there are always subplots to wrap up; there are always loose ends to tie down – but the final chapter of the story had been written. Israel had been consigned to the graveyard of history. They wouldn’t be the first nation to go extinct; they wouldn’t be the last. But extinction was at hand. It was the final chapter in Israel’s story, a chapter written by the LORD God, using Babylon as his word processor. The final chapter had been written. All Israel said, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost, and we are completely cut off.” There was nothing more to say. There was nothing more to see. It was time for bystanders and gawkers to move along. It was time for the faithful person to pray over the bones, “Give them peace.”

**Despair among the exiles made a lot of sense.** Do you remember how upsetting the attacks on New York and Washington were in September 2001? Waves of emotion rose up within us. Our iconic cities had been wounded. And we felt threatened in a way we never had before, not in our memory. Well, the

Babylonians did more than wound Jerusalem. They broke down the city wall. A city without a wall was no city at all. A wall was part of the definition of a city in the ancient near east. And this was no ordinary city. It was Jerusalem. The city. The king's city. The LORD's city. The Babylonians broke down the wall. That meant no more city. They destroyed the king's palace. That meant no more king. And they destroyed the LORD's temple. That meant no more God, not in that no-more city.

The exiles were dragged away from Jerusalem. In Babylon they remembered what they saw last, what they heard last. No city. No king. No God with them. No hope. No life. No future. And they sat by the waters of Babylon and wept. "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost, and we are completely cut off."

**But the final chapter had not been written.** The LORD God gave the prophet Ezekiel a vision: a broad field littered with bones, human bones – so many of them and so dry! – bones whose story had been told, bones whose story was over, unless the author chose to write them into a new chapter. In the vision, the bones came clattering back together: foot bone to ankle bone, ankle bone to leg bone, leg bone to knee bone, and so on. And then came all the fleshy parts: tendons, muscles, and skin – until the field was filled with fully-formed bodies. But they were just that, bodies. They were lifeless forms, like the first man, formed of the dust, lying there with no hope of acting in the story, lying there waiting for breath. Then the breath came, and they stood up, alive! They were "many and strong." They were ready for the next chapter. All that remained was to see what kind of sequel this would be.

They should have known better; they should have expected it. The story so far had sequel written all over it. Here's the clue: "You will know that I am the LORD." That language is used again and again in Scripture. It is used especially in connection with God acting to keep his promises. God had made promises to Abraham, to Israel, to David. God would not fail to keep those promises. There would be more in store for the bones of Israel than a peaceful rest. They should have expected another chapter, another chapter in which the house of David is restored, God dwells in the midst of his people, and all peoples are blessed through Abraham.

Ezekiel 37 is often viewed as a resurrection vision. That's been a standard interpretation since ancient times. But it's a vision of renewal, a vision of restoration, a vision of re-creation. It's a vision of exiles returning to Israel, which is a resurrection of sorts. But it's not a resurrection of individual bodies. It's a resurrection of the people, a resurrection of the nation, a resurrection of the promises.

And so the exiles did return, some of them at least.

And in time the Spirit would be poured out.

**Fast forward to the central chapter of the story.** Jesus has been slaughtered. In his tomb – which is a bone hole in the side of a hill – in his tomb are bones connected to bones, with tendons, muscles, and skin upon them. But no breath, no life. These bones seem destined to dry up. But God had made a promise. This one would not rot in the grave. And on the third day, the Spirit came, the breath of life – and in this case the breath of resurrection – and Jesus stood up on his feet, one and strong.

Seven weeks later, the church waited. God had gathered and formed dust to create Adam. Likewise the church was gathered, formed to the contours of a house in Jerusalem, gathered and formed, sitting there, waiting for the breath of life. And a wind came from God, a divine breath, the Holy Spirit. And the church was alive! And they stood up, twelve of them did, strong. And this chapter is still being written.

Now, it can be argued that the most significant outcome of the life and death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus is this: the sending of the Holy Spirit. That's the big deal. The Holy Spirit is loose in the world, and nothing is the same as before. The Spirit broods over this world, as the wind from God brooded over the waters of the unformed creation – the Spirit broods over this world, giving life and light and faith and hope, changing the world for good.

Why did the Berlin Wall fall? Because of the Holy Spirit. Why did apartheid end? Because of the Holy Spirit. Why did Wilberforce prevail? Because of the Holy Spirit. Why is God worshiped? Why is Jesus followed? Because of the Holy Spirit. Why are we here today? Because of the Holy Spirit.

Now, if you're like me, you probably have an objection or two to what I just said. First of all, who says the Holy Spirit gets the credit for those good things I mentioned? Besides, weren't there similar good things and good people in the world before the Spirit was given? In the second place, am I not guilty of cherry-picking, highlighting a few examples of very good things and giving the Spirit credit for them, when there really isn't much clear evidence that the Holy Spirit is present and is at work in this world? Would someone who is not prejudiced in favor of the Holy Spirit look at the evidence (or lack of evidence) and conclude that the Spirit is powerfully present in the world?

**This is where we come in.** Simply put: if there's not enough evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence and work in this world, then it is up to us to fabricate that evidence. Not to falsify the evidence. Not to invent the evidence. But to create the evidence. We are the body of Christ, alive because the Holy Spirit is in us as our life breath. If there is going to be evidence, widespread, convincing evidence, of the Holy Spirit at work in the world, it will come from us, from the church, the people in whom the Spirit dwells. This is not to say that the Spirit can't pile up evidence in other ways and through other people. This is only to highlight our unique and humble obligation. So, let's make some evidence.

Imagine two and a half thousand people gathering in two months, gathering to change this city, this county, this state. Imagine two and a half thousand people gathering for the sake of schoolkids who slip through the cracks, gathering for the sake of poor people exploited by payday loan sharks, gathering for the sake of neighborhoods and communities that have been devastated by drugs and crime and also by draconian drug laws. Imagine it. And let's be a part of it!

Mark your calendars. On May 5, BREAD will hold its annual action meeting. Come to that meeting. Bring some friends; bring some neighbors. It's only one evening all year, one evening for justice. Can we all be there? Or, if not, at least send a substitute?

And while you have your calendars out, mark down April 7. (Okay, so it's two evenings a year!) That's the date of the BREAD rally. Come to that meeting, and you will learn just what it is you'll be inviting friends and neighbors to on May 5. No one wants you to be in the dark, just a number. Numbers are important in influencing community leaders, but an informed commitment to justice matters more. And at the rally, you will be informed.

So, come to these two meetings. On May 5, bring some other people with you. This is as way for us to make some evidence for the Spirit. Who else gets all kinds of Christians together, gets us together with Jews and Unitarians – who else gets us all together for the sake of justice, who else but the Holy Spirit?

Without the Holy Spirit, we are a body without life. There's a word for that. A corpse. Without the Spirit we are just flesh and bones, and there's nothing to do for us but to pray for peace and rest.

But we are not without the Spirit. In Christ, we have the Spirit. The Spirit is the Lord's greatest gift to us. By the Spirit, we go to the places Jesus goes. By the Spirit we stand up on our feet, many and strong. By the Spirit, we stand up for justice.