

The Valley of Dry Bones

📖 Ezekiel 37:1-14

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Now that we've completed Daniel and have the prophetic framework we're going to teach a few chapters from the Ezekiel 30's, then Zech 12-14 and then move into the NT Matthew 24-25 and 1 and 2 Thessalonians before we get to Revelation 4-19. The reason is these chapters not only present some important prophetic details that confirm what Daniel reveals but also add things to the picture. The prophetic picture has thousands of pieces and it's very difficult to keep them all in mind at the same time so that you see the entire picture. That's why the charts that depict these things only focus on Daniel and Revelation. Even then the detail gets so involved that it's overwhelming. But God has revealed all of this and He wants us to sort it out to get to know Him. So, while Daniel and Revelation are usually taught together in a Seminary course, I am adding some major prophetic chapters as a bridge between our studies of Daniel and Revelation.

We start the bridge with Ezekiel because he was a contemporary of Daniel. They both went into captivity to Babylon. Daniel was taken in the first deportation in 606BC. Ezekiel was taken in the second deportation in 597BC. They both went into captivity and they may have known one another and God gave both of them visions of the future. Visions of the future are a common element of apocalyptic literature because they are designed to engender hope. The reason for this highly visionary revelation is because the Jewish captives were downcast and despondent and a vision of a glorious future helped them cope with the distress of the exile. The visions that describe the glorious future for Israel come near the end of Ezekiel's scroll, chapters 34-39.

For some context, in chapter 34 God Condemns the Past Shepherds of Israel but Promises a Future Shepherd. The past shepherds preyed upon and scattered Israel over the surface of the whole earth, but in the future God Himself will arise to be their true Shepherd. He will search for them, gather them from the whole earth, bring them into their own land, feed them the word of God and seat the Davidic King over them. He will be their true Shepherd. Yet the chapter leaves you wondering how this will come about if Israel remains sinful? Chapters 35-36 answer that God Will Judge Israel's Enemies for Cursing Them and He Will Regenerate the nation Israel for His own Name's Sake. The enemies of Israel have mocked Israel for centuries but God will put a stop to it. Israel is His covenant people and so to mock them is to mock Him who made a covenant with them. In the end, He will set out to bless Israel. Since Israel is sinful He will do this for His own name's sake and to preserve His reputation in the world, and not on the basis of any merit in Israel. He will bless them by gathering them from all nations,

bringing them into the land, regenerating them and placing His Spirit within them. His Spirit will enable them to keep His statutes and thereby remain in the land forever. But the chapter leaves us wondering how this rebirth of the nation Israel to the land will take place since the nation is as good as dead scattered around the earth in exile? In 37:11 the people of Israel are asking that very question, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope has perished, We are completely cut off.'" In this verse the nation Israel compares itself in exile to being dead, so dead that there is no hope of ever being reborn as a nation in the land. So in Ezek 37:1-14 God gives Ezekiel a vision to illustrate in a vivid way just how God will do it.

The type of language used is figurative-literal. There is a valley, there are bones, they come together, they receive breath and come to life. Some take this as an ordinary literal bones coming together in resurrection. But this is a picturesque, out of the ordinary usage of these words designed to convey something else. The passage falls into two basic parts. First, verses 1-10, The Vision of Dry Bones. Second, verses 11-14, The Interpretation of the Dry Bones.

In 37:1 we read **The hand of the LORD was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones.** The word **hand** refers metaphorically to "power." Wallace says, "In Ezekiel God's *hand* being on the prophet is regularly associated with communication or a vision from God (3:14, 22; 8:1; 37:1; 40:1)."¹ Thus, the expression **The hand of the LORD was upon me** signifies that **the LORD** communicated to Ezekiel by way of a vision. When a prophet was in a vision he was not physically re-located but it was more like an audio-video movie playing in his mind. In this vision Ezekiel says the **LORD brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley.** In the Hebrew **valley** is *habbiqa*. It refers to "a wide plain between mountains." **Mountains** commonly symbolize Gentile nations. Ezekiel saw **bones** scattered throughout the valley between these **mountains**. **Bones** signify death and there was no life in the valley, only death. The **bones** are said in verse 11 to be the whole house of Israel. The significance of the valley of bones is that it portrays the nation of Israel scattered among the Gentile nations in exile. Their going into exile was a recent memory in Ezekiel's day. It was fresh on their minds. They had no hope. They were despondent and in despair. God gave this vision to Ezekiel to give them a hope and a future.

In 37:2 **He caused me to pass among them round about, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley; and lo, they were very dry.** Ezekiel, no matter his discomfort at such a sight, was **caused to pass among** the bones, all **around about**. The Hebrew indicates God was giving him some time to realize the gravity of the situation. The thing that struck him was the great number of bones resting **on the surface of the valley**. They weren't buried, they were unburied, just resting **on the surface**. So many bones, so much death. J. Vernon McGee, who ministered in California, said of this verse, "He saw a vision of another "death valley," more desolate, more fearsome, and more awesome than Death Valley, California."² The temperature in Death Valley can reach 120F and has reached as high as 134. In that environment if something dies it quickly decomposes in the sun

and any remains are devoured quickly by the nocturnal residents until all that is left are the bones and if they are allowed to remain they become **very dry**. The thing Ezekiel noticed is that these bones were **very dry**. This means that the nation had been in exile for a very long time. Constable said, "They represent the Israelites slain during the conquest of the land and now in exile for a very long time."³

In 37:3 **He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, You know."**

Ezekiel was reticent to answer. On one hand, he did not want to venture to answer because from a purely human point of view there is no way those **bones** could **live**. But on the other hand he knew that God, if He wanted to, could make the **bones live**. And it seems that Ezekiel held out for this possibility because he used a special name of God. **O Lord GOD** is *adon YHWH*. *Adon* is the Hebrew name of God that means "sovereign." So Ezekiel is saying, God, you are sovereign, **You know** what you have in store for these bones and if you want them to live then they will live. So Ezekiel, very wisely, was not willing to say what God would do but was willing to admit what God could do. He had faith that God could make them live. This would mean in the very least that God could restore Israel from a long period of exile.

In 37:4 we have God's first command to Ezekiel. **He said to me, "Prophecy over these bones and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.'" If you can put yourself in Ezekiel's shoes you can imagine how stupid you might feel being told to prophesy over dead, dried out bones.** J. Vernon McGee said, "I have a notion Ezekiel said, "Now, Lord, you really don't mean for me to start *talking* to these dry bones here! The man with the white coat and the net will be out looking for me if I do that!"⁴ But that's exactly what the Lord commanded Ezekiel to do. The reason is because the sovereignty of God is channeled through the word of God to produce works. Unger said, "It is the divine power that operates through the divine Word, which will accomplish what many scholars still consider impossible and incredible (cf. Matt. 24:31-34)."⁵ What Unger means by "many scholars still consider impossible and incredible" is that they consider it impossible that God will restore the nation Israel. Church history is littered with theological writings saying that God is through with the Jews. If they were in Ezekiel's shoes they would say to the LORD, I am not going to prophesy over these bones, it is impossible that they will live. But God commanded Ezekiel to **say to them "O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD."** And that, of course, is where we get the popular Negro Spiritual, 'Dem Bones, Dem Bones, Dem Dry Bones, Now Hear the word of the LORD." The meaning of those words is that the sovereign God will call on Israel in Exile to hear His word.

In 37:5 here is what Ezekiel is to prophesy. **"Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones, 'Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the LORD.'" This first sentence there, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life is the end result. In the end God will make Israel alive. But the second sentence shows that it will not all happen at one time but in stages, as in a process. I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and then**

put breath in you that you may come alive. So in the end God will make them alive but it will not occur all at one time, but in stages. McGee said, "The first state of the bones is that they are scattered, dry, and dead. Then gradually they come together, and the sinews and flesh come upon them. This is a process—it is not instantaneous at all."⁶ Thus, if we look for the fulfillment of this prophecy we are looking for a process, not only a single event. The last sentence **and you will know that I am the LORD** shows that by the end of this process the nation Israel will **know the LORD**, they will be a spiritually regenerate nation. This is what Ezekiel was commanded to prophesy.

Now in 37:7 Ezekiel obeys the LORD. **So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them.** That last phrase is very significant. Much change took place **but there was no breath in them.** This indicates what we already suspected, that God will make Israel alive in stages and not all at once. The first stage is pictured as beginning with **a noise.** The Hebrew refers to some kind of sound. We are not told what. But to hear any sound standing in a valley of dry bones is certainly not what you would expect. The second stage is pictured as **a rattling.** The Hebrew refers to a quaking of the earth that causes the bones strewn throughout the valley to begin knocking against each other. The third stage is pictured as **the bones came together, bone to its bone.** This is a very big step, each bone came together in the proper orientation to the other bones, a strange sight. Fourth stage, Ezekiel says **I looked, and behold, sinews were on them.** The Hebrew **sinews** refers to the connective tissue such as tendons which connect muscle to bone and ligaments which connect bone to bone. And so we are to know that the inner connective structures that are required to move formed. Then fifth, **flesh grew and skin covered them.** At this point Ezekiel is not looking at a valley of bones strewn across it but millions and millions of bodies lying on the valley floor because you see, **there was no breath in them.** This is reminiscent of God's original creation of Adam. Ryrie said, "The same body-breath sequence occurs in the creation of Adam (see Gen. 2:7)."⁷The original creation occurred in two basic stages and not all at once and the re-creation of Israel will also occur in two basic stages and not all at once. Verses 7-8 are stage one. I think it is too much to divide the **noise** from the **rattling** from the **bones coming together** and so forth and so on, though I have seen a commentator attach some modern significance to each of these. But I think the major point so far is to see two things; first, Israel for a very long time in exile, just a valley of very dry bones scattered throughout Gentile nations and second, God sovereignly bringing them back to their land and forming them into a state. That is what you see by the end of verse 8, you see the modern state of Israel. They have the appearance of life but they do not have life, they are spiritually dead. They have a physical presence but no spiritual life.

And herein then, I think we have a prophecy that deals with the re-establishment of the physical nation Israel. And we can talk about how that came to pass beginning in the late 1800's with the desire of Jews worldwide to return to the Holy Land and the beginning of purchasing property in the land and beginning settlements and seeking to influence governments to encourage this process and then formation of the First Zionist Congress

under Theodore Herzl in 1897 with the stated aim to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law. And then the mass pogroms in Russia and the Dreyfus Affair in France, all of which led thousands of Jews returning to the land to escape persecution. And then the Balfour Declaration in 1917 where Britain stated their purpose to establish in Palestine a national home for the Jewish people. And the San Remo Conference in 1921 when the stated aim of the Balfour Declaration was made a matter of international law. All the while Jews continuing to return but then facing opposition from the Arabs as well as the British who began to side with the Arabs even publishing the white paper of 1939 which limited Jewish migration to the land. But through the horrors of the holocaust national sympathy won sway and on May 14, 1948 David ben Gurion announced to the world the establishment of a Jewish State. All of that I consider to be a fulfillment of Ezek 37:7-8. It is the first prophesy of Ezekiel 37, it is stage one in this prophecy and it results in a state of Israel with a physical presence in the world. There is no other explanation for this than it is the sovereign work of God. No nation on earth has ever been exiled from its homeland and retained its national identity and been restored. Never has that happened in history except with one nation; Israel. But as the end of verse 8 says, **“there was no breath in them,** that is, they have no spiritual life. And if you go to Israel today you will find they have no spiritual life. Of 6.5 million Jews in the Land only about 20,000 are Messianic Jews. That is not very many. In fact, it means that if you meet 1,000 Jews in the land less than 1 of them will be a Messianic Jew. Even the orthodox community is small compared to the majority of Israeli’s. The majority are agnostic and Israel itself is hardly any different than what you would expect of any American city. So very clearly there is a physical state of Israel but that is all, there is no spiritual Israel. And so the end of verse 8 is where we are right now in history. There is a physical presence of Israel in the land but they have no spiritual life. But that is not the end of the prophecy.

Now we come to 37:9, a second prophesy. **Then He said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they come to life.”** Now the word **breath** in Hebrew is the same word translated wind and Spirit in this chapter and so in the figurative language it refers to physical breath and to physical wind but the literal referent, as we will see, is the Spirit of God. Ezekiel is told to **prophesy to the breath, speak to the breath.** Now this is just speaking to the **wind** as you can imagine. And this is what God commanded Ezekiel to do. It must have been a strange thing to do but with what God had already done through his first prophesy, form all those bodies in the valley, perhaps God will do this through his second prophesy. The prophesy is to **breathe on these slain.** The nation Israel, even as a physical state is viewed as **slain.** That is because spiritually speaking the nation is dead. And Ezekiel is told that to prophesy so **that they come to life.**

In 37:10 Ezekiel, for a second time, obeys the Lord. **So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.** As the Lord worked through His word the millions of bodies lying on the floor of the desert had breath enter **into them, and they all came to life and stood on their feet.** Here the point is that the nation Israel came to spiritual life. This is a prophesy of the spiritual regeneration of Israel. Again, this is very similar to God’s creation of Adam. J. Vernon

McGee said, "What happened here resembles the creation of man at the very beginning. God took man of the dust of the earth; Ezekiel started with bones, but God didn't. God started with just the dirt of the earth, and then He breathed life into man."⁸ And note the number, **an exceedingly great army**. Feinberg said, "With his final word of prophecy the entire valley, strewn with an innumerable quantity of desiccated bones, was transformed into a vast battlefield, as it were, filled with an unusually large army."⁹

So Ezek 37:1-10 is the vision of dry bones. In summary God, by His Spirit, took Ezekiel in vision to a valley full of dry bones. The mountains signify the Gentile nations. The bones signify the whole house of Israel. The picture is of Israel in exile, scattered among the Gentile nations. In verse 2 God caused Ezekiel to pass around the bones in the valley so that he would realize two things; they were very many bones and they were very dry bones. This means that Israel would be in exile to Gentile nations for a very long time, to the point there was no hope. In verse 3 God asked Ezekiel if these bones could come back to life. Ezekiel said, only you, sovereign God, know. In verse 4 God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy over the bones because through His prophesy God would start the process of bringing them back to life. In verse 7-8 we see Ezekiel's prophesy and the first stage of the process. In the end all the bones were transformed into new bodies lying on the valley floor. The text makes clear that at this stage there was no breath in them. In verse 9 God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy a second time, this time to the breath, that it might come into the bodies and bring them to life. In verse 10 Ezekiel prophesied and the breath came into them, and they came to life. The valley that was full of dry bones was now replaced by an exceedingly great army and the mountains and valley have shrunk away. We interpreted this vision to mean three things; first, Israel would be in exile for a very long time, second, God would restore Israel physically, third God would restore Israel spiritually. This follows the order of creation of Adam who was first given a body and then a spirit so that he became a living soul.

In Ezek 37:11-14 we have the interpretation of the vision of dry bones (and we'll see if ours is correct). In verse 11 we see the identification of the bones and Israel's despair in exile. **Then He said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off.'** The **bones** do represent **the whole house of Israel**. Those who cannot believe that God will restore the whole house of Israel believe that this was fulfilled in the restoration of the southern kingdom of Judah from Babylon. However, the **bones** are not just the house of Judah but **the whole house of Israel**. Therefore, this prophesy concerns all twelve tribes of Israel. The bones in the valley are all twelve tribes of Israel in exile scattered among Gentile nations. What the whole house of Israel says as they are in exile is **Our bones are dried up and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off**. The nation Israel would be in exile so long that they would lose all hope. The expression **we are completely cut off** is somewhat odd. However, to be cut off basically means to die. When someone would die in Israel they would be buried and forgotten. It is used in Ps 88:5 to refer to being forgotten by God. The nation Israel would be in exile so long that they would consider themselves dead and forgotten by God. Therefore, the exile would bring the nation into a place where they were without **hope** of ever being restored.

However, in 37:12 God tells Ezekiel, **Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel."** This prophecy is designed to give them hope. The name used of God is the same as vv 3, 5 and 9, it is the sovereign God. What the sovereign God says He is going to do is **open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves**. In context this does not refer to physical resurrection but to physical rebirth of the nation. As a nation they considered themselves dead and forgotten by God but God has not forgotten them. As the verse says, you are **My people**. God has never and will never forget Israel. They are His people. At some time, the prophecy is that He will restore them, and in particular He **will** restore them **into the land of Israel**. The land promise is yet to be fulfilled. He is going to take them back into the same land He exiled them from, not another land and certainly not heaven, but **the land of Israel**, the land He originally promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by unconditional covenant. He did this on May 14, 1948. Therefore, to say that the modern state of Israel is insignificant or worse, just the work of man, is a complete denigration of the prophetic word of God. J. Vernon McGee said, "I want to say something very carefully now concerning the three stages of the bones Ezekiel saw. I have said they are the key to understanding the future of the nation Israel, and I now want to add that if there is any place we have fulfilled prophecy, it is in these three stages. I don't go much for finding prophecy being fulfilled on every hand, but I do see it here. Follow me carefully: The nation Israel was buried and scattered in the nations of the world, and was dead to God, dead to the things of God—that's the first stage of the bones that we saw. Now since 1948 they have come back as a nation, but it is really a corpse over there today. They have a flag, they have a constitution, they have a prime minister, and they have a parliament. They have a police force and an army. They have a nation, and they even have Jerusalem. They have everything except spiritual life. If you walk from the old Arab section of Jerusalem where Islam dominates and come over into the Israeli section, there is no spiritual life. I want to say this kindly, but, as far as I am concerned, there is as much spiritual deadness on the one side as the other. There is a great deal more of that which is materialistic, which is intellectual, and which denotes civilization on the Israeli side, but there is no spiritual life whatsoever. This is symbolized by the second stage of the bones—bodies, but without life. That is where Israel stands today."¹⁰

In 37:13, **Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people**. You might say, well, the Jews do not know this today, they do not **know that** it is the **LORD** who has done this. You would be right. But this verse really connects with verse 14 and not verse 12. In other words, verse 12 is talking about Israel coming out of physical graves, so to speak, the formation of a physical nation. But verses 13 and 14 are talking about Israel coming out of spiritual graves, the formation of a spiritual nation.

Verse 14 says, **I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken and done it," declares the LORD.**" This is the spiritual regeneration of the nation Israel. This has not yet happened. What has happened, and why this is so

significant, is verse 12; there is a physical nation of Israel in the land. And so if this has happened, we can know that the sovereign God is also going to do verses 13-14. He is going to put His Spirit in them. In Ezek 36:26 God says, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from our flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. You will live in the land that I gave your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God." They already live in the land but they have no spiritual life. We are living now right in between these two prophecies. We live in exciting times because we can see God's sovereign hand at work. That is why this is a major prophetic passage.

It also shows us how we are to think of the people and state of Israel today. The present state of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been a real source of division in the Church. Fruchtenbaum says, "Not surprisingly the present state of Israel has turned out to be a real disturbance for amillennialists who believe the Church has replaced Israel. It has also turned out to be a disturbance for historic premillennialists who see the Church as the new or spiritual Israel. But surprisingly it has also been a point of dissension among dispensational premillennialists....The issue that bothers some Dispensationalists is the fact that not only have the Jews returned in unbelief with regard to the person of Jesus, but the majority are atheists or agnostics."¹¹ "This picture of an unregenerate Israel does not fit their understanding of the Biblical passages. The real problem is that they don't recognize that the prophets spoke of two returns....First, there was to be a regathering in unbelief in preparation for judgment, namely the judgment of the Tribulation. This was to be followed by a second worldwide regathering in faith. In preparation for blessings, namely the blessings of the messianic age. Once it is recognized that the Bible speaks of two such regatherings, it is easy to see how the present State of Israel fits into prophecy."¹² Ezekiel 37:1-14 is one such passage. Therefore, should we support the nation Israel even in unbelief? Yes. The hand of God is at work. What should our response be to Palestinians? Individually they are lost and need the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile. Therefore, we should preach the gospel to them in the same way that we would preach it to anyone. But divine right to the land belongs to Israel and to go contrary to Israel on the land issue is to go contrary to God who is right now doing a work bringing Jews from around the world out of Gentile nations and into her own land.

¹ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition*; Bible. English. NET Bible.; *The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005).

² J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: The Prophets (Ezekiel)*, electronic ed., vol. 25 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 183.

³ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Eze 37:1.

⁴ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: The Prophets (Ezekiel)*, electronic ed., vol. 25 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 184.

⁵ Merrill Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, p 1573.

⁶ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: The Prophets (Ezekiel)*, electronic ed., vol. 25 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 185.

⁷ Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald Barclay Allen, and H. Wayne House, *The Nelson Study Bible: New King James Version* (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1997), Eze 37:11–14.

⁸ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: The Prophets (Ezekiel)*, electronic ed., vol. 25 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 186.

⁹ Charles Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel: The Glory of the Lord*, p 214.

¹⁰ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: The Prophets (Ezekiel)*, electronic ed., vol. 25 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 187–188.

¹¹ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, p 716.

¹² Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, p 716.