

Easter 2026 - Ezekiel 37:1-14 - Williams

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Preacher: Tad Williams

[0:00] Well, good morning. It's a joy to greet you, joy to see friends and family here. We are gathered this morning to celebrate and commemorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Thank you. Yeah, that is the purpose of an Easter Sunday morning church service, to celebrate and commemorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And in order to do that here this morning, we are turning back in our Bibles to a prophet who lived about 600 years before Jesus. And we are studying a strange passage of Scripture. This is a very Holy Covenant Church thing to do. If you've been with us before, we're sort of prone to this. I hope it's not just me. I like the weird passages quite a bit. This one is strange.

Let's pray once more as we come to this passage. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Word. We thank you that you have spoken through your prophets, that your prophets point forward to Jesus Christ. Help us to see that now, I pray, in the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, keep your Bibles open, please, to Ezekiel 37. Let me begin with some context to help us orient ourselves in this story. The prophet Ezekiel was born in the land of Israel. His father was a priest. He, Ezekiel, was in training to be a priest when he was 25 years old. And the Babylonian army invaded Israel and captured 10,000 of the Jewish people, including Ezekiel, and took them to Babylon, where they settled them in what we would call a refugee camp on the bank of the Kabar River or the Kabar Canal, Ezekiel calls it. And so Ezekiel began officially his priestly ministry at the age of 30 years old in Babylon in this refugee camp. And that's where he lived and ministered his whole life amongst the exiles in Babylon. Ezekiel is famous in his written work, his book, for the weird and bizarre descriptions he gives us of his visions of God and the heavenly realm and what God is doing in the world. Sometimes his writing is shocking, bizarre, gross, sometimes R-rated. He becomes famous for this sort of shocking message. One commentator said, amongst all the prophets, Ezekiel is most effective in communicating uncomfortable truth. Because what Ezekiel does there in Babylon is he confronts these exiles with the reality of their sin. And again and again and again he blames them for what has happened in Jerusalem in very fierce and strong language.

[3:29] Well there's two things that seem to happen in Ezekiel's life about the middle of his life that sort of soften his message, soften his tone. The first thing that happens is that his wife dies. He refers to this, he tells us this story in Ezekiel chapter 24, he refers to his wife as the light of my eyes. Moving beautiful description.

The second thing that happens is messengers arrive and inform these exiles that the Babylonian army has once again invaded and conquered the land of Israel. And this time they have completely annihilated the city of Jerusalem. And this is what we read about in the book of Lamentations. If you remember the siege of Jerusalem that results in starvation and cannibalism. And it is a devastating message that comes to these exiles in their refugee camp. And this seems to soften Ezekiel and soften his messages because his visions from that point on become more hopeful. He begins to look forward more to what God will do.

The restoration. And that brings us to this chapter. This is where we're at in Ezekiel's life and in his ministry as he is looking forward. God is giving him visions of hope. And in this chapter a vision of resurrection.

So let's turn now and look closely at this passage. 14 verses. It divides fairly nicely into two sections. The first 11 verses. Ezekiel is describing what he saw, this vision. And then in verse 11 to 14, God gives Ezekiel the interpretation of the vision and a message to share with these other exiles.

So let's start by looking at the details of this vision, this experience. Verse 1, the hand of the Lord was upon me, Ezekiel says, and he brought me out in the spirit and set me down in the middle of the valley. It was full of bones.

[5:46] We don't know exactly where the valley is. Is it... We don't even know if this is a vision or a dream or if this is just an experience that he has. He doesn't tell us it's a vision. Most people call this a vision.

Say it's a vision that he had. The Lord leads him by the hand in the spirit to the middle of a valley full of bones. Verse 2, You see in your text it says, around among them. That's sort of awkward construction. That's because there's two words in the Hebrew. Right together for emphasis, the Lord led Ezekiel around among. It's a disorienting expression.

He's surrounded by bones. He's in the middle, around among. They're all around him, the bones. This is alarming because as a priest, Ezekiel was forbidden to come into contact with dead bodies. The priests were forbidden to be close to dead bodies. But yet the Lord leads this priest around among in these bones.

And there's very many of them, he says. This is not a few skeletons laid out. This is a great pile of mixed up bones. And there he is in the midst of them and they are very dry.

[7:25] You see that? Very dry. They're very dead is what Ezekiel's telling us. Not just sort of dead. Very dead. Way dead. Very, very dead bones.

Very dry. That's the meaning of that. Verse 3, And he, the Lord, said to me, Son of man, can these bones live? So God asks Ezekiel a question.

What do you think, Ezekiel? Can these bones live? Very many. Very dead. Very dead. And I answered, O Lord God, you know.

It's an interesting response from Ezekiel. He does not say, O yes God, you can do anything. Of course, God, you're God. It's hard to know exactly his tone, but he replies, O Lord, you know. Ezekiel is tired, I think. He's had over a decade at this point of living in this refugee camp where he's proclaiming this harsh message.

[8:41] It takes a big man to slam dunk on your fellow refugees and tell them again and again, It's your fault. O Lord God, you know, he says.

Then the Lord said to him, verse 4, Prophecy over these bones and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones, Behold, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live and I will lay sinews upon you and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin and put breath in you and you shall live and you shall know that I am the Lord. So this is the message that God gives to Ezekiel and tells Ezekiel to proclaim this message to the bones. Why does God do that? Ever think about that?

Why does God not just say, Ezekiel, pull up a chair? This is going to be a great show. Make sure you have a remote so you can turn up the volume, Ezekiel, because you're going to want to hear this.

Okay, that's not what God says. God speaks a message and says, Ezekiel, you proclaim this message to the bones. Just notice that.

[10:05] Very curious. Why? Why? Why doesn't God cut out the middleman at this point, make the pronouncement himself, and let the fireworks begin?

That's not what happens. Look at verse 7. And so I, Ezekiel says, I prophesied as I was commanded. Imagine the oddness of this moment.

Okay, you bones. Very weird. Ezekiel, you're talking to a big pile of bones.

The men in white coats will be here for you soon. Right? I mean, this is the moment. But look what he says. And so I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound and behold, a rattling, your Bible might say, earthquake.

There's a shaking, a trembling, a rattling. And the bones come together, bones to bone. And I looked and behold, there were sinews on them and flesh had come upon them and skin had covered them.

[11:14] Incredible. Incredible. Preachers love this passage. And this is why.

Preachers love to start talking at this point about the power of preaching. The power of preaching. Look what happens. You might think, well, Ezekiel, man, that's a shot in the arm this moment.

Can you imagine? He proclaims the message and this is what happens. But look, very importantly, the end of verse 8, the bones come together and they become corpses because there is no breath in them.

They're not alive yet. They're not living. The bodies have formed up, the bones and the sinews and the flesh, but there is no breath in them.

Then he, the Lord, said to Ezekiel, verse 9, 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 may live.

[12:25] And so this is a second message that God gives to Ezekiel. A second message to preach to a different audience. The first audience was the bones, which is strange and might feel pointless.

The second audience is the wind. God tells Ezekiel now to preach to the wind. Hmm. We miss this in our English translations.

There's a Hebrew word, ruach. Ruach. And it gets translated three different ways as spirit, as wind, or as breath.

Three different English possible translations of this word. That Hebrew word, ruach, is used ten times in these fourteen verses. And it gets translated all three ways.

And so, English translators have quite a challenge here. They have to decide what's the best sense of the word to translate it into English. But in verse 9, I'll read it this way, then he, the Lord, said to Ezekiel, prophesy to the ruach, prophesy, son of man, and say to the ruach, thus says the Lord God, come from the four ruachs, O ruach, and breathe on these slain.

[13:56] That's what the Hebrew is. One commentator said, part of the artfulness of this story is this very artful and intentional play on this word. The spirit that led Ezekiel in verse 1 is the ruach of the Lord.

And now God tells Ezekiel, preach to the ruach that it will come in to these bones so that they will breathe the breath of God.

We are intended at this moment to think about Genesis chapter 2. In Genesis chapter 2, God forms the man of the dust of the ground.

So he forms up the body, makes a body of a man. But then it says, and God breathed into the man the breath of life and the man became a living soul. That's what's happening here.

The body has been formed. It's a body. But now the breath of God comes into the body and again, God asks Ezekiel to preach and proclaim and ask for this.

[15:18] I appreciate it. One commentator who said at this point, this is not preaching, this is prayer. You don't tell the breath of God what to do, but you do ask.

You pray. O breath of God, come into these bones that they may breathe.

And so Ezekiel prays that. He prophesies to the wind. Verse 10, So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet an exceedingly great army.

Wow! The breath of God. It requires, it seems, the prophet's activity, his faithful proclaiming of the word, but it's very carefully presented to us so that there is no doubt that this is not the result of the prophet's magic or his words.

This is the result of the sovereign act of God overcoming an impossibly bleak situation to bring life to the dead.

[16:47] So that is the, that's what happens. That's the event. And now God speaks to Ezekiel in verse 11, and he says to me, Son of man, and he gives him the interpretation, the meaning of all this strangeness.

The Lord says to Ezekiel, verse 11, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are indeed cut off.

What seems to be in view here is God says, number one, the bones are the whole house of Israel, and the house of Israel, is currently saying, our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are indeed cut off.

That probably means the exiles in this refugee camp who have heard this news of Jerusalem are just at a point of incredible despondency and despair, and they think of themselves as dead people.

Our bones are dried up, they're saying. It's how they feel currently. And so the Lord said, these bones, Ezekiel, that you've seen in this vision, they are the whole house of Israel.

[18:00] Therefore, prophesy and say to them, go talk to your fellow refugees, your prisoner of war maybe is a better way to think of them, and tell them this message.

Thus says the Lord God, behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you into the land of Israel, and you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and raise you from your graves.

What a statement. There's a lot of questions at this point. What are we talking about? What? What it seems to say, God tells Ezekiel, go tell your fellow refugees that they may die here in exile in the land of Babylon, but if they do, I will raise them from their graves and bring them back into the land of Israel.

That's the most straightforward reading of this. That raises a lot of questions.

At this point in the sermon, I would like to go down a rabbit hole and I would like all of us to go down the rabbit hole. Maybe we should call it the Easter bunny rabbit hole.

[19:30] I don't know. No. My wife's in the nursery and that's good because I'm going to get in trouble for that joke later, but for now, we can enjoy it. I've given this rabbit hole a name.

Here's the name of this particular rabbit hole. The Problem of Bodily Resurrection for Jewish Interpreters. The Problem of Bodily Resurrection for Jewish Interpreters.

Here's the problem. There are only a few passages in the Old Testament that talk about or seem to talk about bodily resurrection, the idea that human bodies will be raised from the dead.

There's only a few passages. This is one of them. This is one of the main ones. This is one of the most discussed passages in the Old Testament that seems to talk about bodily resurrection.

But what does it mean exactly? because there are so few passages there is not in Jewish theology fully developed or universally agreed on doctrine of bodily resurrection.

[20:41] There's a lot of debate about it. Is it even a thing? That's a big question. Remember this shows up in the Gospels, right? Remember here in the Sadducees are this group and they do not believe in the resurrection.

And Jesus interacts with them and they have some debates and well that debate has persisted to this day. In Jewish theology there is an ongoing debate about bodily resurrection.

Is it a thing? And if it is a thing how does it work and how will it happen? And I want to read you a statement that actually first appeared many many centuries ago in rabbinic commentary talking about this chapter as Ezekiel 37 where one young rabbi asked an older rabbi well how will this happen rabbi that these bodies of the Babylonian exiles will come into the land?

How does it happen? And the old rabbi essentially says the Lord will bring the bodies underground. He will roll them underground from Babylon into the physical boundaries of the land of Israel where the bodies will emerge from the ground.

because the text says the graves will be open and they will be in the land of Israel. So the only way that can happen is if they show up in the land of Israel first not fly through the air from Babylon.

[22:09] So this is the discussion. Here's a quote from a source, Jewish source, quote, the resurrection doctrine is fleshed out in a variety of rabbinic sources.

That's what it said. I thought that was a joke. I don't know when I first read it. The doctrine is fleshed out. Yes it is. It must be, right? But I don't think it was a joke. That's what they said. The resurrection doctrine is fleshed out in a variety of rabbinic sources.

Among the ideas associated with it is the belief that during the messianic age the dead will be brought back to life in Israel. According to the Talmud, all bodies not already in Israel will be rolled through underground tunnels to the Holy Land.

Avoiding this process, which is said to be spiritually painful, is one reason some Jews choose to be buried in Israel or to transport the remains of their loved ones to Israel.

And there's a robust industry that does this. There are businesses that do this, that will transport the body to Israel because this gives them the best hope of resurrection.

[23:28] I would like to declare here this morning there's a better hope of resurrection than the company that transports your loved one's body to Israel. There is a better hope of resurrection and it's been very eye-opening for me this week to realize the clarity that the resurrection of Jesus Christ gives us in this whole area of wondering what happens when we die, what happens to bodies.

Jesus Christ is raised by the power of God from the dead and he becomes the prototype for all Christians of resurrected body.

And Jesus Christ, when he emerges from the grave and when we think about, Jesus becomes a spotlight that shines back onto the Old Testament and illuminates these passages like this one in Ezekiel and helps us understand what it might mean for graves to be opened and for God to raise the whole house of Israel from the grave.

Let me read you, this is a little bit of a longer quote. It's a description of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from a source called the Lexham Survey of Theology.

Here it is, quote, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is that central moment in human history that serves as the foundational doctrine of Christianity.

[25:26] After having truly assumed human nature and submitted to an agonizing and shameful public death, the eternal Son of God was truly raised from the dead in his glorified physical body, no longer subject to decay and death, his resurrection validates his identity as the divine Son of God, demonstrates his irrevocable victory over death and the grave, and secures both the present salvation and future physical resurrection of believers.

believers. I appreciated that statement. That's the light of Jesus Christ and of his resurrection from the dead that allows us to understand.

There are, of course, many questions about resurrection and resurrection of bodies, but Christian doctrine does present some clear principles and clear teaching on this matter that is not shared in other faiths and other traditions.

And because of that, we can have certainty and assurance, and we can rest. Let me just review.

Very teaching moment.

Christianity and Christian doctrine upholds the immortality of the soul. That every human has a soul that is immortal, will live forever.

[27:08] Christian doctrine upholds the resurrection of all human bodies. That all humans will eventually be resurrected from the dead and their immortal souls will be reunited with their physical bodies, though a resurrected body, some to life everlasting at peace with Christ, some to everlasting punishment.

But the immortality of the soul and universal resurrection of all bodies are core tenets of Christian doctrine, and there really is no dispute amongst Christians on that.

We say this every week here at Holy Covenant Church when we recite either the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed like we did this morning. We believe in the resurrection of the body, or we look for the resurrection of the body.

It's a core tenet of Christian teaching, and it is established and grounded on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So we can have that confidence and that assurance.

assurance. Ezekiel 37 points forward to that, I believe.

[28:30] It was certainly a message of hope that Ezekiel gave to his fellow exiles, intended to encourage them in the Lord's sovereign power and care, and that God has not abandoned them, and not all hope is lost, but it also gives us insight into the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Well, as we draw near a close, let me end with two implications, applications, I think, that are on my heart and mind for us. Number one, the valley of dry bones is a picture of spiritual renewal in Christ.

All traditions, Jewish, Christian, all traditions understand and agree on that with this passage, that this is a picture of spiritual renewal, of the power of God to renew us, to give life to the dead.

As Christians, we believe it's a picture of new life in Christ, of what it means to be born again.

That when we trust in Christ, God does a miracle by breathing His Spirit into us.

[30:01] The breath of God comes into the believer, and our dead dry bones are made alive in Christ.

Apostle Paul in Colossians 2 says, you were dead in your trespasses and sins, but you have been made alive in Christ. That's the image exactly.

The valley of dry bones is a picture of new life in Christ. The breath of God in those who believe. I hope you believe that.

And I hope you experience that in your life. If you do believe that, and if that's your experience, would you give God praise and glory and thanks for that today in a special way?

And if you do not believe that, if you have not experienced that, would you pray and ask God to make that your reality? To breathe His living breath into you.

[31:11] That offer is made available to you today because of Christ and His resurrection. Dry bones can live.

Here's the final lesson or application that I see in this passage, and that is the necessity of human proclamation in the work of evangelism.

Right? We saw this in the passage. God does not cut out the middleman. He asks Ezekiel to deliver the message.

And in that same way, God asks us today to deliver and proclaim the message of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and to be God's agents in this world, bearing the good news of Christ, His resurrection, the power, the life we can have in Him.

So there is a necessary role of human proclamation in the work of evangelism.

[32:32] We do not sit by in easy chairs and just ask God to do all the work. We know the work is the work of God, that He is sovereign over it all, but we understand that He asks us, just like He asks Ezekiel, to proclaim the word, to speak of Christ.

I've been reading a book by J.I. Packer called Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God. Wonderful book. I'm happy to recommend it. Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God by J.I.

Packer. But Dr. Packer has a great statement in the book. He says, evangelism is nothing more and nothing less than using words to point people to Jesus. And all of us can do that.

Big and small ways, little ways. Doesn't mean you have to preach a sermon. Doesn't mean you have to have perfect theology and explain all 13 points of your doctrine, you know.

How can we share the good news of Jesus? We use words. We point people to Jesus. We've been doing member interviews here at Holy Covenant Church.

[33:49] I think we have 14 or 15. Is that right? I forget how many. Signing up to be members. It's been fun. So I've been going over the membership covenant with these new member candidates.

We have a membership covenant here at Holy Covenant Church that we ask all member candidates to sign. And so if you're a member of Holy Covenant Church, you have signed this document.

And I'm here to remind you of one particular line in it this morning. In particular, there's a line in our membership covenant and it says this. We make a series of pledges, the members who sign this.

But one of those pledges or commitments is we say this. As a member of Holy Covenant Church, I will seek the salvation of my family, friends, and acquaintances.

So if you're a member of this church, you have committed to do this. And I want to remind us all of that this morning. I've been convicted by that just over the last few weeks doing these member interviews.

[34:51] that part of the work of every Christian is to seek the salvation of my family, friends, and acquaintances. And so let me challenge you to do that and encourage you to do that, to pray and ask God to give you strength and power and boldness and courage in small or large ways, however it is God leads you.

To proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, to celebrate the resurrection of Christ from the dead. To be grateful for the breath of God that he has breathed into all who believe.

To be at peace and rest in that, in the confidence of the resurrected Christ. Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, risen from the dead, we praise you and thank you.

Heavenly Father, Holy Spirit, fill us with the breath of God. Grant us joy and courage to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.
We ask in the name of the risen resurrected Christ. Amen.