

### **From death to life by His Spirit.**

Marathons are run all over the world because an Athenian ran from the battle of Marathon to Athens, about 26 miles, to announce victory over the Persians in 490 B.C. About 100 years before this a Judean refugee made it to the exiles in Babylon to announce that Jerusalem had fallen and all hope was lost, a terror-filled chapter in Judah's history. However, God was behind all this to bring his people **from death to life by His Spirit.**

The ruthless nation of Assyria had long since literally littered the northern ten tribes of Israel all over the world far from their homeland. In about 590 B.C. Babylon was about to do the same with Judah and Jerusalem. Babylon had grown sick and annoyed of Judah's wavering alliances and lies. Ten years earlier Babylon took many captives from Judah, but Jerusalem still didn't learn. The temple and the holy city were helpless in the crosshairs.

Yet the captives in Babylon held out hope that the temple and their relatives might be spared. God crushed that hope. The LORD called a man named "Ezekiel," a prisoner of war in Babylon already 10 years, to prophesy to his fellow exiles in Babylon against any hope of a quick return, of a peaceable solution, of a salvaged temple and city. It would all be laid waste, and deservedly so. God's chosen people chose other gods and idols and refused to return to Him though he had worn out their ears with the words and texts of his prophets. Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, leveling the temple. The first refugee made it to the exiles to confirm that all was lost. Then God took his prophet aside and showed him what he was about to do for his people whom he had systematically and sufficiently crushed. He would bring them **from death to life by His Spirit.**

*Ezekiel 37:1-14 - The hand of the LORD was on 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know." <sup>4</sup> Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! <sup>5</sup> This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. <sup>6</sup> 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.' " <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. <sup>9</sup> Then he said to me, "Prophecy 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.’ ”<sup>10</sup> So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.<sup>11</sup> 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.’<sup>12</sup> Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘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.<sup>13</sup> Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them.<sup>14</sup> 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.’ ”<sup>1</sup>*

The exiles knew what death and destruction looked like, especially the newly arrived exiles, and the sight Ezekiel is given – a valley full of bones, and not just newly dead, but very dry bones, is exactly how they felt. They had been sufficiently killed and dejected. But though they deserved far worse, God asks a question from Ezekiel, *“Son of man, can these bones live?”* To our estimation – “no.” Has anyone ever heard of God doing such a thing? I can think Jesus’ death on the cross. The temple curtain was torn in two. Many saints who were in their graves came out and went into town and appeared to people (Matthew 27). But a valley full of dry, dry bones, Ezekiel wisely answers, *“LORD, you alone know.”*

God alone does know, but he reveals his will to us. The LORD commands Ezekiel to prophesy to these dry bones what God will do for them. Then God does it. The LORD commands Ezekiel to prophesy again to the breath God will send. Then God does it. And these once dry bones attach by tendons, are covered in flesh and skin, and God sends the breath of life into them like at creation. There they are – a vast living army.

What should we make of this? We could jump to the resurrection of all the dead at the last day, which will happen, and take comfort in other portions of Scripture that tell us death is not the end for God’s people, but eternal life. We could jump to a spiritual application that only God can convert people and there is no “deciding for Christ,” and point to passages like *“surely I was sinful from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me,”* (Psalm 51) or *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins”* (Ephesians 2). Those things are true, but what did this mean for the people Ezekiel served that God had crushed and emptied of all carnal hope?

They still had a God. And there is no other god. Baal and Ashtoreth are nothing. It’s not the sun, moon or stars. Most importantly it’s not me or what I choose to be god for me, or something I can manipulate. There is only one God – the LORD, the God of the covenant, the God of the Bible. He kills and brings to life, why? Because he is love and mercy. *“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. Then you,*

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<sup>1</sup> *The New International Version.* (2011). (Eze 37:1–14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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

In his great mercy to his people, he calls them “*My people*” even though they had acted everything the opposite. He promises what they know is impossible – restoration, healing, and a return to the Promised Land. And he did all this. After 70 years of captivity, God used a heathen king, Cyrus, to send the people back and even provide materials for the rebuilding. No doubt, some of those listening to Ezekiel saw with their very own eyes the new temple. The LORD keeps his promises. The LORD slays and brings back to life.

Remember when Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the temple, Simeon held him and sang. Anna, from the tribe of Asher – a northern tribe, also beheld him and talked to anyone who would listen about Jesus. God kept his promise and brought his people back, unified in the promise of the Messiah. God delivered that Messiah, Jesus Christ.

This vision also gives us a beautiful picture of what God did for us. God has raised up a spiritual kingdom from dead dry sinners. On Pentecost God sent his Spirit into the hearts of the disciples to proclaim this kingdom to the world – the kingdom of Christ. And 3000 were brought to life on Pentecost and the kingdom has been growing ever since – a vast army.

God kills and brings to life because he loves us. He leads us to despair of ourselves and of any carnal help or security. This is hard and our sinful natures hate it, but he loves us, so he does this. Our worship service reflects this necessary part of following Christ. Each service we begin with confession. Why? It is for the tax collector in us who has been terrified of his sins and fears God’s just judgment over his sin and in despair brings his awfulness to God’s answer for sin – Christ and his cross, and finds relief and forgiveness only in Him.

It is for the Pharisee in us who has treated God’s grace like a scholarship for good grades. A scholarship is, of course, a gift if you will, but it’s one we’ve really earned and keep earning by our good deeds in our life. The Pharisee in us grade grubs about answers, deeds, thoughts and words which from a Teacher’s point of view are obviously wrong, but in our own eyes we justify even our greed, arrogance and sin, explaining how it is acceptable for us. We need to have our rose colored coke bottle glasses with the blinders on the side knocked from our face so God can show us just how sinful we are before a just and holy God who demands perfection and sees clearly. We are damnable sinners – dead, dry bones that look and see in ourselves no hope. God cares for the tax collector and the Pharisee alike.

God sends his Spirit to bring life and point us to Christ. *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you and your children and for all who*

*are far off, for all whom the Lord our God will call.”* And God breathes faith into our hearts through his Spirit working through the Word. *“Take and Eat this is my body given for you. Take and drink, this is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.”* We approach the Lord’s Table to taste the forgiveness of sins for us in Christ’s own body and blood and be strengthened to live freely for him. *“If you forgive anyone their sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”* And so with God’s authority we say, “As a called servant of Christ and by his authority, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” God has forgiven us through Christ Jesus. God brings us back to life so that we look to our Savior, Jesus Christ, his cross and empty tomb, and not to ourselves. You are part of this vast army.

You don’t need to run a marathon to serve him. You serve him as you hear this Word of God and the Spirit strengthens you. You serve him as you do what is needed and loving for your neighbor because you have been loved. You serve as you witness to the love and forgiveness of God in this sin-sick world because he has brought you **from death to life by his Spirit**. Amen.