

## [Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)

A film I enjoyed back in the 1980s was a comedy called *Clockwise*, starring John Cleese. He plays Brian Stimpson, the headmaster of an independent school. Stimpson is known for his strict punctuality, something he enforces in the culture of the school.

Stimpson is invited to be the guest speaker at an educational conference. However, one obstacle after another puts him more and more behind time to get there – the very worst thing for such a punctual man.

As the stress on him heightens with hopes regularly raised and then dashed, Stimpson says this:

I can take the despair. It's the hope I can't stand.

Ezekiel knows something of the oscillation between despair and hope, and what that can do to someone. In the previous chapter, he has had a wonderful message from the Lord about how he will give Israel a new heart and a new spirit. It's a wonderful message, where God's people are back in their own land, and no longer in exile in Babylon, as is the case at the time of Ezekiel's ministry. Imagine how that lifts him up.

Then in here in chapter 37 it begins with 'The hand of the LORD' being on him (verse 1), and so surely this exhilarating sense of hope is going to continue. But no. He is taken to a valley – rarely, if ever, a good place in Scripture – and that valley is filled with the dry bones of the dead. Israel isn't alive. She is dead.

And you realise just how down in the dumps Ezekiel has become when the Lord asks him,

'Son of man, can these bones live?'

I said, 'Sovereign Lord, you alone know.' (Verse 3)

Not much hope there. The vision of the new heart with God's Spirit inside and God's people living back in the Promised Land has been sunk by seeing the valley of dry bones. I don't know, Lord, says Ezekiel, only you know.

I labour the point because something similar can be our experience. We have in a sense gone into exile too in that Christians are now not only a minority in our culture but also increasingly a group that is thought of as evil. Every now and again, though, we see some signs of hope. But then along comes a pandemic, our churches lose a lot of money, decisions and crises that were still

potentially five or ten years away suddenly confront us, and even when in-person worship resumes not everybody feels happy to come back. Some of those who don't return make that decision for obvious medical reasons, but others who don't show up again are a big surprise.

Are we walking among a valley of dry bones? Sometimes we are.

Is there any solution? Yes there is, but what Ezekiel 37 and the Feast of Pentecost make clear is that it doesn't lie with us. None of our programmes, none of our wheezes will make a scrap of difference. We are dry bones.

No, the solution comes from God and it is in the shape of his Spirit. There are three prophecies about the Holy Spirit that Ezekiel receives, and each shows what God can do for us when we are open to being filled with the Holy Spirit.

The **first prophecy** reveals the Holy Spirit as **the Spirit of promise**:

<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.

It all begins here. The job isn't finished – those last words were 'there was no breath in them' – but here the sending of the Spirit (or breath, it's the same Hebrew word) is the sign that God will keep his promise to give life to his people.

But the question is, will we seek and pray for the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives? Yes, it's a work of divine grace, we are dependent on God for the gift of the Spirit, but that happens after Ezekiel prophesies the word of the Lord. So will we seek the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives?

I know some Christians get nervous about the Holy Spirit. There is something about that word 'Spirit' and sometimes the Holy Spirit does strange things. However, we shouldn't expect the Spirit of God to do things exactly our way!

The good news is that the Holy Spirit is also called in the Book of Acts 'The Spirit of Jesus', so what if the question instead were this: how much do we want the Spirit of Jesus to be at work in our lives?

Or put it this way: if I'm conscious that I'm not as much like Jesus as I might be, then what I need is more of the Spirit of Jesus.

And frankly, which one of us is as much like Jesus as we might be? So don't we all need more of the Spirit of Jesus?

It's time to put our fears about the Holy Spirit aside and recognise that we need to be filled and filled again with the Spirit.

The **second prophecy** reveals the Holy Spirit as **the Spirit of power**:

<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.

Now there is life and breath in the bones, and they become not an enormous mausoleum but 'a vast army'. That is God's power, the power of the Holy Spirit, at work.

Doesn't this speak to another way in which we sense our inadequacy from operating on our own without the Spirit of God? Isn't it true that so often we look at ourselves in the church and feel powerless to do anything effective in society? Do we feel that our best efforts are feeble in the face of overwhelming social forces that aggressively promote values that are contrary to what we hold dear as Christians? Do we look like a vast army? Probably not, much of the time.

Then think of how it was said of the early church that they had turned the world upside-down. Oh sure, they hadn't got rid of some vicious Roman emperors, but they had started a subversive revolution at ground level. For all the good the church does today, I have to be honest and say I don't think we're leading a Jesus revolution in our day.

Of course, we don't want to be a vast army in a literal sense. That's not how God's kingdom works, as Jesus showed, and as the early church lived. But the

battle for what is good, pure, true, and beautiful is one in which we need to be engaged, and we need to fight in a manner like Jesus and the apostles.

So once more, there is really only one solution: to cry out in persistent prayer for more of the Holy Spirit.

The **third prophecy** reveals the Holy Spirit as **the Spirit of prophecy** itself:

<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.”’

It is prophesied that Israel will be back in her land of promise. And a few decades later, it happened.

Not for Christians, of course, is there to be a physical land with its borders somewhere on this planet. Instead, we seek the kingdom of God, where not only God reigns but people walk in his ways and no longer rebel against him. And even inanimate creation is affected, no longer damaged but flourishing. Under God’s reign we have a community of disciples, a community of beauty, of peace, of love, of justice.

We’re a long way short, aren’t we? Not just in society, but in the church. Whatever good things we find in the church, it would take someone with the most rose-tinted spectacles ever made to argue that we were close to the kingdom in all its fulness in the way we live.

Certainly, I believe we’re a long way short. Not only do I as a minister often see the dark side of the church, the longer I live as a Christian the more conscious I am of the ways I fall short.

Either way, there is only one answer, and it’s the one we keep coming back to this week: we need to be more full of the Holy Spirit than we are right now. That is how God changes things for ancient Israel: ‘I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.’

In **conclusion**, everything points to us needing more of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit isn't absent from us as with ancient Israel, when the Spirit only came upon selected individuals. In our era, the Holy Spirit comes upon all who entrust their lives to Jesus Christ.

But just as some people have a vitamin deficiency where they need to take more vitamins, so I think the signs I've described show that we have a Spirit deficiency.

If there is one thing we could all do that would lead to a major difference in the life of the church of Jesus Christ, it would be that we set ourselves persistently, regularly, and urgently to pray that God would fill us with his Holy Spirit.

Because when he does we shall be more like Jesus. When he does, we shall be more equipped to be Christ's subversive army of love in the world. And when he does, we shall see more of his beautiful kingdom.

And if the church changes like that, then we shan't be weighed down with despair, but surrounded by the growing seeds of hope.