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June 18th: Ezekiel 37 & Acts 17:1-15

June 17, 2021



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The resurrection of the house of Israel. Paul in Thessalonica and Berea.

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Transcript

Ezekiel chapter 37. The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the middle of the valley. It was full of bones, and he led me around among them.

And behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, you know. Then he said to me, 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 I prophesied as I was commanded, and as I prophesied there was a

sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, Prophecy 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. 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. 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 is lost, we are indeed cut off, therefore prophesy and say to them, 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, O my people, and I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land, then you shall know that I am the Lord, I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord.

The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, take a stick and write on it, for Judah, and the people of Israel associated with him, then take another stick and write on it, for Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and all the house of Israel associated with him, and join them one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand, and when your people say to you, Will you not tell us what you mean by these, say to them, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am about to take the stick of Joseph, that is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel associated with him, and I will join it with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, that they may be one in my hand, when the sticks on which you write are in your hand before their eyes, then say to them, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from all around, and bring them to their own land, and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel, and one king shall be king over them all, and they shall be no longer two nations, and no longer divided into two kingdoms, they shall not defile themselves any more with their idols, and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions, but I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them, and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, my servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd, they shall walk in my rules, and be careful to obey my statutes, they shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived, they and their children and their children's children shall dwell there for ever, and David my servant shall be their prince for ever, I will make a covenant of peace with them, it shall be an everlasting covenant with them, and I will set them in their land, and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst for ever more, my dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people, then the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst for

ever more. Ezekiel chapter 37 is one of the most memorable and powerful chapters in the entire book. It describes a vision of national resurrection through the prophetic word and spirit of God.

Ezekiel is a witness and participant in this vision, as he was earlier in the vision of the glory vacating the temple and the judgment upon the city of Jerusalem back in chapters 8 to 11. Much as in that earlier vision, Ezekiel is here transported by the spirit of the Lord to the visionary location. The location of the vision seems to be known to Ezekiel and likely also to his hearers, as it is described as the valley.

The valley is littered with dry and whitened bones, presumably it is the site of a great slaughter. The Lord leads Ezekiel around among the bones, enabling him to get a sense of the great number of them and their state, bleached and dried by the sun. As the burial of corpses was a matter of great concern, this mass of bones suggests the occurrence of some awful calamity some time past.

In verse 9 we discover that the bodies are bodies of the slain. This is the site of a massacre. The vision to this point is one of death and of its finality.

The Lord now proceeds to make Ezekiel a more active participant in the vision. He has witnessed the immense number of the scattered bones and the fact that they had been there for a long time. However, now the Lord asks him whether he believes that the bones can be restored to life, something that is clearly utterly beyond the realm of natural possibility.

Ezekiel knows that such a restoration is within the Lord's power, so he does not deny the possibility when asked concerning the bones by the Lord. Nevertheless, none of the signs look promising. The Lord then instructs Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, directly addressing them with the word of the Lord, a very strange act indeed.

The Lord declares his intent to cause breath to re-enter the bones so that they can live once more. The resurrection of the bones will involve a dramatic recreation of the bodies of the dead bones, reassembling them with sinews and flesh, covering them with skin once more and then breathing life into them. Nothing short of a new creation event is taking place here.

This would also serve to prove the sovereignty and faithfulness of the Lord. Ezekiel obeys the Lord's commandment and as he does so, he witnesses a dramatic sight. The bones start to rattle and then reassemble themselves, each bone to its connecting bone.

Before he has almost had the time to register it, the bones had sinews and were clothed with flesh and skin. However, despite this dramatic reassembling, the bodies remain dead. Ezekiel is instructed to perform a second act of prophecy, this time he prophesies not to the bones but to the breath or spirit, summoning it from the four winds to breathe

into the reassembled corpses.

We should here recall the original creation of man when the Lord fashioned the man's body from the earth and then breathed into him the breath of life. As he prophesies to the breath, the reassembled corpses are reanimated, restored to life. They rise to their feet and a once vanquished army is restored to its full strength.

The meaning of this remarkable and dramatic prophetic vision is given in verses 11 to 14. The bones represent the entire house of Israel, not just those slain by the Babylonians. The people had suffered death as a corporate entity, ceasing to exist as their own nation.

While unburied dead bodies of individual Judahites had littered the ground, as foretold by prophets like Jeremiah, the bodies here stand for the entire nation, which had itself been destroyed. The remnant of the house of Israel, languishing in exile, now regarded themselves as being beyond hope of restoration. They considered themselves to be akin to the dead bones of the vision, scattered like the bleached bones of a great host in the Valley of the Nations, or, as the imagery of verse 12 moves to, as skeletons buried in tombs and graves.

The Lord promises to open their graves and raise them up from them. So resurrected, they will be brought back to the land of Israel. In the previous chapter, the Lord had spoken of the restoration and renewal of the house of Israel that He would accomplish in verses 24 to 28.

I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses and from all your idols I will cleanse you and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh and I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers and you shall be my people and I will be your guard.

It is the gift of the spirit in particular that gives life to these dead bones, restoring them to vitality and action on behalf of the Lord. Here in chapter 37 a similar declaration of divine intent as in the preceding chapter is made. However, it is presented in terms of the dry bones and buried bodies imagery and here the dramatic character of what the Lord is accomplishing in the restoration of Israel is made more apparent.

This passage, although it refers to a symbolic resurrection of a dead nation, also expresses something of a deeper hope concerning life after death and the Lord's power to release His people from the clutches of death. It has long been read in a way that recognised a more general literal resurrection as one aspect of its horizon of fulfilment, even if not its primary or immediate one. Indeed, many early readers understood it to

refer to literal resurrection, not merely speaking metaphorically of a remarkable national restoration.

Resurrection starts to come into more view as a doctrine from the exilic period onwards. We already see hope of resurrection in the book of Job, for instance. However, these earlier expressions of resurrection hope have relatively little to go on.

The fact that the Lord would decisively overcome death as a great enemy is a truth that becomes apparent gradually, although the form that this would take remains tantalisingly vague. We see resurrection most clearly in passages such as Daniel chapter 12 verses 2-3 Some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above, and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars, for ever and ever.

However, many years previously we already find statements such as those of Isaiah chapter 26 verse 19. Your dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy.

For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. And then also in Hosea chapter 13 verse 14. I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol.

I shall redeem them from death. O death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? Compassion is hidden from my eyes. The prophecy of Ezekiel chapter 37 is an important step in the development of resurrection hope of the people of God.

In verse 15 a new prophecy begins. Like several other prophecies in the book, it's a prophetic sign act. A dramatic performance that accompanied with a verbal statement would serve to communicate the divine will.

As in the case of the other prophetic sign acts that Ezekiel performs, the meaning of the act is not immediately apparent. Rather he is instructed to explain it to the people, who will ask him what is meant by it. The house of Israel, after the reign of Solomon, was split into two separate nations, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

The northern kingdom had fallen to the Neo-Assyrians around 722 BC. Large numbers of the Israelites were deported by the Assyrians, and other peoples were mixed in with the remnant that remained in the land. The leading tribe of the northern kingdom was Ephraim, who had received the first born blessing from Jacob, or Israel, in Genesis chapter 48.

In Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph had been granted two tribal portions, instead of the single portion received by the other tribes. So really Joseph was the leading tribe of the north. The northern kingdom, of which the transjordanian tribes were also a part, could be referred to as Ephraim or Israel, as Ephraim was the son that particularly continued

Israel's own name.

Here though, the northern tribes are referred to by the name of Joseph, Ephraim's father. The royal tribe ended up being Judah, which was the leading tribe of the southern kingdom, and the tribe from which David arose. After the secession of the northern tribes, Benjamin remained with Judah.

There were also Simeonites as an enclave population within Judah, along with many Levites. After the fall of the northern kingdom, the southern kingdom of Judah would also have contained some refugees from the north. There seem to have been some remaining enclaves of Israelites remaining in the territories formerly belonging to the northern kingdom too, in addition to colonies elsewhere in the Assyrian empire.

History has left us with little evidence of dealings between these Israelite colonies and Israelites in the southern kingdom. However, as Marsha Greenberg observes, we see Josiah carrying out reforms in Samaria in 2 Kings chapter 23, evidencing a continued sense of the unity of the house of Israel in Judah, and at least some of the population then living in Samaria under Assyrian rule. In 2 Chronicles chapter 34 verse 9, again during the reign of Josiah, remnant populations of faithful northern Israelites donated to the repairs of the temple.

Jeremiah also mentioned northern Israelites coming south to worship in Jeremiah chapter 41 verse 5. In the Samaritans and other populations, we see a continuation of some sort of worship of the Lord, also syncretistic in many cases. Ezekiel's prophecy is one of the repairing of the once divided kingdom. As Daniel Bloch observes, there are several possible interpretations of the type of wood being joined.

They might be two trees, shepherds' rods or regular pieces of wood. The two pieces of wood he joins are seen by some to refer to the royal scepters of the two kingdoms. The problem with this reading is that there is no joining of two dynasties.

The dynasty that rules is the Davidic dynasty of the south. The two pieces of wood might also remind us of the twelve staves that are used to symbolise each of the tribes in Numbers chapter 17. Bloch makes the case for them being wooden writing boards, which would make more sense of the fact that he wrote on both of them.

He fills out that possible interpretation by proposing that the writing boards might have stood for registers of names, as important texts were recorded on wood. He also argues that Ezekiel might have recorded the text of this prophecy on them when he was finished. Bloch substantiates this hypothesis by observing that the interpretation divides in two, with a break likely in the middle of verse 24, and two iterations of the covenant formula - they shall be my people and I will be their guard - in verses 23 and then again in verse 27.

If they were writing boards, Bloch writes that they would have been joined together using hinge pins or leather cords. Alternatively, if they were just regular sticks, they would likely have been spliced or tied together. Connecting the two sticks or boards together in his hand, while he was holding them in the sight of the people, Ezekiel was to give the interpretation.

According to Bloch's understanding, the first half of the prophecy would have referred most especially to the northern tribes of Joseph. The promise here is that the people are going to be restored in their unity, they are going to be gathered together from among the nations, they are going to be restored to their own land, the bond between the divided people will be restored, and the bond between the people and the land from which they have been divided will also be restored. They would be established not just as dwellers within the land, but as those who will exercise dominion within it, as the people will live as a nation once more on the mountains of Israel.

They won't be two divided nations, but a single nation ruled over by one king. Morally and spiritually they will be restored, they won't defile themselves any more with idolatry. The Lord will purify and cleanse them, and deliver them from their stubborn rebellion.

They will have a faithful shepherd, a man after the Lord's own heart, to rule over them, David his servant. As in the preceding chapter, the Lord is going to deal with the heart problem of his people. As he deals with that heart problem, they will walk in his rules and obey his statutes, and all of this will lead to blessing within the land.

They will know security, they will remain there and not be removed from it, their life will continue in blessing from generation to generation, they will be fruitful and multiply, and the Lord's presence will be with them. The Lord's dwelling in the midst of his people, in a way that marks them out as his own people, is one of the great promises of the covenant. I will be their God and they will be my people.

The promise of the restoration of David's rule is also at the heart of this prophecy. We might recall chapter 34 verses 23 to 25. and banish wild beasts from the land so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods.

The promise of the covenant of peace reappears in this chapter. A question to consider, how might Christians see the prophecies of this chapter fulfilled in Christ and the church? Acts chapter 17 verses 1 to 15. Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ. And some of them were persuaded, and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and

taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.

And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus. And the people in the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica. They received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there.

Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed. In the first half of Acts chapter 17, Paul and Silas visit Thessalonica and Berea. Travelling from Philippi, where they had been asked to depart by the magistrates, Paul and Silas and their missionary group arrive in Thessalonica, about 70 miles southwest.

Thessalonica was a major harbour town, the capital of Macedonia, and one of the most prominent and prosperous mercantile centres. Estimates for the population of Thessalonica ranged from more conservative estimates of around 40,000 to larger estimates of up to 200,000. It was a free city, ruling itself without a Roman garrison situated within it.

The missionaries, as they typically did, began their work in the synagogue. The gospel was given to the Jews first and also to the Greeks, and there were Jewish synagogues throughout Greece at the time. The extent of the diaspora, both in geographical reach and ubiquity, and in numerical quantity, meant that the ground had been well prepared in many places for the message of the gospel.

In virtually every place there would already be people who were knowledgeable in the scriptures. The missionaries were not working with a blank slate, but the foundation of knowledge was already laid for many. While the gospel met with much opposition from the Jews, who often instigated persecution, the early Jewish converts would likely have been the backbone of the youngest churches.

They had the scriptural background to understand the message of the gospel well, and would have been able to instruct Gentile converts. A further thing to consider is the possibility that, travelling as they were, the missionaries, even if they were to use the new form of the Codex rather than scrolls, would have found it very difficult to obtain and bring many scriptural books with them on their travels. It would have been both costly and cumbersome.

A further benefit of starting their mission in various towns with the synagogue is the fact that the synagogue would likely have its own scriptural texts, which could be used for confirmatory witness. Here we see something more of the approach of the missionaries. Going to the synagogue was Paul's custom, much as Jesus' going to the synagogue is described as his custom in Luke 4.16. Luke's description of Paul's reasoning with the people in the synagogue perhaps suggests that much of the teaching of the synagogue operated in a dialogic or question and answer style.

Paul sets out a case for them that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, and that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the one who fit the prophecies. We might imagine Paul using various strands of biblical reasoning, several of which we have already encountered in messages of the Book of Acts to this point. He could have used quotations from the Psalms, such as Psalm 110, in relation to Christ's ascension, or Psalm 16, in relation to Christ's resurrection.

Isaiah 53 could relate to Christ's suffering, death and vindication in the resurrection, and other references from the books of the prophets. Then he could use retelling of the biblical narrative, as we see in Stephen's speech, showing how the story both typologically anticipates and necessitates the Christ's suffering, and that Jesus fits the silhouette that the anticipatory scriptures projected perfectly. There are two stages to this argument, first, presenting the scriptures' portrayal of the Christ, and second, showing that Jesus of Nazareth uniquely fits it.

While in Thessalonica, Paul reasons in the synagogue for three Sabbaths. If we were to presume that this was the full time that Paul spent in the city, it might lead to questions about how to reconcile this with details that we have elsewhere in the epistles to the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 2, verse 9, For you remember, brothers, our labour and toil.

We worked day and night, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaim to you the gospel of God. In 2 Thessalonians 3, verses 7-8, For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it. But with toil and labour we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.

Beyond this, there is the fact that Paul was seemingly in Thessalonica long enough to receive support from Philippi over a week's journey away, as we see in Philippians 4,

verses 15-16, And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. As Craig Keener notes, during the missionary's stay, they had been able to teach the Thessalonians seemingly fairly extensively concerning the faith, and had also appeared to have appointed leaders.

This suggests a stay longer than three weeks. Of course, the text merely speaks of the duration of Paul's period of Sabbath reasoning in the synagogue. They might have been in the city for some period before that, and some period afterwards.

Paul had a measure of success, especially with the devout Greek God-fearers and the leading women. One can imagine that the status of the uncircumcised in the teaching of Paul concerning the body of Christ would have been especially appealing to such persons. The Jews respond with hostility, inciting a mob to violence and unsettling the entire city.

They attack the house of one of the believers, who was seemingly hosting some of the missionaries, but they could not find them. As they could not find the missionaries themselves, they brought Jason and some of the other Thessalonian believers to the city authorities instead, accusing them of supporting a movement that was in the process of turning the world upside down. In particular, they focus upon the way that the declaration of Jesus' kingship threatens the claims of Caesar.

The message of Paul and the missionaries was potentially subversive in a number of respects. They taught against idols, false gods and false religions, and the imperial cult would have been among the most obvious targets, whether it was explicitly singled out or not. The language of Christ's kingdom, of his coming and of his divine sonship, was extremely similar to the language used of Caesar.

Yet Christians declared that Christ's title was unique, implicitly presenting Caesar's claims as if they were the parody. While the claims of the Christian faith's subversive posture towards Rome have been rather overplayed by many of late, the Jews of Thessalonica would not have been the first to draw attention to the various ways, indirect and more direct, that the gospel message threatened Rome. Perhaps one of the most notable and obvious ways that it threatened Rome was in the claims that the Christians made about Jesus being crucified under the authorisation of Rome.

The unjust condemnation of Christ and his resurrection were an indictment of Rome's injustice and challenged its claims concerning itself. The motives of the Jews should be considered here. They are, we are told, driven by jealousy, presumably at the success that the missionaries had with the devout Greeks, and perhaps more especially with the leading women.

Such elite women would have had more social freedom to convert than elite men, and could act as wealthy patronesses and could exert their influence on behalf of their religious teachers. In the first missionary journey, while in Pisidian Antioch, the Jewish opponents of the missionaries had used the influence of God-fearing elite women to stir up persecution against them from the authorities. If the Christian missionaries successfully converted large numbers of the leading women and devout Greeks, the Jews stood to lose a great deal of their social connections, financial support and influence.

Indeed, it might even turn against them. As Thessalonica was a free city, its inhabitants would have been very nervous about losing its privileged status. Any whiff of sedition would have been extremely troubling to the authorities.

Thessalonica had a temple for the imperial cult, and leading Thessalonians were likely scrupulous in ensuring that Rome's interests were not threatened. They required Jason, as a host of the missionaries, to pay a bond. In contrast to Philippi, here it is one of the early converts, rather than the missionaries themselves, who is persecuted.

Jason courageously suffers on behalf of the missionaries and on behalf of Christ. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul describes them receiving the gospel in much affliction. From Paul's description in 1 Thessalonians, we might also get the impression that a significant number of former pagans were among the earliest converts, not just Jews and devout God-fearers.

As he speaks of their turning from idols to serve the living and true God. From Thessalonica, Paul and Silas are sent away by night to Berea. Berea was about 45 miles west-southwest of Thessalonica, according to Daryl Bach.

It was also on the way to Athens. Once again they began their ministry in the synagogue, receiving a far more favourable response this time. The Berean Jews received the message of the missionaries eagerly and examined the scriptures to confirm their witness, something that wins them commendation as noble in character.

As modern readers of the text, we can easily fall into the trap of imagining the Bereans all flicking through their personal Bibles, perhaps when they go home, but it is entirely likely that the synagogue itself did not contain a full set of the scrolls of scripture, and the text that it did have would likely be in a Greek translation. Although communal reading of the scriptures would have been common, private ownership was very rare. The process of examining the scriptures quite probably took the form of a communal act of deliberation under the oversight of synagogue leaders, reading relevant passages from the Torah scroll and other scriptures that they had in their possession, and discussing them together as a community.

The process of examining the scriptures is described as a daily one, probably involving members of the synagogue community during the week, not merely on the Sabbath. In

Berea, many of the Jews believed, and once again, a number of Greek women of the elite and some men. However, once again the missionaries are followed by a counter-mission, as Jews come from Thessalonica and whip up the crowds against them.

As Paul was apparently the chief target, Silas and Timothy remained, while Paul proceeded alone to Athens, conducted by some of the Bereans. He went down to the sea, and we can presume boarded a vessel to Athens. The fact that some of the Bereans accompanied him, not merely to the sea, but for the entirety of his journey, is an indication of their nobility and their commitment to hospitality.

A question to consider. Many Christians have described themselves as Bereans, on account of their commitment to confirming every teaching that they receive from the scriptures. How might closer attention to the situation of the Bereans help us to follow their noble example even more closely?