

Coming Home

“Part 2: Prioritizing the Word and Spirit”

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on August 29, 2021

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 01)** We are doing a 4-part series that I am calling Coming Home. The original idea was that we would be in phase 4 and coming home to life after Covid. Well, that didn't work. So, here's a revised version. **(SHOW SLIDE 02)**
 - We're still coming home, but we're just further away than we think. The series still works just fine. In fact today's message works even better. **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 03)** The goal here is to talk about priorities that we need to have. It's not that we have lost them, but we just need to make sure they are strong.
- So today I want to look at this incredible story of Ezekiel speaking to this valley that is filled with bones. I want to show you how this relates to the challenges we have faced in Covid and continue to face and what all this says about our priorities moving forward.
 - This passage calls us to do three things: behold the bones, speak to dead, and feel the wind.

BEHOLD THE BONES

- So, the first thing this passage calls us to do is to **(SHOW SLIDE 04) Behold the bones.**
 - We are all so grateful that Covid 19 was nowhere near as bad we originally thought. There are many positives we can look at. But in this point, I want to look at some of the challenges we face because of Covid.
 - To do this I want us to go back and look at the situation and the challenges that the people of God faced way back in Ezekiel's day. Their situation was far more difficult than ours, so there is much we can learn from this.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 05)** Here's the background. The Babylonians had invaded Israel, conquered Israel, and forced the Israelites to leave their land and live as exiles in Babylon. So, the community of God had fallen apart. All their old ways of doing things were changed. After decades of living in Babylon, they had lost hope of ever returning. They felt defeated.
 - And so God gives this vision to Ezekiel. Look at verses 1-2. **(SHOW SLIDE 06) 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. ²And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry.**
 - The picture here is of an ancient battlefield. But the battle must have taken place a long time ago. It's not a valley of dead bodies; it is a valley of bones. The bones are so old they have been scattered all over and are bleached white by the sun. Notice in verse 2 that the Spirit leads Ezekiel back and forth among them. Why? Quite obviously the Spirit wants

Ezekiel, and us, to come to one major conclusion: there is no sign of life in this valley.

- All of this is a picture of what Israel, the people of God, have become. All that once was, has been lost. The community is scattered. There is no sign of life.
 - And then suddenly God's voice interrupts Ezekiel's thoughts. In verse 3 we read, **(SHOW SLIDE 07)** ³ **And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"**
 - Can the community of God live after all that has happened to it? It seems pretty clear that the answer is, "no." These are very dry bones.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 08)** Our situation is nowhere near as bad as that of Israel. Yet, we face many challenges.
 - I've read articles saying that many churches will not survive Covid. People are scattering. Many are saying that up to 30% of people are not returning to the church they were a part of prior to Covid. By the grace of God our church has largely remained committed to each other and not allowed Covid controversies to overtake our unity with each other. But there are a good number of people and families who have left.
 - I talked with one pastor who is feeling near despair. His church is under a 100 people and after he spoke about how they were not going to defy the government he lost 70% of his people. Can these bones live?
 - Over the past year and half many who were once part of Christian communities have sort of drifted away. It's not that they have rejected Christ, but like a boat that is untied from a dock gradually drifts out into the ocean they have drifted away from their community. Can these bones live?
 - Finally, we have faced, and continue to face, many controversies. Over the past year Christians have become increasingly at odds with each other as we take opposing views on masks, opposing views on vaccinations, and opposing views on the seriousness of Covid.
 - The Christian community has been pulled apart on the question of what it means to be faithful to Christ during this time. Some say faithfulness means submitting to the governing authorities, loving your neighbour by following the rules, and to defy the government brings great damage to the cause of Christ.
 - But, of course, others say that faithfulness to Christ means we should have gathered even in defiance of the government, that fines and going to jail are part of faithfulness, that religious freedom is being attacked, and to not stand up against the government is to compromise. And, of course, all of this controversy is only increasing with the current orders around vaccine passports.
 - Here at Central we have had families leave because they say we lack courage and say we were wrong in how we handled things.
- Notice that I am not taking any sides here; I am simply drawing attention to the plain fact that our own community, along with so many other churches, and our wider society has been pulled apart by Covid.

- Can these dry bones live? Can the community of God live after all that has happened to it over the past year and a half? Can the community of God live and thrive as controversies at the moment seem to only be getting worse?
- We don't know, and Ezekiel didn't know. He had been part of the total collapse of God's people. There were no signs of life left. When God asks him if the dry bones could live, it seems obvious that the answer is, "no."
 - But noticed that Ezekiel hesitated. He didn't quite know what to say. On the one hand, he believed in God's great power and so didn't want to say "no" for nothing is impossible with God. But on the other hand, the situation was so bad that he didn't want to foolishly answer, "yes."
 - And so, Ezekiel did not answer with a "yes" or a "no," but left the question in God's hands. **(SHOW SLIDE 09)** ³ **And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O LORD God, you know."**
- Behold the bones. In Ezekiel's day they were very dry. We are not in that bad of a situation, but many Christian communities have lost some of their life during Covid.
 - Can these bones live? Can the community of God be restored? Can life come again so our churches thrive? When we look at all the challenges we also say, "**O LORD God, you know.**"

SPEAK TO THE DEAD

- That brings us to the second thing this passage calls us to do and it is this: **(SHOW SLIDE 10) Speak to the dead.**
 - There may be controversies among us about Covid, but here and now I want to call us to lay those controversies aside. I know we all feel strongly about our positions. That's fine but what we must do is see the bigger picture. To prioritize what matters far more than any of our views on Covid. On what will bring life to us, to those around us, and to our city.
- Come back to Ezekiel's story. Once God made it clear there was no way that Israel could save itself (it's a dead nation after all), God shows the way to life. Look at verse 4. **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** ⁴ **Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD."**
 - Don't you feel bad for Ezekiel? His job is to speak to the piles of bones in this valley. He is supposed speak to skulls, rib cages, and leg bones. What's the point in doing that? You might as well speak to a rock.
 - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 12)** It is like in 1 Corinthians when Paul speaks about the folly of preaching Jesus to people. People say, "**Here are all these problems in the world and you want to talk about Jesus. Talk? Let's be more practical than that! Enough with all the words. Enough talk about crosses and blood and a man who lived 2000 years ago. Let's get practical!**"
- It is very possible for words to be useless and for talking to be a waste of time. But not when the words are God's words; not when it is God doing the talking.

- Oh yes, Ezekiel is to speak, but he is to speak God's words to the bones. He is not supposed to say his own words. He isn't supposed to come up with 5 points on how all the legs bones could be reattached to their respective ankle bones.
 - No! The whole situation is beyond any human abilities. That is why Ezekiel is to speak God's words to the bones.
- When God speaks the results are very different. Think of creation in Genesis 1.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light." (Gen 1:3)
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 14)** And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. (Gen 1:9)
 - When God speaks, a universe comes into existence. When God speaks, his words create life. When God speaks, the impossible happens.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 15)** Ezekiel had tried speaking many times to the people of Israel, but the community just kept falling apart. We have tried to lead through Covid as best as we can, but the challenges to our community and to the larger community are big.
 - Yet, we must not allow a feeling of discouragement or defeat to enter our hearts. God has called us to speak his word.
- We are in the same position as Peter. He had fished all night and caught nothing. As they came to shore Jesus got into the boat and told Peter to push out into deeper water. Then Jesus told them to let down the nets again. Peter was feeling discouraged and defeated. Then we read, **(SHOW SLIDE 16)**⁵ And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." (Lk 5:5)
 - At your word! And then we read, **(SHOW SLIDE 17)**⁶ And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. (Lk 5:6)
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 18)** That's it! Jesus, we've toiled all year long during Covid. It's been tough. Many churches are feeling defeated. Many ministries have struggled. Many Christians have just left. But at your word we will let down the nets. This is a call to refocus on the priority of speaking God's word in our moment in time. We must speak God's word to each other.
 - As we start to regather in Community Groups, we will study God's word, meditate on it, learn it, and apply it.
 - In our children's ministry we will prioritize speaking God's word on Sunday mornings, at Club 456, and through all kid's ministries.
 - We will prioritize this to youth and young adult ministry.
 - We will dedicate ourselves to speaking God's word on Sunday mornings – we will sing songs that reflect what God has said, we will read scripture, and we will preach sermons that arise straight from God's word.
 - We will speak as we sit in coffee shops, speak as we sit in hospital rooms, speak as we share meals in each other's houses again.
- Oh yes, we can all have our views on Covid, but let's make sure that this is bigger than all our views. This will save us from being ripped apart by controversy. We want to be a community that listens to God's word and that speaks God's word.

- What else can we do when the valley is filled with dry bones? It is beyond human ability. There is too much that is dead.
 - So this passage calls us to behold the bones and to speak to the dead.

FEEL THE WIND

- Now finally, this passage calls us to **(SHOW SLIDE 19) feel the wind.**
 - What happened when Ezekiel spoke God's words? **(SHOW SLIDE 20)** ⁷ **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. ⁸ 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.**
 - What a picture! Hollywood would have fun making such a scene. Bones fly from all over together to make skeletons. Suddenly muscles and tendons appear on these prostrate skeletons. And then skin covers them. There is now a valley of bodies all lying down. Yet, notice how he ends: **"But there was no breath in them."**
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 21)** A wonderful thing has been achieved, but the most important thing has not happened. This tells us something very important. We can organize our church as these bones have now been organized into skeletons. It's incredible that all these bones have been put back together. But what good is it if there is no breath?
 - What good is it to organize our lives, organize our church, and get everything in order if there is no spiritual life in them? We may say that our lives and our church are hardworking, committed, and faithful. But what we see here is that all the energy, all the organization, all the plans, and all the budgets means nothing if there is no real experience of God. They are just skeletons.
 - Oh yes, we must organize and plan. We must have committees. We must be committed. But none of them can create life! And life is the greatest thing. Only the Holy Spirit can bring life. This is always the case: we must refocus ourselves clearly on this one great fact: that after we have done everything to the very best of our abilities to build our families, our church, and to reach our city, we are brought back to this great fact, that apart from God we can do nothing. That apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, all we have are skeletons.
- But God did not just call Ezekiel to speak his word. He also promised to give His life-giving Spirit to the word.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 22)** ⁹ **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 may live." 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.**
- Does this two-stage creation process ring any bells? Think of the creation story in Genesis 1-2. First, God forms Adam out of the dust. But he is just a body with no life. Then second, the Spirit of God, the wind of God, breathes into him the breath of life.

- Note this carefully: the Spirit did not just breathe life into the bones. He had Ezekiel speak God's words. The spoken word of God became the conduit, the means, the channel that the Spirit used to bring new life. In some mysterious way the Spirit uses the spoken word to grant new life.
 - So there you have it. As we move keep navigating Covid we must prioritize the word and the Spirit. What will bring life to you, to your family, and to our church is being a people who fill our lives with God's word and who look to the Spirit to bring us life. The Spirit brings life through the Word.
- So, let's start new habits. If you don't have a regular time of reading the Bible then begin this practice. In a few weeks we will talk about Community Groups. If you are comfortable, then why not join a CG and speak God's word to each other. Let's be a people of prayer, calling on God to pour out His Spirit upon us, that we might be filled with life.
 - Pray that we would feel the wind of God's Spirit blowing through our lives, our families, our church, and our city. This is my greatest longing. Spirit of God would breathe upon us. That the Spirit of God would bring us life. This will heal all our controversies around Covid. This will unite our hearts. This will enable us to reach our city.
- And then notice that once the Spirit had brought life, there was a great army standing there. They are ready. They await their orders. They are prepared to serve.
 - And so it is with us. When the Holy Spirit gives us the new birth and we become Christians we are alive. We then stand before our God, ready to serve. And not on our own, but together.
 - The Spirit of God was poured out at Pentecost and we are now the Church. We are together. Oh we must push back against the individualism of our culture and that Covid has re-enforced. We belong to each other. God has not just given you life, He has given life to those in the church. And so this is also a call to be together – to be dedicated to each other. Join together and let's keep living on mission for Jesus.

PRAYER TIME

- Bring all the difficulties of Covid before God
- Commit ourselves to God's word and to each other
- Cry out for God's Spirit to breathe life where there is no life