

## AN UNRESPONSIVE CONGREGATION

Scriptures: Ezekiel 37:1-14; II Corinthians 5:6-21

I once saw a cartoon of a pastor standing in the pulpit about to begin his sermon. He looked at the congregation and said, “This is my fourth sermon on the transforming power of the gospel. Why do you still look like the same old bunch?”

If that preacher had it bad, think about poor Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 37:4 God tells Ezekiel, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.” Now that is an unresponsive congregation.

I once read a story about a Sunday School teacher taking her class into church. Before going into the sanctuary, she asked them, “Why should we be quiet in church?” A little girl replied, “Because people are sleeping.”

I occasionally see people nodding off, but that is nothing compared to what Ezekiel faced. His congregation was dead. Their bones were dry, which meant they had been dead for a long time.

This is, of course, a metaphor—a kind of parable. Verse 11 says, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’” By this time in the story, the Babylonians had launched a second attack against Jerusalem several years after the one that took Ezekiel into exile. In this second attack the temple, the palace, and everything that had been left in the city of Jerusalem were destroyed. If the people in exile had hopes for returning home, they now had no home to go to. So they said, “Our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”

If I had been Ezekiel, I would have started looking for another call. But God says to Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?” Ezekiel replies, “O Lord God, you know.”

I find this a humble yet hopeful response. Ezekiel does not say, “You bet they can live again; I’ll get them going.” That is a dangerous kind of arrogance for preachers. Ezekiel says, “I don’t know if this congregation can be revived or not. They look pretty dead to me. But if you say so, I will preach to them.”

This scripture passage is not about a literal resurrection from the dead. Other scriptures later in the Bible talk about a literal resurrection. When the New Testament talks about Jesus’ resurrection or about our resurrection, it is talking about a literal resurrection from the dead, where tombs are empty and people are given new bodies. But this scripture is about a different kind of miracle: giving new life to people who *thought* they were dead, people who thought they were cut off from God and had no hope.

There is a pun in this scripture passage that works in Hebrew but gets lost in translation. In Hebrew the word breath, the word wind, and the word spirit are all the same word: *ruach*. In verse 5 when God says, “I will cause breath to enter you,” God uses the word *ruach*, which is

exactly the same word God uses in verse 14 when God says, “I will put my spirit within you.” When God breathes the breath of life into the people of Israel, it is the same as putting God’s spirit into them. It is fulfilling the promise we have read about every week in our Words of Forgiveness: “I will give them a new heart and put a new spirit within them.” When God gives us God’s spirit, which the New Testament calls the Holy Spirit, it is like God breathing into us the breath of life. It is like God makes us alive again, making us a new creation.

In our first scripture reading, II Corinthians 5:17, the apostle Paul say, “So if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new!” When we are joined to Jesus as his followers, it is like we have died to an old life and been raised to a new one.

Jesus’ resurrection was a literal resurrection from the dead that makes possible our future resurrection after we die. But Jesus’ resurrection is also a sign for a different kind of resurrection—a resurrection to new life that begins even before we die. When God gives us the Holy Spirit, God breathes into us the breath of life, just as God did when Adam was created out of dust, just as God did to those dry bones in the time of Ezekiel. God breathes into us the Holy Spirit, and we become part of a new creation.

What does that look like? It is different in every person, but let me close with an example. During the Watergate affair the special assistant to President Nixon was a man named Charles Colson. He was known as “the hatchet man,” because his job was to cut down Nixon’s opponents. To do this he would dig up embarrassing information to discredit them, even resorting to break-ins in order to see their private files. This is how Colson came into contact with people like H. Howard Hunt and Gordon Liddy, who broke into the Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate in 1972.

As the Watergate affair began to unravel, Colson went to visit an old friend named Tom Phillips. As they say drinking ice tea on his front porch, Tom pulled out a small book by C. S. Lewis called *Mere Christianity* and began reading this section:

There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which every one in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. ... The vice I am talking of is Pride or Self-Conceit. ... Pride leads to every other vice: it is the completely anti-God state of mind. ... As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.

After listening to this, Colson writes,

Just as a man about to die is supposed to see flash before him, sequence by sequence, the high points of his life, so as Tom’s voice read on that August evening, key events in my life paraded before me as if projected on a screen. Things I hadn’t thought about in years—my graduation speech at prep school—being “good enough” for the Marines—my first marriage into the “right” family—sitting on the Jaycees’ dais while civic leader after

civic leader praised me as the outstanding young man of Boston—then to the White House—the clawing and straining for status and position—“Mr. Colson, the President is calling—Mr. Colson, the President wants to see you right away.” ...

Now, sitting there on the dimly lit porch, my self-centered past was washing over me in waves. It was painful. Agony. Desperately I tried to defend myself. What about my sacrifices for government service, the giving up of a big income, putting my stocks in a blind trust? The truth, I saw in an instant, was that I'd wanted the position in the White House more than I'd wanted money. There was no sacrifice. And the more I had talked about my own sacrifices, the more I was really trying to build myself up in the eyes of others. I would eagerly have given up everything I'd ever earned to prove myself at the mountaintop of government. It was pride—Lewis's “great sin”—that had propelled me through life. ...

That one chapter ripped through the protective armor in which I had unknowingly encased myself for forty-two years. Of course, I had not known God. *How could I?* I had been concerned with myself. *I* had done this and that, *I* had achieved, *I* had succeeded and *I* had given God none of the credit, never once thanking Him for any of His gifts to me. ... In those brief moments while Tom read, I saw myself as I never had before. And the picture was ugly.

Notice the images of dying or of being slain. “Just as a man about to die sees his life flash before him” or “that one chapter ripped through my protective armor.” For a moment Chuck Colson looked at his life, and all he saw was a valley of dry bones.

When he left Tom's house, Colson pulled over on to the side of the road about 100 yards from Tom's driveway. He writes,

With my face cupped in my hands, head leaning forward against the wheel, I forgot about machismo, about pretenses, about fears of being weak. And as I did, I began to experience a wonderful feeling of being released. ... And then I prayed my first real prayer. “God, I don't know how to find You, but I want to try! I'm not much the way I am now, but somehow I want to give myself to You.” I didn't know how to say more, so I repeated over and over the words: *Take me*. ...

After that night Chuck Colson faced indictment and later prison time for his role in the Watergate affair. But when he got out, he started a prison ministry called Prison Fellowship that now has 40,000 prison ministry volunteers visiting and ministering to prisoners in over 100 countries.

The title of Chuck Colson's book is *Born Again*. It could also be titled *Dry Bones Live*.

- Ken Onstot  
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