

God's Life-Giving Breath

Ezek. 37:1-14

The setting for this chapter is well known, but it is worth briefly rehearsing as we lay the groundwork for today's message. The prophet has been transported by the Spirit of God to a place we might call "Death Valley" - a valley of dry bones!

What an experience this must have been for Ezekiel, having already been carried into exile in Babylon. As he is set down in the midst of these skeletal remains, it is a cruel reminder of the horrific scenes of corpses that he and the other exiles had witnessed before their departure from Israel. Jerusalem has been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's army. The temple lies in ruins. The people of Israel and Judah have been dispersed; their government dismantled; their national identity seemingly erased forever.

Please take note of the extreme picture painted in verse two. The Spirit leads Ezekiel back and forth among the bones; bones that are very dry, bleached white in the hot sun. It's as if the Lord is saying to the prophet, "Ezekiel, do you see how completely inimical to life this situation really is? Do you understand how truly hopeless it is in human terms?" It's as if Ezekiel is inspecting the skeletal remains row upon row to see if somewhere there might at least be a corpse - something with which to work, something that can be resurrected. But there is nothing! Even the vultures have moved on, having finished their macabre feast.

Then, in verse three, the Lord asks a question that coming from any other source would be sheer mockery: "Mortal one, can these bones live?" The bewildered prophet is afraid to answer.

Now, let's not make the mistake that too many modern-day commentators make. This passage is not about resurrection in general. No, the New Testament has more to say about that subject. Here, it's about the particular situation in which Ezekiel and his fellow countrymen find themselves. It's very specific. The question is not, "Will bones in general be resurrected?" The question is, "Will *these* bones live?" In other words, if I, the Lord, have allowed your people to go into exile and be a people no more, then can I, the Lord, also bring them out of exile that they may once more be my people? Can I, the Lord God Almighty, breathe new life into your situation, a situation that has seemingly gone beyond recall?

The rest of Scripture answers these questions over and over again. Whenever and wherever the breath of God moves there is life. Throughout Scripture the breath of God symbolizes the moving of the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit of God moves there is life, energy, and power.

- At the very beginning of the human story, when God creates Adam, He breathes into the man's nostrils and he becomes a living creature. The birth of the human race begins with the breath of God! First God *forms* man, then He *fills* man.
- At the very beginning of the church's story on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes like a mighty wind. The Lord God breathes upon those 120 souls who are gathered in prayer and they are immediately transformed, galvanized into a dynamic body of believers who will go out and turn their world upside down. First God *forms* the church and then He *fills* it.

What about here in Ezekiel 37? Notice that in Ezekiel's vision the bones rattled and shook and came together; they even took on tendons and flesh and a covering of skin; but there was no real life and no forward movement until they were breathed upon by the breath of God.

Have you ever considered how crucial breath is? Life begins when we inhale our first breath. It ends when we exhale our last breath, casting a final sigh upon the wind. In between we inhale and exhale millions of times. We do it reflexively without even thinking about it. Yet we cannot live without breathing. Our physical existence depends on breathing in oxygen and breathing out carbon dioxide. Selwyn Hughes illustrates with a moving story:

“I once had the sad duty of conducting the funeral service of a beautiful 12-year-old girl who had fallen victim to polio. After the service I committed her body to the ground in a cemetery on the slopes of a lovely valley near Carmarthen, West Wales, where she had spent most of her short life. As the mourners were singing a hymn, a warm breeze blew across the valley, and I remember thinking to myself, ‘All around us blows some of the purest air in the whole of our country, and this young girl cannot enjoy it because her lungs refused to function.’”

In Scripture, the breath of God generally symbolizes the Spirit of God. It blows to and fro over the earth, but there are many who suffer from what you might call *spiritual polio*. It's as if their *spiritual lungs* are not functioning and they have never taken in the life-giving Spirit of God.

Others are trying to live the Christian life, but they have not learned that spiritual respiration must be regular. They have not understood that a Christian must breathe in the Spirit of God constantly if they are to enjoy proper spiritual health.

The late Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to stress that “Just as we breathe naturally so we must breathe spiritually – fully, deeply, and regularly.” We do this by reading the Word of God and by meditating on it day and night, and by opening ourselves to the Spirit of God, who alone can make it come alive to us. I find myself in agreement with Hughes when he remarks that:

“One of the reasons why there are so many weak and sick Christians among us is because they fail to breathe in the pure air of the Spirit deeply and on a regular basis. All around us at this moment the breath of God is blowing, yet many of us breathe so shallowly that the air never really fills our spiritual lungs.”

I want to issue a plea to each of us not to depend spiritually on some past encounter with the Holy Spirit. We cannot live on yesterday's intake of spiritual breath any more than we can live on yesterday's inhalation of oxygen. It is not enough for a new-born baby to take its first breath and then think that it can get by on that. Neither is it enough for a new believer to take their first spiritual breath at conversion and then think they can get by on that. Just as we need regular respiration to ventilate the lungs and oxygenate the blood, so we need to breathe in the things of the Spirit of God regularly to ventilate our minds and refresh our souls.

God has breathed out His Word to us. Let us breathe it in every day! But let us not approach the Word as if it is like a cook book, dispensing quick and easy recipes for life. Let us not handle it as if it is a catalogue from which we can order whatever tickles our fancy. Neither must we treat it like a telephone book, filled with seemingly endless pages of raw data. The Bible is much more than any of these things. It is the story of Man and his relationship with his Creator. It is the story of Man and his journey away from God and back again. It is an unfolding story, a drama filled with destiny and possibility. It is your story and my story! Keep it fresh and up-to-date!

Let us cultivate our daily walk with the Lord so that walking with Him and talking with Him is regular and begins to come more and more naturally, like breathing!

*Breathe on me, breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what Thou dost love,
And do what Thou wouldst do.*