

God's Amazing Grace – Ezekiel 37:1-14
Argyle – 11/6/16 – 52 Key Bible Stories

Introduction to Scripture

This morning and the next three weeks we will be looking at four Old Testament passages from the 52 Key Bible Stories that we missed earlier this year. Today we are in the Book of Ezekiel which is not a book most of us know very well. If we know anything at all about this book, it is the vision of the valley of dry bones that we will be reading about this morning.

Ezekiel was a Jewish priest who prophesied about and then lived through the fall of Jerusalem to King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. He wrote between 593 and 571 BC. Jerusalem fell in 586. Ezekiel wrote the first part of his book in Judah before the fall. It warned of God's coming judgment because of Israel's idolatry. He wrote the second part from exile in Babylon after the fall. It offered hope in promising God's restoration. This morning's passage is in this hopeful second half of Ezekiel.

One of the things that makes reading Ezekiel challenging is that it is apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic literature is highly symbolic, containing visions and revelations about the future. It often comes out of a time persecution. There are sections of apocalyptic writings throughout the Bible, but the Books of Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation contain the most of this genre of literature. Ezekiel 37 is a

good example of apocalyptic writing. We'll be looking at the first 14 verses.

(Read) (Pray)

The Hopelessness of Israel's Situation

The first thing I would like you to see in this passage is the hopelessness of Israel's situation. God told Ezekiel that this vision of the valley of dry bones represented the nation of Israel. Ezekiel tells us that there were a great many bones. This vision would not be all that different from the disturbing pictures we have seen of unearthened mass graves in concentration camps or the piles of bodies after a natural disaster. It was a horrible scene and represented the destruction of Israel by the Babylonians.

The fact that these bones were unburied would have added to Ezekiel's horror. It was a reminder that these people had not just died, but they had died under a curse. In Deuteronomy 28 we find a list of the blessings and curses of the covenant that God was making with Israel. In the midst of the list of curses we read these words, "The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You will come at them from one direction but flee from them in seven, and you will become a thing of horror to all the kingdoms on earth. ²⁶ Your carcasses will be food for all the birds and the wild animals, and there will be no one to frighten them away." The defeat of Israel by the Babylonians was a tragedy, but what made it especially sad is that the Israel brought it on themselves by their

disobedience. The owners of these bones had been victims not only of a battle, but of divine judgment.

Not only were there a great many bones, but, also, that they were very dry. These people had been dead for a long time. So when the Lord asked, "Son of man, can these bones live?" the obvious answer was "No!" The people had been in exile in Babylon for ten years now. Any hope they had had when they first arrived of being able to return to Jerusalem quickly and rebuild their homeland had been extinguished. "Can these bones live again?" "Of course not." The situation was hopeless.

But wisely, Ezekiel does not answer that way. He knew that God was the Lord of life and earth. Speaking in the Book of Deuteronomy God had said, "See now that I myself am he! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand."

(Deuteronomy 32:39) Hannah affirmed the same thing in her prayer in I Samuel . "The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up."(I Samuel 2:6)

"Son of man, can these bones live?" Ezekiel responded, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know." God knew the answer to his question and Ezekiel was about to find out.

The Amazing Grace of God

Israel's situation was hopeless, but not beyond the amazing grace of God. I want you to notice something very important here. Who took the initiative in Israel's restoration?

Listen again to what Ezekiel wrote. "Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones and say to them, `Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! ⁵ This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: **I** will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ **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.'" And that is exactly what happened. Later in explaining the vision God switched to the metaphor of resurrection. He said, "O 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. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when **I** open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ **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.'" "

Who took the initiative in Israel's restoration? Not the bones. It was God. As John Taylor writes, "...this work of revival is Gods' work from start to finish. If man plays any part in it himself, it is only in obedience to God's direction."

(*Ezekiel*) Israel had rejected God and was paying the consequences in exile in Babylon. Yet, God was going to restore them. That is amazing grace. A simple

definition of grace is God's favor toward the unworthy. The Israelites were clearly unworthy of God's favor, yet he was going to restore them as a nation. In working on this sermon this week I came upon this quote. "Hopelessness is forgetting help is on the way." Wow was help on the way for the hopeless Israelites.

The Plain Picture of the Gospel

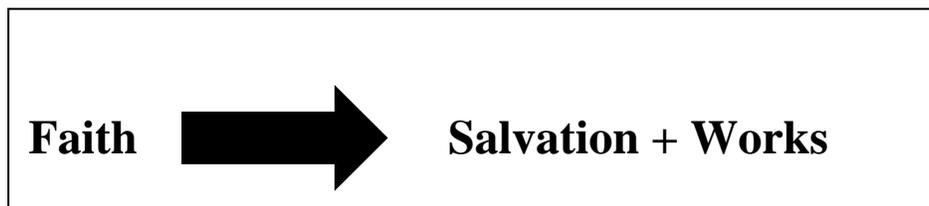
The last thing I want to point out this morning is the plain picture of the gospel we get in this vision of the valley of dry bones. This vision helps to correct a common heresy in the church. I use the word "heresy" because I want to say in the strongest possible way that if you believe this, you will miss the kingdom of God. The heresy is this - that we can earn our salvation through doing good works.

Because we place such a high value on religious activity and good works in the church, sometimes we can be tempted to believe that they contribute to our salvation. That is like thinking that the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision could pull themselves together, attach tendons, cover themselves with flesh and breathe breath into themselves. That would be impossible! And it's just as impossible that we can do anything to earn our salvation. It doesn't matter how often we attend church, how much of our money we give away, how much time we volunteer and how well we know the Bible. It is only by God's grace that we are saved. This is what the Apostle Paul was clarifying when he wrote to the Ephesians, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not of yourselves, it is the gift

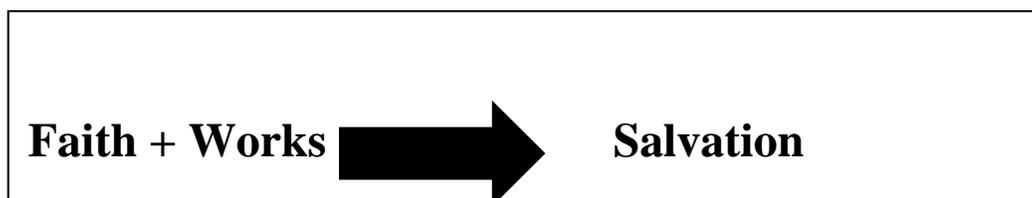
of God - not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9) (2x) Salvation is by God’s grace alone which we receive through faith.

So, if works don’t save us, what role do they play in our lives? Paul answers that question in the next verse. He wrote, “We are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

(Ephesians 2:10) I like to use this diagram to illustrate what Paul is saying in these verses.



Notice that our good works are the result of our salvation, not the cause of it. The mistake that people make can be seen in this second equation - faith + works leads to salvation.



That is just not what the Bible teaches. Do you see the difference between these two equations? The first of these is the gospel. The other is a heresy that is leading lots of people in the church astray.

This vision of the dry bones helps us to understand this by giving us a plain picture of the gospel. What Ezekiel saw in this vision was not only fulfilled when the Israelites returned to Jerusalem years later, but it is fulfilled every time a lost person believes in Jesus. Before we came to Christ we were like these dry bones, without hope and without God, because of our sin. But God, because of his great mercy, has made us alive in Christ. As Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.” (John 5:24) Dry bones have been given life through Christ.

Conclusion

And so we come to the Lord's table this morning to celebrate that the God who restored Israel has also restored us. The one who brought the nation of Israel up from the grave has brought us up from the grave, as well. It is not because of anything we have done, but it is by God's grace alone. We receive God's undeserved favor because of the death of Jesus on the cross that we remember in this table. The body that was broken for us and the blood that was poured out for us has made it possible for us to be spiritually restored - forgiven of our sins, adopted into God's family, seated in the heavenly realms and indwelt by God's spirit. All of this, not because of anything we have done, but because of God's amazing grace.