

# Ezekiel: I Will Put My Spirit in You

## by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

### Prayer of Illumination

Lord, open our hearts and minds  
by the power of your Holy Spirit,  
that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

### Background

“Ezekiel—open your mouth and eat this scroll I give you. Fill your stomach with it.”

Ezekiel obeyed and started chewing. The scroll was sweet as honey, down to the very last bite. Masticating and ingesting God’s message meant that it became a part of Ezekiel, internalized in his very being. As soon as he finished his most unusual meal, the Lord said to Ezekiel:

“Be not afraid: Go to the House of Israel, an obstinate and rebellious people. Speak my word to them—whether they listen or not. I shall make you as stubborn and brazen as they are. In fact I’ll make you stronger than them. But you must speak my words to them.”

Ezekiel’s very name, which means “God strengthens,” was a reminder of God’s promise to sustain the prophet throughout his two decade+ season of ministry to a House of Rebels.

Ezekiel was called by God to be not only a priest and a prophet, but he was a Watchman. A Sentinel posted on the wall to be on the lookout for God’s warnings and to relay them to his people—giving them time to change their ways before judgment. Ezekiel was also unique in his emphasis upon personal responsibility: every life is in a direct relationship with God. If a person changes their wicked ways, God will forgive them. If they willfully turn away from right, God would hold them accountable.

Ezekiel reminds us to take ownership of our lives: you can’t blame your parents, extenuating circumstances, or that your dog ate your homework. And so with a visionary and lively imagination Ezekiel communicated with parables, allegories, symbolic acts, visions, and lengthy oracles in order to jar his people into an awareness of reality. To help them grieve their losses. And to inspire vision for a future filled with hope.

Ezekiel shared tough news, but there was good news too:

God, in his sheer mercy, would give his people a new spirit and a new heart. He would transplant their heart of stone with a heart of flesh so they could be the kind of people God longed for them to be. And so, Ezekiel gave a message of great hope even in the midst of catastrophe, that:

With God’s intervention, an unclean people can be made clean.

With God’s help, an ungodly people can be godly.

With God’s healing, his people can have a new story—where they turn from idols and worship the one true God.

Ezekiel helped his people see the unseen. He reframed Israel's future—helping God's people see a new temple with healing waters flowing from it—that this living spring would bring life and health and nourishment where there was once decay and defeat. God would re-build Jerusalem and give the city a new name: "Yahweh is here."

Finally, we need background on two important words in our morning's passage:

#### Breath and Bones.

First, breath. The word "ruach" is a Hebrew word that appears 10x in our passage. Ruach is a rich word, and depending upon the context can be translated as breath, wind, or spirit. Ruach can speak literally of the air in the lungs, but also can refer to our disposition, our emotional qualities, such as vigor, courage, resilience, hope, or joy. Ruach can also refer to God's Spirit—the Breath of God that breathes new life into his broken people.

Second, bones. Bones are a beautiful metaphor in the Hebrew Scriptures. Bones represent "the whole person." What you are in your bones, is what you are in your entirety. To feel something "right down to your bones" means it goes to the very core of your being. Your marrow is the essence of who you are and what you will become.

The good news is that God's Spirit has the power to resurrect our dead bones. To call us out of our graves, instilling within us new hope, new birth, and a new start.

So let's hear now Ezekiel's famous vision of the Valley of Dry Bones in Chapter 37.

#### **Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14 (NRSV)**

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know."

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on 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 had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and 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, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, "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.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.

I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

## **SERMON – Ezekiel: I Will Put My Spirit in You**

Ezekiel's message was for two crowds:

The Denial Crowd. And the Despairing Crowd.

When we're a part of the Denial Crowd, we shut our eyes to the pain around us and take refuge in distractions, fantasies, and lies. We pretend that the devastation around us doesn't really exist.

The Despair Crowd takes a different approach. They fully see and embrace the catastrophe. But the problem is, this is the final say. The end of everything. There's nothing to look forward to.

The book of Proverbs talks about this: "a downcast spirit dries up the bones."

The word despair literally means "without spirit."

Ezekiel is trying to get through to both camps—the denial camp and the despair camp. Yes, we're in the middle of a catastrophe. BUT—we can embrace God in the worst of times. Life is worth living. With God, there is more than this.

Israel's catastrophe is that they're in exile in Babylon. From all appearances God's promises of a promised land have been broken. The glass isn't just half-empty, there's no glass at all! But right when Israel seemed to be as good as dead, the Word of the Lord comes to Ezekiel.

I like how the Message phrases the first verse: "God grabbed me." So we find Ezekiel in God's loving grip and led by the Spirit to a valley—and God speaks through a bone-chilling vision.

The valley is symbolic in Scripture. What's the most famous valley in Scripture? The valley of the shadow of death. The valley is the lowest point we can come to. It's the furthest point from the mountain. And mountains often represent closeness to God. Revelation. Mountaintop experiences. Valleys may be low places, but they're also places of decision. Places where change happens.

In this particular valley, all Ezekiel could see were bones—old, dry, and unburied bones. These bones in the boneyard were dried out from years and years of baking under the sun. The valley feels like a ghost town. Everything is empty, silent, deserted. No people, no movement, no animation, no life. Nothing.

God asks an unusual question of Ezekiel— Can these bones live? Ezekiel puts the ball back into God's court and basically says,

"I don't know, but you alone know. Can they God?"

Being God, God doesn't let Ezekiel off easy and so he puts the ball back into Ezekiel's court yet again.

"Prophecy to these bones Ezekiel. Prophecy to the breath."

Sometimes God calls us to do what is audacious, daring, and non-sensical from a human perspective. God doesn't always want to do the impossible alone. He wants our participation. Our faith. What dry bones might you be called to prophecy to?

Of all the prophets, Ezekiel was known for being quick to obey, and so he prophesied just as God had ordered. You see there's a time for grieving, and there's a time for acting.

Speak to the bones, speak to the breath Ezekiel!

Something happens inside us when we're given a task, a responsibility, a purpose beyond ourselves to get us out of our shell and involved in God's world and God's designs. And something amazing did happen. A miracle.

The dry bones evidently had ears. And they were listening. First, there was a noise, a rattling.

The Hebrew word means a "shaking." The Greek word is "seismos."

A shifting happened, movement. In geological terms, a seismic shift happened. In spiritual terms, a "soul-shift" began to take place. Bones, sinews, muscles, and flesh started coming together.

Then, after prophesying to the wind, God's ruach, God's breath, came into these lifeless beings. A paradigm shift happened—a shift from death to life.

God's breath always overpowers human death.

God's life is just too much for our despair.

This is the same life-giving breath that God breathed into Adam's nostrils to make him a living being in Genesis 2. The same life-giving breath God is breathing today.

And the bones came to life! A huge multitude—a dispirited people now reanimated, revived, and renewed. The Lord then decoded the meaning of the vision for Ezekiel:

These are the bones of the whole house of Israel in exile. I'm calling you out of your Babylonian tombs and bringing you back home to the promised land for a family reunion.

This is the good news, Immanuel: when we feel washed up, beaten down, burned out, locked-in, or written off—we still have hope with God. Nothing is hopeless, nothing is impossible with God:

God told both Sarah, Abraham's wife, and the Prophet Jeremiah:

Is there anything too hard for me?

The angel Gabriel reminded Mary:

With God NOTHING shall be impossible.

Jesus encouraged his disciples:

With humans this is impossible, but with God ALL things are possible.

This is true today. When we feel discouraged individually or feel our society or church is past its prime or without hope. We've got to remember our hope isn't in our dry bones—our living hope's in our Everlasting God, who never faints or grows weary.

When we find ourselves in the valley, we have to remember:

- The bones didn't do it.
- Ezekiel didn't do it either.
- We can't do it.
- God did it.

We're just the recipients of God's grace.

The key is in our perspective. We need God's help to reframe how we see our challenges and to see with the eyes of faith. To believe. Think about it: What would happen if we looked at the world and ourselves, with God's eyes? With God's vision?

We'd have hope that God's Spirit can grab us too—

healing our hopelessness, mending our wounds, and infusing life where there seems to be only death and discouragement and despair.

Christ has a knack for bringing resurrection out of death, drawing out the possible from the impossible, providing hope in hopeless situations.

Just over two years ago, an early painting by Rembrandt was discovered in the most unlikely of places: a New Jersey basement. Called *The Unconscious Patient*, the painting revealed two physicians administering smelling salts to an ailing young man. Suffering age and dust, when the layers of dust and a layer of lacquer were removed, not only was the beauty of the painting restored, but the renowned artist's monogram "RF" was discovered. Rembrandt's painting now resides in the Getty Museum.

Like a restorer of great art, Jesus too restores us—as individuals and as a church—he administers spiritual smelling salts to us. He cleanses us from all of the basement "mustiness" we carry, inside and out. Only Jesus can give us spiritual CPR with his Spirit and return us to the way God created us and intended us to be, inside and out.

With Christ, Immanuel, our Savior's rescue, restoration and resurrection have the last word. Each of us bare the initials "J.C." on us. We are God's workmanship. We are God's masterpiece. No bones about it.

Amen.

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