

**+ Ezekiel 37:1-14 + The Spirit Breathes Life Through His Word +
+ The Festival of Pentecost + 15 May 2016 +**

There's something fascinating about a battlefield. Now I love history and visiting historical places, but there's something fascinating about visiting a location where an actual battle took place. My family and I have visited battlefields from the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Civil War with plans to visit more this summer. I've even walked a couple battlefields in North Carolina where my great-great grandfather and others fought against Confederate forces in the last year of the Civil War.

Battlefields are fascinating for their importance and their impact on history. Ironically, they're often very peaceful places. It's fascinating to walk around in what once was nothing more than a farmer's field or woods to see how strategy played out or see locations that became famous. Yet at every battlefield, there is always a stark reality that hovers over that place where armies once fought. On that field of battle soldiers gave their lives.

Many battlefields have markers where particular soldiers or officers fell. At one battlefield I visited, the fallen were originally buried where they fell and the markers are still there in formation. No matter how famous a battlefield might be, the sad reality of death is still very present. You can't miss it.

This morning we find the prophet Ezekiel visiting a battlefield where the stark reality of death is quite obvious. Ezekiel had been swept away with the Jewish king and 10,000 other Jews to faraway Babylon—about 1,000 miles from Jerusalem to the east in southeastern Iraq. Shortly after he had been deported, the Babylonians destroyed his homeland of Judah, the capital city of Jerusalem, and the Lord's temple there. Judgment came because generations of Israelites had abandoned the Lord to chase after false gods.

Yet there was still a small, faithful remnant of believers who trusted in the Lord's promises, who hadn't put their trust in kings or the temple, but trusted in the Lord of free and faithful grace. That trust was going to be tested however. You see, through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord had foretold that they would have to wait 70 years before any of them could return to Israel. 70 years! That meant most of the exiles would never see their homes again. Despair crept into their hearts. They cried out to the Lord, ***"Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off."***

So the Holy Spirit sent his prophet Ezekiel on a tour of a battlefield. We don't know the battle. We don't know the location. This may have even been just a vision God gave to his prophet, but what Ezekiel saw was a place where there had been great loss of life many years before. The prophet explains, ***"The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry."*** Imagine walking through a dry, desert valley where the ground is littered with many ***"very dry"*** bones. The pale of death hangs over everything.

As Ezekiel walked back and forth through the valley seeing all those dry bones, the Lord asks him what seems like a silly question, ***"Son of man, can these bones live?"*** The obvious answer is "No! They're dead. They're dried out skeletons. They're dead, dry bones!" Yet that's not how Ezekiel responds. He simply says, ***"O Sovereign LORD, you alone know."*** Rather than state what seems obvious, Ezekiel trusts the Lord—the One who had originally created those bones, the One who had originally given them life—and lets the Lord answer the question. If there was anyone who could breathe life into that valley of dry bones, surely it was the Lord!

The Lord told Ezekiel to prophesy to those dead, dry bones. ***"Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. 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."*** The almighty Lord was about to bring back to full and healthy life those dead, dry bones. He was going to breathe life into those dead, dry bones. So Ezekiel prophesied as he was commanded—and the impossible happened right before his eyes!

As Ezekiel started to prophesy, he heard a noise—***"a rattling sound."*** He saw movement, but this wasn't just a couple bones. No, the entire valley was resounding with that rattling sound, and bones all over the valley started moving and reconnecting. ***"...The bones came together, bone to bone."*** As Ezekiel watched, the rebuilt skeletons became renewed human bodies. ***"I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them."*** The Lord had rebuilt those bodies at his command, but even with bones and tendons and muscles and skin, they were still as dead as before. Rather than a valley of dead, dry bones, Ezekiel now saw a battlefield littered with lifeless corpses.

...But the Lord wasn't done with those dead, dry bones! He commanded his prophet: ***"Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'"*** The Lord was going to breathe life into those lifeless bodies once more. So Ezekiel prophesied as God had commanded, ***"and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army."***

The Lord of life breathed life into those dead, dry bones through his powerful Word. Did you notice that last detail? Only when Ezekiel proclaimed the Lord's command did any change happen with those dead, dry bones. They weren't going anywhere until Ezekiel spoke what God told him to speak. In fact, even after all those bones came back together, they didn't have life until the Lord commanded the wind to breathe life into their bodies.

Now all of this wasn't just to impress Ezekiel. No, this astounding vision was originally meant to encourage those faithful believers, whose trust in the Lord was quickly turning into despair with decades of exile before them.

The Lord explained to his prophet, ***"Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off,' Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: 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. Then you, my people will know that I am the LORD ...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."*** The Jews thought they were as good as dead, but the Lord would breathe life into them through his Word. In fact, that's exactly what he was doing. His Holy Spirit was reviving them. God would bring his people back to their homeland, because nothing is impossible with God.

Centuries later the Holy Spirit breathed life once again into dead, dry bones, but not on some valley battlefield. No, he breathed life into the dead, dry bones of people just like you and me. The Savior whom God had promised over and over again for centuries finally came and fulfilled God's promises. Jesus came to restore life to the dead—and not just physical life to a small handful of deceased people. No, Jesus came to give life to dead, dry hearts like yours and mine. Jesus came to give his life and take that life up again to restore us to life. Then 50 days after Jesus had risen from the dead, on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit breathed life into our dead, dry world with that good news of Jesus. People heard the life-giving news of Jesus and lived.

The Holy Spirit still breathes life through his Word into dead, dry bones today. By nature, you and I and every other human being are nothing more than dead, dry skeletons—lifeless and incapable of coming back to life. The Apostle Paul once described us as ***"dead in your transgressions and sins."*** (Ephesians 2:1) Your sins and mine, your unbelief and mine, your guilt and mine make us spiritually dead in God's eyes, even hostile to him, that is, until the Holy Spirit breathes life into our hearts through the Word of God.

You and I were made ***"alive with Christ."*** (Ephesians 2:5) The Holy Spirit, who once breathed life through God's command at creation and brought all things into being, breathed life through the Gospel of our Savior Jesus. He overcame your spiritual death and mine. Through that Word, the Holy Spirit brought you to Jesus and Jesus to you. He took your dead, dry bones, your dead, dry heart—and breathed new life into them. Apart from that Word, you'd still be dead, but through the Gospel, he created faith and made you alive!

The dead, dry bones of the people around us can also be brought back to life. That's what the Holy Spirit did on Pentecost and what he does today. That's why there can be no greater concern for God's people and his Church than that we breathe the Word of God in all its truth and purity. The Holy Spirit breathed life into our hearts through that Word. So we want to teach that Word purely and proclaim it boldly so the Holy Spirit can breathe life into other dead, dry bones like ours so they can have eternal life like us.

You see, when the Lord made that promise to Ezekiel, he wasn't just promising to bring back his people to their homes 70 years later, but to one day send his Holy Spirit to breathe life again. He looked ahead to the Last Day when the Holy Spirit will breathe into the bodies of the lifeless with God's command. He will wake all the dead and take us to be with our Savior in heaven forever.

The stark reality of death doesn't just hang over battlefields. It hangs over our world, our communities, even our lives, but yet our God conquers that terrifying reality through his own power and mercy. He breathes life through his Word into dead, dry bones one soul at a time. So we pray, ***"Come, Holy Spirit, breathe life into our dead, dry bones and renew our hearts through your Word. Kindle in us the fire of your holy love."*** Amen.