

Fifth Sunday in Lent

JUDGMENT EXECUTED/PROMISE DELIVERED

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

3The 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. 2He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6I 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." 7So 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. 8I 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. 9Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, 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." 10I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 11Then 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.' 12Therefore prophecy, 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. 13And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14I 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.

DIAGNOSIS: Judgment Executed –"Then they will know I'm the Lord" (6:14) as Judge

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Dismembered, but not Dissatisfied*

The vision of the valley of the dry bones is one of the ways GOD depicted to Ezekiel, in vivid fashion, the state of the nation of Judah during the time of the Babylonian Exile. The vision reveals that the once great nation of Israel (which GOD gathered and place in Jerusalem, over which GOD established King David as ruler and to which GOD had given a messianic mission for the world) is no more. It has met its demise (in 597 BC) in exile. It is dismembered. And yet, the exiles did not see their geographical dismemberment as a problem—and that is precisely their initial problem. On the contrary, far from being dissatisfied with exile, they were quite content with it. On the whole, they thought they were doing quite well within the kibbutzim (clusters) that Babylon had set up for them. Therefore, five years into the exile (1:2), God had had enough of this contentment. And so God called the prophet Ezekiel to be a "watchman" on the tower to tell Judah what exile means. Over a period of thirty years (1:1), Ezekiel will have a series of visions from God explaining what exile means. The Book of Ezekiel presents this thirty year ministry; and this vision of valley of dry bones is among the favorites.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Dispirited, Not in the Sense of Depressed, But Apathetic*

But the vision of the valley of dry bones reveals more than the mere geographical and physical fact of exile as a problem. Even worse, it reveals that they have lost their wind, the breath of life that made Judah Judah. They have lost what characterizes them as the people of God! In a word, they are dispirited, which is another word for faithless (See 16:12) or, to put it in Ezekiel's favorite idiom, the condition of "not knowing the Lord." True, they are still breathing, physically, but not spiritually, because they don't have the spirit of the Lord within. Often times we associate the condition of being dispirited with depression. But these exiles have no signs of depression. Here, rather, dispiritedness is more like apathy, i.e., not knowing the Lord. Content with exile, they are apathetic and disinterested in their calling to be the people of God: either, in the sense of maintaining the worship of God (as they did in the temple in Jerusalem before it was destroyed) or in the sense of returning to Jerusalem to be a sign of God's Abrahamic Promise for the nations.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Dispossessed, as in "Cut off" from God (v. 11)*

Although Judah is content with her situation of exile, God is not! God is angry! But significantly, God does not hide that fact from the exiles. He sends his prophet, Ezekiel, to make known to Judah who it is they are dealing with – He is "the Lord"! – and just what exile means: It means judgment! God has Ezekiel perform numerous symbolic acts and deliver various words of warning so that Judah might "know that I am the Lord" (See chapters 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, etc.); but to no avail. But these symbolic acts and words of warning are not an idle exercise. Neither are God's threats to dispossess the exiles idle threats. That truth is asserted forcefully by Ezekiel in the face of the

false prophets who say “peace when there is no peace” (13:10). As Claus Westermann puts it, “Divine judgment could no longer be averted. Even Noah, Daniel and Job [14:14] could no longer rescue Judah. The nation was worthless as the wood of a vine, which can only be burned. The entire first section (chs. 12-15) has as its distinctive feature an emphasis upon the irrevocability of judgment” (p. 172). The vision of the valley of dry bones reveals that God’s judgments are not a vain, empty threats (read Ezekiel 14:1-8). They will come to pass. Exile means for dismembered, dispirited Judah that it is also dispossessed, “cut off” (14:8) from the Lord. The valley of dry bones is a sign of that reality.

Prognosis: Promise Delivered—“Then you shall know the Lord”...as Promise Keeper

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Repossessed*

Paradox abounds in Ezekiel! And it is as paradox that Ezekiel delivers good news for the dispossessed. Specifically, this paradox is exemplified in the fact that Ezekiel is called twice to be a “watchman” for Judah in exile. (See Westermann, pp. 168-9.) Ezekiel’s first calling is to deliver God’s words of warning concerning God’s judgment on the exiles (chs. 1-33). But when that judgment is complete, which it is in Chapter 33, he is called again: only this time to deliver God’s promise to repossess the exiles, to gather scattered Israel back to God’s self. In order to understand the nature of the promise in Ezekiel, two points must be noted. First, the conversation between Ezekiel and God in the vision of the valley of the dry bones highlights the conditions for the fulfillment of this promise. “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord, you know.” Then he said to me, Prophecy...” Fulfillment is completely in the hands of God. In the vision, the “house of Israel” is dead, cutoff, dispirited, dismembered. It has no power of response. If these bones are to become living beings,

it is up to God alone. Judgment operated with the grammar, "you do this or else..." The promise operates with the grammar, "I will do this so that..." In this case, the promise is: I will overthrow my judgment with my promise, I will bring life out of your death, I will bring you out of exile into my homeland. God does this so that Israel will know God as the God of promise. Second, as Westerman notes (pp. 169, 177), Ezekiel's vision of the fulfillment of the promise is suggestively apocalyptic in form. What he means is that the promise is not about reconstituting the Jerusalem of old. That Jerusalem, that Israel, is dead and gone. The promise is rooted, not in nostalgia for the past, but in hope for a qualitatively different/new Jerusalem that bears the name "The Lord is There" (48:35). As Ezekiel makes clear, that new city will not only house the chosen of Israel but also the chosen of the nations (cf. 47:22-23). Both these points are suggestive of the promise that is ultimately fulfilled in the God-man Jesus Christ: who, through the cross, as one of us, entered into the human condition of death, and through his resurrection, as God in person, establishes the conditions for our repossession by God: a new, reconciled life with God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Revived, as in "I will put my spirit within you" (v. 14)*

The promise is not only that God will repossess the dispossessed by overruling his judgment with his promise, but also that he would revive the dispirited by giving them his Spirit (v. 14). Paradox abounds! Ezekiel sounds like Paul when Paul says of the new life: "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20) or when he says that we live by the Spirit. In Ezekiel's language, this inward dynamic is described as "knowing the Lord" (v. 14) as the one who has spoken and acted in mercy on our behalf. Again, all this is suggestive of the Christian idea of Pentecost, where the Spirit now makes known to those into whom it enters that "Jesus is Lord" and that God has spoken

and acted in him as the fulfillment of all that God has promised. The animating power of the exiles is now the Lord himself present through the Spirit, evidenced through their faith, existing as he has promised.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Remembered*

Repossessed by the grace of God and revived by the Spirit of the Lord within, the exiles now remember not only who the Lord is but who they are because of their calling. They are the people of God, God's messianic people to bring the promise to the nations. What is paradoxical in all this is that, exile, being physically and geographically dispersed, does not necessarily contradict that calling. Exile can be a very effective means to disperse the people of the promise among the nations precisely for the sake of fulfilling their calling. How reminiscent is this of Jesus' great commission: Go! Be dispersed among all nations, teaching them also to know Jesus, the Lord of the promise. For where the promise is spoken THERE is the Lord, THERE is the city of God, THERE is the world REMEMBERED by God according to his promises, THERE is the world RE-MEMBERED, knit together, and made right with God.