

New Life For A New Year

In less than a week we'll be in a new year. I can imagine most of us are eager for 2021 and glad to say goodbye to 2020. What a year it's been! As we look to the future I thought it would be helpful to draw some wisdom from someone who had a hopeful vision for the future during very bleak times. In the 22nd year of his ministry, **God spoke to the Prophet Ezekiel, whose name means "God strengthens me."** In the 37th chapter of the O.T. book of his name, we read his vision about a valley of lifeless, dry, sun bleached bones. It was a vision of Israel's conquered, crushed condition in captivity. God asked Ezekiel if these bones could live. Though the vision is 2,500 years old the spiritual truth and applications are still relevant.

I. Have A Realistic Picture Of Our Situation

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, Ezekiel 36:1-2.

Ezekiel was with the Israelites held captive in Babylon, after their country had been defeated and destroyed. These people had survived the conquest, but were like unburied skeletons, in shock, looking backward, lamenting what was lost. From a human perspective there was no way that there would ever be life there again. **Hope was dead.**

Do we have a realistic understanding of our own situation – as God's people? Maybe we're still assessing things in the midst of this pandemic. We face unprecedented changes, restrictions, and challenges. How can we to be a church in this new landscape? Are we fully aware that our cultural landscape has changed? It seems to me that **American culture has drifted away from Christian influence and Judeo-Christian morality.** People are indifferent to the things of God and some are hostile. Other worldviews are competing with a biblical worldview for the vision of America and our church. It's not just in the culture out there, but in here also. How many consider themselves Christian but live as though Christ made no difference in their lives? How many can even say what a biblical worldview is?

Spiritual life and understandings have dried up. Sometimes our "doings" in the name of God become dry because we do them without God in them.

II. Understand God's Economy

The world looks for the big, physically strong, the seemingly intelligent, well-connected, and worldly successful. Then there's God who begins with the small, the seemingly unimportant, and maybe even impotent. Who starts with a valley of dry bones? Yet this: ***...God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did, Romans 4:17.***

God sees resources that we don't always recognize ... in the people already around us; in the gifts they can bring to God's service. We're like the disciples saying to Jesus "... these people need to be fed," and Jesus replies, ***You give them something to eat, Luke 9:13.*** And they protested that their resources weren't sufficient to the need. But placed in Jesus' hands it became a miracle: 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two dried fish. ***It's not really programs that bring Christ to people, but disciples using the gifts God has given them.***

The most important resource God has and which we have is people ... people dedicated to listening to God, committed to studying the Scriptures, willing to serve God. Mother Teresa: "Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love."

III. How Does New Life Begin?

When we pray to God to bring new life to our lives, or our congregation, or the nation, we are usually wanting some sort of miracle; something big to happen fast. Revival now – wouldn't that be great? We implore God to do it ... so that we won't have to make effort, or change, or expenditure. Recognizing first that ***spiritually speaking we are like dry bones that can never live without God,*** that we are hopeless without God, there is nevertheless at least three things we must do.

A. Tell the Story

The Lord commanded Ezekiel: ***Prophesy to these bones and say to them, '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, Ezekiel 37:4-5.***

God still calls on us to speak His word to a people who struggle to be hopeful about our future. Will anyone come back to church someday? What's going to happen to our nation with all the confusion, lust for power, greed and identity politics that is dividing us? Can we have a virtuous society, a civil society, with so much division and immorality? At Christmas we recall how ***The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, John 1:14.*** It is ours to proclaim Jesus and the true life He gives to all who will receive Him.

I am sure that some of you could talk to me all day about your children, or grandchildren, your work, or stories of some trip you've made. Everybody has a story to tell. When something is really good... when we truly believe it ... when we are excited about it, we will tell others about it! The pastor is usually the worst one to share faith in Jesus outside the congregation: outsiders assume

that he's paid to do it. But **when a church member shares faith in Christ it is powerful.** You have something worth sharing!

No other faith, be it monotheistic or not, knows this glorious truth: through Jesus, the Almighty God became one of us so that we might have a personal and loving relationship with Him. ***Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba', Father, Galatians 4:6. (Romans 8:15). Share how your relationship with Christ has made a difference in your life,*** and you will have an impact on someone ... and you'll also be lighting a candle of hope in the darkness.

There will be resistance at times, but that's only so you will learn to rely on the Lord. ***But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict, Luke 21:14-15.***

There are some things in life that realistically are probably beyond my reach. I don't think I will ever be an astronaut and fly into space. I won't ever be the CEO of Chevron-Texaco or Exxon-Mobil; or a U.S. Senator, or a professional tennis player. What about you? Are there things you think are beyond your reach?

But there are a lot of things that you and I can do if we try. God breathed life into you, and you became a living soul. You already have everything you need to be successful in life. ***The Creator of the universe breathed His spirit into you.*** You have been crowned with God's favor. God has equipped and empowered you. ***Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit,' John 20:21-22.***

Here's the paradox in this wonderful life God has given us: If you want to keep the gospel, the good news, the hope, you have to give it away. If you don't let people know what you have, they won't know what they are missing. I am convinced that ***there are a lot of people who don't know what they are missing because you have never told them about the Good News of Jesus Christ.*** We need to tell people about our personal relationship with God through Jesus and the hope we have in Him.

B. Speak the Church's Language

Like a valley of dry bones, God is putting us together to embody Christ, His presence in the world. Becoming the Body of Christ takes time, God's help, and our willingness. Pain and patience are in the process.

Jesus came to us from God full of "grace and truth." We have a truth to share. We must do it with grace. What do I mean by that? The world and sinners do not like to hear God's truth ... that is, that we are not alright and good. That is why ***the church's primary language must be Christ's love. Yet in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than***

ten thousand words in a tongue, 1 Corinthians 14:19. Love is the language of faith.

Healthy churches speak the language of love. It begins in worship – which is the love of Jesus Christ. The church is not those who are dead and buried, or the walking dead. **The church is people of the resurrection - those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells.**

Studies show that the average male speaks 6,073 words per day and the average female 8,805. No wonder the Apostle Paul talked about people speaking 10,000 words in an unknown language. He said he'd rather speak five words that people could understand, rather than 10,000 words that people don't understand. **Words of forgiveness and affirmation are graceful ways to pave the way for truth.**

If you had only 5 words you could speak to someone which 5 words would you speak? How about "I forgive you" or "please forgive me" and the word "love"? A big part of love is forgiveness... because, people do things and say things that hurt. The most powerful phrases you will ever hear or speak are words of forgiveness and words of love. **Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love, 1 Cor. 13:13.** Dry bones given new life will sing this kind of love.

C. Allow God's Spirit to Guide

If we are going to live in victory, we have to walk in the direction **God has planned for us.** All our church activities and all our personal devotions are mere busyness without the Holy Spirit. Pray for the Holy Spirit to fill you and us, when we come to worship, before we begin our small groups, and when we end. Pray for the Holy Spirit to visit us in our meetings, decision-makings, relationships, dreams, and plans. Sometimes we forget this valuable resource which God provides – the living presence of Jesus.

If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever, John 14:15-16. I think one of the problems we have in church, and churches of the entire nation, is that too many folks simply don't heed Jesus' commands. None of us can know the future, but this I know: God is not trying to hide from us. He has given us a Guide in life. **But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you, John 14:26.**

Following the Spirit is not like reading a map, it's more **like taking your bearing from a compass.** There will be moments of fog, stormy weather, detours, and things that block our path. But we should always be headed in the direction Jesus Christ has laid out for us. How many actually ask Him to reveal His way to them and then study the Scriptures for a vision of that way?

The Lord said to Ezekiel: ***Prophesy 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,' Ezekiel 37:9.*** Likewise must we pray, **“Come Holy Spirit and breathe life into your church.”**

Preaching and teaching alone cannot put life back into the dead, the dry, and the lost. **Only the power of the Holy Spirit renews and saves people.** The church finds life when the Holy Spirit fills it, so that people extoll their living relationship with Christ, and it builds a community of love. What attracts people to church and brings them back again? It is not the building. It is not even the people. It is the living presence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. New life in 2021 ... here we come!

I will put my Spirit in you and you will live... Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD, Ezekiel 37:14.