

Ezekiel's Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones: What Does It Mean?

by John Ross Schroeder

The prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of vast numbers of people resurrected to live again as physical human beings. What is the meaning of this mystifying vision, and what does it teach us about God's plan?

From early youth Ezekiel had been educated and trained to be a priest in the kingdom of Judah. But his hopes and dreams had been dashed by King Nebuchadnezzar's invasion, taking him and other young Jews captive to Babylon. Now far separated from the temple in Jerusalem, how could his education and training be of any real value? There was no need to worry. God was looking after His own. The Creator had called Ezekiel to be a great prophet, ranked alongside Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Christian writer Christopher Wright put it this way: "So while we can value all the positive contributions that Ezekiel's education and training as a priest brought to his prophetic ministry, we must also appreciate the immense personal, professional and theological shock it must have been to him . . . [Yet] God would use all that He had built into Ezekiel's life during his years of preparation" (*The Message of Ezekiel*, 2001, p. 27).

When he was 30 years old, Ezekiel began to experience astonishing visions from Almighty God. Perhaps in a personal diary, he recorded the exact date on which the first vision occurred: "Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the River Chebar, that the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God" (Ezekiel 1:1, emphasis added throughout).

The invisible barriers between heaven and earth were supernaturally parted for

Ezekiel. But what did this prophet actually see in vision? Moving beyond the introductory revelation of the awesome angelic realm, we fast-forward to verses 26 and 28. "On the likeness of the throne was a likeness with the appearance of a man high above it . . . *This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.*"

Ezekiel initially reacted just like the prophet Daniel and the apostles Paul and John did later. "So when I saw it, *I fell on my face*, and I heard a voice of One [God] speaking. And He said to me, 'Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak to you' . . . And He said to me; 'Son of man, *I am sending you to the children of Israel*'" (Ezekiel 1:28; 2:1-3). God gave Ezekiel a great mission to accomplish. He had important announcements to make.

These were intended to reach people far beyond his own time to people down through the ages. And one important vision would serve to encourage all who have ever lived in facing the same remorseless enemy—the seemingly hopeless ending of life in death.

Looking ahead

The prophet did have a comparatively small personal audience in Babylon of fellow captives from Judah (Ezekiel 3:11). But the real import of his message was *not* primarily for these deported, displaced prisoners who could do little about their circumstance.

It's important to understand that the kingdoms of Israel and Judah had sepa-

rated after King Solomon's death and that the people of the kingdom of Israel had already gone into captivity at the hands of the Assyrians during the latter part of the eighth century B.C.—well over a century before Ezekiel prophesied.

And by the time his prophecies began, some of the inhabitants of the kingdom of Judah were likewise already in captivity, first by the Assyrians and then the Babylonians, with most of the rest soon to follow as a result of later Babylonian invasions.

Careful reading of Ezekiel's prophetic message will reveal that it was aimed mainly at the distant future, primarily directed to the end-time descendants of Israel. Much of God's revelation to him



revolved around crucial, end-time events—both positive and negative—that would take place centuries in the future.

In the prophecy Jesus Christ gave on the Mount of Olives the week He died, He plainly stated regarding the end-time, "For these are the days of vengeance, *that all things which are written* [in the Old Testament prophets, including Ezekiel] *may be fulfilled*" (Luke 21:22). But cataclysmic occurrences at the close of man's age are just one aspect of this overall prophetic scenario.

Notice the apostle Peter's words to the crowd gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost seven weeks after Jesus' death

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and resurrection: “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so *that times of refreshing* may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive *until the times of restoration of all things*, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets [again including Ezekiel] since the world began” (Acts 3:19-21).

This insightful passage depicts a future golden age brought to a suffering humanity by the returning Jesus Christ, lasting 1,000 years (see Revelation 20:1-6). Israel’s prophets aptly describe this long period of peace, prosperity and well-being. One of God’s annual festivals, the Feast of Tabernacles, corresponds directly to Christ’s coming millennial reign.

A rebellious nation lost forever?

God continued to instruct Ezekiel: “Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, *go to the house of Israel* and speak with My words to them’” (Ezekiel 3:4).

So many people among the Israelites have died as victims of evil and injustice. How should we try to understand all of these tragic occurrences?

Our Creator speaks to a rebellious people who have rarely been inclined to take His warning messages seriously. Their descendants down through time have most often chosen to remain in the depths of idolatry and Sabbath-breaking, two sins against God that Ezekiel emphasized (Ezekiel 14:1-6; 20:12-13, 16-17, 24; 22:3, 8). Tragically, these two trends continue unabated today (see our free booklet *The Ten Commandments*).

But who truly represents the “Israel” today to whom these prophecies are intended? The present tiny state of Israel

consists mostly of Jews descended from those of the kingdom of Judah, so the name Israel is a misnomer.

History and Bible prophecy show that the modern descendants of the other tribes of Israel stand clearly identified as the Americans, British Commonwealth and peoples of northwestern Europe. For the biblical and historical evidence, request or download our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*. You cannot truly grasp God’s prophetic message to humankind apart from the essential knowledge disclosed in this eye-opening publication.

The modern descendants of Israel have been likewise rebellious against God. And all share in the same fate—national punishment and, for each individual, the ultimate penalty of sin, which is death (Romans 6:23). The prophecies of future national blessings are encouraging, but what good are they to those who have died?

After the Exodus from Egypt, a whole generation of disobedient Israelites perished in the wilderness. Later, many died at the hands of ruthless Assyrian invaders. Much

(Matthew 2:18). Are these children, then, now lost?

So many people among the Israelites have died as victims of evil and injustice. Today we remember the Holocaust in which 6 million Jews were callously murdered in Central and Eastern Europe. How should we try to understand all of these tragic occurrences? Is there no hope for even innocent children who died in infancy without ever knowing why?

Of course, these questions beset people of every nation—not just Israel. But God has given a special message through Ezekiel to Israel in this regard—one that holds significance for all people.

Portrait of the great resurrection

Ezekiel continued to have visions throughout his prophetic ministry. The one in the 37th chapter speaks directly to the desperate plight of Israel down through the ages. Its intriguing description of the valley of dry bones was the subject of a popular song, “Dry Bones,” during the mid-1950s.

No matter how many times one rereads it, this account remains both arresting and



later, about 40 years after Christ’s death and resurrection, many died tragically as a result of the Roman invasion of Judea and the capture of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Of course, the same fate is shared by those who never had the opportunity to choose a way of life to follow. Consider all those little babies Herod cruelly killed in a failed effort to murder the Christ child. Their parents were devastated with unrelieved grief. “A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more”

suspenseful to the converted mind. But even more important is the profound *meaning* for us—and for our departed loved ones, who may never have been called of God or spiritually converted during this age. This remarkable, comforting vision assures us that we will see them again!

“The hand of the LORD came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones . . . and He said to me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ So I answered, ‘O Lord GOD, you know’” (Ezekiel 37:1-3).

God must not be underestimated. He asked the patriarch Abraham, “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” (Genesis 18:14). Centuries later He posed the same question to the prophet Jeremiah: “Behold, I am the LORD, *the God of all flesh*. Is there anything too hard for Me?” (Jeremiah 32:27).

Ezekiel’s vision continues: “Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: ‘Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, *and you shall live*’ . . . Also He said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, *that they may live*’”’ (Ezekiel 37:5, 9). Physical human beings cannot live without drawing breath—the essence of our fleshly life. Even excellent swimmers, experts at holding their breath, cannot survive long without breathing air.

“So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, *and they lived*, and stood upon their feet, *an exceedingly great army*” (verse 10).

God identifies this vast group

“Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, *these bones are the whole house of Israel*’” (verse 11). God then summarizes what He had just described in detail. “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. *Then you shall know that I am the LORD*’” (verses 12-13). Most pictured here never really knew God during their previous human lives.

The closing verse of this vision reveals why God, who never does anything without purpose, has just resurrected all these people: “*I will put My [Holy] Spirit in you, and you shall live*” (verse 14). At that time all of these people will have an opportunity to be converted—that is, to repent of their sins, be forgiven and baptized, and receive God’s Holy Spirit by which they can truly be converted and receive God’s gift of eternal life.

The indication of this preceding verse is that the majority of this great multitude of people will obtain everlasting life in God’s Kingdom.

The New Testament also speaks to this incredible, miraculous phenomenon. The apostle Paul wrote: “*And so all Israel will be saved*, as it is written: ‘The Deliverer

Most in mainstream Christendom erroneously believe that today is the only day of salvation. But this belief simply is not found in the Bible.

[Jesus Christ] will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob [whose name was changed to *Israel*]; For this is My covenant with them [i.e., the New Covenant], when I take away their sins” (Romans 11:26-27).

By no stretch of the imagination is all of Israel being saved now during this present age of man. But God promises that the whole of Israel will have their opportunity for salvation in the future. Relatively few are being called now to join with the first-fruits of God’s salvation. These called-out ones, true Christians, will be resurrected to receive everlasting life when Christ returns (1 Corinthians 15:50-54; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Philippians 3:20-21).

What about other nations and peoples?

Is this great resurrection exclusively for Israel? Or will other peoples and nations also be included? Remember that our loving Creator remains “*the God of all flesh*” (Jeremiah 32:27). Several passages in the Gospel accounts show that non-Israelite rulers and peoples are to be resurrected as well.

The queen of the South (Sheba), the peoples of Tyre, Sidon and Nineveh (ancient nations and city-states that long predated Jesus’ human lifetime), and even the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah will be resurrected to physical life alongside Christ’s generation of Israelites (see Matthew 11:20-24; 12:41-42; Luke 10:12-14).

Jesus plainly stated: “Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live . . . Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which *all who are in the graves will hear His voice*” (John 5:25, 28).

Later Christ revealed to this same apostle John that “the rest of the dead”—referring to those not raised to life in this resurrection —“did not live again until the thousand years were finished” (Revelation 1:1; 20:5). This tells us that the timing of this resurrection is after the thousand-year period known as the Millennium.

This verse also clearly shows that there is more than one resurrection. To learn more, read our article “The Resurrection of the Dead: What Does the Bible Really Teach?” from the September/October 2008 *Good News*, available online at www.GNmagazine.org/issues.

Is today the only day of salvation?

Most in mainstream Christendom *erroneously* believe that today is the only day of salvation. But this belief simply is not found in the Bible. In fact the vast majority of mankind will receive their opportunity for salvation during the great resurrection to judgment that we have been reading about in Ezekiel 37:1-14.

The apostle John also refers to this resurrection to temporary physical life in Revelation 20:11-13: “Then I saw a *great white throne* and Him who sat upon it . . . And I saw the dead, small and great [now resurrected], standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the *books* [plural, the books of the Bible].”

The “great white throne” judgment occurs not in an instant as people are raised from the dead, but instead *over a considerable period of time*. God will judge them over time, just as those called to salvation today are judged over time during this present age by this very same standard, the books of the Bible (1 Peter 4:17; 2 Timothy 3:15-17).

Many Bible readers misunderstand the nature and meaning of *judgment*, nearly always associating the term with sentencing to condemnation—not realizing that God is a merciful judge who patiently evaluates human existence with righteous discernment. He earnestly desires to see the blood of His Son Jesus blot out the sins of as many as possible. Christ Himself firmly stated, “*And I, if I am lifted up from the earth [by crucifixion], will draw all peoples to Myself*” (John 12:32).

What Will It Be Like to Be Resurrected?

What will it be like for those raised to life again in the resurrection described in Ezekiel's vision? Suddenly being raised back to physical life will certainly come as a shock to just about everyone affected!

It's likely that many will find themselves in a similar condition to those at the beginning of Christ's millennial reign, where many will have lived through the terrible time of the Great Tribulation and the Day of the Lord (see our free booklet *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy*). Their needs would be similar—food, shelter, emotional healing and someone (actually those faithful servants of God already raised to everlasting spirit life at Christ's return a thousand years earlier) to comfort them and explain what has happened—giving them hope and help through the psychological trauma (see Revelation 5:10; 20:4-6).

Many who will rise in this White Throne Judgment period after the Millennium may have died peacefully and undoubtedly will be overjoyed by suddenly having new life and breath. However, the likelihood is that just as many will have died facing disasters and distress—death on a battlefield, starvation, hor-

rific illness, natural disasters, drowning at sea (Revelation 20:13) and who knows what else. Some will be resurrected having been career criminals. Some will have died in accidents, others from drink- or drug-induced stupors.

From the descriptions given in Ezekiel 37:11-14, it seems unlikely that God will miraculously blot out all these memories (although He may alleviate some of the worst ones). Those mentioned in this passage remember their past lives—their memories leaving them with a sense of hopelessness (verse 11).

Perhaps God will use these terrible memories as a basis for healing of a different kind. Recovery from trauma can be a slow and painful process. While the grief of losing loved ones in death will no doubt be quickly overcome as people realize their loved ones have also been resurrected, there will be other emotional and psychological issues to deal with and overcome.

Severe anger, hatred and a desire for vengeance could be particular challenges. This kind of healing can take many months and even years—talking through, coming to terms with the circumstances and finally resolving the whole matter. Learning about the need to forgive and how to forgive is a vital part of the process.

But why would God want people to go through this kind of healing process? Why would He not just supernaturally remove all the awful memories and angry thoughts? Because all must learn not just about how sin causes untold suffering, but also how to value the newfound opportunity for everlasting life—avoiding those sinful thoughts and actions that if unchecked would eventually result in the second death (Revelation 20:14-15). Those resurrected will have to be taught a deep appreciation of God's plan of salvation.

They will have to learn that Christ is their personal Savior who suffered an ignominious death by crucifixion so that they could be forgiven and reconciled to God the Father. The salvation process of true repentance, water baptism and the receiving of the Holy Spirit for inward transformation helps bring true emotional and psychological healing (Acts 2:38).

It is the process that God uses today, it is the process that will be used during the millennial rule of Jesus Christ, and it is the process that God will use during the White Throne Judgment period. But the comfort provided by the already spiritually transformed saints of God will also be an essential part of supporting the salvation process.

—Barbara Fenney



Paul writes of “God our Saviour, whose will it is that *all should find salvation and come to know the truth*” (1 Timothy 2:3-4, Revised English Bible). And in Ezekiel 18:32 we read, “‘For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,’ says the Lord GOD. ‘Therefore turn [to righteousness] and live!’”

This coming time of judgment will give those who never really knew God during their previous lifetime a just and fair opportunity for salvation—not a second chance. (To learn more, read our article “How Will God Judge the World?” from the September/October 2009 *Good News*, available online at www.GNmagazine.org/issues.)

The special meaning of the biblical eighth-day festival

As mentioned earlier, the Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the Feast of Ingathering, pictures Christ's millennial reign. But immediately following this seven-day Feast is a separate one-day celebration referred

to simply as “the eighth day” (Leviticus 23:34-36; Numbers 29:35; 2 Chronicles 7:9; Nehemiah 8:18). The real meaning of this celebration is rarely understood in modern theological circles. Yet it represents an essential missing piece to the puzzle of salvation.

This special Holy Day directly corresponds to the Great White Throne Judgment period, during which God will give all those who have ever lived but never really understood the truth their first real opportunity for salvation.

Because few people are aware of the God-ordained festivals spelled out in the Bible, few understand God's step-by-step plan of salvation revealed through these celebrations. The meaning of the eighth day corresponds to Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones, referring to a time when lost family members will be joyously joined together again to learn God's ways while living under utopian conditions of mutual love, peace and prosperity.

This Holy Day reminds us that God's plan promises to offer every human being the opportunity to truly repent of sin and receive a permanent place in His everlasting family, the Kingdom of God. **GN**

To Learn More...

Few people know about the festivals God commands in the Bible, and even fewer observe them. What do they mean? What do they teach us about God's plan for the salvation of mankind? You'll find a complete explanation of the Eighth Day and the other biblical festivals in our free booklet *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*. This intriguing publication explains the meaning of all of God's annual festivals in order. You need this little-understood information. Request or download your free copy today!



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