

The Desperate Need For The Church In Exile...Is The Living God

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Preacher: Dr. Ross Hastings

[0 : 00] Let me encourage you to keep your Bible open at this text, Ezekiel 37, a great privilege to be with you, and thanks to Aaron and Jordan for the privilege of sharing in this great series on the book of Ezekiel.

I have never preached in Ezekiel 37, despite having been in the ministry for many years, so a great privilege to come to this exciting text of Ezekiel 37. I see that the clock says that I'm already finished.

It kind of reminds me of the Scottish preacher who was trying to do all of the minor prophets in one sermon, and he got as far as Habakkuk, and somebody sitting in the front row was getting increasingly restless, and he says, now where should we put Habakkuk?

And he said, here, you can have my seat, I've had enough. I hope you haven't had enough of the book of Ezekiel, and particularly this series which is focused on the God of Ezekiel.

My title for this passage tonight is, The Desperate Need for the People of God in Exile is the Living God. For those of you who are new tonight, the book of Ezekiel is about the people of Judah, many of whom were taken into exile in 597 BC.

[1 : 22] And in fact, Ezekiel is one of 10,000 of those exiles. King Nebuchadnezzar leaves a king in place in Jerusalem, but he rebels, and around about 586 BC, Jerusalem is sacked.

In fact, the message of the book of Ezekiel is roughly this, chapters 1 to 24 is about judgment. Chapter 24 focuses heavily on the destruction of Jerusalem as the pinnacle of God's judgment.

And then from 25 to 32 is an expression of God's judgment on Gentile nations. And then from chapters 33 to 48, hope for the exilic people of God begins to be expressed in this book, but they are still in exile.

As I thought about how to apply this passage for today, I really think that we as the people of God in the West are the church in exile.

Perhaps the parallelism isn't exact, but the state of the Christian church today in the West is very much, I think, exilic in its character. Whereas we used to be the force, the mission force in Christianity, now the Christian West is only 30%.

[2 : 43] 70% of the world's Christians are East and South. Leslie Newbigin, who helped the church in England realize its missional nature again, was a missionary to India for many years, and he came back to a country that had transformed significantly.

And he made a comment that the culture of modernity in England was more resistant to the gospel than anything he had encountered in India. If I think about the state of the Christian church in Canada, I think it's true to say that in one sense we are also in exile.

I think about our own church and the fact that we meet in this building is symbolic in some sense of our exilic nature. I think about the decision that was handed down by the BC Law Society members just this week, voting against Trinity Western University having a law school because its students are required to observe certain sexual standards.

I find it ironic that we, the Christian church here in Canada, which probably, and I think almost certainly gave the language of human rights to this nation, is now being refused religious rights.

I think we're certainly in exile in some ways. The reputation of God, the Christian God, is not high in our culture as a result. And of course, scandals don't help.

[4 : 13] Scandal of the fall of many Christian leaders and most recently to the south, the fall of Mark Driscoll does not help our reputation. The general tepid state of the Christian church is another sign that it is an exile.

One of the challenges, I think, for us as the Christian church is that rather than being prophetic to our culture, we are often enculturated so that the narrative of our culture, which is a narrative of consumerism, materialism, individualism, has become our narrative.

We've become, in many senses, spiritually tepid, maybe even sometimes dry, even dead.

We are in exile. Now, the days of the church being in a Constantinian state are certainly over. Lee Beach has just written a book called *The Church in Exile*, in which he recommends to the Christian church that they view themselves as being a church in exile so that we can imagine what it is to be missional as the people of God in exile.

Walter Brueggemann goes further and says, not only are we in exile, it's more like we are in diaspora. That is, we are the dispersed people of God, and there really isn't any hope of a return to normalcy.

[5 : 32] Exile assumes that one day we will not be in exile. He suggests that diaspora is perhaps a more appropriate image. The motif of exile, I think, does offer for us a provocative and potentially fruitful way of reimagining the mission of the church in ways that are helpful.

As Jordan so ably communicated to us last week, many of the people of God in exile had lapsed into despair, and others were characterized by idolatry.

And almost, I think, all had this sense of, is there any hope? And you may feel that way as you think about the Christian church. You may feel that way as you think about your own spiritual life.

You may feel a certain deadness, a certain dryness, and ask the question, is there any hope? I want to suggest to you that there is hope. When the people of God are in exile, they desperately need God.

That's point number one. There are two great themes that undergird this passage that are themes that run throughout the book, but which come to roost in this passage.

[6 : 46] Number one is the restoration of the reputation of God or Yahweh. The way in which the ancient Near Eastern culture assessed a God was on the basis of the military power and success of a nation.

Israel is in exile. Israel is possessed by other nations. The reputation of God is at a low ebb. Ezekiel is not unaware of this.

God is not unaware of this. And in chapter 36, we read these words. Again, the word of the Lord came to me. Son of man, when the people of Israel were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions.

Their conduct was like a woman's monthly uncleanness in my sight. So I poured out my wrath on them because they had shed blood on the land and because they had defiled it with their idols. I dispersed them among the nations and they were scattered through the countries.

I judged them according to their conduct and their actions. And wherever they went among the nations, they profaned my holy name. For it was said of them, they are the Lord's people. And yet they had to leave his land.

[7 : 56] I had concern for my holy name, which the people of Israel profaned among the nations, where they had gone. A dent in God's reputation that happened as a result of what has happened to the people of God.

But it has not escaped his notice. And in this most eloquent turnaround passage of the whole book, make no mistake, God's ultimate purpose is to bring restoration to his own reputation.

It is to glorify his holy name. And chapter 37 verse 13 says, But that's not all.

In chapter 37 verse 28, he goes on to say, This will affect all nations. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, that I the Lord make Israel holy when my sanctuary is among them forever.

And so this is the character of God that encouraged the people of God then. He is at work and whatever may have happened to them, ultimately he will be at work and he will bring glory to his own name.

[9 : 04] But there's another great theme that runs through this passage, throughout the book and through this passage in particular. He's not only the God of great character who will glorify his own name, who will be just with his people, but he's also the God of grace and mercy.

He's the God of covenant, God of character and God of covenant. And covenant makes its way through chapter 36 and chapter 37. My dwelling place will be with them.

I will be their God and they will be my people. That is verse 27 of chapter 36, which anticipates the message of chapter 37, this resurrection of the dry bones.

In other words, this is a God who's not only a God of character and who will glorify his own name, he is the God who will never forsake his people and will form a united people and reveal his glory among the nations through his people.

The new covenant is an important concept that runs throughout scripture as expressed in Jeremiah and also here in Ezekiel. There are three components to it. The concept of belonging or intimacy.

[10 : 10] I will be their God and they will be my people. They didn't sense that intimacy right now, but God says I haven't forgotten my covenant. And I'm going to bring about a new covenant that will restore that sense of intimacy and perhaps deepen it beyond anything you could ever imagine.

And that's repeated, of course, in the book of Hebrews in chapter 8 as referring to the people of God now. Second dynamic of the new covenant is the idea of pardon or justification. I will forgive all your sins, your sins and iniquities.

I will remember no more. And here in chapter 36, Ezekiel expresses it, or God through Ezekiel expresses it in this way. I will sprinkle them clean.

I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. And so belonging or intimacy, pardon that enables that intimacy. And thirdly, spiritual regeneration or life.

And that's anticipated in chapter 36 as well. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

[11 : 14] And I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. And fourthly, a reoccupation of the land. In chapter 36, verse 35, God says, they will say this land that was laid waste has become the garden of Eden.

And so this is a people of God who are in desperate straits, but God promises them that His covenant will be restored, that there will be an exodus. And this is very much the language of new exodus.

They will come out of captivity and go back into a land, the language of the new exodus, but also the language of new creation in which dead people are made alive.

How do we interpret Ezekiel 36 and 37 for today? The church fathers said that verses 1 to 10 of Ezekiel 37 are really the locus classicus of resurrection from the dead.

So this is a passage, according to the church fathers, that has a lot to do with our ultimate resurrection from the dead. And I don't dispute that that's a part of this passage and who am I to speak against all of the church fathers.

[12 : 21] But I suspect that there's more to it than that and that probably they would have believed this as well. That you cannot separate bodily resurrection from spiritual resurrection.

Those who experience bodily resurrection because Christ has died and risen are those who experience spiritual rebirth, the resurrection of the people of God in the new covenant, I think is what is in mind in this great passage before us.

So, it is impossible for us to rule out the sense of spiritual awakening.

And how I apply this text today is not only to say one day the people of God are going to be resurrected, that is a marvelous truth. That gives us great hope no matter what happens to us as the exiled people of God.

There's something more profound here in this text and that is that God wants to bring His people even in exile to a state of spiritual life. See, the challenge for us is we may be in exile, but can we be alive in exile?

[13 : 29] When we hear Ezekiel's vision, they could hardly imagine, I'm sure, what Ezekiel's seeing here.

You know, I think they could look at the valley of bones that he was talking about and say, yes, I get that. We are like a valley of bones. When he said particularly that they are dry bones, they could say, yes, we are dry bones. In other words, beyond hope.

They could even get a vision of this valley of the fallen slain and relate to that. A battlefield strewn with the bones of the fallen. They could even get the question, can these bones live?

But God is about to impress upon them through His prophet Ezekiel the amazing reality that God could raise these bones, that God could bring the bones together, that God could form a vast army out of His broken and dead people.

Sovereign Lord, you alone know. So these are the two great themes that undergird, that cause us to say, for people in exile, what do they need? They need a God.

[14 : 41] A God who is committed to His own glory and a God who is committed to covenant. But on this first thought of needing a God in the midst of exile, I want to suggest to you that there are three lovely touches in this passage.

Two great themes that reveal who God is, but also three lovely expressions in this passage that reveal that this is the God of hope. Number one is the reference to the word valley. So Ezekiel sees a vision of a valley.

It's sometimes translated plain. And this word echoes what has already been spoken of in Ezekiel chapter 3. In other words, what's happening in this passage is that Ezekiel is connecting with his inaugural experience of being a prophet.

There, however, back in Ezekiel 3 and Ezekiel 8, when he ministered in the valley, it was a message of judgment. Now he's in a valley, but the message is one of hope.

Things are turning. That's the first lovely touch I've noticed in this text in the context of Ezekiel. Secondly, the phrase, the hand of the Lord was upon me. That also connects him with his first experience.

[15 : 48] It's the formula for prophetic trance. It's the formula for being under the work of the Holy Spirit. And so, again, a sign that here's something fresh, something authentic, an authentic revelation of hope that's coming.

Thirdly, the text itself is very wonderful. Verses 1 to 10 of our passage is a representation of the prophet's symbolic vision. Bones living.

Symbolizing a new creation. Secondly, verses 11 to 14 is the accompanying disputation that goes along with the vision. The metaphor shifts slightly in verses 11 to 14 and it shifts from bones coming alive to corpses actually coming out of graves.

The risenness of a reformed people moving out of Babylonian captivity is what's in mind. This is not a new creation concept so much in verses 1 to 10 as a new exodus that's in mind for the people of God.

The point is this, that when the people of God are in exile, they desperately need God. For you and I, in the midst of our exile, we need the God of Ezekiel 37 who brings hope even in exile, even in the darkest valleys of our experience as the people of God communally and even in the darkest valleys of our personal experience.

[17 : 13] They were in despair. Verse 11, Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We are clean cut off. All three of the Hebrew verbs that are used in those phrases end with inu, E-N-U, which means that they're words of lament.

The people are lamenting. Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We are clean cut off. There is no hope. But Ezekiel begs to differ.

God is there. God has heard. God will bring revival. God will bring reformation. Do we have a hope of surviving in our time?

In God? Yes. But only God can raise the dead. Only God can raise up the bones of the church. This church, your life, we desperately need a spiritual awakening in order to become that vast army of God to work in subversive ways in our culture.

So point number one, when the people of God are in exile, they desperately need the God who brings life, the living God. But secondly, when the people of God are in exile, they desperately need God who is the living God, the God who brings life actively to His people.

[18 : 36] We need God. We need the God specifically who brings life. Does Israel have hope in this passage?

Do the covenant people of God today have hope? Yes. Because He brings life out of death. Because He brings refreshment out of dryness. And if you look at how this passage unfolds, this beautiful vision in Ezekiel's most famous prophetic vision, the dry bones come together, verse 7.

The tendons, the flesh, and the skin are added in verse 8. And then the breath is imparted in a two-stage process. And the slain live again in verses 9 to 10a. The living community stands up as a vast army, as the whole people of God, verse 11, the whole house of Israel to be brought back to the land of Israel and God is glorified.

Folks, specifically, what does hope look like for the people of God then and for the people of God now? It looks like awakening. It looks like renewal. It looks like revival.

The God of life bringing life out of death. One of my great fears with all the talk of the church being missional in our time, and it's an area of interest for me, the church being missional often gets translated into us being more incarnational, being more concerned with social justice, being more concerned with creation care, being more concerned with the significance of our work in the world.

[20 : 01] All of those are wonderfully rich emphases. But I have to say that I sometimes think there's a missing spirit piece in all of that. That is the dynamic, that is the engine that drives it all.

That is the God of life. The God of life who renews His church. The God of life who renews His people. That they may do all those things well. So the incarnational and the pneumatic or the spirit, they go together.

When the people of God are in exile, they need God. When the people of God are in exile, they desperately need the God who brings life. Thirdly, when the people of God are in exile, they desperately need the God who sends His Spirit specifically.

That's point number three that I gained from this passage. I note here the agency of the Spirit of God in bringing about this miracle. The Spirit is emphasized in this text. Something I've noticed is that the phrase the Spirit of the Lord is used only here in this text and one other time in the book of Ezekiel.

Elsewhere, the Spirit is just referred to as the Spirit. The Spirit of Yahweh is emphasized therefore here in this text. There's also an emphatic repetition of this word for Spirit which in Hebrew is ruach which can be translated breath or wind or spirit.

[21 : 17] And the translators had to be very skillful in deciding which is which in this text. Mostly, this is a representation of the work of the Spirit. This passage echoes the creation narrative.

Genesis chapter 1 verse 2 when the Spirit hovers over the creation to bring order out of chaos and life out of death. It echoes also Genesis chapter 2 verse 7. You may remember Genesis 2 verse 7 when God created the first human person that it was a two-step process.

First of all, the body is created but there's no life and then God breathes into this human person the breath of life and man becomes a living soul.

And that's exactly what happens in our text here. There's a two-stage process which is meant for us to echo the work of creation that's the work of the Spirit in creation in particular.

The passage also, I believe, prefigures the day of Pentecost as the day when new creation would be fulfilled. John chapter 20, you may remember that Jesus gathers with His disciples after the resurrection.

[22 : 22] They're a sorry lot. They have forsaken the Lord on the hour of His trial. They are despairing. They are discouraged. And God, the Son, Jesus, steps into the midst and He breathes on them and says, receive the Holy Spirit.

And I believe He's anticipating the day of Pentecost. So here's the risen Jesus on the first day of new creation in the midst of His people breathing on them the Holy Spirit and then on the day of Pentecost that Spirit will actually come down upon His people and the dry bones will live and a body will be formed, the church.

And there are parallels between Acts 2 and Ezekiel 37 that bear this out. For example, there's an audible sound when the bones rattle together as they come together. It reminds me of Acts chapter 2 verse 2.

Suddenly the sound like the blowing of a rushing mighty wind came from heaven and filled the whole house. And Acts chapter 4 tells us that the house was shaken with the presence of the Spirit of God.

And I think in a full sense Ezekiel 37 is fulfilled by this outpouring upon the church of the Spirit of God to form a church of not just the house of Israel but the whole Israel of God in Christ consisting of the international people of God, the church.

[23 : 42] So the Spirit of God is crucial. And it's my conviction that we need as the church today in exile a fresh touch of the work of the Holy Spirit.

I look at my own life, my own heart. I'm very busy serving God in all kinds of ways. But sometimes I feel a dryness. Sometimes I don't feel very alive.

And I cry out for a fresh work of the Spirit of God. And it may be that you cry out for that as well. And upon our communities, the Son is the mediator of the new covenant, but the Spirit is the one, the gift of God given us to effect that new covenant in our hearts.

And you say, well I received the Holy Spirit when I was converted. And I say, Amen, I'm so glad you received the Holy Spirit when you're converted. In fact, it's impossible to be converted without the Holy Spirit. That's not the question. The question, are you living today in the fullness and power of the Holy Spirit?

Do we need a fresh touch of the Spirit? And will we be open to a fresh touch of the Holy Spirit? I read some time ago the work of Andrew Murray in South Africa. Andrew Murray was a Presbyterian minister and at a particular season in his life, he was preaching in the main sanctuary and there was a young people's meeting going on at the same time.

[24 : 57] And the testimony of the historians is that all of a sudden the young people heard the sound of a rushing mighty wind and the Spirit of God came into that room and touched these young people and moved them powerfully.

Of course, someone came to call the senior pastor who was preaching in the adjoining hall and said, you need to come and see what's going on. And so Andrew Murray went into that hall and immediately wanted to shut down whatever was happening.

His reasoning being, if the Holy Spirit's going to come, He's going to come to my congregation first and not to the young people first. I want to say that when we look for a fresh touch of the Spirit, we need to have a heart and a mind that's open to what He wants to do.

Fourthly, when the people of God are in exile, they have a desperate need for the God who empowers prophets. Desperate need for God. Desperate need for the God who brings life.

Desperate need for the God who sends His Spirit. Fourthly, a desperate need for the God who empowers the prophetic. One of the most remarkable things about this passage for me is the authority the prophet is given to speak to the breath.

[26 : 11] The breath being the Holy Spirit. Who brings about this new work of grace? Who brings about this revival? We would say, yes, the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the one who mediates this. And yet, He chooses in this instance to work through the immediate rather than immediate agency of the Holy Spirit.

Quite remarkable. God allows Ezekiel to have agency for the working of the Holy Spirit. Then He said to me, prophesy to the breath.

Prophesy, Son of Man, and say, this is what the Sovereign Lord says, come breath from the four winds and breathe into these slain that they may live. And so I prophesied as He commanded me and breath entered them and they came to life.

And they stood up on their feet a vast army. So who does the awakening in this passage? Is it the Holy Spirit? Or is it the prophet Ezekiel? The answer, of course, is yes.

[27 : 11] To both. The Holy Spirit is the immediate agency. But God allows this prophetic person, Ezekiel, to participate in what the Spirit is doing.

You say, well, how are you going to apply that today? I've got to be very careful how I apply that today. But I simply want to say at the simplest level, after the day of Pentecost, according to the prophet Joel, which Peter quotes, in the last days, I will put out my Spirit on all people and your sons and your daughters will prophesy.

So I don't want in the first instance to talk about the gift of prophecy that God has given to the church. I want to democratize this. By that I mean that every child of God has been given a prophetic ability.

What do I mean by that? That as the Holy Spirit takes hold of them, they have the ability to be witnesses. They have the ability to declare the gospel. And as they declare the gospel, the Spirit is at work ahead of them to regenerate people.

This is the wonder of evangelism. The only hope of evangelism. And as you are a witness in the power of the Holy Spirit, God will be at work.

[28 : 26] As you are a prophetic person in this culture, you will be able to poke holes in this culture's idolatries. Expose the false gods and speak of the one true God who satisfies our deepest soul longings and brings us into fellowship with himself.

When the people of God are in exile, they need God. They need the God of life. They need the God who sends the Spirit.

They need the God who empowers prophets. Lastly, they need to be receptive to all of those things. God speaks both communally and personally to us as I close, I believe, communally.

Notice this, that the bones needed to come together. Notice that a vast army, notice that the whole house of Israel is envisioned here. God's interested in this community. God's church is his first missionary, not only one individual.

God wants to restore us as the people of God. God wants to restore us to the people of God. But there's also a personal application here, I believe, for all of us. Every one of us needs, I think, a fresh awakening, a fresh empowerment of the work of the Holy Spirit.

[29 : 47] We need to receive a fresh awakening so that we may be alive in exile and open to how God may use us in this season of the church's history. You say, I've been awakened a long time ago.

I came to Christ and I have the Holy Spirit. Shall I tell you this? You have everything that's required, everything that's needed for the life of godliness according to 2 Peter 1. And yet, there's a sense in which you need again and again to enter into that inheritance.

Again and again to be refreshed. As Paul prays for Christian people at Ephesus, he says, I kneel before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name praying that according to his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

You say, come on, didn't Christ already dwell in their hearts? I love what Bishop Hanley Mool says about this text. He states that at whatever stage of the Christian life we are always in need of that fresh realization, a new arrival and entrance of the presence of Christ within us.

Local images are always elastic in the spiritual sphere and there is no contradiction thus in the thought of the permanent presence of one who is yet needed to arrive. Saying you have it all is precisely what the problem is with our Christianity.

[31 : 08] It is what perpetuates our tepid and ineffective witness for Christ. Will you afresh tonight be open to a fresh awakening of the Holy Spirit? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.