

The Vision Of Dry Bones

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IN EARLY LIFE THE Prophet Ezekiel had been witness of sieges and battle-fields—he had himself experienced many of the horrors and calamities of war; and this seems to have tinged his natural character in such a way that his prophecies, more than those of any other prophet, are full of terrific images and visions of dreadful things. In these words we have the description of a vision which, for grandeur and terrible sublimity, is perhaps unequalled in any other part of the Bible.

He describes himself as set down by God in the midst of a valley that was full of bones. It seemed as if he were stationed in the midst of some spacious battle-field, where thousands and tens of thousands had been slain, and none left behind to bury them. The eagles had many a time gathered over the carcasses, and none frayed them away; and the wolves of the mountains had eaten the flesh of these mighty men, and drunk the blood of princes. The rains of heaven had bleached them, and the winds that sighed over the open valley had made them bare; and many a summer sun had whitened and dried the bones. And as the prophet went round and round to view the dismal scene, these two thoughts arose in his mind: "Behold, they are very many; and, lo, they are very dry."

If the place had not been an open valley, it might have seemed to his wondering gaze some vast charnel-house—as if the tombs of all the Pharaohs had been laid bare by some shock of nature to the wild winds of heaven—as if the wanton hand of violence had rifled the vast cemeteries of Egypt, and cast forth the mummied bones of other ages to bleach and whiten in the light of heaven. How expressive are the brief words of the seer: "Behold, they are very many; and, lo, they are very dry!"

No doubt there was an awful silence spread over this scene of desolateness and death; but the voice of his heavenly guide breaks in upon his ear: "Son of man, can these bones live?"

How strange a question was this to put concerning dry, whitened bones! When Jesus said of the damsel: "She is not dead, but sleepeth," they laughed him to scorn; but here were not bodies newly dead, but bones—bare, whitened bones; nay, they were not even skeletons, for bone was separated from its bone; and yet God asks: "Can these bones live?" Had he asked this question of the world, they would have laughed a louder laugh of scorn; but he asked it of one who, though once dead had been made alive by God; and he answered: "O Lord God, thou knowest. "They cannot live of themselves, for they are dead and dry; but if thou wilt put thy living Spirit into them, they shall live. So, then, thou only knowest.

Receiving this answer of faith from the prophet, God bids him prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them: "O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones, Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live; and I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the Lord." Had the prophet walked by sight, and not by faith, he would have staggered at the promise, through unbelief. Had he been a worshipper of reason, he would have argued: These bones have no ears to hear, why should I preach to them, "Hear the word of the Lord"? But no—he believed God rather than himself. He had been taught "the exceeding greatness of his mighty power;" and therefore he obeyed: "So I prophesied as I was commanded."

If the scene which Ezekiel first beheld was dismal and desolate, the scene which now opened on his eyes was more dismal—more awfully revolting still: "And as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking; and the bones came together, bone to his bone; and when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above; but there was no breath in them." If it were a hideous sight before, to see the valley full of bones, all cleansed by the rains and winds, and whitened in the summer suns, how much more hideous now, to see these slain, bone joined to his bone—sinews, and flesh, and skin upon them; but no breath in them! Here was a battle-field indeed, with its thousands of unburied dead-masses of unbreathing flesh, cold and immovable, ready only to putrefy—every hand stiff and motionless—every bosom without a heave—every eye glazed and lifeless—every tongue cold and silent as the grave.

But the voice of God again breaks the silence: "Prophecy unto the wind (or Spirit), prophecy, son of man, and say to the Spirit, Thus saith the Lord God, Come from the four winds, O Spirit, and breathe upon these slain that they may live."

Before, Ezekiel had bent over the dead, dry bones, and preached unto them—a vast but lifeless congregation; but now he lifts his head and raises his eyes; for his word is to the living Spirit of God. Unbelief might have whispered to him, To whom are you going to prophesy now? Reason might have argued, What sense is there in

speaking to the viewless wind—to one whom you see not; for it is written: "The world cannot receive the Spirit of God, because it seeth him not"? But he staggered not at the word through unbelief: "So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army."

The first application made of this vision is to the restoration of the Jews. 1. It teaches that at present they are like dry bones in the open valley—scattered over all lands—very many, and very dry—without any life to God. 2. It teaches that the preaching of Jesus, though foolishness to the world, is to be the means of their awakening, and that prayer to the all-quickening Spirit is to be the means of their new life. 3. It teaches that when these means are used with them, God's ancient people shall yet stand up, and be an exceeding great army—shall be as they used to be when they marched through the wilderness, when God went before them in the pillar of cloud; that they shall then be led back to their own land, and planted in their own land, and not plucked up any more. But another, and to us a more important, application of this vision, is to the unconverted souls in the midst of us. Let us go over it with this view.

Unconverted souls are like dry bones—very many, and very dry.

They are very many. When a soul is first brought to Christ, he enjoys a peace in believing which he never knew before; and not only so, but he is quickened from the death of trespasses and sins into a life which he never knew before—he knows the blessedness of living to God. But even with all this joy, there is an awful feeling of loneliness; for when he looks round upon the world, he feels just like Ezekiel, set down in the midst of a valley full of dry bones. He is alive himself, but this world, once all his joy, looks now like some ancient battle-field, where the remains of the dead are all lying exposed on the open field; and he feels a solitary thing in a world of dead. This world appears now like one vast charnel-house, where whole generations of dead meet, and are jumbled together— all alike fit only for the burning; and he feels himself a solitary living thing, moving over heaps of slain. He feels like Elijah on the Mount of God, when he complained: "Lord, they have killed thy prophets, and digged down thine altars, and I, even I, am left alone." He feels like our blessed Lord, who was a light shining in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not. He feels as if he were a feeble "light in the world, holding forth the word of life"—a lamp suspended in the densest darkness, whose oil is all supplied by grace from on high, and whose rays seem only to make the darkness more visible. He feels like Paul at Athens; for his spirit is moved in him, to see the whole world given over to idolatry. He feels like Paul at Rome, when he complained: "I have no man like-minded, who will naturally care for your state; for all seek their own, not the things that are Jesus Christ's." He feels like John, when he said so sweetly, yet so sadly: "We know that we are of God, and the whole world beth in wickedness," To the eye of sense, O what a happy living world this is, with its shops and markets—its compliments and companies—its visits of ceremony and visits of kindness—its mirth and its melody! how living and life-like is the whole world, from morning's dawn till midnight. But to the eye of faith, what a lonely wilderness is this world! for "the whole world lieth in wickedness." Is it not so, believing brethren? Is it not like Egypt in that dreadful night when there was a cry heard from every dwelling; for there was not a house where there was not one dead? Oh! it is more dismal far; for in every house there are many dead souls, and yet there is no cry. Look into your own family—look among the families of your neighbours—look into your native town—are not the many all dead, dead souls? The most are dead, dry bones. Nay, look into the Christian Church—look among our Sabbath keepers, and those who sit down at sacraments—O, brethren! is it not true that, like the members of the Church of Sardis, most have a name to live and are dead? Do not the most of you live lives of pleasure? and is it not written: "She that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth?" Do not most of you show no love for the brethren? and is it not written: "He that loveth not his brother abideth in death?" O yes, the most are dry bones! Truly, then, "they are very many."

They are very dry. Dry bones are the farthest of all from the possibility of living. (1.) They are without any flesh or comeliness. (2.) They are without any marrow or spirit. (3.) They are without any activity or power of moving. And oh! is not this the very picture of poor, unconverted souls—"They are very dry"?

(1.) They are without any comeliness. They see no beauty in Christ, and Christ sees no beauty in them—their souls are lean and ill-favoured. Man was made perfect in beauty at the first; for he was made in the image of Him who is perfect loveliness; but a fallen, unconverted soul has no beauty—it is like a beautiful building scattered in ruins—it is like a beautiful statue all defaced, not one feature remaining—it is like a beautiful body smitten by death, corrupting in the grave.

(2.) They are without any marrow or spirit. Man was made to be a habitation of God through the Spirit; and it is only when we are led by the Spirit that we are alive unto God. But the unconverted soul is "sensual, not having the Spirit." The Bible says: "The world cannot receive the Spirit, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him." They have no work of the Spirit in their hearts—no awakening work—no convincing of righteousness—no sanctifying work—no sealing of the soul—no walking in the Spirit—no love in the

Spirit—no praying in the Holy Ghost.

(3.) They have no activity or motion God-ward. If we preach the Word of the Lord unto them, they have no heart to attend to the things which are spoken; dry bones have no ears. If we tell them of the wrath of God that is coming upon them, they are not moved to flee; dry bones cannot run. If we tell them of the loveliness of the Lord Jesus—how he offers himself to be their complete Saviour—still they are not moved to embrace him; for dry bones cannot stretch out their arms. Ah! these dry bones are very dry.

Brethren, is it not possible to make you anxious about your souls? Can you sit still and hear how dead and dry they are, and yet go away and forget it all? Can you bear to carry about with you a dead stone in your bosom instead of a heart? Can you bear to have such a cold, icy, wicked heart, as sees no desirableness in the lovely Saviour—no beauty in him who is stretching out his hands to you all the day—"the chief among ten thousand"—the "altogether lovely"? Oh, brethren! if you will go away unmoved—and, doubtless, hundreds of you may—what need have we of witnesses? Ye yourselves are the only evidence we need that unconverted souls are "very many; and, lo, they are very dry."

The second lesson we learn from this vision is, that preaching is God's instrument for awakening the unconverted.

Every intelligent man among you has been puzzled at one time or another by a seeming contradiction which runs through the whole of the Bible. It is written in one place: "No man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him"; and yet the whole Bible through bids every one of you come to Jesus. Again it is written: "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them"; and yet what are we continually urging upon you, but to receive the things of the Spirit of God? Again, God opened the heart of Lydia to attend to the things which were spoken of Paul—which makes it plain that no natural heart can attend; and yet we do nothing but press these things on your attention. By nature your hearts are as hard as adamant, and even demonstration will not make you flee from hell; yet, "knowing the terrors of the Lord, we persuade men." By nature you cannot so much as comprehend the beauty and loveliness of the Lord Jesus; and yet "we are determined to know nothing among you but Christ, and him crucified." Oh! what a mass of contradiction there is here; and yet how easily it is solved! These bones were dead, dry, spiritless, lifeless, without flesh, without ears to hear; and yet God says: "Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord." And while he prophesied there was a noise, and "behold a shaking; and the bones came together, bone to his bone; and when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them, above." Just so, my unconverted friends, your souls are like these dry bones—dead, dry, spiritless, lifeless, without ears to hear, without hearts to attend to the things which are spoken. You have such blunted consciences, that no words of mine can move you to flee from the wrath to come; you have such hard, wicked hearts, that no words of mine can persuade you to embrace the beseeching Saviour; and yet it is by the foolishness of preaching that it pleases God to save them that believe; and though our words have no Power, yet God can work almightily through them; and this is his message unto you: "O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."

I earnestly beseech those of you who care little for the preaching of the Word to attend to this. You may say, and say truly, that preaching seems a weak and foolish instrument for such a work—God himself has called it "the foolishness of preaching." You may say, and say truly, that ministers are but earthen vessels—that they are men of like passions with yourselves—God himself has called them so before you. But you cannot say that it is not God's way of converting souls; and it is at the peril of your own souls if ye despise it. Keep away from the house of God, and lock up your Bible, and you put away from you the only instruments by which God can reach you.

The third and last lesson we learn from this vision is, that prayer must be added to preaching, else preaching is in vain.

The effects produced by the prophesying of Ezekiel to the dry bones were very remarkable. The bones came together, bone to his bone—the flesh, the sinews, the skin came up upon them, and covered them; but still there was no breath in them—they were as dead as ever. And, oh! how like this is to the effects which often follow on the preaching of the Word. How often is a people outwardly reformed! Instead of Sabbath breaking there is Sabbath observance—instead of drunkenness, sobriety—the form of godliness, but none of the power—the bones, and sinews, and flesh, and skin of godliness, but none of the living breath of godliness. Ah! my friends, is not this just the way with our congregations at this day? abundance of head knowledge, but, ah! where is the lowly heart that loves the Saviour? Abundance of orthodoxy and argument, but, ah! where is the simple faith in the Lord Jesus, and love to all the saints? Does not the Saviour say, when he looks down on our Churches: "There is no breath in them"? Oh! then, brethren, let us, one and all, give heed to the second command to the prophet: "Prophesy unto the Spirit, son of man; say, Come from the four winds, O Spirit, and

breathe upon these slain, that they may live. So I prophesied as he commanded, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army."

Learn two lessons from this.

1st, Unconverted friends, what dead hearts you must have!—all the preaching in the world cannot put life into them. What hard hearts yours must be!—the heaviest hammer we can lift cannot break them.

We speak the weightiest arguments into your ear, yet all will not move you. We must lift up our voice, and prophesy to the Spirit!—we must bring down the Almighty Spirit before we can touch your heart. We try to convince you of sin!—we show you how you have broken the law, and that "cursed is every one that continueth not in all things written in the book of the law to do them" - that you must be under that curse!—that you will not be able to bear that curse!—that it crushed the Saviour to the earth, and will crush you to the lowest hell. You are somewhat impressed, and we hope that your heart is touched; but your impressions are like impressions on the sand when the tide is out, and the very next tide of the world effaces all. We try to convince you of righteousness. We tell you of the love of the Saviour, how it passeth knowledge; how there was an ocean of love in that bosom, which no line could fathom!—love to lost sinners like you; how he served in the stead of sinners, obeying the law for us; how he suffered in the stead of sinners, bearing the curse for us. We tell you to believe in him, and be saved; you are melted, and the tear stands on your cheek; but, ah! it is like "the morning cloud and early dew!—it quickly passes away."

Ah! brethren, what hard, iron hearts you must have, when all that man can do will not melt them. Your hearts are too hard for us; and we have to go back weeping to our Lord, saying: "Who hath believed our report?" In all other things we could persuade you by arguments. If your bodies were sick, we could persuade you to send for the physician!— if your estate were entangled, we could persuade you to be diligent for your family!— oh! how readily you would obey us; but when we demonstrate that you are the heirs, soul and body, of an eternal hell, you will not awake for it all. Even if we could show you the Lord Jesus Christ himself!— the bleeding, beseeching Saviour!— your wicked hearts would not turn or cleave to him. You need Him that made your hearts, to break and bend them. Will you not, each of you, go away, then, beating on the breast, and saying: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner"?

Learn, 2ndly, Believing brethren, what need you have to pray. When God, in the chapter before (Ezek. 36), promises to give a new heart and a new spirit to Israel!— "to take away the stony heart out of their flesh, and to give them an heart of flesh" — he adds, at verse 37: "I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them." And when God promises to give to Christ the heathen for his heritage, he only promises it in answer to prayer: "Ask of me, and I will give thee." And just so here; when he wishes to give life to these dead carcasses that are lying in the open valley, his word is: "Prophecy, O son of man, unto the Spirit."

O believing brethren! what an instrument is this which God hath put into your hands! Prayer moves Him that moves the universe. O men of faith and prayer! -Israel's, who wrestle with God, and prevail! — righteous, justified men, whose prayers avail much!—you may be a little flock, but be you entreated to give the Lord no rest. O pray for the Spirit to "breathe upon these slain, that they may live!" And you, selfish Christians, if such a contradiction can exist!—you, who approach the throne of God only for yourselves!— you, whose petitions begin and end only for yourselves!—who ask no gifts but only for your own peace and joy! — go you and learn what this meaneth: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" — "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."