

Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God

Preaching to Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on March 1, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ Years ago I worked with the youth group here in this church, and I remember one evening talking to a group of teenagers about a very sensitive subject for Christians. The kind of subject that makes young people squirm in their chairs. Where they get embarrassed.
 - ▶ So as I was explaining the Bible's teaching on this subject, I could actually see it triggering in them feelings of inadequacy and shame. I was surprised how much guilt they carried around regarding this particular issue. They don't like talking about it.

- ❖ Now would it surprise you to know that it wasn't a sex talk? That I wasn't talking about pornography or lust? I was talking about evangelism. It was a message on sharing your faith.
 - ▶ **It's interesting how, next to lust and pornography, evangelism is one of the most guilt-inducing, shame-producing subjects to talk about with Christians.** Among youth and adults alike. Perhaps you're even starting to squirm a bit knowing we're going to talk about something that you know you should be doing but you're not.

- ❖ **And some of you dread going to church because you're experience of church is listening to a preacher tell you to do things you know you should do but you're not doing.** So you end up feeling worse about yourself and less inclined to do that thing you should be doing. Well I for one don't want that to happen when it comes to you and evangelism.
 - ▶ Evangelism is what we're going to be talking about this month. And the last thing I want is for you to be burdened with guilt over your lack of doing it. I want the exact opposite to happen. I want to see that burden lifted and replaced by a confidence that compels you towards greater and more active evangelism.
 - **And I'm convinced that to lift off your burden we're going to have to build up your theology.** To inspire and compel you towards more active evangelism, there's a preliminary step and that's developing your doctrine, specifically the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty.

- ❖ **If we want to be a church known for our evangelism, then we ourselves need to know God as the Sovereign One who has full authority and complete control over the salvation of souls.** He is in charge over our evangelism. He has the power, the sovereignty.
 - ▶ So we're calling our series *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. One my favorite authors, J.I. Packer, wrote a book in 1961 by the same name. It's perfect because it brings together what some would consider two seemingly opposite commitments.

- ❖ It's argued that **if you're totally committed to the sovereignty of God** – if you believe God's gonna do what God's gonna do – then why would you be so committed to evangelism? If he's gonna save who he's gonna save, then pouring out so much time and energy into evangelism seems like a needless and vain pursuit.
 - ▶ And vice versa, **if you are totally committed to evangelism** – if you believe it's our duty and responsibility to share the gospel otherwise people won't get saved – then you must not be committed to a belief in the absolute sovereignty of God.

- ❖ People think it's either one or the other. You're either **the theology-minded Christian** whose evangelism is all theory and no practice. Or you're **the practical-minded Christian** where you're zoned in on evangelism but your doctrine is all over the place.
 - ▶ **But we're convinced that you can be both.** And in fact we'd argue that those who hold to a robust view of God's absolute sovereignty, especially over salvation, are the ones best equipped to engage in evangelism with greater confidence, greater boldness, and greater patience.
- ❖ This morning's passage comes from Ezekiel 37:1-14. As we consider this vision that the Lord gave to the prophet, we'll make three observations regarding evangelism. **1) The unconverted are harder to save than you tend to think. 2) The Word of God is more powerful to save than you tend to believe. 3) Evangelism is easier than you ever thought possible.**

The Unconverted are Virtually Impossible to Save

- ❖ So our first observation is that **1) the unconverted in Christ are harder to save than you tend to think.** I doubt any of us would consider it easy to save anyone otherwise we'd be seeing conversions happen all the time. We'd all agree it's a challenge.
 - ▶ There are so many competing religions and worldviews out there. So many options. That's why Christian truth claims are often considered too narrow or just implausible.
 - And at the same time, so many of our colleagues and neighbors are distracted by so many worldly pursuits that they don't have the time to ponder spiritual things. To think about God or the afterlife or just the purpose of life.
- ❖ So I think we'd all agree that for someone to convert to Christianity today is tough. It's not easy. There's a lot working against them. But this passage goes further and says it's actually tougher than you think. **In fact, it's virtually impossible for them to convert.**
- ❖ Let's look at Ezekiel 37. First let me set the stage for us. Ezekiel's ministry took place during the days of the Babylonian exile. He was a member of the priestly class that was taken captive during the sack of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar (1 Kg. 24:10-17).
 - ▶ In chapter 1:1 we're told he was thirty when he began to receive visions of God. And for twenty years in exile, he continued to receive them and wrote them down here.
- ❖ Two major themes come across in Ezekiel's prophecy: a) **Israel's deserved condemnation** for neglecting and rejecting God's glory before the nations and b) **Israel's undeserved restoration** because of God's commitment to exalt his own glory before the nations. A glory attached to a people who bear his Name.
 - ▶ Now by the time we get to chapter 37 we're in the portion of the book focused on their eventual restoration. In the previous chapter, Ezekiel already mentioned God's promise to restore Israel for the sake of his holy name, to bring them back to their own land (cf. 36:22-28).

- ❖ But before God's people are brought up to the heights of salvation, Ezekiel is brought out to the middle of a low valley, a valley of death, a valley of dry bones. Look at chapter 37:2, "*2And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry.*"
 - ▶ This vision of a valley full of very dry bones makes you think of the aftermath after an epic battle. Bodies of fallen soldiers are strewn everywhere. Left where they had fallen. **But Ezekiel makes a point of emphasizing that they weren't freshly slain corpses. These were dry skeletal remains.** These were sun-bleached bones.

- ❖ So when God poses the question in v3, "*Son of man, can these bones live?*", that question is like a dagger to the heart. It stabs at their very doubts. Their feelings of hopelessness. In v11 the exiles are saying, "*Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.*"
 - ▶ Can these bones live? These dry bones? That's what *they* want to know. Will we live again? Are we still the people of God? Is there any hope for us?

- ❖ For God to use the imagery of dry bones seems to suggest the answer is no. I mean maybe if we were dealing with fresh corpses, then maybe there's a chance some of them might come back to life. Maybe some are not dead but just dying. Maybe there's some life left.
 - ▶ But that's the whole point of dry bones. *Very* dry bones. **The point is that there's no life present whatsoever. There's no hope.**

- ❖ All of this is intended to illustrate the hopelessness of the human condition. Ephesians 2:1 describes us as dead in our trespasses and sins. We're physically alive. We're here breathing. But because of our sins, because we've neglected and rejected the glory of God, we've been alienated. **We've been cut off from the source of true life. We're spiritually dead.**
 - ▶ That means the most important question to ask and most important to answer is the same question the LORD posed to Ezekiel. *Son of man, can these bones live? Can a spiritually dead soul be made alive?*

- ❖ No, not if it's up to the spiritually dead soul. That's the first thing we need to get straight. There's no way a bunch of bones can bring themselves back to life, and there's nothing a living person like Ezekiel can do to make a difference.
 - ▶ **That's why we're arguing that Christian conversion – the making alive of a dead soul – is harder than we tend to think.** It's virtually impossible. You can share the good news with your friends, but if you think you're able to convince them of the truth of the gospel, you'll be disappointed. **You'll be just as successful standing in a graveyard shouting at tombs, telling their occupants to come alive.** To come out.

- ❖ **Dead people can't make themselves alive. And there's nothing you, as a living person, can do to make a difference.** You need to come to grips with this. The fundamental reason your non-Christian family and friends are not Christians is *not* because they're so intellectual that they need more answers to their questions before they're ready to believe.

- ▶ It's *not* because they're so busy with so much else going on in the lives. And it's *not* because they're so wicked at heart (as if you were better off and more deserving).
- ❖ No, the fundamental reason is because they're spiritually dead. **So it doesn't matter how logical your answers are. It doesn't matter how winsome or persuasive your explanations of the gospel can be. Dead is going to stay dead.** Dry bones are just going to lie there. Your non-Christian family and friends can't make themselves alive. And there's nothing spiritually living people, like you and I, can do to make them live.
- ❖ That's one of the hardest truths to accept. But until you do, you won't last long as an evangelist. You won't be active in it, at least not for the long haul. **What'll happen is that you'll grow discouraged and disillusioned when those you care about continue to resist and refuse to believe.** Even though you've answered all their questions. Even though you've explained the gospel over and over again.
 - ▶ Maybe I'm doing something wrong. Maybe I'm not praying hard enough. Maybe this is all a waste of time. **Or maybe you forgot that you're preaching to dry bones.** Maybe you just forgot how dead the human heart is towards God and his Word.

The Word of God is Powerful to Save

- ❖ Ezekiel didn't forget. He understood how virtually impossible it is to save someone, which explains his answer in v3. "*And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"*"
 - ▶ Notice Ezekiel didn't dare answer, "Sure! Of course they'll live." He didn't presume. He didn't treat conversion as this easy, predictable thing. Yet at the same time, he didn't say, "No". He didn't question God's ability or desire to make these bones live.
 - He just resigned himself to the sovereignty of God. Look at how he answered, "*O Lord GOD, you know.*" You know what you can do and what you're going to do. I don't. That's the big difference between us, Lord.
- ❖ That's striking a good balance. Just as we have to remember that the unconverted are harder to save than you tend to think, we can't forget that **2) the Word of God is more powerful to save than you tend to believe.**
 - ▶ There is no chance sinners can make themselves alive, and there is nothing spiritual living people can do about it. The picture of very dry bones gets the point across. And as the passage continues, it's obvious just how dependent we are on God to sovereignly act of his own initiative to bring new life.
 - **For someone dead in sin to even have a chance of coming alive, God has to perform a miracle, a supernatural work of new creation.** Scripture calls it a new birth, a second birth, being born again by the Holy Spirit (Jn. 3:3-8).
- ❖ **For us, preaching to tombstones is an exercise in futility.** It's pointless. But the whole point is that God does it all the time. Jesus once stood before a tomb and shouted, "*Lazarus, come out!*" (Jn. 11:43), and he actually did. Those bones actually lived!

- ▶ And that wasn't just a one time occurrence in one Gospel account. Jesus the Son of God does this *all* the time. **Every time someone is converted, every time someone becomes a Christian, it's because Jesus did his thing.** He puts flesh on bones. He puts breath in corpses. He brings the spiritually dead back to life.
- ❖ Our passage couldn't be any clearer that salvation is of the LORD and of him alone. He is absolutely sovereign over the fate of souls. It's completely his prerogative to save. It's his call. He's sovereign. And yet that in no way denies the necessity of faith and repentance.
 - ▶ **Just because God is sovereign over your salvation, it does not relieve you of the responsibility to repentant of your sins and trust in Christ.** They're still the conditions that God requires.
 - But they're also the gifts that God supplies. **Your faith and repentance are gifts. You didn't generate them by yourself just as dry bones don't start walking by themselves.** Life must be granted first and then walking is a natural and daily occurrence. Likewise, spiritual life must be granted to you first and then repenting and trusting become natural and daily occurrences.
- ❖ We saw last week how it says in **Philippians 1:29** that it was *granted* to you to believe in Christ. **Ephesians 2:8** says, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.*" That faith through which you have been saved is a gift.
 - ▶ Or **Acts 5:31** Peter says, "*God exalted [Christ] at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.*" God gave repentance. Or **Acts 11:18** after the apostles hear Peter's story about Cornelius, they glorify God and say, "*Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.*"
- ❖ There's no contradiction between a belief in God's absolute sovereignty over salvation and a belief that one must exercise faith and repentance to be saved. **They're perfectly harmonious as long as you understand faith and repentance to be gifts of God.** To be the firstfruits of a new life, born again by the Spirit of God through the Word of God.
- ❖ **And likewise there's no contradiction between God's sovereignty to save whomsoever he wills and our responsibility to preach the gospel and invite sinners to turn to Christ.** God is so sovereign and so powerful that at the snap of his fingers rattling bones can instantaneously transform into flesh and blood, into living, breathing creatures.
 - ▶ He could do that all by himself. And yet he delights to use human means. **He wills to use prophets and prophesying, preachers and preaching, evangelists and evangelizing, all to accomplish his sovereign purposes.**
- ❖ So in v4 we see God command Ezekiel to prophesy, to preach, to proclaim the word of the LORD over these dry bones. "*Then he said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.* And I'm certain the intent is for readers to initially think to themselves, "What's the use? What are mere words going to do?"

- ❖ Well if they're just our words, then nothing. But if the words are the Word of God, then it's an entirely different matter. **Through the Word of God conveyed in a simply message from the lips of a mere mortal, the virtually impossible can be accomplished.**
 - ▶ Read on in v7, *"⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them."*

- ❖ God then tells Ezekiel to prophesy again but this time to the breath. To the *ruakh*. Which in Hebrew, the word for *breath* is the same for *wind* and for *spirit*. So when Ezekiel calls on the breath of God to come from the four winds to give life to these newly-formed corpses, it's ultimately the Spirit of God coming and giving new life.
 - ▶ Many have noted that this two-phase approach is reminiscent of Genesis 2 and the creation of Adam. There God first forms the lifeless man out of dust, and then he breathes life/Spirit into Adam. What we see in Ezekiel is a re-creation process.

- ❖ The point is that, in any instance of salvation/conversion, God is exercising his creative power once again. But unlike in the beginning when it was just him, now he has a whole people, a Church. And he invites us into the process of creating new life out of dead, dry bones. **He delights to use us and the spoken Word of God out of our own lips.**
 - ▶ Why? Because the object of our speech is Jesus. And God loves to glorify his Son. **For him impart new spiritual life to people with a snap of the finger – apart from any spoken reference to Christ – would rob Jesus of his blood-bought glory.**
 - It's by the blood of the Son that we're freed from our sins. It's by his resurrection that we have any hope of life beyond the grave. **So I think like any proud dad, God the Father wants everyone to know what his Son accomplished. That's why he uses the gospel message to save.**

- ❖ God wants to save his people, and he wants to glorify his Son. So in his sovereign design, he does both at the same time by ordaining the salvation of sinners in Christ through the preaching of the Word centered on Christ.

Evangelism is Easier Than You Thought

- ❖ *So what does all this mean for evangelism?* This means that **3) evangelism is easier than you ever thought possible.** If you think about it, evangelism is not that hard. Now the saving of a soul, the conversion of dry bones into a living creature – that's hard. As we've said, it's virtually impossible. It's something only God can accomplish.
 - ▶ **But that's why we have to distinguish the task of evangelism itself from the results of evangelism.** The result, Lord-willing, is conversion. But that's something you have no control over. So if you confused *that* with evangelism then I understand why you think it's so hard and why it cripples you to do nothing.
 - **But if evangelism itself is just being faithful to open up our mouths and let the Word of God roll off our lips, then it's not as hard as you think.**

- ❖ Listen, you're not responsible for saving your non-Christian family and friends. That's *not* your job. This one author I was reading talked about how he once worked for a major Christian organization, and how every week his boss would go around the room during a staff meeting and ask, "***How many people did you convert this week?***"
 - ▶ That's not only bad theology. That's terribly discouraging. Now it would've been fine if he asked, "***How many people did you share the gospel with this week?***" That's a legitimate question. I hope if I'm ever asked that I can give a number besides zero.

- ❖ But to ask how many did you convert is the wrong question. **You and I have never and will never convert anyone. That's God's job.** Your job is to open your mouth and faithfully speak the good news of Jesus Christ to a valley of dry bones, to an office suite of dry bones, to a classroom or dorm of dry bones, to a home or family of dry bones. And it's God's job to make those bones live.
 - ▶ ***Do you see how light and easy the yoke of evangelism is once you get this?*** Once you stop trying to be God and let him do his thing and you do your thing. This is what I mean by sound theology lifting your burden and liberating you to greater and more active evangelism.

- ❖ If you have this kind of theology, this belief in the absolute sovereignty of God over salvation, it'll make you **a much bolder evangelist**. It'll give you thicker skin to handle rejection. You won't be as daunted if people shrug off your gospel presentation with apathy, and you won't be as offended if they turn around and mock you or your beliefs.
 - ▶ Such reactions won't surprise us if we know we're preaching to dry bones. Nor will they discourage us *if* our theology teaches us that no heart is so dry or so dead as to be beyond the reach of God's sovereign grace.
 - **We'll never write off anyone as irredeemable, as a hopeless cause, if we believe God is absolutely sovereign over salvation.** If we believe his grace can penetrate the hardest of hearts and bring to life the deadest of bones.

- ❖ Let me ask: Who in your life fits the bill? ***Who in your life seems so hardened to the gospel, so far away from God, that you're tempted to think they're a lost cause?*** Have you stopped trying to share Christ with them? Have you even stopped praying for them?
 - ▶ That person needs God to sovereignly act a miracle in his/her life. But at the same time, you need to develop some convictions about the sovereignty of God. *Do you see how bold it'll make you? How courageous you'll become in your evangelism?*

- ❖ Likewise, a belief in the sovereignty of God and his grace will make you **a much more patient evangelist**. It won't demoralize you when your efforts to witness to your non-Christian family and friends seem to produce little to no results. It won't get to you because you know that God has his own sovereign timetable. God saves in his own time, and he's not anxious or in a hurry like us.

- ❖ **Often we're so anxious for our family and friends to be saved.** And we get really worried when we don't see any changes in their attitude towards God or in their interest in Christianity. But if you worship a sovereign God who promised that his Word never comes back void – that it always accomplishes the purpose for which it was sent (Isa. 55:11) – then you have no need to fear. No reason to fret.
 - ▶ **It's likely going to take more than just one moving sermon or one serious conversation or one awesome retreat.** The lost are harder to save than you tend to think. But the Word of God is more powerful to save than you tend to believe.
 - If God so wills to save your friend or family member, then one day, when you least expect it, the Word of God is going to hit them like a ton of bricks. And it's not necessarily going to be some amazing sermon or some air-tight, logical answer to their tough questions.

- ❖ I love **Charles Spurgeon's** conversion story. He was fifteen. He got caught in a snowstorm so he took shelter in this little Methodist church on a side street. He happen to walk into the church as a lay preacher was walking into the pulpit. The pastor was caught in the same storm and didn't make it. So one of the congregants became a last-minute substitute. The man had no training and no experience preaching, so he just opened his Bible to that morning's text, Isaiah 45:22, and just read, "*Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else.*"
 - ▶ He didn't have much else to say so he just kept repeating, "*Look unto me, and be ye saved!*" And that's was it. That's all the Bible it took. God came down on that young teen and worked a miracle. Dry bones came to life, and the greatest preacher and most effective evangelist of that generation was born.

- ❖ **Be patient. Keep preaching. Keep pleading. Keep praying.** Maybe you've already explained the gospel to your friend a hundred times. But who knows? Maybe it's going to take one hundred and one times before God comes down in power and makes those bones live. Who knows? "*O Lord GOD, you know.*"