

IMAGES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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THIS IS THE SECOND OF A THREE-PART BIBLE STUDY ON IMAGES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Within the Bible, wind and breath symbolise God's Spirit. The Old Testament Hebrew word 'ruach', and the New Testament Greek word 'pneuma,' can be translated as breath, wind and spirit.

- Where in the Bible is God's Spirit symbolised by wind and/or breath?

A key Old Testament scripture is in the book of Ezekiel. It's all too easy to miss the awesomeness of this vision. As you read, try to imagine what the prophet saw, heard and felt, and reflect upon what catches your attention.

- Read Ezekiel 37:1-14.

Within Ezekiel's vision there are a number of stages which I invite you to consider.

First Stage: God's Spirit. It's all too easy to miss the significance of v. 1. Ezekiel believed that the hand and Spirit of the Lord was upon him, and gave him this vision. This vision was the awesome work of God's Spirit.

Prior to this, Ezekiel had promised God's people a change in their fortunes: new leadership, a restored land, rebuilt cities and many features of the Messianic era. But things didn't go well; in 586 BC Jerusalem had fallen, and many of the people were exiled in Babylonia. Into this bleak situation, this vision gave hope.

- Are there things in your own life, or church life, which appear hopeless? How does God increase your hope through this vision?

Second Stage: Dry Bones. The bones were so dry that they could never come to life by natural means. In v. 11, the Lord explained, 'these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say "our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.'" In v. 3, the Lord asked: 'Son of man, can these bones live?' Even though God was referring to his Old Testament people, we can also apply this to Christians and churches today.

- Concerning your church, if God asked you, 'Can these bones live?' how would you respond?
- What do you make of Ezekiel's reply, 'O Sovereign Lord, you alone know'?

I think that Ezekiel answered very wisely. He didn't deny God's ability, but perhaps lacked faith. He recognised that the Lord is sovereign, and that he can do whatever he wants to do. 'For nothing is impossible with God' (Luke 1:37). If God can transform a valley of very dry bones into a vast army, then he can transform any dry congregation into a flourishing Body of Christ - if the wind of the Spirit is allowed to blow upon us afresh.

If you are feeling spiritually dry, if the Lord asked you, "Can your dry bones live?" how would you respond? You could reply: "O Sovereign Lord, I believe that you can bring new life to my life." MET's fresh focus is on revival; the reviving breath of God's Spirit can enable us to be a very active part of his vast army.

Stage Three: Bones into Bodies. The Lord instructed Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones: 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.' In essence this was preaching: proclaiming the word of God. God has always required that his people should listen to, and obey, his word.

- How well are you and your church doing at hearing and obeying ‘the word of the Lord’?

If we are not hearing and obeying ‘the word of the Lord’, then we can’t expect the wind of God’s Spirit to be blowing through our lives and ministries. If we want God’s Spirit to be breathing abundant life into us, we need to be listening to God’s word, and acting upon it.

The Lord’s ultimate aim comes through in v. 6, ‘Then you will know that I am the Lord.’ His main purpose is not to raise up a vast army of Christians, but to enable each one of us to know him. In Ephesians 1:17, Paul prayed that God ‘may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.’ Even though we may want more Holy Spirit to increase our effectiveness in ministry, his most important work is enabling us to know him. Closer intimacy with the Lord should result in greater fruitfulness, yet knowing him more deeply should be our main aim.

In vv. 7-8, as Ezekiel prophesied, amazing things began to happen; the bones became bodies! In v. 6 the Lord had promised to breathe into the bodies and that they would come to life, but v. 8 ends, ‘but there was no breath in them.’ Something more than his preaching was needed: prayer. Ezekiel continued to listen, and the Lord said: “Prophesy to the breath; ... Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.” Ezekiel was to invoke breath into the bodies.

Stage Four: Breath into Bodies. V. 10: ‘So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.’ This has similarities to Genesis 2:7 where God formed a man from the dust of the ground, breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. In this vision, what had resembled a battlefield strewn with the bones of fallen soldiers, became a vast army; what an awesome transformation! What preaching by itself failed to achieve, prayer made a reality.



- When have you witnessed prayer and preaching coming together with amazing results?

In 1807, the vision for the first Mow Cop Camp Meeting was to pray for God to move in power. As people gathered, they did what Ezekiel did; they prayed to God and preached his word. Many were converted, and Primitive Methodism was born. Jesus likened the Spirit to the wind and said to Nicodemus: ‘You must be born again. The wind blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit’ (John 3:7-8). Even though the wind is invisible, we can feel it, and even though God’s Spirit is invisible, we can feel his gentle presence and great power. Each one of us can enjoy new birth and new life through the life-giving, life-enhancing, breath of God’s Spirit.

In March 2022, the Revd Dr Bill and Mrs Laura Phares came from the USA to pray at key Methodist sites across the UK. When we visited Mow Cop, the wind was blowing, and it felt like God was providing a visual aid as we prayed for Holy Spirit to blow afresh. Like Ezekiel, Bill prayed prophetically for the wind of God’s Spirit to breathe new life. To watch a video of Bill at Pill, Avonmouth, visit methodistevangelicals.org.uk/stir-the-fire-video. In February 2023, Asbury University in Kentucky experienced God’s Spirit blowing in greater power. That didn’t just happen. The college encourages its students to attend chapel 3 times a week for praise, prayer and preaching. And in response, God’s Spirit blew in greater power and many young lives were transformed.

Stage Five: The Interpretation. During the vision, I can’t imagine that Ezekiel had chance to think about what it meant. In vv. 11-14, the Lord gave the interpretation. He explained that the bones symbolised the Jewish nation, who thought that their bones were dried up and that their hope was gone. Having been in exile in Babylonia for several years must have meant that they felt so cut off from the land of Israel, from Jerusalem, and from all the worship and sacrifices at their temple. They must have felt more ‘cut off’ than we did during the Covid pandemic.

After prophesying to the bones and to the breath, Ezekiel had to prophesy to the demoralised people.

- Re-read Ezekiel 37:11-14.
- Into what appear to be hopeless situations, how does God give hope?

Opening up their graves spoke of God giving life to the dead. He also spoke of bringing them back from the lands they had been scattered across, which they would have understood to mean bringing them back to Israel. In 2 Chronicles 7:14, God promised that if his people turned back to him, he would forgive them and heal their land; through this vision God is promising to heal their land. In v. 13 and again in v. 14, the Lord spoke of them knowing him. Jesus Christ came, lived and rose again, and gave his Spirit so that we can know him.

Even though we have reached the end of Ezekiel’s Vision, we need to consider further fulfilment of this prophetic message.

Stage Six: Post Easter. Ezekiel’s vision was partially fulfilled on the evening of the first Easter Sunday when the risen Jesus appeared to his followers, breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’ (John 20:19-22). It was also partially fulfilled 50 days later when they experienced something like wind and fire, and were ‘all filled with the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2:1-4). At Pentecost, the Lord put his Spirit into the followers of Jesus and brought them to life, and the early church grew into a vast army taking the Good News of Jesus Christ across the world. In this 21st century, Ezekiel’s vision is also being partially fulfilled through us.

Stage Seven: ‘I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.’ This is the key stage, and resonates with MET’s fresh focus on revival: ‘Lord, send revival, and begin with me’.

- In what ways have you experienced the breath of God’s Spirit? In what ways would you like to experience God’s life-giving Spirit?

The sovereign Lord wants to fill every human being with his Spirit, so that we have life – not physical life, but abundant spiritual life. That is not the same as an easy life, or a long life, but it’s a Spirit-filled life. It is a life of knowing Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit; with us, within us and working through us. No matter how hopeless we may feel our situation is, may we experience the wind of God’s Spirit breathing into us abundant spiritual life. As individuals and as churches, may our prayer be ‘Holy Spirit, revive me’. The sovereign Lord declares: ‘I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.’ Amen!

The Revd Derek Balsdon served as the MET Development Worker from 2018 - 2022. He is an accredited minister with the Global Methodist Church, and is currently offering preaching and healing ministries. Derek and his wife Hilary live in Congleton, are involved at Cross Street, their local Pentecostal Church, and are open to God’s future plans for them. Hilary will lead worship at MET’s November conference: REVIVE (see methodistevangelicals.org.uk/revive for more info and to book).

