

All for One and One for All

Lesson for June 18, 2023

Unit I: The Prophets Proclaim God's Power

Scriptural Background: Ezekiel 37:15-28

Printed Text: Ezekiel 37:21-28

Key verse: *"My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people."* (Ezekiel 37:27, NIV)

During World War II, Hitler commanded all religious groups to unite so that he could control them. Among the Brethren assemblies, half complied and half refused. Those who went along with the order had a much easier time. Those who did not, faced harsh persecution. In almost every family of those who resisted, someone died in a concentration camp.

When the war was over, feelings of bitterness ran deep between the groups and there was much tension. Finally, they decided that the situation had to be healed. Leaders from each group met at a quiet retreat. For several days, each person spent time in prayer, examining his own heart in the light of Christ's commands. Then they came together. Francis Schaeffer, who told of the incident, asked a friend who was there, "What did you do then?" "We were just one," he replied. As they confessed their hostility and bitterness to God and yielded to His control, the Holy Spirit created a spirit of unity among them. Love filled their hearts and dissolved their hatred.

When love prevails among believers, especially in times of strong disagreement, it presents to the world an indisputable mark of a true follower of Jesus Christ.

Our Daily Bread

In this week's lesson, Ezekiel prophesies of the reuniting of the two factions, or kingdoms, of Israel – Israel and Judah – through the same love.

Key terms

1. **Decrees** (verse 24) – Things prescribed; enactments; ordinances; customs; statutes.
2. **Nation** (verse 22) – A large body of people united by common descent, history, culture, or language, inhabiting a particular country or territory. Gentiles.

Lesson Background

Ezekiel lived 2600 years ago. What's going on at that time? The nation of Israel has already split into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom (called Israel and the worse of the two kingdoms) had already been uprooted and exiled by the Assyrians over 100 years before Ezekiel's time. The southern kingdom, called Judah, was not as evil as their northern kin, but they were not in right

relationship with Yahweh God. They had obedient seasons and also wickedly disobedient seasons. To get a sense of what led up to Ezekiel's time, we need to talk briefly about the covenant Yahweh made with Israel. After Yahweh rescued the people of Israel out of Egypt way back in Exodus, he established an alliance or pledge with the Israelites. To put the lengthy covenant simply, the Israelites would be his blessed people representing Yahweh to the rest of the world if they obeyed him. Their covenantal blessing was fundamentally actualized in the form of the land of Canaan — the actual dirt and farms, the city and territory of the land Yahweh brought them to after their time in the wilderness. Israel's "blessed-ness" depended on their obedience to Yahweh, but if they did not obey Yahweh, their disobedience would be met with curses.

Deuteronomy 28 lays out Yahweh's blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, and the curses for disobedience pile up onto each other: diseases, wartime defeat, destruction of families and livelihoods, even cannibalism. The curses in this chapter culminate in the loss of the territory and land Yahweh had given them.

The prophet Ezekiel was living in Babylon with the early Jewish exiles (Ezekiel 1:1). These people had been carried off before the nation of Judah's final fall to Nebuchadnezzar. Ezekiel spoke of God's glory departing the temple in Jerusalem (Ezekiel 10:1-22) and going to reside in exile with God's people (Ezekiel 1:1-28).

Ezekiel prophesied to a broken people, who were devastated by the Babylonian conquest and captivity. They were too crushed even to admit that their own idolatry had caused this turn of events. Therefore, they persistently resisted Ezekiel's message (Ezekiel 3:7-11).

And to these defeated, exiled people, Ezekiel promises a coming day (Ezekiel 36:22-32). A day when God will vindicate the holiness of his name (Ezekiel 36:22-23). A day when he will sprinkle them with water to cleanse them from the filth of their idolatry (Ezekiel 36:25). A day when he will give them new hearts of flesh to replace their dead hearts of stone (Ezekiel 36:26). A day when he will put his own Spirit within them and enable them to obey him (Ezekiel 36:27).

Ezekiel leaves no doubt about when this day will come. It is the day when "I will take you from the nations...and bring you into your own land" (Ezekiel 36:24). The day when they "shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers" (Ezekiel 36:28).

The exiled people, dead in their idolatry, will be raised to new life when God restores them back to their land.

Ezekiel 37:1-10 details Ezekiel's vision in the valley of dry bones, where the Spirit of the Lord sets Ezekiel down and commands him to prophesy over the bones, and to the breath, so they might live. After a rattling sound, bone comes together with bone, flesh appears, and the dead come back to life, an exceedingly great army.

In Ezekiel 37:1-14, the Lord Himself makes the interpretation clear to Ezekiel. There is no reason for us to be unclear on this ourselves. The dead bones coming back to life are a picture of the exiled people being brought back into the land of Israel, placed in their own land. A people without hope will be resurrected to new hope. God's promise in Ezekiel 37 was primarily to

bring Israel out of captivity and back into the Promised Land. The resurrection of the dead bones to life was a metaphor for this.

The rest of Ezekiel 37 has the new covenant in mind, which explicitly teaches a future bodily resurrection.

Lesson in Depth

I. All for One, One for All (Ezekiel 37:21-23)

Gather them from every side and bring them into their own land: The restoration after the Babylonian exile was only a shadow of this promise. This was a promise to bring the Jewish people **from among the nations**, from a scattering much broader than the Babylonian captivity.

I will make them one nation in the land: This looked forward to a restoration much greater than what happened in the days of Ezra, Zerubbabel, and Nehemiah. God would bring the Jewish people *as a whole* back into the land.

In the land, on the mountains of Israel: This phrasing emphasizes that God made this promise regarding the *literal land* of Israel.

They shall no longer be two nations: Gathered together under **one king**, they would be established in the literal land of Israel under a literal king.

This has not yet been fulfilled in history: “Despite the prophet’s words and various attempts, the divisions between north and south remained. In the NT period, these divisions were clear enough in the animosity between Jew and Samaritan.”

“Whether it’s the Children of Israel or the saints in the church today, the Lord wants His people to be united. ‘Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity’ (Psalm 133:1). Paul appealed to the believers in Corinth to cultivate unity in the church (1 Corinthians 1:10), and he exhorted the Ephesian believers to ‘make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace’ (Ephesians 4:3, NIV).” (Wiersbe)

They shall not defile themselves with their idols: These promises are typical of passages that speak of the new covenant. The promises of purity (**shall not defile**), of cleansing (**will cleanse them**), and relationship (**they shall be My people, and I will be their God**) are often characteristic of the new covenant.

Among other things, this shows that the unity promised here is a unity of purity and devotion to *one king*. It is not the unity of compromise and lack of standards.

“Provoked by their defiling and abominable acts, Yahweh had abandoned his people. Now that he has purified them, he may return and normalize the covenant relationship with them.” (Block)

II. A Covenant of Peace (Ezekiel 37:24-26)

David My servant shall be king over them: In Ezekiel 37:22 God said that there would be one king over the restored and unified Israel. Here we learn that the one king is David (as previously stated in Ezekiel 34:23-25).

They shall dwell in the land that I have given to Jacob My servant: The clear, repetitive nature of these promises of a specific, literal land cause wonder at the attempts to spiritualize such promises and deny that God has no future plan for ethnic Israel in their ancestral land.

“Jacob means here the *twelve tribes*; and the *land given to them* was the whole land of *Palestine*; consequently, the promise states that, when they return, they are to possess the whole of the *Promised Land*.” (Clarke)

My servant David shall be their prince forever: This plain promise is most appropriately seen *not* as a strange and imprecise reference to Jesus the Messiah, but as part of the several promises that King David will once again rule over Israel in the Millennial Kingdom (Isaiah 55:3-4, Jeremiah 30:8-9, Hosea 3:5).

Covenant of peace: This is the New Covenant in full force. Israel has never yet been in a state of perpetual salvation peace; this awaits fulfillment in the future kingdom of the Messiah who is the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

An everlasting covenant: The everlasting nature of the Abrahamic, Davidic and New Covenants are joined together in the redeemed who experience the millennial kingdom “forever”. The Hebrew word for “everlasting” may refer to a long time or eternity. It is also true that these covenants will continue to be fulfilled after the Millennium in the eternal state.

I will establish them and multiply them: These promises are characteristic of the new covenant (as in Ezekiel 36:10-11). God’s ultimate restoration of Israel would be on a large scale, not a small scale.

III. God’s Dwelling Place to be with Them (Ezekiel 37:27-28)

The nations also will know: “Then all nations would see that it was the Lord who made Israel holy. She would be set apart from all nations as God’s special possession. No other nation would have the Lord dwelling in its sanctuary uniquely in its midst as would Israel.” (Alexander)

I will set My sanctuary in their midst forevermore: The promise of this **sanctuary** will be described in great detail in Ezekiel 40-48. To Ezekiel and the Babylonian exiles, no restoration could be complete without some kind of temple.

“The restoration of the temple is thus far more than simply a matter of repairing war-damage. It is God’s way of demonstrating that he is not dead and that Israel are still his people.” (Taylor)

The Spirit of God also begins to prepare for the great reality that God will have a sanctuary in the midst of His people and will dwell with them. God promised to dwell with man on earth. This has been God's desire in all epochs:

- (1) Before Moses,
- (2) In the Mosaic era,
- (3) In the church era,
- (4) In the Millennium; and
- (5) In eternity future.

“The restoration of the sanctuary is the climax of all that this prophet had to say.” (Smith)

And the heathen shall know that I the LORD do sanctify Israel: Israel is speaking of all believers, both Jew and Gentile. A believer in Christ is no longer classified as a heathen.

Ephesians 2:19 “Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God;”

Revelation 7:9 “After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands;”

Lesson Summary

After the death of King Solomon his son, Rehoboam, became king. But when he continued the heavy taxation commenced under his father's rule, the ten northern tribes united under Jeroboam, who was from the tribe of Ephraim, and revolted. The two tribes of Benjamin and Judah, along with the Levites remained loyal to Rehoboam and formed the southern kingdom of Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem. Although we often use the term “Jews” to refer to the entire commonwealth of Israel, technically the term refers only to the inhabitants of the southern kingdom of Judah. The remaining ten tribes became the northern kingdom of Israel, with its capital in Samaria.

Because Jeroboam did not want his subjects to go to Jerusalem to worship during the feasts, he set up golden calves in Dan and Bethel, at the two extremities of the kingdom, as symbols of God. This began the idolatrous worship that continued through the history of Israel and led to their fall in 722 BC at the hands of the Assyrians.

Although there had been some attempts to re-unify the two kingdoms, especially during the reign of King Abijah of Judah, that goal had never been accomplished by human hands. And now that the northern kingdom no longer existed, and the people had been scattered among the surrounding nations and the southern kingdom lay in ruins that seemed even more impossible.

But just as we have seen consistently throughout the Old Testament prophets, God promised that one day He was going to reverse the division that existed and unify the two kingdoms again. The process of reconciling the two house of Israel is a theme that runs throughout the Bible and which will culminate in the events recorded in the Book of Revelation. That process was initiated

during the first coming of Jesus, the Messiah and is described very clearly by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians:

“Therefore, remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands - remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” (Ephesians 2:11-16, ESV)

When Paul refers to the Gentiles here, that group includes the descendants of the ten tribes of the northern kingdom who had been scattered throughout the surrounding nations and who no longer were identifiable as a separate people. Notice that Paul reminds them that they have been alienated from the commonwealth of Israel. But Jesus, through His shed blood, has provided the opportunity for them to be reconciled spiritually with the Jews, and with each other.

The prophecy here in Ezekiel hasn't been completely fulfilled yet since the people of both Judah and Israel have not been physically planted back into the land God had promised them and they certainly don't have one king ruling over them. That final fulfillment awaits the return of the Messiah, Jesus, the seed of David who will rule over the united kingdom.

As important as the reconciliation of Judah and Israel is, it is only one component of an even more significant act of reconciliation that Paul describes in the passage we just read – the reconciliation of man to God through Jesus the Messiah. As Paul points out clearly, peace between Judah and Israel can only occur because they have both been reconciled to God through the cross.

How can we apply it in our lives?

1. God's people reconciled – from division to unity (vv. 21-22)

- Each person must be reconciled to God through Jesus (Romans 10:9).
- Unity in the church results from focusing on Jesus (Colossian 3:1, 2).

2. God's people redeemed – from rebellion to obedience (vv. 23-24)

- As we maintain our distinctiveness by obeying Jesus, we bring glory to God

3. God's people restored – from barrenness to fruitfulness (vv. 25-26)

- We can only be fruitful as we stay connected to Jesus.

4. God's people reposed – from distress to rest (vv. 27-28)

Ezekiel 37 ends with a beautiful picture of an intimate relationship between God and His people. God will be with them – He will be their God and they will be His people.

- We find rest by pursuing a relationship with God.

Notes collected and developed by Ethel Williams