

Daily devotions Monday 25th May

Ezekiel 1-14 (esp. 4-6)

Let's put ourselves in the situation Ezekiel found himself in. Ankle deep in a valley full of dry bones and God tells him to prophesy to the bones! How ridiculous must he have felt? His previous experiences were with real people but here he is told to preach to dead bodies! Preach the promise of new life and breath and the knowledge of God.

Ezekiel doesn't hesitate, doubt or ask any questions. He just does what God commands (v7).

Notice what God requires of the bones before anything else can happen, 'Hear the word of the Lord'. There is a power in the word of God that is supernatural and it is through the foolishness of preaching that people are saved. (1Cor1v21) Whenever we tell someone about the truths of the gospel and especially when we use the recorded words of God in the Bible, we are preaching.

The New Testament describes people as dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph2v1) if we have God's word we have the means to give them life.

Then God says, 'I will make breath enter you.' (v5) From the moment of birth to the moment of death we are able to breathe and each breath is a gift from God (Acts17v25) but there is a deeper meaning.

The Hebrew word for breath is 'ruach' which means wind or spirit. God is promising the Holy Spirit. The combination of hearing God's word and the action of the Holy Spirit results in full life for these dry bones. God rebuilds the bodies but until the breath comes (v10) they were lifeless lumps of flesh and bone!

We don't need to question God's power; it is evident all around us and in the transformed lives of those who are born again. Ezekiel prayed to the Holy Spirit for him to enter the bodies that God had built. (v9, 10)

Let's model our thinking and actions on Ezekiel. For the spiritually dead friends and family we know, enable them to hear God's word and pray to the Holy Spirit to enter them!

Even mature Christians can often feel their spiritual lives are dried up and lifeless. If you feel this way then the same still applies. Read or listen to God's word and pray for the Holy Spirit to revive you.

'For the word of God is living and active' (Heb4v12)

Ezekiel 37 15-28

Some books refer to this as the parable of the two sticks. In 721 B.C. the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel consisting of 10 of the tribes of Israel (descendants of Jacob). These 10 tribes were scattered among other nations where they still remain. The two other tribes of Judah and Benjamin constituted the southern kingdom and were allowed to return to their homeland after the Babylonian exile of 586 B.C. into which Ezekiel prophesies. (Ephraim represents the northern tribes)

God promises to re-unite the north and south kingdoms (the two sticks) but how do we see that happening?

There came a time when the exiles returned to Jerusalem. They reclaimed the land and rebuilt the temple. This did not unite all the tribes so this cannot be the fulfilment of the promise.

It may be that God has something planned for future earthly history where all the descendants of all the tribes are re-united as one nation in one land.

There is a more obvious fulfilment of the promise and the clue comes in verse 22. 'There will be one king over them'. Later in v24, 'My servant David will be king over them'. As we have seen earlier, this refers to Jesus and when we read in verse 25 that their descendants, 'will live their forever', we need to think eternally!

The new heaven and earth is the ultimate fulfilment of this promise. Not only will all believing Jews be united as one nation under Jesus but so too will the Jews and Gentiles be combined in that kingdom.

God has a special love for his ancient chosen people. Paul recognises this in Romans 11 v11 when he states that salvation for the Gentiles is to make the Israelites envious!

Israel however represents God's chosen people. We are now God's chosen people and he promises to cleanse us from our sinful backsliding.

Many of us will have experienced times of personal revival and times of increased intimacy with God. These times usually begin with a fresh view of our own sinfulness as seen through the eyes of God. God is able and willing to cleanse all those who see themselves in the light of God's holiness.

Though we may see ourselves as far worse in that light than we could ever imagine, we are also more loved by God than we ever dreamed possible.

Repent and rejoice!!

Ezekiel 40 vs 1-16

On a clear day the view from the top of Scafell is spectacular. The whole of the Lake District is laid out below. I've been up there several times but most times only been able to see my hands in front of my face!!

'When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
Consider all the works thy hand hath made'

Here, and from Chapter 40 onwards, Ezekiel looks down from a high mountain in his vision, not on what God has made but on what he is going to make.

Remember the Israelites didn't have the Bible as we have it in its complete form. They didn't know what we now know happened through Jesus or the description of heaven given to John. (Also while in captivity!)

Ezekiel has to recount his vision to the people so God gives him a view they could relate to and at the same time be thrilled by. They would have known that Moses was taken up onto Mount Nebo to view the Promised Land after their wanderings through the wilderness. Here Ezekiel is shown a view of the future which includes details of the rebuilt temple to which God's presence will return and a fertile land in which to live. To a people who have lost their God and their city this would be a thrilling hope for the future.

The vision occurred on the 10th day of the month in the 25th year of exile. This is significant. Recorded in Leviticus 25 is when God instructed Moses to institute the year of Jubilee after 7 lots of 7 years. The 50th year was to be a special year and was to begin on the 10th day of the 7th month. During this year slaves were to be released, debts cancelled and the people were to rest as much as possible.

After 25 years they are half way to that special time symbolic of when they will experience full salvation and eternal rest. I think God deliberately chose to reveal the future promise to Ezekiel in this year and on this day as the Israelites would recognise the significance.

I believe Ezekiel is catching a glimpse of the new heaven and new earth. His vision was for the people of his time. John has given us a similar vision in the book of Revelation.

Take a trip up the mountain and read Rev 21 & 22 to see the view of God's new world given to John and what he has planned for our futures.

Be thrilled with our hope for that future.

Ezekiel 43 vs 1-12

Have you ever sat and daydreamed about what the glory of God might look like? I think our mortal, finite brains would struggle to express what we would experience. To see something that is not bound by matter, space or time, as we are, would be indescribable.

Ezekiel tries to describe it but is limited to what he can hear and the effect God's glory has on the land. Yet again he is overawed and hides his face away (v3).

The last 2 chapters have been a detailed and vivid description of the visionary temple. It culminates in these verses as Ezekiel describes the return of God's glory to be with his people in the temple. In chapter 11 it left via the East gate. Here it returns through the same gate. The Lord shuts this gate behind himself and said that it must remain shut (Chapter 44v1, 2). Doesn't this give a sense of the permanence of God's future presence with his people!

Whilst God's glory may have departed from the temple, his heart was always with his people. Their sin had separated them but the God who said I will never, never, never, never, never leave you had always intended to make reconciliation possible.

We've already noted that when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday he entered through the East gate but he had already been in Jerusalem a few times before.

At 8 days old he came into the temple. The Holy Spirit was with an old man called Simeon. As he held the baby Jesus he called him, 'the glory of your people Israel.' (Luke 2v 32 KJV). Not only was the glory of God in the temple but Jesus was the temple!!

On the day Jesus cleared the temple of bad practice he said, 'Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in 3 days. The Jews replied, "It has taken 46 years to build this temple and you are going to raise it again in 3 days?". But the temple he had spoken of was his body.' (John 2vs19-21)

The perfect temple of Jesus was the only possible dwelling place for the glory of God. Remember Colossians 2v9, 'In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form'.

As with the Israelites we can sometimes feel God isn't with us. It may be because we are conscious of something that separates us from him. He is never far away and always has his children in mind. In Christ he has made reconciliation possible!

Daily Devotions Friday 29th May

Ezekiel 43 vs 10-27

If, like me, you've been wondering why Ezekiel had to pass on such detail about the structure of the temple with its courtyards, gates and different rooms then in verses 10 and 11 we get the answer. The place where God's glory is to dwell must be perfect. There is perfect symmetry and harmony in the structure. (See 42 vs 16-20) It is in the light of this perfection that the chosen people of God were to measure themselves.

We only see our sins in a true perspective when we measure them against the perfect purity and holiness of God.

The passage highlights the entrances and exits, designed to either allow people in and out or to prevent people from coming in or out. God never imposes his will on his people. We are always free to choose his way or our own way. Despite our sin being a barrier between us and God (like the walls of the temple), he still makes it possible to enter his presence but first we need to feel the shame of our sin! (v10).

Unbelievers were not allowed to enter the temple (44 v 9). The same of course is true of heaven!

The description of the temple culminates with the altar. It was here where the people were to sacrifice bulls and goats for their sins. These were conditions laid down by God. It's his way and we are in no position to question his wisdom. Day after day, month after month, year after year, if the Israelites sinned they had to sacrifice an animal. If this was the case now, imagine not only the amount of livestock we would need but also the horror of having to shed the blood of an animal so regularly because we sinned!

But God in his wisdom was preparing the hearts of his created people for the time when He himself was going to provide a sacrifice once and for all through his son, Jesus Christ. Heb. 9 vs 13-14 tell us how much more sufficient was the shed blood of Jesus than that of bulls or goats.

This is now the means by which we can be accepted into God's presence. Have you accepted this truth?

Christ's death has completely deal with our sin. God's wrath is satisfied. We can enter God's presence and enjoy a restored relationship with our heavenly Father.

Daily Devotions Saturday 30th May 2020

Ezekiel 44 10-31 (esp. 13,15-16,23)

This is a tricky passage but there are some fundamental principles that are illustrated in it.

We have to read this bearing in mind that the new covenant had not yet come. God distinguishes between the Levitical priests who had turned to idols while still serving God (v6-10) and the Levitical priests descended from Zadok (High Priest during David's reign) who had remained faithful to God.

The former group is told they must suffer the consequences of their sin and may not occupy honourable places serving God. In his mercy, however, God still allows them to perform lesser duties in the temple. God says they must not come near him, whereas the obedient descendants of Zadok were the only ones allowed to stand before God.

Given the symbolism of Ezekiel's visions, I wonder if this has any implications for the new heaven and earth? Devout and enthusiastic Christians are still capable of backsliding and may have to suffer the consequences by being distant from God in heaven. I have no back up for my thinking on this. Let me know what you think! The New Covenant (see later) would not prevent repentant backsliders such as these from entering heaven.

One thing is clear. Obedience is very important to God!

It is still possible for us today to think of certain groups of people as being like Zadok's descendants. A kind of spiritual elite. Maybe pastors, missionaries, bishops and evangelists? But it was always God's plan that all his people would be holy priests (Exodus 19v6). Christ has made that possible through the covenant sealed with his blood. We are, as Christians, a royal priesthood and a holy nation (1Peter2v9). The same chapter in Peter tells us that we each are, 'living stones being built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1Peter2v5)

This New Covenant view reflects Ezekiel's vision.

We offer spiritual sacrifices when we give generously to God's work, when we sing and celebrate what he has done and when we give ourselves bodily over to God's purposes. (Ro12v1)

We may think that teaching holiness is reserved for specially qualified theologians who have been to college but as priests ourselves, we have the same role. (v23). Remember Colossians? 'Let the word of God dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another...' (Col 3v16)

We are all in this together! Praise God that at MBC we are surrounded by such a wonderful cloud of witnesses!