

The Restoration and Conversion of the Jews

Ezekiel xxxvii. 1-10

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Extracts from a sermon preached in the Metropolitan Tabernacle in June 1864, on behalf of Missions to Jews.

This vision has been used from the time of Jerome as a description of the resurrection, and certainly it may be so accommodated with much effect. But while this interpretation of the vision may be very proper as an accommodation, it must be quite evident that this is not the *meaning* of the passage. There is no allusion made by Ezekiel to the resurrection, and such topic would have been quite apart from the design of the prophet's speech. I believe he was no more thinking of the resurrection of the dead than of the building of St. Peter's at Rome, or the emigration of the Pilgrim Fathers. That topic is altogether foreign to the subject in hand, and could not by any possibility have crept into the prophet's mind. He was talking about the people of Israel, and prophesying concerning them; and evidently the vision, according to God's own interpretation of it, was concerning them, and them alone, for "these bones are the whole house of Israel." It was not a vision concerning all men, nor, indeed, concerning any men as to the resurrection of the dead, but it had a direct and special bearing upon the Jewish people.

This passage, again, has been very frequently, and I dare say very properly, used to describe *the revival of a decayed Church*. This vision may be looked upon as descriptive of a state of lukewarmness and spiritual lethargy in a Church, when the question may be sorrowfully asked—"Can these bones live?" But while we admit this to be a very fitting accommodation of our text, yet we are quite convinced that it is not to this that the passage refers. It would be

altogether alien to the prophet's strain of thought to be thinking about the restoration of fallen zeal and the rekindling of expiring love ; he was not considering the Reformation either of Luther or of Whitfield, or about the revival of one Church or of another. No, he was talking of his own people, of his own race, and of his own tribe. He surely ought to have known his own mind, and led by the Holy Spirit he gives us as an explanation of the vision, not—" Thus saith the Lord, My dying Church shall be restored," but—" I will bring My people out of their graves, and bring them into the land of Israel."

With very great propriety, too, this passage has been used *for the comforting of believers in their dark and cloudy days*. When they have lost their comforts, when their spiritual joys have drooped like withering flowers, they have been reminded that God could return to them in grace and mercy, that the dry bones could live, and should live ; that the Spirit of God could again come upon His people ; that even at the time when they were ready to give up all hope and lie down in despair, He could come and so quicken them that the poor trembling cowards should be turned into soldiers of God, and should stand upon their feet an exceeding great army.

Once more. There is no doubt that we have in this passage a most striking picture of *the restoration of dead souls to spiritual life*. Men, by nature, are just like these dry bones exposed in the open valley. The whole spiritual frame is dislocated ; the sap and marrow of spiritual life has been dried out of manhood. Human nature is not only dead, but, like the bleaching bones which have long whitened in the sun, it has lost all trace of the divine life. Will and power have both departed. Spiritual death reigns undisturbed. Yet the dry bones can live. Under the preaching of the Word the vilest sinners can be reclaimed, the most stubborn wills can be subdued, the most unholy lives can be sanctified. When the holy " breath " comes from the four winds, when the divine Spirit descends to own the Word, then multi-

tudes of sinners, as on Pentecost's hallowed day, stand up upon their feet, an exceeding great army, to praise the Lord their God. But, mark you, this is not the first and proper interpretation of the text ; it is indeed nothing more than a very striking parallel case to the one before us. The way in which Israel shall be saved is the same by which any one individual sinner shall be saved. It is not, however, the one case which the prophet is aiming at ; he is looking at the vast mass of cases, the multitudes of instances to be found among the Jewish people, of gracious quickening, and holy resurrection. His first and primary intention was to speak of *them*, and though it is right and lawful to take a passage in its widest possible meaning, yet I hold it to be treason to God's Word to neglect its primary meaning. The preacher of God's truth should not give up the Holy Ghost's meaning ; he should take care that he does not even put it in the background. The first meaning of a text, the Spirit's meaning, is that which should be brought out first, and though the rest may fairly spring out of it, yet the first sense should have the chief place.

The meaning of our text, as opened up by the context, is most evidently, if words mean anything, first, *that there shall be a political restoration of the Jews to their own land and to their own nationality* ; and then, secondly, there is in the text, and in the context, a most plain declaration, *that there shall be a spiritual restoration, a conversion in fact, of the tribes of Israel.*

1. There is to be a National Restoration of the Jews.

Israel is now blotted out from the map of nations ; her sons are scattered far and wide ; her daughters mourn beside all the rivers of the earth. Her sacred song is hushed ; no king reigns in Jerusalem ; she bringeth forth no governors among her tribes. But she is to be restored ; she is to be restored " as from the dead." When her own sons have given up all hope of her, then is God to appear for her. She is to be

re-organised ; her scattered bones are to be brought together. There will be a native government again ; there will again be the form of a body politic ; a state shall be incorporated, and a king shall reign. Israel has now become alienated from her own land. Her sons, though they can never forget the sacred dust of Palestine, yet die at a hopeless distance from her consecrated shores. But it shall not be so for ever, for her sons shall again rejoice in her : her land shall be called Beulah, for as a young man marrieth a virgin, so shall her sons marry her. " I will place you in your own land," is God's promise to them. They shall again walk upon her mountains, shall once more sit under her vines and rejoice under her fig-trees. And they are also to be re-united. There shall not be two, nor ten, nor twelve, but one—one Israel praising one God, serving one king, and that one king the Son of David, the descended Messiah. They are to have a national prosperity which shall make them famous ; nay, so glorious shall they be that Egypt, and Tyre, and Greece, and Rome, shall all forget their glory in the greater splendour of the throne of David. The day shall yet come when all the high hills shall leap with envy, because this is the hill which God hath chosen, when Zion's shrine shall again be visited by the constant feet of the pilgrim ; when her valleys shall echo with songs, and her hill-tops shall drop with wine and oil. If there be meaning in words this must be the meaning of this chapter. I wish never to learn the art of tearing God's meaning out of His own words. If there be anything clear and plain, the literal sense and meaning of this passage—a meaning not to be spirited or spiritualised away—must be evident that both the two and the ten tribes of Israel are to be restored to their own land, and that a king is to rule over them. " Thus saith the Lord God : Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land : and I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel ; and one king shall be king to them all ; and

they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all " (Ezek. xxxvii. 21-22).

Let this be settled, that if there be meaning in words, Israel is yet to be restored.

" Yet not in vain—o'er Israel's land
The glory yet will shine ;
And He, thy once rejected King,
Messiah, shall be thine.

Then thou, beneath the peaceful reign
Of Jesus and His Bride,
Shalt sound His grace and glory forth,
To all the earth beside.

The nations to thy glorious light,
O Zion, yet shall throng,
And all the list'ning islands wait
To catch the joyful song."

2. Israel is to have a Spiritual Restoration or a Conversion

Both the text and the context teach this. The promise is that they shall renounce their idols, and, behold, they have already done so. " Neither shall they defile themselves any more with their idols." Whatever faults the Jew may have besides, he certainly has no idolatry. " The Lord thy God is one God," is a truth far better conceived by the Jew than by any other man on earth except the Christian. Weaned for ever from the worship of all images, of whatever sort, the Jewish nation has now become infatuated with traditions or duped by philosophy. She is to have, however, instead of these delusions, a spiritual religion: she is to love her God. " They shall be My people, and I will be their God." The unseen but omnipotent Jehovah is to be worshipped in spirit and in truth by His ancient people ; they are to come before Him in His own appointed way, accepting the Mediator Whom

their sires rejected ; coming into covenant relation with God, for so our text tells us—" I will make a covenant of peace with them," and Jesus is our peace, therefore we gather that Jehovah shall enter into the covenant of grace with them, that covenant of which Christ is the federal head, the substance, and the surety. They are to walk in God's ordinances and statutes, and so exhibit the practical effects of being united to Christ Who hath given them peace. All these promises certainly imply that the people of Israel are to be converted to God, and that this conversion is to be permanent, for the tabernacle of God is to be with them, the Most High is, in an especial manner, to have His sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore ; so that whatever nations may apostatise and turn from the Lord in these latter days, the nation of Israel never can, for she shall be effectually and permanently converted, the hearts of the fathers shall be turned with the hearts of the children unto the Lord their God, and they shall be the people of God, world without end.

They are to be restored, and they are to be converted too. We take this for our joy and our comfort, that this thing shall be, and that both in the spiritual and in the temporal throne, the King Messiah shall sit, and reign among His people gloriously.

Now I come to the practical part of my sermon this evening ;

3. The Means of that Restoration

Looking at this matter, we are very apt to say, " How can these things be ? How can the Jews be converted to Christ ? How can they be made into a nation ? Truly, the case is quite as hopeless as that of the bones in the valley ! How shall they cease from worldliness, or renounce their constant pursuit of riches ? How shall they be weaned from their bigoted attachment to their Talmudic traditions ? How shall they be lifted up out of that hardness of heart which makes them hate the Messiah of Nazareth, their Lord and King ?

How can these things be ? ” The prophet does not say it cannot be ; his unbelief is not so great as that, but at the same time he scarcely ventures to think that it can ever be possible. He very wisely, however, puts back the question upon his God—“ O Lord God, Thou knowest.”

In answer to this, the Lord says to His servants, “ *Prophesy upon these bones,* ” so that our duty to-night, as Christians, is to prophesy upon these bones, and we shall then see God’s purpose fulfilled, when we obey God’s precept.

I want you to observe that there are two kinds of prophesying spoken of here. First, the prophet prophesies *to the bones—here is preaching* ; and next, he prophesies *to the four winds—here is praying*. The preaching has its share in the work, but it is the praying which achieves the result, for after he had prophesied to the four winds, and not before, the bones began to live. All that the preaching did was to make a stir, and to bring the bones together, but it was the praying which did the work, for then God the Holy Ghost came to give them life.

It is the duty and the privilege of the Christian Church *to preach the gospel to the Jew*, and to every creature, and in so doing she may safely take the vision before us as her guide.

What are we to preach ? The text says *we are to prophesy*, and assuredly every missionary to the Jews should especially

Keep God’s Prophecies very Prominently before the Public Eye

It seems to me that one way in which the Jewish mind might be laid hold of would be to remind the Jews right often of that splendid future which both the Old and the New Testaments predict for Israel. Every man has a tender side and a warm heart towards his own nation, and if you tell him that in your standard book there is a revelation made that that nation is to act a grand part in human history, and is, indeed, to take the very highest place in the parliament of nations,

then the man's prejudice is on your side, and he listens to you with the greater attention. I would not commend, as some do, the everlasting preaching of prophecy in every congregation, but a greater prominence should be given to prophecies in teaching the Jews than among any other people.

But still, *the main thing which we have to preach about is Christ*. Depend upon it, dear brethren, the best sermons which we ever preach are those which are fullest of Christ. Jesus the Son of David and the Son of God ; Jesus the suffering Saviour by Whose stripes we are healed ; Jesus able to save unto the uttermost—here is the most suitable subject for Gentiles, and God has fashioned all hearts alike, and therefore, this is also the noblest theme for Jews. Paul loved his countrymen ; he was no simpleton ; he knew what was the best weapon with which to assail and overcome their prejudices, and yet he could say, " I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified." Lift up the Messiah, then, both before Jew and Gentile. Tell of Mary's Son, the eternal Son of God, the Man of Nazareth, Who is none other than the incarnate Word, God made flesh, and dwelling amongst us. Preach His hallowed life—the righteousness of His people ; declare His painful death—the putting away of all their sins. Vindicate His glorious resurrection, the justification of His people ; tell of His ascent on high, their triumph over the world and sin ; declare His second advent, His glorious coming, to make His people glorious in the glory which He hath won for them, and Christ Jesus, as He is thus preached, shall surely be the means of making these bones live.

Let this preaching resound with sovereign mercy ; let it always have in it

The Clear and Distinct Ring of Free Grace

I was thinking as I read this chapter just now, that of all the sermons which were ever preached, this sermon to the dry bones is the most Calvinistic, the most full

of free grace, of any which were ever delivered. If you will notice it you will find that there is not an "if," or a "but," or a condition in it; and as for free-will, there is not even a mention of it. It is all in this fashion—"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." You see it is all "shalls," and "wills," and covenant purposes. It is all God's decrees declared, and declared, too, as if there were no possibility of man's resisting them. He does not say, "You dry bones, you shall live if you like, you shall if you are willing." He doth not say to them, "You shall stand upright and be an exceeding great army if it pleases you to consent to My power." No, but it is, "I will," and "you shall." As for will, it is altogether put out of the question, for how shall the dead have a will in the matter? And so, dear friends, I would have the gospel preached both to the Jew and the Gentile with a very clear and distinct note of free, sovereign, almighty grace. Man has a will, and God never ignores that will, but by His almighty grace He blessedly leads it in silken fetters. He never stops to ask that will's consent when He comes forth upon His errands of effectual grace, but He wins that consent by the sweet persuasions of His own omnipotent love. He comes arrayed in the robes of His omnipotent grace, and the most hardened of rebels see at once such an attractive force in the love of God in Christ, that with full consent against their ancient wills they yield themselves captives to the grace of God. I do not believe that the Jews, or anybody else, will ever be converted, as a usual thing, by keeping back any of the doctrines of grace. We must have God's truth, and the whole of it; and more distinct utterances concerning evangelical doctrines and the grace of God are required both for Jews and for Gentiles. Preach, preach, preach, then, but let it be the preaching of Christ, and the proclamation of free grace. The

Church, I say, has a model here as to the matter of preaching.

And I am certain that she has also a model here *as to her manner of preaching*. How shall we preach the gospel? Was Ezekiel to go and talk to these bones, but never to say a word to them by way of command? Was he to explain the way of salvation, but never bid them walk in it? No; after he had declared covenant purposes, he was then to say, "Thus saith the Lord, ye dry bones *live*." And so the message of the gospel minister when he has declared the purposes of divine grace, is to say to sinners, "Thus saith the Lord, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ; trust Christ, and you are saved." Whoever you may be, Jew or Gentile, whether your speech be that of the land of Canaan or of a Gentile tongue, whether you spring of Shem, Ham, or Japheth, trust Christ, and you are saved; trust Him, then, ye dry bones, and live. Withered arm, be outstretched; lame men, leap; blind eyes, see; ye dead, dry bones, live. The manner of our preaching is to be by way of command, as well as by way of teaching. Repent and be converted, every one of you. Lay hold on eternal life. "Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."

We have a model here, moreover, *as to our audience*. We are not to select our congregation, but we are to go where God sends us; and if He should send us into the open valley, where the bones are very dry, we are to preach there. Preach to the dry bones, then. Do not say, "Such-and-such a man is too bigoted"; the case rests not with him, nor with his bigotry, but with God. These bones were very dry, but yet they lived. There is very little to choose after all, between one man and another, when all are dead; a little difference in the dryness does not come to much account when all are dead in sin. That some men are drunken and some are sober, that some men are debauched and some are chaste, makes a very great difference in the moral and civil world, but a very little

difference indeed in the spiritual world, for there the same things happen to them both. If they believe not they shall alike be lost, and if they trust Jesus Christ they shall alike be saved. Let not, therefore, the greater viciousness of a people, or their greater hardness of heart, ever stand in our way, but let us say to them, dry as they are, "Ye bones, live."

And here, again, we have another lesson *as to the preacher's authority*. If you will observe, you will see the prophet says, "Hear the Word of the Lord." We are to go neither to Jew nor to Gentile upon our own errand, or bearing our own words. I have no right to command a man to believe this or that, except I be an ambassador of God, and then, with God's authority to direct and empower me, I speak no longer as a man following his own wit, but as the mouth of God. So let every one of us go, when we are trying to save souls, feeling the hand of God upon us, with a soul big with anxious thoughts and heaving high with earnest desires: let us speak

"As though we ne'er might speak again,

As dying men to dying men,"

taking hold upon God's arm, and beseeching Him to work by us and through us for the good of men.

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