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Toward Revival, Part 3

The focus of Ezekiel 37 has shown us the all-too familiar struggle in the Christian life, extreme dryness or coldness in our walk with God.

Ezekiel 37:11: "Then He said to me, 'Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off."'"

This is where life in this state of sin and misery oft-times can find the child of God, sometimes because of their sin, BUT not always. Spurgeon wrote referencing our spiritual vitality:

If you were to look at one of the statues, say, in Westminster Abbey, you would find that it never complains of rheumatism and is not affected either by heat or cold, because it is not alive. But living men and living women have their changes because they have life. The most flourishing tree that grows sheds its leaves when the time comes. All plants are not always in flower; they have their springs, their summers, their autumns, and their winters. And it is just so with God's people. (Spurgeon, 2017, p. Revival)

What a helpful observation! If you walk with Christ there will be an ebbing and flowing in your relationship with God regardless of how faithful you are to the Lord! It is part of living in a state of sin and misery!

Thus, we read of many throughout church history who at times found themselves struggling with apathy, doubt, and fear. Augustine testified to one such time in a prayer he wrote down:

I was astonished that although I now loved You... I did not persist in enjoyment of my God. Your beauty drew me to You, but soon I was dragged away from You by my own weight and in dismay I plunged again into the things of this world... as though I had sensed the fragrance of the fare but was not yet able to eat it. (Augustine, 1960, p. 152)

John Bunyan wrote:

A whole flood of blasphemies, both against God, Christ, and the Scriptures were poured upon my spirit, to my great confusion and astonishment... My heart was at times exceeding hard. If I would have given a thousand pounds for a tear, I could not shed one... (Bunyan, 1666, pp. 55-59)

Consider the words of the Psalmist who wrote that glorious statement, "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God" (Psalm 42:1). Yet just three verses later he wrote, "These things I remember, and I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go along with the throng *and* lead them in procession to the house of God, with the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival. Why are you in despair, O my soul? And *why* have you become disturbed within me?" (Psalm 42:3-4).

Truly change and decay is part and parcel of living in a fallen world. Accordingly, there will come times in your walk where you enter into what we might call the cold of winter. It might be due to a sin. Or it might just be due to the sinful estate in which we live. Regardless, what ought we to do if we find ourselves in one of these times? How do we get out of spiritual dryness? The passage at which we are looking answers that question:

- As we have seen, it was written to a people of God who had become disillusioned in their walk with their Lord, the false prophets said that the exile of 586 BC would last just a couple of years (cf. Jeremiah 27:16; 28:3). Yet in our text it had been a good decade

and it was quite obvious that no one was getting out of Babylon alive! This plunged God's people into a dark despair! If ever there was a time when revival was needed, it was now!

- And it was for this reason that God gave Ezekiel the vision before us, The Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones! It is describing NOT the restoration of the nation of Israel (as some commentators suggest), BUT the restoration of the well-being of the people of God in exile when it came to their walk with the Lord!

We began looking at the components of genuine revival! Recall, the first component of revival, the consuming of the word of God.

Ezekiel 37:4, "Again He said to me, 'Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.'""

Clearly, the word of God was instrumental in the revival referenced in this vision. However, it just wasn't God's word; it was God's word understood, received, and implemented in the life of the believer. That is the nuance of "hear" in this verse.

From this we saw that the word of God was given first and foremost NOT to make us better husbands, employees, or Christians, BUT to enable us to walk with Christ- to have a love-relationship with Him! In the context of general and special revelation, what is the purpose of special revelation? There is no question here: God's word was given that the sinner might be reconciled to God and so be restored to their original privilege of "walking with God in the cool of the day" (Genesis 3:8)!

Accordingly, the purpose of special revelation, God's Word, is NOT to give us a pick-me-up for the day OR to teach us how to do religious things, BUT to enable us to fellowship, commune, and so adore Christ! George Mueller put it this way:

How shall we learn to enjoy God? How shall we obtain such an all-sufficient soul-satisfying portion in him as shall enable us to let go the things of this world as vain and worthless in comparison? I answer, this happiness is to be obtained through the study of the Holy Scriptures. God has therein revealed Himself unto us in the face of Jesus Christ." (*Addresses by George Muller Complete and Unabridged, 2 Vols., 1:646*)

Accordingly, if you go to the word of God for anything else, you are misusing the word and so, like Hudson Taylor almost two centuries ago, will be plunged into a darker condition (cf. Psalm 106:46).

The first component to revival is fellowshiping with Christ via His word! Notice a second component is the work and will of God.

Ezekiel 37:5-6a, "Thus says the Lord God to these bones, 'Behold, I will cause breath to

enter you that you may come to life. And I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin, and put breath in you that you may come alive..."

This is such an important truth when it comes to revival- which on the whole was completely missed during the Second Great Awakening (again, think of Charles Finney). Any and all reviving in our walks with God is according to the will and good pleasure of the Lord!

This means there is no formula, no five-step program! Just as "the wind blows where it wishes... but you do not know where it comes from and where it is going" (John 3:8a), so it is with the reviving and renewal of the believer. God is the one who must act! God is the one who must bring it about! Practically speaking, this is so important to understand, for living in light of this truth will deliver us from so many pitfalls in our walk with Christ. Consider one of them from the words of Solomon.

Psalm 127:1-2, "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; for He gives to His beloved *even in his sleep.*"

This rightly identifies Christian discipline void of the work and will of the Lord is vanity, or in other words, worthless!

Did you get that? Bible study, worship, the sacraments, or any religious duty are all worthless/impotent if they are not accompanied by the working of the Spirit of God! This is so important for us to understand. It is easy to consider a passage like the one before us in Ezekiel and be moved to get back into the word, back into serious devotion to the Lord. Yet how long will it be before our passion is sidetracked and we begin glorying in the means rather than the Lord?

Brothers and sisters, don't ever forget that our "righteousness is as filthy garments" (Isaiah 64:6)! Only God can bring forth the fruit of Revival. That does NOT mean He doesn't use means; He does (as we just saw)! Rather, it means that our faith and trust must be and remain in Christ and NOT the means!

1 Corinthians 3:6-7, "I [Paul] planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth."

As it is God who is the sole agent behind growth/revival, therefore it is exclusively on Him that we must rely for change or growth in our walk- not the disciplines He gives us for growth. Again, this is so important for the tendency in dry times is to "try" different things to wake us up from our spiritual lethargy. We try:

- Bible reading.

- Prayer.
- Scripture memory.
- Going to a Bible study or fellowship group.
- Being good.
- Acting the part.

And because no discipline, drug, person, or created thing can produce spiritual growth or change in our lives, all of these eventually let us down. Then, *EITHER* we settle at this point, fall away, *OR* succumb to mysticism that once again we might feel alive!

Family of God, we need not go down any of these roads. Understand that Christian discipline is only a little profit; our focus and reliance must therefore be on God!

1 Timothy 4:7b-8, “On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and *also* for the *life* to come.”

This perhaps is one of the more misquoted Scriptures in modern Christianity. The “bodily discipline” referenced here is NOT physical health or exercise. Look at the context (v. 3)! Clearly, “bodily discipline” is in reference to religious acts of devotion, like the ones I just referenced.

Truly, Bible reading, prayer, fasting, acts of sacrifice or service “are only little value” (yet, they are of value when accompanied by the working of the Spirit of God)! Accordingly, THE FOCUS of our walk must be “godliness.” And what is that? Most I think confuse godliness with holiness- as if they were the same. Holiness speaks of being set apart unto God. It is recognizing that our life belongs to God and AS SUCH I ought NOT to do what I want to do, BUT what God wants me to do. Translated, that means we don’t engage in sinful living or practices! That’s holiness. Godliness on the other hand speaks of motive. It is the beautiful and balanced mixture of love and reverence for Christ that serves as that which drives us in all that we do. And so:

- If our fellowship is driven NOT by pleasure, BUT love and reverence for Christ...
- If we help another individual out of love for the Lord.
- If we forgive the sinning brother or sister because we are grateful for the grace God has given us in our lives.

This is godliness!

In this context then where do Christian disciplines factor in? They are given by God to promote love and reverence for Christ! They are the means/tools of growth which enable us to fellowship with God (akin to weight training for an athlete)! So stop looking to these disciplines as that which will produce revival or growth in your life. Rather, look to God... only

He can bring it about!

Because this is the case, what sort of people ought we therefore to be? That brings us to the third component referenced, a life devoted to prayer.

Ezekiel 37: 8b-9, “And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew, and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then He said to me, ‘Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, “Thus says the Lord God, ‘Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they come to life.’””

The word for “breath” is found in this passage ten times! Clearly it is a major focus of this vision. What is the word here? And why the various translations?

First off note that “breath” has a broad use in Scripture. In fact, most Bibles translate the word three different ways in this passage alone: (1) “Spirit,” vv. 1, 14, (2) “Breath,” vv. 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, and (3) “Winds,” v. 9. Defined, the word in Hebrew is רִיחַ (*rûah*). In its most essential form it references “air in motion.” It can reference the “spirit/soul” which God breathed into man at creation (cf. Genesis 2:7; Is. 42:5). It can refer to literal “wind” and so is an apt description of the coming and going of the Spirit of God (cf. John 3:8). In this regard, it is frequently used of the “Holy Spirit” as in the text before us (vv. 1, 14). And because “movement”/“ability” is fundamental to the idea of רִיחַ (*rûah*) it is also used of “power” (1 Kings 10:5), “courage” (Joshua 2:11; 5:1), “aggressiveness” (Is. 25:4), or “anger” (Judges 8:3; Proverbs 29:11)- all of which is the result of an individual quickly breathing in air!

From all of this I want you to see that the ten uses of the word for “breath” could be in reference to many things! Accordingly, context will be that which dictates how we translate this word here. In this regard, consider the text before you:

- Who is it that gave life to a clump of mud that was formed into a person in Genesis 2? It was God!
- Who/What then do you suppose is responsible for the giving of life to the dead bodies in the vision before us- look at.

Ezekiel 37:14a, “And I will put My Spirit within you, and you will come to life...”

What/who in this context could give life to that which is dead? It could only be God, or more specifically the Holy Spirit (since again we are talking here about רִיחַ [*rûah*])! Right?- not “a strong wind from the east”!

As that is the case, let’s translate the passage accordingly and see how it reads:

Ezekiel 37:8-9a, “And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew, and

skin covered them; but there was no LIFE in them. Then He said to me, 'Prophecy to the HOLY SPIRIT, prophecy, son of man, and say to the HOLY SPIRIT...' "Thus says the Lord God, 'Come from the four winds, O HOLY SPIRIT, and breathe on these slain, that they come to life.'""

Call me crazy, but that sounds like a prayer! Doesn't it?

The third element to the revival herein described occurred when Ezekiel requested the Spirit of God to vivify the resurrected bodies of this vision! And lest you think I am being a little too free here with the translation, this is how many have interpreted this verse. L. E. Cooper wrote:

It clearly was God's Spirit who was to give breath to these corpses, and Ezekiel was given the extraordinary task of summoning Him. (Cooper, 1994, p. 324)

J. P. Lange wrote:

Correspondingly, therefore, Ezekiel has in ver. 9 to prophecy once more,- this time to the Spirit (ver. 5)... Hence the Spirit is to come from the four winds. (John Peter Lange, 2014, p. 349)

From all of this we see a third component when it comes to Revival. It was Ezekiel, in obedience to God's command (v. 9), calling upon the Spirit of God to move and so act! Another word for that is Prayer!

Prayer is the third component that God gives us when it comes to revival! So, if you want to break out of the lethargy and enjoy a reviving of your walk with the Lord, most definitely go to the word of God and sup upon it! Now again, we are NOT saying here, "Learn more theology or another fun fact." RATHER, the focus clearly is on using the word of God according to its intended purpose which is fellowshiping and walking with Christ

That is what we must be after when it comes to God's word! Secondly, spend much time in prayer asking the Spirit of God to transform you and so mold and shape you into the person God wants you to be!

And once again the focus here is on fellowshiping with God! It is adoring Him, talking to Him, seeking His perspective and will for your life! Speaking of prayer, Horatius Bonar wrote:

Be much alone with God. Do not put Him off with a quarter of an hour morning and evening. Take time to get thoroughly acquainted. Talk everything over with Him. Pour out every thought, feeling, wish, plan, and doubt to Him. He wants to converse with His creatures. Shall His creatures not want to converse with Him? He wants, not merely to be on 'good terms' with you, if one may use man's phrase, but to be intimate. Shall you decline the intimacy and be satisfied with mere acquaintance? What! Intimate with the world, with friends, with neighbors, but not with God? That would look ill

indeed. Folly, to prefer the clay to the potter, the marble to the sculptor, this little earth and its lesser creatures to the mighty Maker of the universe, the great 'All and in all!' (Dyer, 2013)

Thirdly, we know that all of this will be but vanity "unless the Lord builds the house" (Psalm 127:1)!

Again, that means our focus cannot, nor should it ever be on a five-step program to spiritual renewal- the means instead of the Lord! Rather, we are called to wrestle with God all night if need be (as did Jacob) until the Lord brings about spiritual renewal. In other words, don't quit after one prayer or one attempt to fellowship with the Lord in His word. Persist in your dependence and devotion upon God! In time, He will bring it to pass!

That is God's program for spiritual renewal- which brings us to two very important consequences when it comes to the working of this grace in our lives... consequences we need to be aware of! If God should grant you a sense vitality in your walk, what will be the result? We might think that it will come in the form of:

- Walking as if on air.
- Unmitigated happiness.
- Wearing a constant smile.

That we might NOT be misinformed as to the results of genuine revival, God gives us an idea here of how it will translate into a person's life, in other words, the consequences.

Ezekiel 37:10, "So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life, and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army."

The first consequence is that of service, "They came to life, and stood as an exceedingly great army!"

Truly the first fruit of genuine revival in a person's life is Service when it comes to God and His Kingdom. It is saying to the Lord, "Here I am, send me!" Yet the focus here is NOT simply service, BUT their service as an army which lays emphasis on our corporateness. In other words, spiritual growth is never for ourselves! It is always given that we might serve the Lord together. That is the immediate consequence. Notice the long-term consequence:

Ezekiel 37:6b, "And I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin, and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the Lord."

We've discussed this phrase in the past- for it saturates the book of Ezekiel (it is found 61 times in this prophecy)! For a people to "know that I am the Lord" speaks of God's greatness, sovereignty, rule, and so His glory. It is what we mean when we say that "*man's chief end is to glorify God*" (WSC #1). Get this:

- God fashioned a world that it might bring glory to Him.
- That means that the best that could ever occur in our lives as creatures is for God to be glorified, exalted, and praised. It is as John said regarding Christ, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30)!

I know that this is a slap in the face when it comes to our flesh! Yet don't forget that the fall occurred when Adam and Eve endeavored to flip the world upside down and so live as if God existed for their benefit and pleasure. Ever since, man has lived on this earth to make much of himself! In fact, so strong does this passion reside in us that I can't imagine that there are not at least a few here this morning who take offense at the idea that God made us to make much of Himself! In fact, as the supreme act of selfishness on the part of the sinner, we will consider that to be selfishness in God!

God made us to make much of Him! When we do that we are at our best! Accordingly, genuine revival will always result in God's people being better able to make much of God!