

“In the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost; the Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.”¹

That’s how the Westminster Confession summarizes Scripture’s teaching about our Holy Three-in-One God. And on this day of Pentecost, the day when the Church celebrates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the great gift of the Father sent to us by the Ascended Lord Jesus, we give special attention to the Third Person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is not a mask that God wears sometimes, a mysterious impersonal energy force, or a lesser created being like an angel. The Holy Spirit is God, one of three persons in the Godhead, and as the Nicene Creed puts it, the Lord and giver of Life, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified.

And on this day, we remember the vivid scene from the book of Acts where Jesus’ disciples were hidden in an upper room until a mighty wind roared into their midst, and tongues of fire rested on each person there, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues and glorifying Jesus Christ. And because the Spirit came as fire, we associate the day of Pentecost with the color red. [Children, red balloons!]

But today, we are looking back into the Old Testament to learn more about the Holy Spirit, looking to Ezekiel’s incredible vision in the valley of dry bones. This is one of the key passages that illustrates the work of the Holy Spirit, and why we confess that it is the Spirit in particular who is *the Lord and giver of life*.

Because what we see in this passage is that *you were dead in your trespasses and sins, but God breathes life into you by His Holy Spirit*. This is a work that *only God can do*, although He uses Ezekiel to carry it out. Apart from the Spirit, God’s prophet can’t do anything. Apart from the Spirit, even the Word of God does not give life. *God must act* to bring the dead to life. And this means, as v. 14 says, that when we see the Spirit at work raising the dead to life, then we *know* that our God is the Lord. And the good news that we celebrate at Pentecost is that God has sent His life-giving Spirit into the world to open our graves and raise us up to life!

At the beginning of his vision, the Lord brings Ezekiel out in the Spirit of the Lord, and sets him down in the middle of a valley full of dry bones. Now, something like *seeds* would be an image of potential life, only in need of planting and the right conditions to flourish, but what Ezekiel sees are *bones*, not an image of potential life, but an image of death, of life *lost*.

¹ WCF II.3.

And not only that, but v.2 goes on to rule out any Jurassic Park style re-birth. These are not the kind of bones that still might have a bit of marrow or DNA clinging to life inside; these bones are *very* dry; these bones are *dead*. And in v. 11, God tells Ezekiel that the bones are the whole house of Israel – God’s people. These bones are not a picture of sin, or the unbelieving world, or of death in the abstract. These bones are you and me, dried up and dead.

What this means is that after Adam unleashed death into the world through sin, mankind’s natural state is one of death. We are not sick, we are not struggling, we are not asleep. We are *dead*. This is the biggest reason why we cannot save ourselves, by the way. We need Jesus to be our Savior, because we needed somebody *alive* to save us!

And this state of dried up death is one you are all too quick to forget. You were dead, and if you do not know the Lord Jesus as your Savior, then His Holy Spirit has not given you life and you are still dead. And since you are dead, everything you do and everything you touch is death! Like King Midas turning everything he touched to gold, without God’s Spirit, everything you touch turns to dust and ashes! You can’t be a decent human being; you’re dead! You can’t be a good father or mother or son or daughter or friend; you’re dead! You can’t overcome sin and do things that please God; you’re dead!

And when you forget this as a Christian, then the life you have been given doesn’t seem quite so special, and the sin that wants to drag you back down to death doesn’t seem so serious. Serving God becomes a burden. Obeying God becomes drudgery. When the Christian life seems hard or difficult or oppressive, and you forget that you were dead, then you think that you can have life on your own! You think, “I can take a break from Church, and still have life.” “I can live how I want to live, and still have life.” But no, apart from the Spirit, there is nothing but death.

So for the sake of your Christian life, you need to know that apart from the Spirit, you are just a pile of dry bones; a dusty shell, not a human being. But you also need this lesson for evangelism, or you won’t even understand what you are doing. Evangelism is when God sends His people into the *morgue*; into the *cemetery* and tells them to bring people back *alive*. He is not sending us merely to awaken sleepers or assist the struggling. An evangelist is called to be a *resurrector*!

And in v. 3, God gives Ezekiel a sense of the *impossibility* of the task of evangelism: “Son of man, can these bones live?” “O Lord God, you know.” Ezekiel doesn’t know! He does know that *he* can’t give life to the bones. But can God? Ezekiel is willing to take it on faith and find out!

And so God gives Ezekiel a powerful prophecy to speak over the bones, proclaiming beforehand what God will accomplish by His *breath*. And here you need to know that the Hebrew word “ruach” lies behind our English words for spirit, breath, and wind. Spirit, breath, and wind are all related concepts in this and many passages throughout the Bible, including Acts 2, where the Spirit rushes down on the disciples as a mighty wind. And in this vision, the breath of God refers to the Spirit of God, which becomes clear in our English versions in v.14.

And remember back at the very beginning, when God made a man-shaped figure out of dirt. When God breathed into the nostrils of that clay statue of a man, it became a living soul. God turned *dirt* into *Adam* through the breath of His Spirit, the breath of life. It has always been the special work of the Spirit to create life where there is no life. And that’s exactly what God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones: God is going to breath life into these bones.

And look at what happens in v.7: Ezekiel prophesies as he was commanded, and the Word God gave him causes the dry bones to rattle together into a skeleton, and the skeleton is clothed in sinew, flesh, and skin. Don’t miss what’s happening: as Ezekiel breathes out God’s Word, bones start to come to life. That’s the Trinity at work: God breathing out a Divine Word that gives life!

But not quite. The preaching of God’s Word puts the scattered bones in order, and clothes them with flesh, but there is still no life. And this is a great picture of both the power and the limits of God’s Word. You need God’s Word to have life, but you need more than that! I’m sure you’ve experienced this: you know what God says, but simply hearing and knowing the Word is not enough! And people you know and are praying for and maybe even have shared the gospel with have heard sermons, they’ve heard Christian truth, and yet *something’s missing*.

And listen carefully here: what’s missing is *the breath of God*. What’s *present* is the Word, which God has placed in your mouth and commanded you to speak. Dry bones need us to preach to them! But all the preaching in the world cannot give life until the Spirit empowers that Word! And so God tells Ezekiel to prophesy *to the breath*, to speak to the Spirit, calling on Him to come and give life. [v.10] This is how God raises the dead: by preaching *and* prayer. His messengers speak at His command, and they call on God to bless their efforts by sending the Spirit.

Let me say this another way: when God calls us to evangelize, He calls us to raise the dead. This is impossible for us, but not for Him! He gives us a Word and commands us to preach, and He tells us to call on the Spirit to breathe the dead to life. By sharing the gospel with our words, we are arranging the wood; and by praying for the Spirit to work, we are asking God to send fire from heaven.

And think about what this means for evangelism: many of us feel that we aren't very good at this work. We don't know what to say, when to say it, and so on. But it's much *worse* than that! Our task is *hopeless*: the best and smartest person in the world cannot talk a dead person back to life. So instead of worrying that we might mess up an impossible task, maybe we should realize that something else is going on. You'll never be able to perfectly answer the question: "Is now the right time? Is what I'm about to say the right thing so say?" So instead of getting all caught up in trying, be like Ezekiel: "Lord, you know!" And just like a lightning rod can't *cause* a lightning strike, but it can *attract* one, fire from heaven falls where faithful saints speak God's Word.

That's some *exhortation* concerning evangelism. But this passage also gives us a great deal of *hope* for evangelism. In this passage, God promises to send forth His Spirit to bring life to a valley full of death. And in Acts 2, we see that the Spirit of God has indeed been sent into the world in the fullest and most powerful way imaginable. It happened! The Spirit is here!

Until the events of Pentecost happened, spiritually speaking, the world was like Mars – barren, lifeless, no oxygen. But now that God sent His Breath, earth is starting to share the atmosphere of heaven, and lungs are being filled all over the planet! That's what happened at Pentecost, and that's how a few dozen living souls surrounded by dry bones turn into an exceedingly great army of *billions* of Christians! Pentecost is good news, because it means that this world can breathe now.

And finally, one more personal application for you. Before the Spirit of God breathed on you, you were nothing more than a pile of dry bones. You had no life within yourself. You aren't born into this world alive. You're born dead. But out of sheer mercy and grace, the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit to breathe you to life. Your every breath is a gift of grace. Remember that as you walk with God this week. How can you thank God for that gift? What should you do with the breath that you've been given?

Ephesians 4 tells you: "Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Glory be to God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ, for He has sent the Spirit to breathe new life into a dead world! This is your gift from our Lord Jesus, the Ascended King: the Holy Spirit, the Breath of God, is within you, and you are *alive*.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*