

SERMON

Sermon: Preaching to the Burned Over

Full sermon manuscript on Ezekiel 37 and ministry to the spiritually depleted, disillusioned, and relationally wounded in the congregation

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Equipping pastors and leaders to serve with excellence, integrity, and lasting Kingdom impact.

Sermon Overview and Context

Primary Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14 | Revelation 3:14-22 | Acts 3:19-21

Preaching Hook

In the 19th century, the region of western New York state was known as the "burned-over district" -- a region that had been swept through by so many religious revivals that the spiritual soil seemed exhausted. The evangelical enthusiasm had burned so hot, so many times, that many people were no longer responsive to religious appeals of any kind. They had been to the altar. They had heard the promises. The fire had come and gone. The experience had not sustained. The term "burned over" is a remarkably accurate description of a spiritual condition that is not unique to that region or era. It describes a person who has attended church for years, raised their hand at a hundred youth camps, served on every committee, read every Christian self-help book -- and feels nothing. The soil is exhausted.

Ezekiel's Valley -- Naming the Condition Honestly

God takes Ezekiel by the Spirit and sets him down in the middle of a valley full of bones. And then he asks one of the strangest questions in Scripture: "Son of man, can these bones live?" (Ezekiel 37:3). The question is not rhetorical -- God is not testing Ezekiel's faith by asking an obvious question. He is genuinely inviting the prophet's assessment of the situation. The situation looks impossible. The bones are very dry. They have been in the sun for a long time. There is no moisture left, no organic matter, no sign of life. This is the pastoral diagnosis before the pastoral intervention. The pastor who looks at the burned-over landscape of his congregation -- or his own burned-over soul -- and honestly says "these bones are very dry" is doing something important. He is naming the reality that ministry will not improve by pretending does not exist.

"Ezekiel 37:1-14"

-- Primary Text

The Command to Prophecy -- Ministry to the Apparently Dead

God's instruction to Ezekiel is surprising: "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD" (Ezekiel 37:4). Prophecy to bones. Speak the word of God to what appears to be dead. This is the most countercultural pastoral instruction in the Old Testament: do not write off the apparently hopeless situation. Speak life into it. Not positivity, not wishful thinking -- the word of the LORD. The same word that called creation into existence out of nothing, that brought the universe into being by divine speech, is capable of bringing life to the most dead-looking spiritual situation. The pastor who preaches to the burned-over congregation is doing exactly what Ezekiel did: prophesying to the dry bones, trusting that the word has power that human assessment cannot calculate.

"Revelation 3:14-22"

-- Secondary Text

The Breath -- What Only God Can Do

The valley of dry bones narrative has two movements, and both are essential. First, the bones come together (Ezekiel 37:7-8): there is a rattling and a reassembling. The sinews come, the flesh comes, the skin covers -- but "there was no breath in them" (v. 8). External structure without internal life. The pastor who builds excellent programs, who assembles excellent teams, who creates an impressive organizational structure, but who does not pray for the Breath of God to fill what has been built -- has produced the structure without the life. The second movement (vv. 9-10) is the prophesying to the wind, the breath from the four corners, the life from God that turns the reassembled bodies into a vast army. Only God can do this. The pastor's job is to build the structure and to pray.

"Acts 3:19-21"

-- Third Text

Application and Invitation

For the burned-over congregation: acknowledge the exhaustion rather than demanding more enthusiasm. Tell the truth about what extended dryness feels like. Then prophesy -- not cheerfully, not positively, but with the confidence of someone who has been in the valley and watched the bones come alive. Pray for the Breath. Expect it. And tell the congregation to expect it with you.

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. What did this sermon say to you personally -- not in general, but specifically? Where did it land?
2. Was there anything in the message that challenged or confused you? How did you engage with it?
3. What specific application is this text calling you to? Name it as concretely as possible.
4. Who in your life needs to hear what you heard today? How might you share it?

Preacher's Preparation Checklist

- Have I allowed this text to preach to me personally before I prepared to preach it to others?
- Do I have a specific illustration that makes the central theological claim concrete and immediately recognizable?
- Is my introduction creating genuine need for what the text provides -- curiosity, tension, a felt question?
- Is my conclusion specific, clear, and calling for a concrete response rather than general inspiration?
- Have I prayed specifically for the individuals who will be in the room when I preach this?

The sermon is not yours. You are the herald -- the one who delivers the message on behalf of the One who sent you. Prepare with everything you have, and then step behind the text and let it do what only it can do.

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