**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**EZEKIEL-004. THE DRY BONES AND THE SPIRIT OF LIFE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones, 2. And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry. 3. And He said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, Thou knowest. 4. Again He said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5. Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live: 6. 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. 7. So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone. 8. And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them. 9. Then said He unto me, Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. 10. So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army. 11. Then He said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts. 12. Therefore prophesy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, O My people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. 13. And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up out of your graves. 14. And shall put My spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord."*

*Ezekiel 37:1-14*

This great vision apparently took its form from a despairing saying, which had become a proverb among the exiles, Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost: we are clean cut off (v. 11). Ezekiel lays hold of the metaphor, which had been taken to express the hopeless destruction of Israel's national existence, and even from it wrings a message of hope. Faith has the prerogative of seeing possibilities of life in what looks to sense hopeless death. We may look at the vision from three points of view, considering its bearing on Israel, on the world, and on the resurrection of the body.

**I.** The saying, already referred to, puts the hopelessness of the mass of the exiles in a forcible fashion. The only sense in which living men could say that their bones were dried up, and they cut off, is a figurative one, and obviously it is the national existence which they regarded as irretrievably ended. The saying gives us a glimpse into the despair which had settled down on the exiles, and against which Ezekiel had to contend, as he had also to contend against its apparently opposite and yet kindred feeling of presumptuous, misplaced hope. We observe that he begins by accepting fully the facts which bred despair, and even accentuating them. The true prophet never makes light of the miseries of which he knows the cure, and does not try to comfort by minimising the gravity of the evil. The bones are very many, and they are very dry. As far as outward resources are concerned, despair was rational, and hope as absurd as it would have been to expect that men, dead so long that their bones had been bleached by years of exposure to the weather, should live again.

But while Ezekiel saw the facts of Israel's powerlessness as plainly as the most despondent, he did not therefore despair. The question which rose in his mind was God's question, and the very raising it let a gleam of hope in. So he answered with that noble utterance of faith and submission, O Lord God, Thou knowest. With God all things are possible. Presumption would have said Yes; Unbelief would have said No; Faith says, Thou knowest.

The grand description of the process of resurrection follows the analogy of the order in the creation of man, giving, first, the shaping of the body, and afterwards the breathing into it of the breath which is life. Both stages are wholly God's work. The prophet's part was to prophesy to the bones first; and his word, in a sense, brought about the effect which it foretold, since his ministry was the most potent means of rekindling dying hopes, and bringing the disjecta membra of the nation together again. The vivid and gigantic imagination of the prophet gives a picture of the rushing together of the bones, which has no superior in any literature. He hears a noise, and sees a shaking (by which is meant the motion of the bones to each other, rather than an earthquake, as the Revised Version has it, which inserts a quite irrelevant detail), and the result of all is that the skeletons are complete. Then follows the gradual clothing with flesh. There they lie, a host of corpses.

The second stage is the quickening of these bodies with life, and here again Ezekiel, as God's messenger, has power to bring about what he announces; for, at his command, the breath, or wind, or spirit, comes, and the stiff corpses spring to their feet, a mighty army. The explanation in the last verses of the text somewhat departs from the tenor of the vision by speaking of Israel as buried, but keeps to its substance, and point the despairing exiles to God as the source of national resurrection. But we must not force deeper meaning on Ezekiel's words than they properly bear. The spirit promised in them is simply the source of life,--literally, of physical life; metaphorically, of national life. However that national restoration was connected with holiness, that does not enter into the prophet's vision. Israel's restoration to its land is all that Ezekiel meant by it. True, that restoration was to lead to clearer recognition by Israel of the name of Jehovah, and of all that it implied in him and demanded from them. But the proper scope of the vision is to assure despairing Israelites that God would quicken the apparently slain national life, and replace them in the land.

**II.** We may extend the application of the vision to the condition of humanity and the divine intervention which communicates life to a dead world, but must remember that no such meaning was in Ezekiel's thoughts. The valley full of dry bones is but too correct a description of the aspect which a world dead in trespasses and sins bears, when seen from the mountain-top by pure and heavenly eyes. The activities of godless lives mask the real spiritual death, which is the condition of every soul that is separate from God. Galvanised corpses may have muscular movements, but they are dead, notwithstanding their twitching. They that live without God are dead while they live.

Again, we may learn from the vision the preparation needful for the prophet, who is to be the instrument of imparting divine life to a dead world. The sorrowful sense of the widespread deadness must enter into a man's spirit, and be ever present to him, in order to fit him for his work. A dead world is not to be quickened on easy terms. We must see mankind in some measure as God sees them if we are to do God's work among them. So-called Christian teachers, who do not believe that the race is dead in sin, or who, believing it, do not feel the tragedy of the fact, and the power lodged in their hands to bring the true life, may prophesy to the dry bones for ever, and there will be no shaking among them.

The great work of the gospel is to communicate divine life. The details of the process in the vision are not applicable in this respect. As we have pointed out, they are shaped after the pattern of the creation of Adam, but the essential point is that what the world needs is the impartation from God of His Spirit. We know more than Ezekiel did as to the way by which that Spirit is given to men, and as to the kind of life which it imparts, and as to the connection between that life and holiness. It is a diviner voice than Ezekiel's which speaks to us in the name of God, and says to us with deeper meaning than the prophet of the Exile dreamed of, I will put my Spirit in you, and ye shall live.

But we may note that it is possible to have the outward form of a living body, and yet to have no life. Churches and individuals may be perfectly organised and perfectly dead. Creeds may be articulated most correctly, every bone in its place, and yet have no vitality in them. Forms of worship may be punctiliously proper, and have no breath of life in them. Religion must have a body, but often the body is not so much the organ as the sepulchre of the spirit. We have to take heed that the externals do not kill the inward life.

Again, we note that this great act of life-giving is God's revelation of His name,--that is, of His character so far as men can know it. Ye shall know that I am the Lord (vs. 13, 14). God makes Himself known in His divinest glory when He quickens dead souls. The world may learn what He is therefrom, but they who have experienced the change, and have, as it were, been raised from the grave to new life, have personal experience of His power and faithfulness so sure and sweet that henceforward they cannot doubt Him nor forget His grace.

**III.** As to the bearing of the vision on the doctrine of the resurrection little need be said. It does not necessarily presuppose the people's acquaintance with that doctrine, for it would be quite conceivable that the vision had revealed to the prophet the thought of a resurrection, which had not been in his beliefs before. The vision is so entirely figurative, that it cannot be employed as evidence that the idea of the resurrection of the dead was part of the Jewish beliefs at this date. It does, however, seem most natural to suppose that the exiles were familiar with the idea, though the vision cannot be taken as a revelation of a literal resurrection of dead men. For clear expectations of such a resurrection we must turn to such scriptures as Daniel 12:2, 13.