

“Restoration”

Proverbs 11:7, 16:25; Ezekiel 37:1-14; 1

Corinthians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 5:17

Never forget God’s larger purposes: to reconcile humanity to himself and restore a creation wrecked by sin.



Here’s a question for you: Across the vast expanse of Scripture, what is God’s overarching purpose? Or to ask it differently: What is the heart of God’s work in this world that is revealed to us in the Bible?

Answer: To restore humanity to a right relationship with God and to restore the cosmos, broken as it is by the consequences of human sin.

I have fought a number of house fires in the last forty years. The restoration of a house that has burned is a long process that takes a month or more to finish. The restoration of Pacific Palisades will take years—just like right here after the flood. That is how restoration is with us. And it is easy to think that is how God’s restoration project must be. A slow climb toward completion.

But that is not how God’s project has proceeded. There is simply the before and the after, focused on events two millennia ago when Jesus took on human flesh and ushered in the kingdom of God. Yes, we still await the consummation of this kingdom, but even in this, this not a slow climb.

Too many people in this world seem bereft of hope, for they cannot see beyond themselves. They refuse to grasp that our hope lies outside ourselves and can be found only in God. He is the one who will make all things new, not us.

If you can order your mind around these truths, so much of the Bible will make more sense. You will see the deeper revelation of God’s love and determination to rescue us from ourselves.

The vision that God gives Ezekiel of a valley covered in dry human bones is a great example. This is a vision of hope and restoration. Israel has been sent off into exile and Jerusalem has been burned along with God’s dwelling place, the temple. The vision of the dry bones being knit back together is a promise that God has not abandoned his people; Israel will one day be restored to the living, vibrant community of God’s people.

James Wallace, professor at Washington Theological Union, made some excellent observations about this vision, that will help us to see the richness of the vision:

I remember following a guide through a Franciscan church in Lima, Peru, to an ossuary where the bones of those long dead were stored—piles of skulls, leg and arm bones, in a room whose lighting cast a golden glow on the remains. As impressive as this space was, there was also an impersonal quality to it. These long-deceased persons were nameless to those who looked on them and saw only a room full of dry bones. They were not so once.

A scene in Kenneth Branagh’s version of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* takes place in the graveyard just before the burial of Ophelia. While walking, Hamlet and his friend Horatio come upon a gravedigger who is preparing her grave. He has just dug up a skull. Hamlet asks whose skull it was; the man answers, “Yorick.” Hamlet takes the skull, cradling it tenderly in his hands, and lifts it to his eyes, saying, “Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio—a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times.... Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs?” As he ponders what remains of the former court jester, a flashback shows the young Hamlet laughing at Yorick, playfully throwing his arms around him and kissing him. Then, suddenly, we are jolted back to the graveyard and the lifeless skull.

“Can these bones live?” God asks Ezekiel, challenging the prophet and all who have ever looked into the face of death, calling for a response. Ezekiel answers, “O Lord GOD, you know” (v. 3b). God does know. It is the God of Israel, the God who created the world and all that is in it, who brought a people to birth from a childless couple in Haran, who freed their descendants from the living death of slavery in Egypt and entered into covenant with them, who raised up judges and kings and prophets, calling them to life again and again, while they continued to choose death.

Ezekiel’s vision is given for a people who have lost heart, who are suffering a death of the spirit, a living death in exile in a foreign land. Their temple has been destroyed, their holy city plundered, their leaders maimed and put in chains, their soldiers put to the sword, their young men and women either killed or dragged off into a foreign land. Ezekiel witnesses the soul of his people gradually wither and die, becoming as lifeless as a valley of dry bones. Can these bones live? That is what God asks.

This vision is held up again today, when so many in the world have had their own experience of dry bones, literally and metaphorically. Our earth has been fashioned into massive graveyards of dry bones, transforming valleys into vales of desolation— from Darfur and the Congo and Zimbabwe to Myanmar and Pakistan and Iraq, from the gang slayings and the drug wars in our cities to all those places lacking food or drink or clothing or shelter or any respect for life. Not only is there the physical toll people continue to pay, but also the spiritual death that poverty, natural disasters, and genocide exact from people to reduce them to a state of dry bones. Can these bones live?

Today we hear a promise only God can give. God tells the prophet to speak to these bones, saying: “Thus says the Lord GOD: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live” (v. 5). God promises not only sinews and flesh and skin, but, most importantly, God calls the breath to come from the four winds and breathe upon the slain. So it happens. This breath is the spirit of God, the life-giving *ruach* God breathed into the first human creature in the garden.

This breath moves forth in the Lazarus story. This same breath was breathed into Jesus crucified, lifting him up to resurrection life, and touched us when the Spirit came upon us in baptism. This breath moves through the world, raising people into new life when all the odds are against it. We need to hear the vision of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones. It is a scene meant to live in the imagination and the heart, when we find ourselves gasping for breath, struggling to stay alive. Preachers can ask themselves, where are the dry bones today, where is the valley of death that needs to hear the promise of the living God?¹

This Hebrew word *ruach* (v. 5 and 6-14 in Ezekiel’s vision) occurs almost 400 times and is usually translated as “spirit/Spirit (Gen: 1.1), “wind,” or “breath,” depending on the context and the theological lens of the translators. It is connected in Scripture to the Greek word, *pneuma*. So let’s take a look at the arrival of God’s Holy Spirit/ *hagios pneuma* at Pentecost, for God’s gift of the Spirit is both the evidence and guarantee of God’s restorative work.

The Spirit as Evidence

It is hard for us to grasp the significance of Pentecost because we’re not even sure what we mean by the Holy Spirit. It is tempting to simply embrace the Spirit as a godly force of some kind, an electrical grid of sorts that we can plug into. But that isn’t even close.

The Holy Spirit (a.k.a. “the Spirit,” “the Spirit of God,” “the Spirit of Christ”) is not a “what” but a “who.” The Spirit is God. Not the Father and not the Son, but still God. Fully and completely God though not all of God. The Spirit is every bit as personal and genuine and God as Jesus is personal and genuine and God. In Acts, we

¹ James A. Wallace, “Homiletical Perspective on Ezekiel 37:1–14,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 123–127.

are told about people who lie to the Spirit (Acts 5). Who lies to electricity or even to their dog? We lie to other people.

It is in Paul's letters that we most clearly see the relationship between Easter and Pentecost. Paul refers to Jesus as the "first fruits of those who have died" (1 Corinthians 15:20). Likewise, the followers of Jesus are the "first fruits of the Spirit" (Romans 8:23). "First fruits" is an agricultural metaphor referring to the beginning of the harvest. Both Jesus' resurrection and the arrival of the Spirit marked the coming of God's kingdom, which has arrived already but has "not yet" been consummated.

Like Jesus' resurrection, the arrival of the Spirit during the festival of Pentecost was direct evidence that God's new age had dawned. Likewise, Paul's own experience of the Spirit and the experiences of other Christians was evidence that in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, God's work had come to its climax.

The Spirit as Guarantee

Though Jesus' resurrection and the arrival of the Spirit are the first fruits of God's harvest, we want to know when God's restoration project will be consummated, when this restoration project will be fully manifest. When will suffering, sickness, sin, and tragedy be swept away? Paul is no fool. He knows that there is a lot wrong in the world. But he sees the Spirit as the guarantee that all will be put right – that, not only will God's victory be won, but it has also been won!

Paul writes, "When you believed you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance . . ." (Ephesians 1:13-14 (NIV). Again, "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30, NIV). And "But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment (2 Corinthians 1:21-22, NRSV)."

In the ancient world, letters were sent on a piece of rolled up papyrus that would often be marked with the seal of the sender. If the sender's seal arrived intact, then the recipient could be sure of the sender and confident that no one had opened the letter. The Holy Spirit, who is God's gift to everyone who has faith is God's seal on each of his people, marking us as belonging to God.

But the Spirit is more than a seal, the Spirit is a down payment, a first installment on all of God's promises. It is a bit like the old lay-away plan. The store would hold the merchandise as payments were made, guaranteeing that the item would one day belong to the customer.

Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones was fulfilled in the return of Israel to Jerusalem after exile, but we still await the final consummation of God's promises to restore a broken world, even as we celebrate and remember that this restoration is both present and coming...

God's Empowering Presence

The Holy Spirit is the renewed presence, the empowering presence, of God among his people – collectively and individually. This ought to take our breath away! We are Christians. We place our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. We have all been born from above (John 3). We have all received the Holy Spirit – collectively as the church and as individual believers. God is always with us. If it doesn't feel like it at times, it isn't because God has gone anywhere, it is because *we* have. God's presence, God in the person of the Holy Spirit, is with us *always*.

So . . . it shouldn't surprise us when Paul urges us to show the fruit of God's ever-present Spirit working in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). We are people of the Spirit. We live by the Spirit and are to be guided by the Spirit. We have the "Spirit of Christ" (Romans 8:9) with us, who enables us to cry, "*Abba! Father!*"