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Ezekiel 37:11-14.

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 is lost; we are indeed cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD."

A Vision from God: *The palace will not be for man.*

During the forty-year reign of Solomon, the construction of the Temple began around 966 B.C., and it took roughly a decade. Yet it was his father, King David, who had first wanted to build the Temple. 1 and 2 Chronicles tell us about the reign of King David, starting around 1000 B.C., and the story of the two books continues to the last king, Zedekiah, and the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. to the Babylonians – who would destroy the Temple that Solomon had built almost four hundred years before. Here is an abridged passage, from 1 Chronicles, Chapter 28; it tells of how God decided that Solomon, not David, would build the Temple:

***28** David assembled at Jerusalem all the officials of Israel. ² Then King David rose to his feet and said: "Hear me, my people. I had it in my heart to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD and for the footstool of our*

God, and I made preparations for building. ³ But God said to me, 'You may not build a house for my name, for you are a man of war and have shed blood.' ⁴ Yet he has chosen Solomon my son to sit on the throne of the kingdom of the LORD over Israel. ⁶ He said to me, 'It is Solomon your son who shall build my house, for I have chosen him to be my son, and I will be his father.

God blessed Solomon with the honor of building the magnificent Temple. There is a long, detailed description of the Temple in 1 Kings; the 2 Kings books describe the roughly the same time period as the two Chronicles books. For its day, the Temple was massive: 90 feet long, 30 feet wide, and 45 feet tall. It was ornately furnished. Here are just a few abridged verses of the description of the Temple:

²⁷ He put the cherubim in the innermost part of the house. And the wings of the cherubim were spread out so that a wing of one touched the one wall, and a wing of the other cherub touched the other wall; their other wings touched each other in the middle of the house. ²⁸ And he overlaid the cherubim with gold.

³⁰ The floor of the house he overlaid with gold in the inner and outer rooms.

The “he” here is King Solomon, the person who led the construction effort. The New Testament does not describe the construction of Christian churches, as the early Christians met in each other’s homes and did not start building standalone churches until the third century A.D. But from the description of Solomon’s Temple it’s clear that God doesn’t disapprove of lavish houses of worship.

As a boy, I worshiped in a beautiful Gothic Catholic church built around 1900. It has vaulted ceilings lined with gold, brilliant stain glass windows, and beautiful frescoes. Its steeple is over a hundred feet high. When I was there, I felt the

magnificent presence of God. But there can be a significant downside to opulent churches. People can start building churches not for God, but for themselves. The story I am about to tell is about my childhood church, but I am not trying to lay blame on Catholics in particular. Many Protestant churches have been built as splendid edifices to honor those who built them and those who preached in them.

When I was in grammar school, the kids often raised money for school materials and equipment. On the first day of fourth grade, the sisters announced that we would spend the school year raising money to get the school air conditioning. In each class, a giant paper thermometer went up. The sisters incrementally raised the red line on the thermometers, as they tracked our progress toward the total amount needed for the a/c. We went door to door selling plastic crosses, string rosaries, and holy cards. It became a competition to see which class could raise the most money. Then, near the end of the academic year, our Principle, Sister Adele, came on the intercom to tell us the good news: We had raised the money. We all knew we would have our air conditioning. There was cheering throughout the school. But then there was a moment of silence. Sister Adele, in a soft voice, told us she had something else to tell us. She tried hard to sound upbeat, but there was no denying the disappointment in her voice. She said that the Monsignor of the parish had decided that the money

would be better spent another way: to cover up the gold paint on the cross on the steeple of the church with real gold flake. We didn't know what that meant. She explained that rather than the cross merely being painted gold, it would have real gold on it. She wished us a good day and signed off. We were stunned. We knew that this meant that we would not have our air conditioning, and that instead, when people looked up at the cross at the top of our church, they would see real gold. I tried to picture this and imagined a brilliant, almost blinding gold cross that would stop car drivers. In the days to come, a crew put scaffolding around the steeple. The school was across a small street from the church, and so during recess and lunch, we stood on the playground and watched the gold flake go up. But after the job was done, I couldn't tell the difference. The gold flake looked just like the gold paint. Instead of having air conditioning in the school, we had a cross that didn't look any different from one that had been painted gold.

I was not very familiar with the Bible when our cross was gold flaked. I had read parts of it, studied it in school, and heard many passages quoted in church. But I had a poor overall knowledge of the sorts of literature in the Bible. I didn't know the histories of the Israelites and the early Christian church. However, because of the Bible stories I had been exposed to, I did know that the Bible can be a source of amazing inspiration. As it turned out, the day that crew finished

putting up the gold leaf on the cross, the sister teaching my class spent a full hour telling us about an amazing story from the Book of Ezekiel. I will never forget how passionately she summarized the story, reading parts of it from the Bible.

Here is the story, from Chapter 37 of Ezekiel. Ezekiel was an Old Testament prophet, and the book is written in the first person, with Ezekiel telling the story of his three-decade long ministry. The book was written around 570 B.C. As a young married man, Ezekiel was living in Jerusalem. He was set to be a Temple priest, but the life of Ezekiel coincided with the height of Babylonian power over a vast area, and this altered his destiny. The Babylonians had recently wrested control over Mesopotamia from the Assyrians. The Babylonians sent their armies out to expand their power base south and west to include much of the land that surrounded the Israelites, which at this time consisted of two areas known as Israel and Judah. This aggressive expansion led the Babylonians to wars against Egypt and Phoenicia - with the region including the holy city of Jerusalem, in Judah, caught in the middle. The mighty Babylonian army of Nebuchadnezzar besieged and captured Jerusalem. But at one point, Egypt came close to beating back the Babylonians. This caused the Israelites to think that perhaps they could rebel against Babylon and regain their independence from this giant colonial power. However, they failed and there was a brutal crackdown. Ezekiel had been

training to be a Temple priest. Now, though, in retaliation, the Babylonian army sacked Jerusalem, and destroyed the Temple, robbing it of its treasures. And to weaken the upstart Israelites further, many of the educated and skilled, along with the rulers of Israel and Judah, and leaders of the army, were forcibly moved about 700 miles east to the heart of the Babylonian empire. This deportation happened in multiple waves, and the wave in which Ezekiel was caught up included about 8,000 people. Ezekiel found himself living on a barren plain, deep in Babylonian territory, near the Kebar River. The Babylonians allowed the exiled Israelites to set up their own independent faith-based government and farm the land. They lived somewhat independently, but they were separated from the land that God had granted them. A handful of years later, when Ezekiel was around thirty, he transitioned from being a priest to being a prophet.

Ezekiel fought to wrest control from a secular ruling class of Israelites that had emerged back in Jerusalem. Although he was exiled from the land, he proposed that the Israelites in exile should live strictly by God's laws. As a prophet, Ezekiel spoke for God. It was God's will that God's people return to a life of holiness, a life dedicated to God. Ezekiel was perhaps the most colorful of all the Old Testament prophets. He experienced dramatic visions from God. He went into trances, was struck mute for months at a time, and was mentally

transported over great distances. He even returned to Jerusalem in a vision. The book is more visceral than most of the rest of the Old Testament. Here is an abridged version of a bizarre vision, from Chapter 37; with the prophet speaking:

37 *The LORD brought me out in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. God said to me, “Prophecy over these bones, and say: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.”*

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. There was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on 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 on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

¹¹ Then God said to me, “These bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’ ¹² Therefore prophecy, and say to them: I will raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land.”

In this passage, Ezekiel sees a valley filled with the dead people of God.

These people didn’t die natural deaths – they had been slain. Their skin and their flesh are gone. The bones have been separated from each other and cast into heaps. The bones are dry and brittle. All life has long been drained from the slain people of God. Then, Ezekiel’s vision becomes sci-fi-ish. The bones begin to rattle together. They rise up and begin reassembling into their original skeletons. Then tendons begin attaching muscle to bones. Then skin covers the muscles. Then

God empowers Ezekiel to breathe life into the reassembled people of God. What rises up from the valley of dry bones is a mighty army of God. God tells Ezekiel to tell the people that they are in exile now; they are like dried and separated bones. They are cut off from their land and their Temple – and they have lost their hope. But God is opening the graves of his people. God is bringing them back to life and will bring them back to their land. Just as the dried bones turned into a vast army, the broken Israelites will rise again in their own land under the hand of their God.

Ezekiel's vision of a valley of bones is a lesson of hope. It says that God never abandons those who believe, no matter how horrible the circumstances. The vision is a dramatic communication from God, something so powerful and vivid that it leaves no doubt that God is indeed there for the People of God.

As a boy, hearing this vision and knowing little about the Babylonian invasion and Ezekiel's forced deportation, what struck me was the wildly dramatic way in which God spoke to him. It impressed in me that at times, God does amazing things to show that he – and not any human – is in control of the world. Looking back, I think that perhaps the sister who chose to tell us this Bible story right after the cross was covered with gold leaf did so quite deliberately.

Why do I say this? My school was in southern California. Normally, the winds blew in from the ocean, gentle and wet and cool. But inland, east of the

heavily populated region of southern California, are mountains. Occasionally, powerful winds come down out of the mountains, sweeping in the opposite direction, westward toward the coast. These winds are hot and dry and mighty. They are called Santa Ana winds. A few days – just a few days – after the Monsignor put real gold on the cross on the steeple of the church, we were all out at recess. We were playing on the hot, sticky blacktop when a Santa Ana wind kicked up. It blew hard and strong, and kids stopped playing tetherball, kickball, and hopscotch. The sisters were about to blow their whistles and call us in as they always did when the Santa Anas kicked up. They didn't want any of us being blown over or hit in the face by flying debris. But suddenly, the sky became filled with highly reflective bits of material. It started off lightly, then grew heavy. As it fell, we all began chasing this stuff around, catching it, scooping it up from the ground. It was the gold flake from the cross from the steeple across the street. It was all coming off. We children went wild. The sisters began calling out for us to collect the gold flake up and bring it to them. I'm sure they didn't know what they were going to do with it, but the stuff was presumably still valuable. From our perspective, we simply saw this as the most fun we'd ever had. We laughed and shoved the stuff in our pockets, and periodically ran it over to the sisters, who stuffed it in the deep pockets of their long black habits. They didn't bother to ring

the bell to bring us in from recess. The rest of the school day was shot. By the time we made it back into the school, we were far too wired to do any work. And there were only bits of gold left on the cross on the top of the steeple.

Ezekiel prophesied during the lowest point in the Israelites' history. He battled the despondency of his people. His visions served to draw the attention of his people away from the dark days in which they lived. Ezekiel's visions offered the prospect of a life lived under the protection and righteousness of God.

¹¹ Then God said to me, "These bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them: I will raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel.

I had just heard Ezekiel's unbelievable vision when I experienced my own unworldly vision. God spoke to me with a vision just like Ezekiel's. Jesus was crucified on rough wood, hewn together probably by a Roman guard, not a carpenter. God declared that Jesus did not need a real gold cross on his church.

The earliest Christian churches were simply people's homes. As the faith grew, it adopted increasingly more of the trappings of an organized faith supported by the power elite of society. There's nothing wrong with a beautiful church in which to honor God. But we need to remember the first verse of Chapter 29 of 1 Chronicles, where David makes it clear that the Temple will not be

for him or for his son, Solomon. It seems that David understood the dangers of building magnificent structures in which to worship God:

29 And David the king said to all the assembly, "Solomon my son, whom alone God has chosen, is young and inexperienced, and the work is great, for the palace will not be for man but for the LORD God."

God usually doesn't talk to us so loudly or dramatically. God's voice can be subtle and highly varied. We might lose a job. A social door might close. We find that a lesson from the Bible is eerily echoed in everyday life. Seemingly meaningless words from someone we barely know ring hauntingly true long after they are spoken. Do we recognize these as visions from God? Or do we see everything around us as random – and not controlled by God? I spoke with a man recently who had a circulatory problem and had lost a few toes. He said that each lost toe was a crisis, incrementally threatening him with immobility, but it was his first amputation, just the tip of one of his big toes, that caused him to return to God. It woke him up to a faith he had had as a kid but had abandoned in high school when his father stopped making him go to church. He said that as he was rolled out of the hospital in a wheelchair he looked up at the setting sun – and for the very first time in his life, he felt the presence of God. It was the loss of part of a toe that made him realize that God was calling him. But I think God had been calling him for a long time – it was just that God had decided to call more loudly.