

A person in a dark coat walks away from the viewer down a dirt path in a desolate valley. The ground is covered with hundreds of human skeletons, including skulls and ribcages. The background shows rolling hills under a cloudy, overcast sky.

*Can These*  
**Bones Live?**

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*How God Has Always Made  
Dead Things Live*

PAUL HAINLINE

# Can These Bones Live?

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Paul Hainline

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**Can These Bones Live?: How God Has Always Made Dead Things  
Live**

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First Edition

*“Son of man, can these bones live?”*

— Ezekiel 37:3

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## CHAPTER ONE

# The Valley

The valley is silent.

There is no wind. No sound of water. No birds. Nothing living moves anywhere in sight. The ground is covered — not with sand or stone, but with bones. Human bones. Scattered across the valley floor in every direction, as far as a man can see. Skulls and ribs and long bones bleached white and gray under an open sky. There are very many of them, and they are very dry.

These are not the remains of a single battle or a single generation. The dryness tells you that. Bones dry slowly. Flesh has to go first, then sinew, then the moisture inside the bone itself. By the time a bone is very dry, whatever life it carried has been gone a long time. No one is coming to bury these dead. No one has come for a long time. Whatever happened here — whatever killed these people — happened so long ago that the death has become the landscape. This is not a battlefield. It is a graveyard that no one tends, and the bones have been lying in the open so long that they have become part of the scenery.

This is where God brought His prophet.

His name was Ezekiel, the son of Buzi. He was a priest — trained for the temple, set apart for the service of God in the most sacred place on earth. That was supposed to be his life. The priesthood was not a career a man chose; it was a calling he was born into. Ezekiel would have grown up learning the rituals, the sacrifices, the laws of purity, the rhythms of worship that had governed Israel’s relationship with God since Sinai. His entire life was oriented toward the temple in Jerusalem, toward the presence of God that dwelt between the cherubim above the mercy seat.

He never served there.

In 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, besieged Jerusalem for the second time. He carried off King Jehoiachin, the king’s household, his officials, the mighty men of valor — ten thousand captives in all — along with the craftsmen and the smiths. “None remained except the poorest people of the land” (2 Kings 24:14). Among those ten thousand was Ezekiel. A priest, ripped from the city where God dwelt, marched hundreds of miles east into a foreign empire, and settled with the other exiles in a place called Tel-abib, along the river Chebar.

He was roughly twenty-five years old. The temple he had been trained to serve in was still standing — but he was not in it. He was in Babylon. The priesthood began at thirty (Numbers 4:3), and Ezekiel would turn thirty in a land where

there was no altar, no sacrifice, and no mercy seat. A priest with no temple. A servant of God with no place to serve.

Five years into exile, God spoke to him.

*“The word of the Lord came expressly to Ezekiel the priest, son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the Lord came upon him there”*

— Ezekiel 1:3

Not in the temple. Not in Jerusalem. In Babylon. By a river in a foreign land, among the displaced and the defeated, God opened His mouth and spoke to a priest who had lost everything except the voice of the One who called him.

What God showed him over the next twenty-two years would fill forty-eight chapters of Scripture — visions of divine glory, prophecies of judgment against Israel and the surrounding nations, warnings, lamentations, and promises so vivid they still stop readers in their tracks three thousand years later.

But the vision we are concerned with did not come early. It came late — after Jerusalem had fallen, after the temple had been destroyed, after the last ember of hope had gone cold.

Because the temple did fall.

In 586 BC, eleven years after Ezekiel was carried into exile, Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem a final time. He breached the walls. He burned the house of the Lord. He burned the king’s house. He burned every great house in the city. The army of the Chaldeans broke down the walls of

Jerusalem on every side. The bronze pillars of the temple, the bronze sea, the stands — they broke them in pieces and carried the bronze to Babylon. The pots, the shovels, the snuffers, the dishes, the firepans — everything made of gold and everything made of silver — the captain of the guard took away (2 Kings 25:8-15).

Everything. Stripped. Burned. Carried off. The place where God's presence had dwelt among His people — the building Solomon had built, that had taken seven years to construct (1 Kings 6:38), that had been the center of Israel's worship for nearly four hundred years — was reduced to ashes and rubble.

Ezekiel was sitting in Babylon when the news arrived.

He already knew it was coming. God had told him. He had acted it out in front of the exiles — lying on his side for 390 days (Ezekiel 4:4-5), building a model of Jerusalem under siege (Ezekiel 4:1-3), shaving his head and dividing the hair into thirds to symbolize the death that was coming (Ezekiel 5:1-4). He had been God's visual aid, performing the destruction in miniature before it happened in full. And when the refugees finally arrived with the report that the city had been struck, it was not news to him. It was confirmation of what God had already said (Ezekiel 33:21).

But knowing it was coming did not make it lighter. The temple was gone. The city was gone. The monarchy was gone. The land was gone. Everything that had defined Israel as a

people — the covenant markers, the physical evidence of God’s promises — was destroyed or in enemy hands.

And the people broke.

The Scripture preserves their words. Not a paraphrase. Not a summary. Their actual words, recorded so that we could hear exactly what despair sounds like when it comes from the mouth of God’s people:

*“Our bones are dried up and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off”*

— Ezekiel 37:11

Our bones are dried up. It was their own metaphor. They felt dead. They felt like there was nothing left — no marrow, no moisture, no life. They described themselves the way you would describe a skeleton that had been lying in the desert sun for years. Dry. Finished. Beyond recovery.

And God heard them say it.

*“The hand of the Lord was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones”*

— Ezekiel 37:1

God took Ezekiel’s metaphor — the people’s own language of despair — and made it visible. You say your bones are dried up? Let me show you what that looks like.

He set him down in the middle of it. Not at the edge where he could observe from a safe distance. In the middle. Surrounded. Bones in every direction.

*“He caused me to pass among them round about, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley; and lo, they were very dry”*

— Ezekiel 37:2

God walked him through. He made Ezekiel look. Not a glance, not an overview — a tour. Round about. See them. See how many there are. See how dry they are. Understand the scope of what has died here. This is not a handful of casualties. This is a nation. This is what it looks like when an entire people loses the life that held them together.

And then, standing in the middle of that silence, surrounded by the evidence of total death, God asked Ezekiel a question.

*“Son of man, can these bones live?”*

— Ezekiel 37:3

It is one of the most remarkable questions in all of Scripture — not because God didn't know the answer, but because He wanted Ezekiel to face it honestly before He revealed it. Can these bones live? Look at them. Look at how many there are. Look at how dry they are. Look at how long they have been dead. Now tell me — is there life in this valley?

Ezekiel's answer deserves to be read slowly.

“O Lord God, You know.”

He did not say yes. A man standing in a valley of dry bones, looking at the evidence with his own eyes, could not honestly say yes. Nothing in front of him suggested that life was possible. The bones were not mostly dead. They were completely dead. Very dry. Long past any natural hope of recovery.

But he did not say no. That is the other half of his answer, and it matters just as much. Ezekiel had walked with God long enough to know that the evidence in front of his eyes was not the final word. He had seen the glory of God above the river Chebar. He had eaten a scroll and found it sweet. He had watched God’s presence depart from the temple in a vision and understood that the departure was not permanent — that God does not abandon what He has made. He had been given promises of restoration that he could not yet see fulfilled.

So he gave the only honest answer available to a man who trusts God more than he trusts what he can see.

You know.

I don’t. But You do.

That question — and that answer — is where this book begins. Because the valley of dry bones is not just a story about ancient Israel. It is a picture of what happens when the life of God departs from a people. And the question God asked Ezekiel is a question that hangs over every generation that has

ever watched the bones dry out and wondered whether anything could bring them back.

Can these bones live?

The rest of this book is an attempt to answer that question the way Scripture answers it — by tracing the thread from the first breath God ever breathed into lifeless dust to the last letter Christ ever dictated to a dying church. The answer is not simple. But it is consistent. And it begins not in the valley, but much further back — in a garden, before anything had ever died at all.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Dust and Breath

Before anything ever died, God made something live.

The account is in the second chapter of Genesis, and the language is so familiar that most readers pass over it without stopping to notice what it actually describes. But the details matter here — not just for what they tell us about the first man, but for what they establish about how God has always brought life into existence.

*“Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being”*

— Genesis 2:7

Two acts. Not one. Two.

The first act is forming. God took dust — the most lifeless, common material on earth — and shaped it into a man. The Hebrew word is *yatsar*, a word used for a potter working clay. It implies deliberate craft. Careful shaping. Hands on the material, pressing and molding it into something with structure. When God finished forming, there was a body lying on the ground. It had everything a human body has — organs,

muscles, bones, a brain, a heart, lungs, eyes. It was complete. It was intricate. It was beautifully and carefully made.

And it was dead.

The text does not rush past this. It separates the forming from the breathing with a conjunction — *and* breathed into his nostrils — because these are two distinct actions. The body was finished before the breath came. The structure was complete before the life arrived. For however long that moment lasted, what lay on the ground was a masterpiece of divine craftsmanship that could not see, could not think, could not move, could not worship. It had form. It did not have life.

Then God breathed.

The Hebrew word for what God breathed into the man is *neshamah* — the breath of life. And the moment that breath entered the body, the text says the man *became* a living being. Not that he was activated, like a machine being switched on. He *became*. The breath did not animate something that was already alive in some lesser sense. It transformed lifeless material into a living person. The difference between dust and a man is the breath of God.

This is not a metaphor. This is the mechanism.

And it is not limited to Adam. The principle established in Genesis 2:7 repeats across the whole of Scripture because it was never a one-time act — it was a revelation of how God works. The forming and the breathing. The structure and the Spirit.

The body and the breath. These two together produce life. Either one without the other does not.

Elihu understood this. Speaking to Job, he said, “The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life” (Job 33:4). Elihu was not describing Adam’s creation as a historical event he was remembering. He was describing his own existence. The same breath that made Adam live was the breath sustaining Elihu. The Spirit of God was not a gift given once at the beginning and then left to run on its own. It was the ongoing, present source of life itself.

The psalmist saw it even more clearly. Psalm 104 is a meditation on God’s sustaining power over all creation — the waters, the mountains, the animals, the cycles of day and night. And in the middle of that meditation, the writer says something that should stop every reader:

*“You hide Your face, they are dismayed; You take away their spirit, they expire and return to their dust. You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; and You renew the face of the ground”*

— Psalm 104:29-30

Read that again. When God takes away His spirit, they expire — they die — and they return to dust. When God sends forth His Spirit, they are created. Life and death are not self-sustaining systems running independently of God. They are the direct result of His Spirit being present or absent. The

breath comes, and things live. The breath withdraws, and things return to what they were before the breath came.

Dust.

The Hebrew word *ruach* is essential to everything that follows in this book, so it is worth pausing here to understand it. *Ruach* is used 378 times in the Old Testament, and it carries three interlocking meanings: breath, wind, and spirit. These are not three different concepts that happen to share a word. They are three aspects of the same reality. The breath of God, the wind of God, the Spirit of God — these are all *ruach*. When Genesis 1:2 says “the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters,” the word is *ruach*. When God breathes life into Adam, the animating force is *ruach*. When Ezekiel stands in the valley and God tells him to prophesy to the breath, the word is *ruach*. It is the same word and the same power doing the same thing at every stage of the story.

This is the principle the rest of this book will trace, and it needs to be set here like a cornerstone before we build anything else on top of it:

God brings dead things to life by two means — His word and His Spirit. The word provides structure. The Spirit provides life. Both are required. The word without the Spirit assembles a body that cannot breathe. The Spirit without the word has no structure to fill. Together — and only together — they produce what neither can produce alone.

Go back to Genesis 1. Before God formed anything, the earth was formless and void and darkness was over the surface of the deep. And the Spirit of God — *ruach elohim* — was moving over the surface of the waters (Genesis 1:2). The Spirit was present before the first word was spoken. Then God spoke: “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). The word went out, and creation came into being. Psalm 33:6 pairs the two forces at work: “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host.” Word and Spirit. Voice and breath. Command and power. That is how God created light, sky, sea, land, vegetation, sun, moon, stars, fish, birds, animals, and man. Every act of creation involved both.

And every act of resurrection — every time God has brought something dead back to life — has followed the same pattern. The word is spoken. The Spirit moves. The dead thing lives.

That is what happened in the valley.

When Ezekiel prophesied to the dry bones, he was speaking God’s word — and the bones responded to the word. They assembled. Sinew and flesh and skin appeared. The structure was restored. But they did not breathe. The word had given form, but not life. Then God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the *ruach* — to the breath, the wind, the Spirit — and say, “Come from the four winds, and breathe on these slain.” And the breath came, and they stood up alive.

Form and breath. Word and Spirit. The pattern never changes because the God who established it never changes.

But there is another side to this principle, and it is the darker side — the side that explains the valley in the first place.

If life depends on the presence of God's Spirit, then death is what happens when the Spirit departs. Psalm 104 says it plainly: "You take away their spirit, they expire and return to their dust." The withdrawal of the Spirit is not a punishment administered from the outside. It is the removal of the very thing that was keeping them alive. When the breath leaves, the body returns to what it was before the breath arrived.

Dust and bones.

That is what Ezekiel saw in the valley. He was not looking at people who had been struck down by an enemy. He was looking at what remains when the life of God departs from a people. The bones were dry because the breath had been gone a long time. The silence in the valley was not the silence of a battlefield. It was the silence of a place where God's Spirit had withdrawn and nothing was left to sustain what had once been alive.

The question is not whether God can bring dry bones back to life. He can. He has. He did it in a garden with a handful of dust, and He did it in a valley with a field of bones. The question — the one that matters for every generation, including this one — is why the bones dried out in the first place.

Why did the breath leave?  
That is where we turn next.

## CHAPTER THREE

# When the Word Goes Silent

The bones in Ezekiel's valley did not appear overnight.

That is the first thing a careful reader must understand about the death that chapter describes. The dryness of those bones tells a story all by itself. Bones do not become very dry quickly. The flesh goes first — days, weeks. Then the sinew dries and pulls away. Then the moisture inside the bone itself slowly evaporates, month after month, year after year, until what remains is white and brittle and light enough for the wind to scatter. By the time a bone is very dry, the life it once carried has been gone a long time.

The death of a nation works the same way.

Israel did not wake up one morning in the valley. The bones dried out over generations — slowly, silently, one degree at a time. And the drying always began in the same place: the word of God went quiet. Not all at once. Not in a dramatic moment of national rebellion. It faded. The voice that had sustained them grew faint, and the people gradually stopped noticing it was gone.

Scripture describes this process in precise terms, and it is worth tracing the progression from the earliest warning to the final silence.

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### *The Warning*

The clearest single statement of the principle is in Proverbs 29:18.

“Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained; but happy is he who keeps the law.”

This verse has been misread so often and so thoroughly that the misreading has become more familiar than the text. In popular usage — in sermons, in leadership books, on motivational posters — “where there is no vision” has come to mean something like: where there is no strategic direction, no dream, no personal foresight, the people wander aimlessly. It has been turned into a proverb about planning. About goal-setting. About organizational leadership.

That is not what it says.

The Hebrew word translated “vision” is *chazon*. It does not mean personal vision, foresight, or strategic planning. *Chazon* is the technical term for prophetic revelation — the word of God disclosed to His people through His prophets. It is the same word used in 1 Samuel 3:1, Isaiah 1:1, and the opening of virtually every prophetic book. When Nahum

writes, “The oracle of Nineveh. The book of the *chazon* of Nahum” (Nahum 1:1), he is not describing a business plan. He is describing what God showed him. *Chazon* is God’s revealed word — His message, delivered through the men He chose to speak it.

The proverb is not about leadership. It is about revelation.

And the second half of the verse confirms it. Hebrew proverbs are built on parallelism — the two halves interpret each other. “Where there is no *chazon*, the people are unrestrained; but happy is he who keeps the law.” Vision and law. Revelation and commandment. The first half describes what happens when God’s word is absent. The second half describes what happens when God’s word is present and obeyed. The two halves are not talking about two different subjects. They are talking about the same subject from two angles.

When the prophetic word is present and the people keep it, they are blessed. When the prophetic word is absent, they *para* — they cast off restraint. The Hebrew *para* carries the sense of loosening, unbinding, letting go. It is what happens to a people whose boundaries dissolve because the voice that established the boundaries has gone silent. They do not rebel in a single dramatic act. They come undone. They scatter. They drift into whatever feels right to each person individually, because the word that held them together is no longer holding.

This is not a prediction about a distant future. It is a description of a recurring pattern. Every time God’s word has

gone silent among His people, the same thing has happened. The restraints loosen. The standards erode. The people unravel. And the drying of the bones begins.

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### *The Early Silence*

The book of 1 Samuel opens with a description that should read like a diagnosis.

*“Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord before Eli. And word from the Lord was rare in those days, visions were infrequent”*

— 1 Samuel 3:1

Two phrases, saying the same thing. Word from the Lord — rare. Visions — infrequent. The *chazon* of Proverbs 29:18 was already scarce. Not gone entirely. Rare. Infrequent. The famine was beginning, but there was still an occasional meal.

The context makes the cause painfully clear. Eli was the high priest — the man responsible for the spiritual life of the nation. His sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests serving in the tabernacle at Shiloh. And the text says of them: “Now the sons of Eli were worthless men; they did not know the Lord” (1 Samuel 2:12).

Priests who did not know the Lord.

These were not outsiders. They were not pagans who had wandered in from a foreign country. They were the sons of the high priest, serving in the house of God, wearing the priestly garments, handling the sacrifices — and they did not know the God they were supposed to serve. They took meat from the sacrifices by force before the fat was burned (1 Samuel 2:13-16). They slept with the women who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting (1 Samuel 2:22). They treated the offering of the Lord with contempt (1 Samuel 2:17).

And Eli knew. The text says he heard about everything his sons were doing (1 Samuel 2:22). He confronted them — mildly. “Why do you do such things?” (1 Samuel 2:23). But he did not remove them. He did not stop them. He let them continue serving at the altar of God while living in open defiance of everything that altar represented.

God’s assessment was blunt. He sent a man of God to Eli with this message: “Why do you kick at My sacrifice and at My offering which I have commanded in My dwelling, and honor your sons above Me?” (1 Samuel 2:29).

You honor your sons above Me.

That is the diagnosis. The word of God was rare because the men who were supposed to speak it had stopped honoring the God who gave it. The silence did not fall from heaven like a judgment. It grew up from the ground like a weed, planted by the very men who should have been tending the garden.

And into that silence — that nearly wordless era — God called a boy.

*“Then the Lord came and stood and called as at other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, for Your servant is listening.’”*

— 1 Samuel 3:10

The contrast is devastating. An old priest who honored his sons above God. A boy who said, “Speak, for Your servant is listening.” The word was rare, but it was not extinct. God found someone willing to hear.

But the larger point remains. By the time Samuel was called, the word had already become scarce. The silence was not sudden. It was the accumulated result of priests who did not know the Lord, a high priest who would not act, and a people who had grown accustomed to hearing nothing. The bones were not yet dry. But they were drying.

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### *The Famine*

What Proverbs describes as a principle and 1 Samuel records as a condition, Amos escalates into a prophecy. And the language he uses is among the most striking in the Old Testament.

*“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord God, “when I will send a famine on the land, not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the Lord. People will stagger from sea to sea and from the north even to the east; they will go to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they will not find it”*

— Amos 8:11-12

A famine. Not of food — of the word of God.

The image is deliberate and precise. In an ordinary famine, the land stops producing. The rain does not come, the crops fail, and the people starve. They know they are hungry. They search for food. They travel from place to place looking for something to eat. The suffering is visible — gaunt faces, empty storehouses, children crying.

Amos takes that image and applies it to something worse. A famine of hearing the words of the Lord. The people will stagger — the Hebrew suggests stumbling, lurching, the unsteady movement of someone disoriented and weak. They will go from sea to sea and from north to east — everywhere, in every direction — seeking the word of the Lord. And they will not find it.

This is not a famine because there is no food anywhere in the world. It is a famine because the food is gone from their land. The word of God has not ceased to exist. It has ceased to be available to them. They are hungry for it and cannot find it.

The reason this prophecy is so devastating is what comes before it. Amos has spent seven chapters documenting exactly why the famine is coming. Israel is not a nation of atheists. They are a nation of worshipers — worshipers who have separated their worship from the word of God.

*“I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”*

— Amos 5:21-24

The festivals were still happening. The assemblies were still solemn. The offerings were still being offered, and the songs were still being sung, and the harps were still playing. The external structure of worship was fully intact. And God said, “I hate it.”

He hated it because the structure had become detached from the substance. They had the form. They were going through the motions. The altars were busy and the calendar was full and the music was polished. But justice and righteousness — the things the word of God actually required — were nowhere to be found. The people were oppressing the poor (Amos 2:6-7), perverting justice in the courts (Amos 5:12), and

living in luxury while the nation rotted from the inside (Amos 6:4-6). The worship was elaborate and empty. The word had been functionally silenced even while the religious machinery kept running.

That is the condition that produces the famine. God does not remove His word from people who are clinging to it. He removes it from people who have already replaced it — who have kept the form of worship but discarded the content. The famine of the word is not the first stage of the death. It is the consequence of a process already well underway.

And by the time the famine is in full force — by the time the people are staggering from sea to sea looking for a word they can no longer find — the bones are nearly dry.

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### *The Progression*

Step back and look at the three texts together.

Proverbs 29:18 gives the principle: when the prophetic word is absent, the people cast off restraint. This is the law of spiritual gravity. It is always true, everywhere, in every generation.

First Samuel 3:1 gives the early stage: word from the Lord was rare in those days, visions were infrequent. The silence is beginning. It is not total. There is still a voice, but it is faint. The cause is visible — leaders who do not know the Lord, who

honor their own interests above God's word, who allow corruption to stand because confronting it would cost too much. The word grows rare not because God has stopped speaking, but because the people responsible for delivering it have failed.

Amos 8:11-12 gives the final stage: a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. People searching and unable to find. Staggering. Disoriented. Desperate for a word that is no longer available to them. The silence is now complete — not because there was no word, but because the word was ignored for so long that God withdrew it. The structure of worship is still standing. The buildings are open. The songs are still being sung. But the word is gone, and no one can find it, and the bones are dry.

This is the progression: scarcity, then famine, then silence, then death.

And the progression is not ancient history. It is a pattern, and patterns repeat. Every element Amos described — the elaborate worship disconnected from the word, the external structure without internal substance, the people who have religion but not revelation — exists somewhere today. The question is not whether the pattern can recur. The question is whether anyone will recognize it while the word is merely scarce, before the famine sets in.

Because there is a detail in Amos that deserves close attention. When the famine comes, the people search. They

stagger from sea to sea looking for the word of the Lord. That means they eventually realize it is gone. They eventually feel the hunger. But by then, the text says, they will not find it.

The time to seek the word is not during the famine. It is before the famine. It is while the word is still available — while it is merely rare, merely infrequent, merely being neglected rather than removed. Proverbs 29:18 is not a eulogy. It is a warning. And warnings are only useful to people who hear them before the thing they warn about arrives.

The word of God does not go silent without cause. In every case Scripture records, the silence was preceded by neglect. Someone stopped speaking. Someone stopped listening. Someone decided that the form was enough and the substance could be quietly set aside.

That is how the breath leaves. That is how the bones begin to dry.

But who was supposed to be speaking? And what happened when they stopped?

That is where we turn next.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Destroyed for Lack of Knowledge

The previous chapter traced a progression — from scarcity to famine to silence to death. The word of God went quiet, and the bones dried out. But a question was left unanswered, and it is the question that matters most for understanding why the valley exists.

Who was supposed to be speaking?

The word of God did not deliver itself. It never has. From Sinai forward, God entrusted His word to specific people and gave them the responsibility of teaching it to others. The system was not complicated. God spoke. The priests taught. The people heard and obeyed. When the system worked, the nation lived. When it broke down, the nation died.

And Scripture is remarkably specific about where the breakdown began.

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## *The Indictment*

Hosea 4 opens with a courtroom scene. God is bringing a case — not against the surrounding nations, not against Babylon or Assyria, but against His own people.

*“Listen to the word of the Lord, O sons of Israel, for the Lord has a case against the inhabitants of the land, because there is no faithfulness or kindness or knowledge of God in the land”*

— Hosea 4:1

Three things are missing. Faithfulness. Kindness. Knowledge of God. These are not three unrelated virtues that happen to appear in the same sentence. They are cause and effect. When the knowledge of God disappears, faithfulness goes with it. When faithfulness goes, kindness follows. The root is knowledge — not knowledge in the abstract, not awareness that God exists, but the deep, intimate, covenantal knowledge of who God is, what He requires, and what He has said. That knowledge was gone. And everything built on it collapsed.

What replaced it was the opposite. “There is swearing, deception, murder, stealing and adultery. They employ violence, so that bloodshed follows bloodshed” (Hosea 4:2). The catalog is not random. These are violations of the Ten Commandments — the foundational words God spoke to Israel at Sinai. The people were not breaking obscure ceremonial regulations. They were breaking the most basic,

most clearly stated commands God had ever given. And they were doing it so routinely that violence had become the norm.

“Therefore the land mourns, and everyone who lives in it languishes” (Hosea 4:3). The land itself was affected. The death was not confined to the spiritual — it was showing up in the physical world. The creation was groaning under the weight of a people who had abandoned the knowledge of their Creator.

And then God names the cause.

*“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children”*

— Hosea 4:6

Every word in that verse matters, and the verse has been so often quoted in isolation that its sharpest edge has been dulled by familiarity. So look at it carefully.

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” Not the pagans. Not the Philistines or the Moabites. *My people*. The ones who bore God’s name. The ones who had the covenant, the law, the temple, the priesthood, the prophets. They were the most resourced people on earth when it came to the knowledge of God. They had everything they needed. And they were being destroyed — not for lack of resources, but for lack of knowledge.

“Because you have rejected knowledge.” This is the line that changes everything. The knowledge was not unavailable. It

was rejected. The Hebrew word is *maas* — to refuse, to spurn, to throw away. This is not ignorance in the sense of never having heard. This is the deliberate refusal of something that was offered. The knowledge was there. It was accessible. And it was pushed away.

“I also will reject you from being My priest.” Now the target becomes specific. God is speaking to the priests. The “you” in this sentence is not the general population — it is the priesthood. The priests rejected knowledge, and God’s response is to reject them from the very office they were supposed to fill. The punishment fits the crime with devastating precision. You would not teach? Then you will not serve. You rejected the knowledge you were supposed to deliver? Then I reject you from the position that required you to deliver it.

“Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.” Forgotten. Not lost. Not stolen. Forgotten — the way a person forgets something that used to matter to them but no longer does. The priests had the law. They knew it once. And they let it slip away, gradually, until it was no longer part of their thinking, their teaching, or their lives. And God’s response is proportional: you forgot My law, I will forget your children. The consequences will outlast you. The death you are causing will extend beyond your generation.

This is the anatomy of the valley. The bones did not dry out because God abandoned His people without warning.

They dried out because the men God appointed to teach His word stopped teaching it — and then actively rejected it — and then forgot it entirely. The silence of God’s word in the land was not a drought sent from heaven. It was a dereliction of duty by the men standing in the pulpit.

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### *The Job Description*

If Hosea describes the failure, Malachi describes what was supposed to happen.

The book of Malachi is the last prophetic voice in the Old Testament. After Malachi, the *chazon* — the prophetic revelation — went silent for four hundred years until John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness. Malachi is God’s final word before the long silence, and a significant portion of it is directed at the priests.

*“For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts”*

— Malachi 2:7

That is the job description. Three things.

First: the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge. The word “preserve” in Hebrew is *shamar* — to keep, to guard, to watch over. It is the same word used in Genesis 2:15 when God

placed Adam in the garden “to cultivate it and keep it.” The priest was a guardian of knowledge the same way Adam was a guardian of the garden. The knowledge was entrusted to him. It was not his to create, modify, or discard. It was his to protect and to pass on intact.

Second: men should seek instruction from his mouth. The people were supposed to come to the priest for teaching. That was the design. The priest was not merely a ceremonial figure who performed rituals — he was a teacher. His primary function, beyond the sacrifices, was to know the word of God and to teach it to the people who came seeking it. When a question arose about the law, the priest was the one who was supposed to have the answer — not his own opinion, not the conventional wisdom, but the word of God.

Third: he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. The priest was not speaking for himself. He was a messenger — the Hebrew word is *malak*, the same word used for angels. The priest carried a message that was not his own. His authority came not from his education, his personality, or his position, but from the fact that he was delivering the words of the Lord of hosts. When he spoke faithfully, God spoke through him. When he stopped speaking faithfully, the message stopped.

That is what a priest was supposed to be. A guardian of knowledge. A teacher of the word. A messenger of God.

Now look at what Malachi says happened.

*“But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by the instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi”*

— Malachi 2:8

Three failures, answering the three responsibilities.

They turned aside from the way. The guardians of knowledge left the path they were supposed to guard.

They caused many to stumble by the instruction. The teachers did not merely stop teaching — they taught wrongly. The instruction itself became a stumbling block. The people came seeking the word of God and received something else, and it caused them to fall.

They corrupted the covenant of Levi. The messengers of God corrupted the very covenant that gave them their authority. The priesthood — the office God established to preserve and transmit His word — was hollowed out from the inside by the men who held it.

The result: “So I also have made you despised and abased before all the people, just as you are not keeping My ways but are showing partiality in the instruction” (Malachi 2:9).

Showing partiality in the instruction. They were selective. They taught what was convenient and omitted what was not. They gave the people the parts of God’s word that were comfortable and left out the parts that would have required change. The instruction was not absent — it was edited. And

edited instruction is not the word of God. It is the word of man dressed in God's clothing.

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### *The Partnership*

Hosea identifies the priests as the source of the failure. Malachi defines what they were supposed to do and how they fell short. But Jeremiah adds a detail that is perhaps the most uncomfortable of all.

*“An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their own authority; and My people love it so! But what will you do at the end of it?”*

— Jeremiah 5:30-31

Three parties. Three failures. And a question.

The prophets prophesy falsely. The men who were supposed to speak God's word were speaking their own — and calling it God's. This is not silence. This is worse than silence. A silent prophet leaves a void. A false prophet fills the void with lies and stamps God's name on them. The people think they are hearing from God when they are hearing from a man, and they cannot tell the difference because the false word comes through the same office, in the same tone, with the same authority as the true word once did.

The priests rule on their own authority. The Hebrew here is vivid — the priests ruled “at their hands,” meaning by their own power, their own direction, their own agenda. They were not serving under God’s authority. They were exercising their own. The office that was supposed to submit to the word of God had become a platform for personal power. The priesthood was no longer about delivering God’s message. It was about controlling the institution.

And then the third line — the one that should sit heaviest.  
My people love it so.

The people loved it. They preferred the false prophets to the true ones. They preferred priests who ruled on their own authority to priests who demanded obedience to God’s word. The comfortable lie was more welcome than the uncomfortable truth.

This is not a passage about corrupt leaders deceiving innocent victims. It is a passage about a partnership. The leaders gave the people what they wanted, and the people rewarded them for it. The prophets prophesied falsely because false prophecy was popular. The priests ruled on their own authority because the people preferred human authority to divine authority. The system worked — not for God, but for everyone who had decided that God’s actual word was too demanding, too narrow, too inconvenient to live by.

And God’s question at the end is not rhetorical. “But what will you do at the end of it?” What happens when the

false words run out? What happens when the authority that was not God's collapses? What happens when the system that everyone loved stops working and the only thing left is the truth that was rejected?

The valley. That is what happens at the end of it. Dry bones.

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### *The Pattern*

Hosea, Malachi, and Jeremiah are three prophets writing at different times to different audiences. But they are describing the same disease, and it always progresses the same way.

It begins with the leaders. The priests stop guarding the knowledge. The prophets start speaking on their own authority. The word of God is not lost in a single dramatic moment — it is gradually replaced by something that looks similar but carries no life. The instruction continues, but it is partial. The prophecy continues, but it is false. The office continues, but the messenger has changed the message.

Then the people adapt. They grow accustomed to the edited word. They begin to prefer it. The full word of God requires things of them — repentance, obedience, sacrifice, change. The partial word requires nothing but attendance. Given the choice, most people will choose the version that costs

them the least. Jeremiah says they loved it. Not tolerated it. Not accepted it reluctantly. Loved it.

And then the silence comes. Not because God had nothing to say, but because the people who were supposed to say it had replaced His words with their own, and the people who were supposed to hear it had stopped wanting the real thing.

That is the full picture of how the word goes silent. It is not a single failure by a single group. It is a system failure — leaders who will not speak, teachers who edit, prophets who fabricate, and a people who prefer the counterfeit to the genuine. When all of these converge, the word disappears from the land. And when the word disappears, the bones dry.

Chapter 3 asked why the breath left. This chapter has answered the first half: the word was abandoned by the people God appointed to deliver it. But there is a scene in the Old Testament that shows this failure more vividly than any prophetic indictment — a scene so specific, so concrete, that it needs no interpretation. The book of the law was physically present in the house of God, and no one was reading it.

That is where we turn next.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# The Book Lost in the Temple

The previous two chapters have traced the cause of the silence in general terms — the principle (Proverbs 29:18), the progression (1 Samuel 3, Amos 8), the guilty parties (Hosea 4, Malachi 2, Jeremiah 5). The prophets identified the disease. They named the symptoms. They pointed at the priests and the people and said: this is why the bones are drying out.

But there is a moment in the Old Testament where the failure is not described in prophetic language. It is not a metaphor. It is not a vision or an oracle. It is a scene — a specific event, recorded in plain narrative, involving real people in a real building — that makes the abstract concrete. And it may be the most devastating passage in the Old Testament for understanding how a people who possess the word of God can still die for lack of it.

The book of the law was inside the temple. And no one was reading it.

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## *The King Who Was Different*

The story begins with a boy.

“Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem” (2 Kings 22:1). Eight years old. A child on the throne of David, inheriting a kingdom that had been spiritually gutted by the two kings who preceded him.

His grandfather was Manasseh — the king who reigned longer than any other in Judah’s history (fifty-five years) and who did more damage than any of them. Manasseh rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had torn down. He erected altars for Baal. He made an Asherah pole and put it in the temple — in the house where God’s name was supposed to dwell. He built altars to the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord. He practiced witchcraft and divination. He made his son pass through the fire. And the text says he “seduced them to do evil more than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the sons of Israel” (2 Kings 21:9). More than the nations God had driven out of the land to make room for Israel. The king of God’s people led them to become worse than the pagans they had replaced.

His father was Amon — who reigned only two years before his own servants assassinated him. The text gives Amon’s summary in a single sentence: “He did evil in the sight of the Lord, as Manasseh his father had done” (2 Kings 21:20). Two years of the same corruption, cut short by murder.

That is the legacy Josiah inherited. Two generations of deliberate, systematic dismantling of everything God had established. The high places were active. The idols were in place. The temple had been converted into a house of syncretism — a building that still bore God’s name but served other gods. And the boy who sat on the throne had no living memory of anything different.

What Josiah did next has no natural explanation.

*“He did right in the sight of the Lord and walked in all the way of his father David, nor did he turn aside to the right or to the left”*

— 2 Kings 22:2

No one taught him this. His grandfather was the worst king in Judah’s history. His father was an echo of the same evil. The priests, as Hosea and Malachi have shown, had long since stopped faithfully teaching the word. There was no national movement toward God. There was no revival sweeping the land that carried Josiah along with it. He turned to God in the middle of a culture that had turned away — and the text gives no human explanation for why.

In the eighth year of his reign, when he was sixteen years old, “he began to seek the God of his father David” (2 Chronicles 34:3). In the twelfth year, he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the Asherim, the carved images, and the molten images. He tore down the altars of the Baals. He cut the incense altars that were above them. He broke

the Asherim and the carved and molten images into pieces and ground them to dust and scattered it on the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. He burned the bones of the priests on their altars (2 Chronicles 34:3-5).

This was not a cautious reform. This was demolition. A young king tearing down with his own hands the entire religious infrastructure his grandfather had built over five decades. The text lists the destruction in detail because the scope of it matters — this was not trimming around the edges. This was a man who had seen the rot and was pulling it out by the roots.

And then, in the eighteenth year of his reign — when Josiah was twenty-six years old — he turned his attention to the temple itself.

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### *The Discovery*

The temple was in disrepair. That is worth pausing over. The house of God — the building Solomon had constructed with cedarwood and gold, the place where the ark of the covenant rested, the physical center of Israel's relationship with their Creator — needed repairs. It had been neglected. The building where God's presence was supposed to dwell had been left to deteriorate while the high places and the idol shrines were maintained and active.

Josiah sent Shaphan the scribe to the temple with instructions to take the money that had been collected and give it to the workers to repair the house of the Lord (2 Kings 22:3-6). It was a practical matter — fund the repairs, fix the building, restore the structure. Josiah was doing what a faithful king should do. He was putting the house of God back in order.

And then something happened that changed everything.

*“Then Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the scribe,  
I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord”*

— 2 Kings 22:8

He found it.

The high priest of Israel found the book of the law. Inside the temple. He *found* it — the way you find something that has been misplaced, something that no one has been looking for, something that has been sitting in a place where it should have been obvious but was not being used.

The book of the law. The foundational document of Israel’s covenant with God. The words God spoke at Sinai and through Moses. The instructions for worship, for justice, for community, for priesthood, for sacrifice, for everything that defined Israel as a people set apart for God. That book. In the temple. And finding it was news worth reporting.

This means no one had been reading it. Not recently. Not for a long time. The high priest did not say, “I found the book

of the law where we always keep it — here, let me pull it out for the reading.” He announced the discovery as if it were unexpected. The book had been physically present in the building, and no one had opened it. No one had taught from it. No one had read it aloud to the people. The very document that was supposed to govern every aspect of Israel’s life with God had been sitting in God’s house, gathering dust, while the nation deteriorated around it.

Think about what that means.

Every priest who served in that temple walked past the book of the law. Every sacrifice offered on that altar was offered by men who had access to the instructions and did not consult them. Every festival, every ceremony, every act of worship that took place in that building happened within arm’s reach of the word of God — and no one picked it up.

The word was not hidden. It was not stolen. It was not destroyed by enemies. It was right there. In the building. In the place where it was most needed and most relevant and most obviously supposed to be in use. And it was ignored.

This is what Hosea meant when he said the knowledge was *rejected*. This is what Malachi meant when he said the priests stopped preserving knowledge. This is what Jeremiah meant when he said the priests ruled on their own authority. The book of the law lost in the temple is the concrete, narrative evidence of every prophetic indictment in the previous chapter. It is the crime scene.

### *The Response*

Shaphan took the book to the king. And he read it in the king's presence (2 Kings 22:10). Whatever portion he read — and many scholars believe it was the book of Deuteronomy, based on the specific responses it provoked — the effect was immediate.

*“When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes”*

— 2 Kings 22:11

Tearing the garments was the sign of grief, horror, and mourning in ancient Israel. It was not a casual gesture. It was what a man did when he received news of death, or when he recognized the full weight of a catastrophe. Josiah heard the words of God and understood instantly how far the nation had fallen. He did not need a commentary. He did not need a committee to study the implications. The words themselves carried the weight. He heard them, and he tore his clothes.

Then he spoke, and what he said is among the most honest statements any king ever made:

*“Go, inquire of the Lord for me and the people and all Judah concerning the words of this book that has been found, for great is the wrath of the Lord that burns against us, because our fathers have not listened to the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us”*

— 2 Kings 22:13

Notice what he did not say. He did not say, “This book is outdated.” He did not say, “Times have changed and we need to reinterpret this for our context.” He did not say, “Our fathers must have had good reasons for setting it aside.” He said: our fathers did not listen to the words of this book. They did not do what it says. And the wrath of God is burning against us because of it.

Josiah did what the priests should have been doing for generations. He took the word of God at face value. He measured the nation’s conduct against it. And when he saw the gap between what God had said and what the people were doing, he did not adjust the word to fit the behavior. He recognized the behavior as the problem.

His response was immediate and comprehensive. He gathered all the people — the elders of Judah and Jerusalem, the priests, the prophets, all the inhabitants from the small to the great — and he went up to the house of the Lord. And there, in front of everyone, “he read in their hearing all the

words of the book of the covenant which was found in the house of the Lord” (2 Kings 23:2).

He read the whole thing. Out loud. To everyone.

The word that had been silent was spoken again. The book that had been collecting dust in the temple was opened and read to the nation. And the king “made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord, and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to carry out the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people entered into the covenant” (2 Kings 23:3).

Word spoken. People respond. Covenant renewed. The pattern from the previous chapters — the word goes out, and the dead begin to stir.

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### *The Limit*

Josiah’s reform was real. It was thorough. It was the most sweeping national repentance recorded in the books of Kings. He removed the idolatrous priests. He broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes. He defiled the high places. He destroyed the altar at Bethel that Jeroboam had built — the altar that had divided Israel’s worship for three centuries. He kept a Passover so comprehensive that the text says, “Surely such a Passover had not been celebrated from the days of the

judges who judged Israel, nor in all the days of the kings of Israel and of the kings of Judah” (2 Kings 23:22).

The word was spoken. The nation responded. The bones rattled.

But the damage was too deep.

*“However, the Lord did not turn from the fierceness of His great wrath with which His anger burned against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked Him”*

— 2 Kings 23:26

Josiah’s reform was genuine, but it could not undo the accumulated judgment that generations of rejection had earned. Manasseh’s fifty-five years of systematic destruction, Amon’s continuation of the same, the decades of priestly failure, the people who had loved the false prophets and the edited instruction — the roots went too deep. Josiah tore down the visible structures of idolatry. He could not uproot what had been planted in the hearts of a people who had lived without the word of God for so long that they no longer knew what it demanded.

And when Josiah died — killed in battle at Megiddo when he was thirty-nine years old (2 Kings 23:29) — the reform died with him. His son Jehoahaz reigned three months and “did evil in the sight of the Lord” (2 Kings 23:32). His son Jehoiakim reigned eleven years and “did evil in the sight of the Lord” (2 Kings 23:37). His son Jehoiachin reigned three months and

“did evil” (2 Kings 24:9). And then Zedekiah — the last king — reigned eleven years, did evil, and watched Nebuchadnezzar burn the temple to the ground (2 Kings 25:8-9).

The temple where the book of the law had been found — and lost, and found again — was destroyed. The building was gone. The priesthood was scattered. The nation was carried into exile. And a generation later, Ezekiel stood in a valley full of dry bones.

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### *The Weight*

Josiah’s story is not a story of failure. It is a story of what happens when one man takes the word of God seriously in a culture that has abandoned it. It is proof that the word still has power — that when it is read, it convicts, and when it convicts, it can move a nation to repentance. The book was in the temple the whole time. The answer was in the building. And the moment someone opened it and read it aloud, things began to change.

But it is also a warning. The reform did not outlast the reformer. One generation heard the word and responded. The next generation returned to the silence. The pattern of death that had been building for decades was interrupted — but not reversed. The bones rattled, but the breath did not come. Structure stirred, but life did not take hold. Josiah spoke the

word, but the Spirit that would raise the dead to permanent life was not yet given — not in the way it would be given later, when God Himself would promise to put His Spirit within His people and cause them to walk in His statutes (Ezekiel 36:27).

The book lost in the temple is a picture that should follow the reader through the rest of this study. Because the question it raises is not an ancient one. It is a present one.

Is the book still being read?

Not whether the book exists. It exists. Not whether people own copies. They own copies — more copies than any generation in history. The question is whether it is being opened, and read, and heard, and obeyed — or whether it is sitting within arm's reach in a building that bears God's name, while the people inside go about their worship without ever consulting the words that are supposed to govern it.

Josiah found the book. And when he read it, he tore his clothes.

When was the last time the word of God produced that response?

The cause of the death has been established. The word went silent. The priests stopped teaching. The people stopped listening. The book was in the temple and no one opened it. The bones dried out over generations, one degree at a time, until the valley was all that remained.

But God did not leave Ezekiel in the valley just to show him the death. He brought him there to show him the remedy. And the remedy begins the same way it has always begun — with a voice.

“Prophesy over these bones.”

That is where we turn next.

## CHAPTER SIX

# Prophecy to These Bones

For three chapters, this book has been standing over the dead.

Chapter 3 traced the silence — the word of God growing rare, then scarce, then absent altogether. Chapter 4 named the guilty — the priests who stopped teaching, the prophets who spoke falsely, the people who preferred it that way. Chapter 5 showed the evidence — the book of the law sitting inside the temple while no one read it, and a boy king who tore his clothes when he finally heard the words.

The cause of the death has been established. The word went silent. The breath departed. And what remained was a valley full of bones — very many, very dry.

But God did not bring Ezekiel to the valley to give him a diagnosis. He brought him there to show him a remedy. And the remedy begins exactly where every act of creation and restoration in Scripture has always begun.

With a voice.

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## *The Command*

*“Again He said to me, ‘Prophesy over these bones and say to them, “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord””*

— Ezekiel 37:4

God did not begin with the Spirit. He did not send the breath first. He sent the word. And He did not speak the word Himself — He commanded Ezekiel to speak it. Prophecy over these bones. Say to them. The prophet was to be the instrument through which God’s word reached the dead.

This matters for a reason the text does not pause to explain but the pattern demands. Before Sinai, God spoke directly to individuals — to Adam in the garden, to Noah before the flood, to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob by name. But from Sinai forward, when God established a nation and gave it a covenant, He entrusted His word to human agents for delivery. God spoke to Moses, and Moses spoke to the people. God gave the law to the priests, and the priests taught the people. God spoke through the prophets, and the prophets declared the message to the nation. The system was built on transmission — God’s word given to a man, and that man commanded to speak it faithfully to others.

Ezekiel was standing in a valley of bones that existed precisely because the human instruments had failed. The priests had stopped teaching. The prophets had spoken falsely. The kings had not read the book. The entire system of

transmission had broken down, and the death that surrounded Ezekiel was the result.

And God's remedy for the failure of human instruments was not to abandon the system. It was to call another instrument and say: Prophesy. Speak My word. Say it to the dead.

The command itself reveals something about the nature of God's word that runs deeper than this single passage. God told Ezekiel to speak to bones. Dry bones. Not to people who were struggling. Not to a remnant that still had some life in them. To bones — objects that had no capacity to hear, no ears to receive, no minds to process, no will to respond. The word was to be spoken to things that could not, by any natural measure, do anything with it.

This is not how human communication works. A man does not speak to something that cannot hear and expect results. But God's word is not human communication. Isaiah said it plainly:

*“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it”*

— Isaiah 55:10-11

God's word accomplishes what He sends it to do. It does not depend on the receptivity of the audience. It does not require pre-existing conditions of life or awareness in the hearer. It goes out, and it does what it was sent to do. When God told Ezekiel to speak to dry bones, He was not asking Ezekiel to attempt something hopeful. He was deploying the same power that called light out of darkness and formed the world out of nothing.

The word is not an invitation to the dead. It is a command over death.

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### *The Promise*

The word God told Ezekiel to speak was not vague. It was specific, and it described exactly what would happen — in sequence.

*“Thus says the Lord God to these bones, ‘Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the Lord’”*

— Ezekiel 37:5-6

Read the sequence carefully. God describes two things: structure and breath. And He describes them in order.

First the sinews. Then the flesh. Then the skin. Then the breath. First the body is rebuilt. Then the life is given. The same order as Genesis 2:7 — forming first, breathing second. God is telling Ezekiel in advance that the restoration will follow the same pattern as the creation.

And the purpose is stated at the end: “you will know that I am the Lord.” The restoration is not merely physical. It is revelatory. The people who were dead will be brought to life so that they will *know* — not hope, not guess, not wonder — that the one who did this is the Lord. The act of restoration is itself an act of revelation. God proves who He is by doing what only He can do.

This is the same principle that operated in creation. When God formed man from dust and breathed life into him, the man did not wake up confused about who made him. He woke up in the presence of his Creator. The life itself was the introduction. And in the valley, when the bones come to life, the life itself will be the proof that God is God.

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### *The Response*

*“So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone”*

— Ezekiel 37:7

Ezekiel did not hesitate. He did not question the logic of speaking to bones. He did not modify the message or add his own commentary. He prophesied as he was commanded. The Hebrew is direct — he did what he was told, in the way he was told to do it.

And the bones responded.

There was a noise. A rattling. The Hebrew word *raash* suggests a shaking, a trembling, a commotion. The silence of the valley — the silence that had defined it, the silence of death so old it had become the landscape — was broken by the sound of bones moving. The word went out, and the first thing it produced was sound where there had been none.

Then structure. Bone came together, bone to its bone. Not randomly. Not in disordered heaps. Each bone found its partner — the femur to the hip, the rib to the spine, the skull to the vertebrae. The word of God did not just move things. It organized them. It assembled them in the right order, each piece in its proper place, because the word carries within it the design of the Creator who spoke it.

“And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew and skin covered them” (Ezekiel 37:8a).

Sinews — the connective tissue that binds bone to bone and bone to muscle. Then flesh — the muscle itself, the substance that gives the body its strength and shape. Then skin — the covering, the boundary, the completion of the external

form. Layer by layer, in the exact sequence God had promised in verse 6, the bodies were rebuilt.

And at this point, anyone watching would have seen something that looked like victory. The valley that had been covered with scattered, dry, disconnected bones was now filled with bodies. Complete bodies. Reassembled. Covered in skin. They looked like an army. They looked like the restoration God had promised.

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### *The Silence*

“But there was no breath in them” (Ezekiel 37:8b).

Seven words. And they carry more weight than the entire restoration that preceded them.

The bodies were complete. Every structure was in place. The sinews connected the bones. The flesh covered the sinews. The skin wrapped the flesh. Anatomically, there was nothing missing. If you could have examined one of those bodies, you would have found everything a human body is supposed to have — every organ, every system, every component in its proper location.

And they were dead.

The text goes out of its way to make this point. It does not say “and they were almost alive” or “and they began to stir.” It says there was no breath in them. None. The word had done

everything the word was designed to do. It had assembled. It had organized. It had restored the structure from scattered bones to complete bodies. And the result of the word alone — without the Spirit — was a valley full of corpses.

This is the hinge of the entire book.

The word is necessary. Without it, the bones stay scattered. Without it, there is no structure, no order, no form. The word is the indispensable first step. Nothing happens without the word.

But the word was never meant to work alone. God did not design one act. He designed two. The word does exactly what God sends it to do — it assembles, it organizes, it builds the structure that life requires. And then the breath comes. Not because the word failed, but because God has always brought life through two means, and neither one replaces the other.

Structure is not life. Order is not breath. A body that has every component in the right place but no breath in its lungs is not a living person — it is a corpse in good condition. And a people who have the word of God accurately assembled — the right doctrine, the right structure, the right order — but no Spirit animating it are not a living body. They are Ezekiel 37:8. Complete. Covered. Correct.

And dead.

This is what God wanted Ezekiel to see. Not just the power of the word — that was demonstrated in the rattling, the assembling, the sinews and flesh and skin. God wanted

Ezekiel to see the *limit* of the word without the Spirit. He wanted the prophet to stand in a valley full of perfectly assembled bodies and understand that the job was not finished. The word had done its work. But the breath had not yet come.

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### *The Pause*

There is a pause between verse 8 and verse 9 that the text does not measure but the reader must feel. Ezekiel has prophesied. The bones have assembled. The bodies are complete. And now he is standing in a valley full of the dead — not scattered dead, not ancient dead, but newly assembled dead. Whole. Intact. Lifeless.

The silence in the valley is different now than it was at the beginning. When Ezekiel first arrived, the silence was the silence of a place that had been dead a long time — bones bleached by the sun, scattered by the wind, undisturbed. That was the silence of abandonment.

This silence is worse. This is the silence of a body that looks like it should be breathing and is not. This is the silence of a form that has everything it needs except the one thing that would make it alive. The first silence was the silence of death. This silence is the silence of death that has been given a shape.

And it is in this silence — not in the rattling, not in the assembling — that the deepest lesson of the valley sits.

Because this silence is not unique to Ezekiel's vision. It is the silence of every place where the word of God has been accurately assembled but the Spirit has not been given or received. It is the silence of correct doctrine without living faith. It is the silence of proper order without the breath of God. It is the silence of a body that looks alive and is not.

Jesus would later give this condition a name when He wrote to the church at Sardis: "You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead" (Revelation 3:1).

That is Ezekiel 37:8 in a single sentence.

The word had done its work. The structure was in place. But the breath had not come.

And until the breath comes, the dead do not stand.

That is where we turn next.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Breathe on These Slain

The valley is full of bodies.

That is where the previous chapter left us — standing with Ezekiel in a silence worse than the one he walked into. The first silence was the silence of old death, of bones that had been scattered and dry for so long they had become part of the landscape. That silence was terrible, but it was at least honest. It looked like what it was.

This silence is different. The word has been spoken. The bones have assembled. Sinew and flesh and skin have covered them. The valley that was littered with scattered remains now holds what looks like a great company of men — whole, intact, complete in every visible way. If a man had walked into the valley at this moment and seen the bodies lying there, he might have thought they were sleeping. They had form. They had structure. They had everything.

Except life.

“*But there was no breath in them*”

— Ezekiel 37:8

The word had done its work. The first act was finished. And the bodies were still dead.

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### *The Second Command*

*“Then He said to me, ‘Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, “Thus says the Lord God, ‘Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they come to life’””*

— Ezekiel 37:9

The first time, God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. This time, he is told to prophesy to the breath.

The difference matters. When Ezekiel spoke to the bones, he was speaking the word of God to dead material — and the material responded. The bones assembled. The structure appeared. The word produced what the word was designed to produce. But the word was not the only thing God intended to send. The word was the first act. The breath is the second.

And the Hebrew word in this verse demands attention, because it is doing something that no English translation can fully capture.

The word is *ruach*.

It has appeared in this book before. Chapter 2 introduced it — breath, wind, spirit — three interlocking meanings that are not three different concepts sharing a word but three

aspects of the same reality. But nowhere in the Old Testament does the triple meaning of *ruach* converge more visibly than in this single verse.

“Prophesy to the *ruach*” — the breath. The life-force that animates a body.

“Come from the four *ruchot*” — the winds. The invisible, powerful movement of air from every direction.

“And breathe on these slain” — the Spirit. The presence of God Himself, doing what only God can do.

Breath, wind, and Spirit — all three meanings present in one sentence, working together in one act, producing one result. Ezekiel is told to call on the breath of life to come from the four winds — from every direction, from everywhere at once — and to breathe on the slain so that they live. The life that is about to enter these bodies is not coming from inside them. It is not a property they possess that needs to be restarted. It is coming from outside — from the four winds, from the *ruach* of God — and it will enter them as a gift.

This is exactly what happened in the garden.

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### *The Verb*

Genesis 2:7 — “The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.”

The Hebrew verb for what God did to Adam is *naphach* — to blow, to breathe out. It describes an intimate, direct, personal act. God did not speak life into Adam from a distance the way He spoke light into existence. He leaned close. He breathed into the man’s nostrils. The word carries the image of mouth near face, breath passing from one person to another. It is the most personal act of creation recorded in Scripture.

In Ezekiel 37:9, when God tells Ezekiel to say “breathe on these slain,” the Hebrew verb is the same. *Naphach*. Blow. Breathe out. The breath that is being called from the four winds to enter these bodies is performing the same act, using the same word, that God performed when He knelt over a lifeless form in a garden and breathed a man into existence.

The text is not being subtle. It is not drawing a loose analogy. It is using the same verb to describe the same act because it is the same act. What God did to one body in Genesis 2, He is doing to a nation in Ezekiel 37. The scale is different — one man, then an army. The setting is different — a garden, then a valley. But the mechanism is identical. Form the structure. Breathe the life. The body that was dead becomes a living being.

And this is where a detail from the Greek translation of the Old Testament becomes essential.

When the Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek — the translation known as the Septuagint, completed roughly two centuries before Christ — they had to

choose a Greek word for *naphach*. In both Genesis 2:7 and Ezekiel 37:9, the word they chose was *emphysaō* — to blow into, to breathe upon. The word appears elsewhere in the Septuagint in contexts of blowing fire or wrath, but in these two passages — the two moments where God’s breath brings life to the lifeless — the translators used the same Greek verb.

That word — *emphysaō* — appears in the New Testament exactly once. And where it appears changes everything.

But that comes later in this chapter. First, the breath must enter the valley.

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### *The Dead Stand*

*“So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army”*

— Ezekiel 37:10

Ezekiel prophesied as he was commanded. Again — as in verse 7 — the text notes that he did what he was told, in the way he was told. He did not improvise. He did not add to the message or subtract from it. He spoke what God gave him to speak, to the audience God told him to address.

And the breath came.

Not gradually. Not partially. The text does not describe a slow awakening — first one body stirring, then another, then a

few more. The breath came into them. All of them. The *ruach* that was called from the four winds entered every body in the valley, and they came to life.

And they stood.

That single word carries the weight of the entire vision. They did not simply begin to breathe. They did not lie on the ground gasping and weak. They stood — on their feet, upright, the posture of the living. The Hebrew word is *amad* — to stand, to take one's place, to be established. These were not invalids recovering from a long illness. They were an army taking the field. The text says *exceedingly great* — the Hebrew construction is emphatic, stacking words for magnitude. Not just a company. Not just an army. An exceedingly great army. What had been a valley of scattered, dry, ancient death was now a host of the living, standing at attention, filled with the breath of God.

The contrast with verse 8 is total. One verse earlier, the bodies were complete and lifeless. Now they are complete and alive. The only difference between verse 8 and verse 10 is the breath. The structure did not change. Nothing was added to the anatomy. No organ was missing in verse 8 that was supplied in verse 10. The bodies were the same. The breath made them live.

This is Genesis 2:7 replayed at national scale. One man formed from dust, then breathing — now a nation reassembled from bones, then breathing. The same two acts. The same

sequence. The same result. The dust became a living being. The bones became an exceedingly great army. And in both cases, the dividing line between death and life was not structure. It was breath.

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### *The Interpretation*

God does not leave the vision to the reader's imagination. He tells Ezekiel exactly what it means.

*“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 has perished. We are completely cut off””*

— Ezekiel 37:11

The bones are Israel. God says it plainly. And He reaches back to the words the people themselves spoke — the words from the beginning of this book, the words that prompted the vision in the first place. “Our bones are dried up and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off.” The people had diagnosed themselves. They felt dead. They felt finished. They described themselves the way you would describe a skeleton lying in the desert — dry, hopeless, severed from everything that had given them life.

And God heard their diagnosis and said: Yes. That is exactly what you look like. Let me show you.

But the vision was not given to confirm the diagnosis. It was given to answer it.

*“Therefore prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken and done it,” declares the Lord”*

— Ezekiel 37:12-14

Three acts, each one building on the one before.

First: I will open your graves and cause you to come up. The death is not permanent. The valley is not the end. God will reverse what has been done — not by pretending the death did not happen, but by reaching into the place of death and pulling His people out of it.

Second: I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life. Not just resurrection as an event, but life as a condition. The Spirit — the *ruach* — placed inside them. Not hovering above. Not passing through. Within. This is not the breath breathed into Adam’s nostrils from outside. This is the Spirit

placed inside, making its home in the people of God. And the result is the same: they come to life.

Third: I will place you on your own land. The restoration is not only spiritual. It is concrete. The people who were exiled — who lost their land, their temple, their identity as a nation — will be returned. God will put them back where they belong.

And the refrain that runs through all three acts is the same: “Then you will know that I am the Lord.” The purpose of the restoration is revelation. God is not merely fixing a problem. He is proving who He is. The people who were dead will be brought to life so that they will know — with the certainty that comes from having experienced it — that the one who did this is the Lord. The act of giving life is itself the evidence of God’s identity. No one else can do this. No one else ever has.

But there is a phrase in verse 14 that connects this passage forward to something that had not yet happened when Ezekiel spoke — and when it did happen, it changed everything.

“I will put My Spirit within you.”

The Spirit within. Not among. Not upon. Within.

In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God came upon certain people for certain tasks — upon judges to deliver Israel, upon kings to lead, upon prophets to speak. But the Spirit upon was selective and often temporary. It came for a purpose and could depart when the purpose was fulfilled — or when

the person failed. Saul is the clearest example: “The Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul” (1 Samuel 16:14). The Spirit came upon him and the Spirit left him. It was not permanently within.

What God promises in Ezekiel 37:14 is different. “I will put My Spirit within you.” This is the same promise He made one chapter earlier, in the passage that immediately precedes the valley vision: “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (Ezekiel 36:27). The Spirit within — not visiting, not resting upon for a season, but placed inside, permanently, causing obedience from the inside out.

That promise was not fulfilled in Ezekiel’s lifetime. It was not fulfilled when the exiles returned to the land under Zerubbabel, or when the temple was rebuilt, or when the walls of Jerusalem were restored under Nehemiah. The people returned to the land, but the Spirit within — the permanent, indwelling presence of God that would cause them to walk in His statutes — waited for another day.

It waited for a room in Jerusalem, and a sound like a violent rushing wind.

But before Pentecost, there was another room. And in that room, the risen Christ did something that the text records in a single sentence — a sentence that most readers pass over the way they pass over Genesis 2:7, without stopping to notice what it actually describes.

### *The Upper Room*

The scene is in John 20. It is the evening of the resurrection — the same day the tomb was found empty. The disciples are gathered behind locked doors. They are afraid. The man they followed for three years was crucified two days earlier, and they do not yet understand what has happened. The doors are shut because the Jewish leaders who killed Jesus are still in power, and the disciples are hiding.

Then Jesus is there.

He stands in their midst and says, “Peace be with you.” He shows them His hands and His side — the wounds, the evidence, the proof that the man standing in front of them is the same man who hung on the cross. And the disciples rejoice (John 20:19-20).

Then He speaks again. “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you” (John 20:21). He is commissioning them. He is sending them out the same way the Father sent Him. The mission is being transferred. The word that the Father gave to the Son is now being entrusted to the disciples — the human instruments who will carry it into the world.

And then the verse that ties the entire thread together.

“*And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’*”

— John 20:22

He breathed on them.

The Greek word John uses is *emphysaō*. To blow into. To breathe upon. The word appears in the Septuagint in several contexts — blowing fire, breathing wrath — but when it describes the act of breathing life into the dead, the occurrences are specific: Genesis 2:7, when God breathed life into Adam, and Ezekiel 37:9, when the breath entered the slain. In the entire New Testament, *emphysaō* appears exactly once — here, in this room, in this act, performed by the risen Jesus on His disciples.

John had the entire Greek language available to him. He could have used *pneō* — the common word for blowing or breathing. He could have used any number of words that simply meant to exhale. He chose a word that any reader who knew the Septuagint would have recognized from the two most important life-giving moments in the Old Testament: the creation of man and the resurrection of a nation.

This was not a casual choice. John was a careful writer. His Gospel is built on echoes of Genesis — “In the beginning was the Word” mirrors “In the beginning God created.” He opens his account the same way Moses opens his, because he wants the reader to understand that the story of Jesus is not a new story. It is the same story. And here, in the upper room, John uses a word that reaches back through the valley of dry bones to the garden of Eden and says: this is the same act. The same God. The same breath.

Garden. Valley. Upper room. One verb. One act.

God formed a man from dust and *naphach* — breathed into his nostrils. The man became a living being.

God told Ezekiel to call the *ruach* from the four winds to *naphach* — breathe on the slain. They stood up alive.

The risen Christ stood before His disciples and *emphysaō* — breathed on them. “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

The mechanism has never changed.

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### *What the Breath Means*

It is worth pausing to understand what Jesus was doing in that room, because the relationship between John 20:22 and Acts 2 has been debated — and the debate matters less than what the text actually shows.

Some have argued that John 20:22 is the moment the disciples received the Holy Spirit, and that Acts 2 was a separate, additional empowerment. Others have argued that John 20:22 was symbolic or anticipatory — a preview of what would come at Pentecost. The positions vary, and this book is not going to resolve a question that the text does not explicitly resolve.

What the text does show is this: Jesus performed a physical act — breathing on His disciples — and used a word that the Septuagint had used for the moments when God breathed life

into the lifeless. Whether John 20:22 was the full giving of the Spirit or a foretaste of Pentecost, the act itself was deliberate. Jesus chose to breathe on them. He chose the word the Greek Old Testament used in Genesis 2:7 and Ezekiel 37:9. He was showing them — and showing every reader who would come after them — that the breath of God was passing from His lips to theirs, the same way it had passed from God’s lips to Adam’s nostrils, the same way it had entered the slain in the valley.

And the words He spoke with that breath confirm the connection: “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The *ruach*. The *pneuma*. The breath, the wind, the Spirit of God. The same reality that moved over the surface of the waters before the first word was spoken. The same power that entered the bodies in the valley and made them stand. Jesus breathed it onto His disciples and told them to receive it.

The upper room is not a separate event from the pattern. It is the pattern — performed by the Son of God in His resurrected body, connecting the first breath ever breathed into man to the Spirit that would fill the church. The thread runs in a straight line from Genesis 2:7 through Ezekiel 37:9 to John 20:22, and the verb — *naphach, emphysaō* — is the thread.

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### *The Unbroken Line*

Step back and look at what the text has built.

In the garden, God formed one man from dust and breathed life into him. One body. One breath. One man became a living being.

In the valley, God spoke through Ezekiel and the word assembled a nation from scattered bones. Then the breath came from the four winds and entered the bodies, and they stood — an exceedingly great army. A nation of the dead became a host of the living.

In the upper room, the risen Christ stood before the men who would carry His word into the world, and He breathed on them. The same verb. The same act. The word had already been given — three years of teaching, and in this very moment, the commission: “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” Now the breath followed the word. Structure, then life. Commission, then Spirit.

And in each case, the result was the same. What was lifeless became alive. What was dead stood up. What had no breath received it — not from within itself, not from any natural source, but from the mouth of God.

The breath has always come from outside. It has always been a gift. It has never been something the dust could generate on its own, or the bones could produce from their own marrow, or the disciples could manufacture from their own devotion. The breath comes from God. It comes when God sends it. And it comes to what the word has already prepared.

That is the mechanism. It has not changed from the first man to the last apostle. Word and Spirit. Form and breath. Structure assembled, then life given. Two acts, one result.

And the next time this mechanism operated — the next time the word went out and the breath came and the dead stood up alive — it did not happen to one nation. It began with three thousand in a single day, and it has not stopped since.

That is where we turn next.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# A Rushing Mighty Wind

The pattern has now been established at every stage of the story.

In the garden, God formed a man and breathed life into him. In the valley, God spoke through Ezekiel and the bones assembled, and then the breath came and the dead stood. In the upper room, the risen Christ breathed on His disciples with the same verb that Scripture had reserved for the creation of man and the resurrection of a nation. At every scale — one man, one nation, a handful of disciples — the mechanism has been the same. Word and Spirit. Structure and breath. Two acts producing one result: life.

But none of those moments is the one the New Testament treats as the birth of something new.

That moment came fifty days after the resurrection, in a city full of pilgrims, with a sound that no one in the room expected and no one who heard it would ever forget.

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## *The Setting*

To understand what happened on the day of Pentecost, you have to understand what Pentecost was before it became the name for what happened.

Pentecost was a Jewish festival — the Feast of Weeks, *Shavuot* in Hebrew. It fell fifty days after Passover, and it celebrated two things. It was a harvest festival — the firstfruits of the wheat harvest were brought to the Lord. And by the first century, Jewish tradition had also associated it with the giving of the law at Sinai. The people gathered. They remembered the day God spoke from the mountain and gave His word to Moses. They brought the firstfruits of what the land had produced.

That is the day God chose.

The day that already celebrated the giving of God's word and the bringing of the firstfruits. The day when Jerusalem was full of "Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). God chose a day when the audience was already assembled, already remembering Sinai, already thinking about the word of God and the harvest. He filled the day He had designed with the reality the day had always pointed toward.

The disciples were together. Acts 1 tells us there were about a hundred and twenty of them (Acts 1:15). They had been told to wait. The risen Jesus, in His final words before ascending, had said: "You will receive power when the Holy

Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Then He was taken up, and they went back to Jerusalem, and they waited.

They did not know what was coming. They knew the promise — the Holy Spirit would come. They knew the mission — witnesses to the remotest part of the earth. But they did not know what it would look like or sound like or feel like when it arrived. They were in the position Ezekiel was in when God set him down in the middle of the valley. They could see the situation. They had the word. They did not yet have the breath.

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### *The Wind*

*“And when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting”*

— Acts 2:1-2

A noise from heaven. Not from the street. Not from the crowd. From heaven — the direction matters. The sound came from above, from God, from outside the room and outside the natural order. And the text describes it as a noise *like* a violent rushing wind. Not that it was a wind — the writer is careful

with his language. It sounded like wind. It had the force and the volume and the overwhelming presence of wind. But it was not merely wind. It was what wind had always pointed to.

The Greek word for the rushing blast in this verse is *pnoē* — and it is not a word Luke chose carelessly. *Pnoē* is the exact noun the Septuagint uses in Genesis 2:7 for the “breath of life” that God breathed into Adam — *pnoēn zōēs*. It is also from the same root as *pneuma*, the Greek equivalent of *ruach*. Both words come from *pneō* — to blow, to breathe. When Luke described the sound that filled the house, he used the word that the Greek Old Testament had already assigned to the breath that made the first man live. The reader who knew the Septuagint would have recognized immediately what was happening.

The *ruach* was arriving. The breath that had hovered over the waters before the first word was spoken. The wind that had come from the four directions to enter the slain in the valley. The Spirit that Jesus had breathed onto the disciples in the upper room. It was here — not as a quiet indwelling, not as a private experience, but as a sound from heaven that filled an entire house and announced itself to the city.

*“And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance”*

— Acts 2:3-4

Tongues as of fire — visible, resting on each person individually. Not a single flame over the group. One on each of them. The Spirit was not given to the assembly in general. It was given to each person in particular. And the immediate result was speech — they spoke in languages they had not learned, as the Spirit gave them the words.

The breath came, and the first thing it produced was the word. That detail should not be missed. The Spirit’s arrival did not produce silence, or private ecstasy, or an inward experience that could not be communicated. It produced language. Speech. The word of God going out — in the native languages of the people gathered in Jerusalem from every nation — so that it could be heard and understood.

The Spirit did not bypass the word. It carried the word. It gave the word its power and its reach. The breath filled the structure, and the structure was language — the word of God spoken in the tongues of every nation represented in the city.

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## *The Word*

The crowd gathered. Devout Jews from across the known world — Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, Crete, Arabia — all hearing the mighty deeds of God in their own languages (Acts 2:9-11). Some were amazed. Some mocked: “They are full of sweet wine” (Acts 2:13).

And Peter stood up.

This is the man who had denied Jesus three times on the night of His arrest. The man who had followed at a distance, who had warmed himself at the enemy’s fire, who had sworn he did not know the man from Nazareth. Seven weeks earlier he had been hiding. Now he stood in front of thousands and opened his mouth.

The breath will do that to a man.

*“But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: ‘Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words’”*

— Acts 2:14

What followed was not philosophy. It was not persuasion in the Greek rhetorical tradition. It was not Peter’s personal testimony or his emotional experience of the morning’s events. It was Scripture.

Peter preached the word of God.

He started with Joel. “This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: ‘And it shall be in the last days,’ God says, ‘that I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind’” (Acts 2:16-17). The Spirit that had just fallen — Peter identified it. This is what Joel prophesied. This is not confusion or drunkenness. This is the fulfillment of what God said He would do. The Spirit had come because God had promised the Spirit would come, and the word of the prophet was the evidence.

Then he preached Jesus. His life, attested by God through miracles and wonders and signs (Acts 2:22). His death — “this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (Acts 2:23). Peter did not soften it. He stood in front of the people whose leaders had demanded the crucifixion and told them plainly: you killed Him. And it was not an accident. It was the plan of God, executed through your hands.

Then he preached the resurrection. He quoted David — Psalm 16:8-11 — and pointed out that David was not speaking about himself, because David died and his tomb was still there, visible, verifiable. David was speaking about his descendant, the Christ, whose flesh would not undergo decay (Acts 2:25-31). God raised Jesus. Peter and the other apostles were witnesses. They saw Him.

And then the conclusion — the sentence that landed on the crowd like a hammer.

*“Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ — this Jesus whom you crucified”*

— Acts 2:36

That is the word. Preached. Declared. Dropped into the ears of the crowd with the full weight of the prophets behind it and the full evidence of the resurrection underneath it. Peter did not ask them to consider a possibility. He told them to know for certain. God has done this. The Jesus you killed is Lord. The Jesus you crucified is Christ.

The word went out.

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### *The Response*

*“Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’”*

— Acts 2:37

Pierced to the heart. The Greek word is *katanyssomai* — to pierce sharply, to stab. The word of God did not bounce off them. It went in. It reached the place where conviction lives and it cut. These were not casual listeners evaluating an

argument. These were men who suddenly understood that they had participated in the murder of the Messiah, and the weight of it broke them open.

“What shall we do?”

That is the question the word produces when it does its work. Not “That was interesting” or “Let me think about it” or “I have some follow-up questions.” What shall we do? The word had assembled the bones — it had given them the structure, the facts, the truth about who Jesus was and what they had done. And now the bones were rattling. The dead were hearing. And they were asking for the breath.

Peter’s answer is the most concise statement of the pattern in the entire New Testament.

*“Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself”*

— Acts 2:38-39

Two things. Repent and be baptized — the human response to the word. The obedient act that answers what God has spoken. This is the structure. This is the bones assembling, the sinew and flesh and skin appearing, the form taking shape in response to the word of God.

And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The breath. The *pneuma*. The *ruach*. Given — not earned, not

achieved, not generated from within. Given by God to those who respond to His word in obedience.

Word and Spirit. Structure and breath. The pattern that began in Genesis 2:7, that was demonstrated in Ezekiel 37, that was embodied in the breath of the risen Christ in John 20:22 — it now becomes the normative means by which every person enters the life of God under the new covenant. Hear the word. Respond in obedience. Receive the Spirit. The dead stand.

*“So then, those who had received his word were baptized;  
and that day there were added about three thousand  
souls”*

— Acts 2:41

Three thousand. In a single day. The word went out, the hearers responded, and three thousand people who had walked into Jerusalem that morning as participants in the crucifixion of Christ walked out as members of His body. The breath had come. The dead were standing.

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### *The Pattern Confirmed*

The events of Acts 2 did not happen in a vacuum. They happened in the context of everything this book has traced — and the parallels are not incidental. They are structural.

In Ezekiel 37, the word was spoken first. Then the breath came. In Acts 2, Peter preached the word first. Then the Spirit was received.

In Ezekiel 37, the word was spoken through a human instrument — a prophet commanded to prophesy. In Acts 2, the word was spoken through a human instrument — an apostle who stood and declared.

In Ezekiel 37, the breath came from outside the bodies — from the four winds — and entered them. In Acts 2, the Spirit came from outside the believers — from heaven — and was given to them.

In Ezekiel 37, the result was life: the dead stood up as an exceedingly great army. In Acts 2, the result was life: three thousand were added, and the church was born.

In Ezekiel 37:14, God promised: “I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life.” In Acts 2:38, Peter declared: “You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” The promise Ezekiel recorded was being fulfilled through the mouth of a fisherman from Galilee.

Acts 2 is Ezekiel 37 in the new covenant. The setting changed — a valley became a city. The nation changed — Israel became the church. The prophet changed — Ezekiel became Peter. But the mechanism did not change. The word goes out. The Spirit comes. The dead stand up alive.

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## *The Two Confirmatory Outpourings*

There is a distinction in Acts 2 that the text makes but that is easy to miss — and missing it has caused confusion for centuries.

The miraculous outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost — the sound from heaven, the tongues of fire, the speaking in unlearned languages — was not the normative experience of every person who came to faith after that day. It was a special, confirmatory act of God, and the text itself reveals why it was necessary.

Consider the audience. These were devout Jews — men who had come to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel. They knew the prophets. They kept the festivals. They believed in the God who had spoken at Sinai. And the apostles were standing in front of them making an unprecedented claim: that the Jesus of Nazareth whom their leaders had crucified seven weeks earlier was the Messiah — the Christ — the Lord.

Why would they believe that?

The man had been publicly executed. He had been condemned by the Sanhedrin, the highest religious authority in Israel. To accept the apostles' claim required these devout men to conclude that their own religious leaders had murdered the Son of God. That is not a claim anyone accepts without evidence. The miraculous signs — the sound from heaven, the languages no one had learned, the unmistakable presence of something beyond human explanation — were the evidence.

God was confirming, through signs that could not be counterfeited, that the message Peter was preaching was from Him.

The only other comparable outpouring in the New Testament occurred at the household of Cornelius in Acts 10 — and the circumstances reveal the same purpose from a different direction.

Cornelius was a Gentile. A Roman centurion. A devout man who feared God, but not a Jew. And the entire tension of Acts 10 is not whether Cornelius needed the gospel — it is whether Gentiles could even receive it.

Peter himself was the one who needed convincing. God gave him a vision of a sheet descending from heaven with unclean animals, and a voice saying, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy” (Acts 10:15). Peter resisted. God repeated the vision three times before Peter understood (Acts 10:16). Even then, when he arrived at Cornelius’s house, he opened by saying, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit one” (Acts 10:28). Peter went because God told him to go. He did not go because he was already persuaded.

And while Peter was still speaking — before he had finished his sermon, before anyone had responded — the Spirit fell on Cornelius and his household. The Jewish believers who had come with Peter were astonished. The text gives the reason explicitly: “All the circumcised believers who came with Peter

were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also” (Acts 10:45).

The outpouring was not for Cornelius’s benefit. It was for the Jewish witnesses. God was declaring, through unmistakable evidence, what the Jewish believers were not yet ready to accept on the strength of the word alone: these people too. The Gentiles are included. The breath is not confined to Israel.

Peter confirms this reading himself — twice. In Acts 11:15-17, when he is called to defend his actions before the church in Jerusalem, he says the Spirit “fell upon them just as it did upon us at the beginning.” He reaches back to Acts 2 — “at the beginning” — because those are the only two comparable events. And in Acts 15:8, at the Jerusalem council, he says it again: “God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us.”

Peter recognized these two events as the same kind of thing. And by calling Acts 2 “the beginning,” he identified both as confirmatory — signs given to establish something new. Acts 2 confirmed to the Jews that the gospel of the crucified Christ was from God. Acts 10 confirmed to the Jews that the Gentiles were included in the same gospel. Both were extraordinary because both had an evidentiary purpose that the ordinary did not require.

Every other conversion recorded in Acts follows the normative pattern Peter laid down in Acts 2:38. The word is preached. The hearers respond — they repent, they are

baptized. The gift of the Holy Spirit is received. No tongues of fire. No sound from heaven. No visible outpouring to convince onlookers. The Samaritans in Acts 8 (Acts 8:12-17). The Ethiopian in Acts 8 (Acts 8:36-38). Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9 (Acts 9:17-18). Lydia and the Philippian jailer in Acts 16 (Acts 16:14-15, 30-33). The Ephesian disciples in Acts 19 (Acts 19:1-6). In each case, the pattern is the same — word and Spirit, structure and breath, the mechanism that has operated since the garden.

The distinction between the extraordinary and the ordinary does not weaken the thesis. It strengthens it. The miraculous signs of Acts 2 and Acts 10 were God making visible what normally happens invisibly. The mechanism underneath is the same in every case. The word goes out. The Spirit is given. The dead come to life. What changed in those two special moments was not the mechanism — it was how much of it God allowed the witnesses to see.

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### *What the Newborn Church Did*

There is one more detail in Acts 2 that should not be overlooked, because it reveals what life looks like once the breath has come.

*“They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”*

— Acts 2:42

Four things. And the first one is the apostles’ teaching.

The word.

The church that was born by the word and the Spirit devoted itself first and continually to the word. Not to the experience of Pentecost. Not to recreating the sound or the fire or the languages. To the teaching. The apostles’ teaching — the doctrine delivered by the men Christ had commissioned, the word of God entrusted to human instruments for transmission. The newborn church understood instinctively what the pattern demands: the Spirit animates what the word assembles. Remove the word, and the Spirit has no structure to fill. The first act of the living church was to anchor itself in the word that had given it life.

Fellowship. Breaking of bread. Prayer. These are the life of the body — the community, the communion, the ongoing conversation with the God who breathed them into existence. But the word comes first. It always comes first. The structure precedes the breath, and the teaching precedes the fellowship, because without the word there is nothing to hold the community together, nothing to give the communion its meaning, nothing to direct the prayer toward the God who actually is.

Acts 2:42 is what a living body does. It is the opposite of the valley. The valley was what remained when the word went silent and the breath departed. Acts 2:42 is what exists when the word is spoken and the breath has come — a people devoted to the teaching, gathered in fellowship, breaking bread together, and praying. Structure filled with life. Bones covered with flesh, standing upright, breathing.

This is the church born. Not an institution organized by men. Not a religious system assembled by tradition. A body brought to life by the word and Spirit of God, using the same mechanism God has used since He knelt over a handful of dust in a garden and breathed.

But with that birth came an inheritance. The church did not arise in a vacuum — it stepped into the place Israel had occupied. The promises, the identity, the covenant language that had belonged to Israel at Sinai were transferred to this new body by the apostles themselves. And with the identity came the responsibility.

If the priests of the old covenant were condemned for failing to teach, what of the teachers of the new? If Israel's bones dried out when the word went silent, what happens to the church when the word is no longer faithfully proclaimed?

The transfer of identity is also a transfer of accountability.

That is where we turn next.

## CHAPTER NINE

# The Israel of God

What stood up at Pentecost was not new.

The mechanism was the same — word and Spirit, structure and breath, the two-part act that has produced life since the garden. The word was preached, the Spirit came, and three thousand who had been dead stood up alive. That much has been established.

But the body that stood up did not appear in a vacuum. It stepped into a place that had been occupied before. The promises it claimed, the identity it wore, the covenant language it used to describe itself — all of it had belonged to someone else first. The church did not invent a new vocabulary. It inherited one. And the men who gave it that vocabulary — the apostles — knew exactly what they were doing.

The question is simple, and it determines everything that follows in this book: What is the church's relationship to Israel? Is it something separate — a new people, a second covenant community running on a parallel track? Or is it the continuation of what God has always been doing — the same people of God, reconstituted around the Christ that Israel's entire story had been pointing toward?

The apostles answered that question. They answered it repeatedly, in multiple letters, to multiple audiences. And they did not hedge.

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### *What God Said at Sinai*

To understand what the apostles claimed for the church, you have to hear what God said to Israel first.

Three months after the exodus from Egypt, Israel stood at the base of Mount Sinai. God told Moses to deliver this message to the people:

*“Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”*

— Exodus 19:5-6

Three phrases. Each one a definition. Together they constitute the identity God gave Israel — not an identity they earned or invented, but one He spoke into existence.

My own possession. The Hebrew is *segullah* — a treasured possession, a special inheritance. Among all the peoples of the earth, God set this nation apart as His own. Not because they were larger or stronger or more righteous than the others. Because He chose them (Deuteronomy 7:6-8).

A kingdom of priests. Not merely a nation that had priests within it, but a nation that was, in its entirety, a priesthood. Israel as a whole was meant to stand between God and the world — mediating, representing, carrying the knowledge of God to the nations around them.

A holy nation. Set apart. Consecrated. Distinguished from every other people on earth by the fact that they belonged to God and were governed by His word.

This was not a loose description. It was a covenant identity — conditional on obedience (“if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant”) and spoken by God Himself at the mountain where He gave the law. For fifteen hundred years, this language defined what Israel was. It survived the divided kingdom, the exile, and the return. Even when the people failed — and the previous chapters of this book have documented how completely they failed — the identity language remained. Israel was God’s possession. Israel was the priesthood. Israel was the holy nation.

Until the apostles took that language and applied it to someone else.

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### *The Transfer*

Peter’s first letter was addressed to believers “who are chosen, who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia,

Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1-2). His audience included Gentile converts — people who, by birth, had no connection to Sinai, no share in the covenant, no claim on the promises God made to Abraham or Moses. Peter himself would later describe their former condition: “you were not a people” (1 Peter 2:10). They had been outsiders.

And to these former outsiders, Peter wrote:

*“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy”*

— 1 Peter 2:9-10

Read that against Exodus 19:5-6. Peter did not borrow similar language. He used the same language. Chosen race. Royal priesthood. Holy nation. A people for God’s own possession. Phrase by phrase, he lifted the identity God gave Israel at Sinai and placed it on the church.

And the final line — “you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God” — is not Peter’s invention. It is a reference to the prophet Hosea. God told Hosea to name his son Lo-ammi — “not My people” — as a sign of Israel’s rejection (Hosea 1:9). But in the next verse, God promised a reversal: “In the place where it is said to them, ‘You are not My people,’ it will be said to them, ‘You are the sons of the living

God” (Hosea 1:10). And later: “I will say to those who were not My people, ‘You are My people!’ And they will say, ‘You are my God!’” (Hosea 2:23).

Peter took God’s promise through Hosea — the promise that those who were “not My people” would become “My people” — and said to Gentile believers in Asia Minor: this is you. This promise is about you.

Paul made the same connection explicitly. In Romans 9, arguing that God’s word has not failed even though much of ethnic Israel has rejected Christ, he quoted the same Hosea passages: “As He says also in Hosea, ‘I will call those who were not My people, “My people,” and her who was not beloved, “beloved.” And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, “you are not My people,” there they shall be called sons of the living God’” (Romans 9:25-26, drawing from Hosea 2:23 and 1:10).

Two apostles, writing independently, applied the same Old Testament promise to the same reality: Gentile believers are now the people of God.

But this was not merely a matter of inclusion — of adding Gentiles to an existing category while leaving the category unchanged. The apostles went further. They redefined the category itself.

Paul, in the same chapter of Romans: “For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants, but: ‘through Isaac

your descendants will be named.’ That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants” (Romans 9:6-8).

Not all who descend from Israel are Israel. Physical descent does not make a person part of God’s people. The children of the promise — not the children of the flesh — are the true descendants.

And who are the children of the promise? Paul answered that question in Galatians: “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:29). Those who belong to Christ — regardless of ethnicity, regardless of whether they were circumcised on the eighth day or never circumcised at all — are Abraham’s descendants. They are the heirs. They are the ones who inherit what God promised.

This is why Paul could write, at the end of his letter to the Galatians — after six chapters arguing that the dividing line between Jew and Gentile has been erased in Christ, that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28) — this closing benediction:

*“And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God”*

— Galatians 6:16

The Israel of God. Paul used the name. He did not say “like Israel” or “a new Israel alongside the old.” He said the Israel of God — at the close of a letter whose entire argument is that belonging to Christ, not belonging to the flesh, is what makes a person an heir of the promise.

A grammatical note is owed here. The *kai* in “and upon the Israel of God” has been read two ways — as a simple connective pronouncing peace on two groups (the church and ethnic Israel), or as exegetical (“and, that is, the Israel of God”) identifying one group. The grammar alone does not settle it. The reading offered here takes the *kai* as exegetical, because that is the reading consistent with the argument of the whole letter — a letter whose burden is that belonging to Christ, not belonging to the flesh, is what marks the heirs of the promise. The connective reading would have Paul contradict his own argument in its closing line.

He said it again from another angle in Philippians: “For we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Philippians 3:3). The true circumcision is not the mark on the body. It is the worship in the Spirit — the *ruach*, the *pneuma*, the same breath that has animated every living thing God has made since the garden.

And again in Romans: “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is

that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter” (Romans 2:28-29). The true Jew is defined not by ethnicity but by the Spirit’s work in the heart.

The cumulative weight of these texts is difficult to overstate. Peter applied Israel’s Sinai identity to the church. Paul called the church the Israel of God, the true circumcision, the heirs of the promise, the true Jews. Both applied Hosea’s “not My people / My people” reversal to Gentile believers. And Paul explicitly stated that physical descent from Abraham does not make a person part of Israel — belonging to Christ does.

The identity has been transferred. The apostles said so. Repeatedly. In plain language. To audiences who needed to hear it.

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### *The New Covenant*

The transfer of identity rests on a transfer of covenant. And the writer of Hebrews made this explicit by quoting the longest Old Testament passage reproduced anywhere in the New Testament.

“Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in My covenant, and I

did not care for them, says the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Hebrews 8:8-10, quoting Jeremiah 31:31-33).

Notice who the new covenant was promised to. “The house of Israel and the house of Judah.” Not a new people. Not a Gentile body that would exist alongside Israel. The new covenant was promised to Israel — through Jeremiah, centuries before Christ, in language that specifies the recipient by name.

And the writer of Hebrews applied this promise to the community he was writing to. He did not say, “This promise belongs to ethnic Israel and will be fulfilled at some future date.” He said the new covenant has been enacted — “a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises” (Hebrews 8:6) — and it has been enacted through Christ, and the people living under it are the church.

The logic is not complicated, but it is inescapable. The new covenant was promised to Israel. The church receives it. Therefore the church is Israel — the Israel of God, reconstituted around Christ rather than around the law, defined by faith rather than by flesh, but the same people of God under a new and better covenant.

And the writer stated the consequence: “When He said, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is

becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear” (Hebrews 8:13).

The old covenant is finished. The new has come. And the terms of the new covenant — God’s laws in the mind, written on the heart, “I will be their God and they shall be My people” — are the same terms that have run through this entire book. The word internalized. The Spirit indwelling. Structure and breath, together, producing a people who know the Lord.

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### *The Olive Tree*

There is one more passage that must be addressed, because it contains not only the transfer of identity but the warning that comes with it.

In Romans 11, Paul used an image that tells the church exactly where it stands — and exactly what it should fear.

*“But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you”*

— Romans 11:17-18

The olive tree is the people of God — rooted in the promises made to the patriarchs, defined by the word, sustained by the

covenant. Some of the natural branches — ethnic Israelites who rejected Christ — were broken off because of unbelief. And the Gentile believers were grafted in. Not planted in a separate garden. Not given their own tree. Grafted into the same tree, sharing the same root, drawing life from the same source.

The image eliminates two errors at once. The church is not separate from Israel — it is grafted into Israel's tree. And the church is not self-sustaining — it draws its life from the root, not from itself. The root supports the branch. The branch does not support the root.

Then Paul delivered the warning.

*“You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.’ Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you either. Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God’s kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off”*

— Romans 11:19-22

If God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you either.

The natural branches — ethnic Israel — had the covenant, the temple, the priesthood, the prophets, every advantage God could give a nation. And they were removed for unbelief. Paul

looked the Gentile church in the eye and said: do not be conceited. Fear. Because the same God who removed Israel for unbelief will remove you for the same cause.

And the condition is stated plainly: “to you, God’s kindness, *if you continue* in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.” The church’s place on the tree is not unconditional in the sense that it requires nothing. It requires continuance. It requires faithfulness. It requires the same thing it has always required — hearing the word of God and keeping it. And if the church does not continue, the consequence is the same one Israel experienced.

The branches are cut off. The bones dry out. The valley fills again.

One note on scope. Romans 11 raises questions this book is not taking up — most prominently, what Paul means when he writes that “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:25-27), which faithful readers have taken in different directions. This book engages Romans 11 for one purpose: its warning about the mechanism of life and death, the same mechanism that has run through every chapter. It is not offering a comprehensive treatment of every question the chapter raises. Those questions are worth a careful study of their own. The warning Paul delivered to the Gentile church — that God does not spare branches that do not continue in faith — stands regardless of how those other questions are resolved.

## *The Priesthood*

The transfer of identity carries a specific, practical weight that this book has been building toward since Chapter 4.

Peter did not only call the church “a people for God’s own possession.” He called it “a royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9). Four verses earlier he had said: “You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5).

The church is a priesthood. Every believer is a priest — not a select clergy class, not an ordained subset, but every member of the body. Peter used the language of Exodus 19, and Exodus 19 applied the priesthood to the entire nation. The church inherits the same breadth.

And what was a priest supposed to do?

This book answered that question in Chapter 4. Malachi defined the job: “For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 2:7). Three responsibilities — guard the knowledge, teach the word, deliver God’s message faithfully.

And what happened when the priests of the old covenant failed?

“But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by the instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi” (Malachi 2:8). They left the path. Their teaching became a stumbling block. They corrupted the covenant that gave them their office.

God’s verdict was delivered through Hosea: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest” (Hosea 4:6). The priests rejected the knowledge they were supposed to guard. And God rejected them from the priesthood.

If the church is now the priesthood — and Peter says it is, using the very language God spoke at Sinai — then the church has inherited the job description. Guard the knowledge. Teach the word. Deliver the message. And the standard has not changed. The God who told the priests of Israel, “Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest,” is the same God watching the royal priesthood of the new covenant. The question is whether this priesthood will guard what it has been given — or lose the book in the temple.

The mechanism of life has not changed. The mechanism of death has not changed. The word goes silent, the breath departs, and the bones dry out. The only question is whether the people holding the word will speak it.

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## *The Accountability*

Step back and see what the texts have built.

The church is the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). The true circumcision (Philippians 3:3). The true Jews — inwardly, by the Spirit (Romans 2:28-29). Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise (Galatians 3:29). A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession (1 Peter 2:9) — the exact identity God gave Israel at Sinai (Exodus 19:5-6). Grafted into Israel's tree, sharing Israel's root (Romans 11:17). Living under the new covenant that was promised to the house of Israel (Hebrews 8:8-10, Jeremiah 31:31-33).

The transfer is not ambiguous. It is not a theological inference drawn from vague parallels. It is the explicit, repeated, plainly stated teaching of the apostles — the men Christ commissioned, the men the Spirit filled at Pentecost, the men whose teaching the newborn church devoted itself to in Acts 2:42. They said it. In multiple letters. To multiple audiences. Using language no careful reader can miss.

And the transfer of identity is a transfer of accountability.

If the prophetic word went silent in Israel and the people became unrestrained (Proverbs 29:18), the same will happen in the church when the word is neglected. If Israel's priests were destroyed for rejecting knowledge (Hosea 4:6), the church's priesthood faces the same danger when it stops guarding the truth. If the prophets prophesied falsely and the priests ruled on their own authority and the people loved it that way

(Jeremiah 5:30-31), the same partnership of comfortable silence can form inside any body that bears God's name. If the book of the law sat inside the temple while no one read it (2 Kings 22:8), the word of God can sit inside a church building — owned by every member, available in every language, closer than it has ever been in the history of the world — and still go unheard.

The same God. The same mechanism. The same standard.  
And the same consequences.

Paul told the Gentile believers plainly: “If God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you either” (Romans 11:21). That is not a warning about a hypothetical future. It is a statement about the character of God — a God who does not change (Malachi 3:6), who does not lower the standard because the audience has changed, who holds His people accountable for the word He has given them regardless of whether they are called Israel or called the church.

The question that now hangs over this book is not whether the warnings apply. The apostles settled that. The question is whether the church has listened.

Within a single generation of the breath falling at Pentecost — within the lifetime of the apostles themselves — Christ dictated seven letters to seven churches. Not to Israel. Not to the world. To His church — the body He purchased with His own blood, the body the Spirit had filled, the body

that had been given every advantage the new covenant could provide.

And what He found in several of them was the valley of dry bones in miniature.

That is where we turn next.

## CHAPTER TEN

# Letters to the Dead

The church was less than a generation old when the letters arrived.

The breath had fallen at Pentecost. Three thousand had stood up alive. The apostles' teaching had gone out from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and the remotest parts of the earth, carried by men and women who had received the word and the Spirit and had been made into the body of Christ. Churches were planted across the Roman world — in cities, in homes, in provinces that had never heard the name of the God of Israel. Those who had been dead were standing. The word was being spoken. The Spirit was filling what the word had built.

And then the risen Christ dictated seven letters.

Not to Israel. Not to the synagogue. Not to the pagan world. To His church — the body He had purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28), the priesthood Peter had identified in the language of Sinai, the Israel of God that Paul had named. The letters were addressed to seven specific congregations in the Roman province of Asia — Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (Revelation 1:11).

And what Christ found when He examined them was not uniformly alive.

In some of them, the bones were already drying.

Not all seven churches serve the thesis of this book equally. Christ commended two of them without correction — Smyrna and Philadelphia — and what He said to Thyatira, while serious, addresses a specific false teacher rather than the systemic pattern this book has been tracing. But in four of the seven, Christ diagnosed conditions that map directly onto the valley. Sardis. Ephesus. Pergamum. Laodicea. Each one shows a different stage of the death — a different way the word goes silent or the breath departs — and each one receives the same remedy.

These are not ancient problems confined to first-century Asia Minor. They are the same patterns that killed Israel, described by the same God, addressed to the body that inherited Israel's identity. And they are the patterns that answer the question hanging over this book: are the bones drying out again?

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### *Sardis — A Name That You Are Alive*

The letter to Sardis begins with the most direct statement of the valley's condition anywhere in the New Testament.

*“I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead”*

— Revelation 3:1

You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. That is Ezekiel 37:8 in a single sentence. The bodies were assembled — bone to bone, sinew, flesh, skin. The structure was complete. They looked like an army. And there was no breath in them.

Sardis had a name. A reputation. Whatever the surrounding community or the other churches knew about this congregation, what they knew was that it was alive. The external evidence — the assemblies, the activities, the visible structure of a functioning church — gave every appearance of life. From the outside, Sardis looked like a body that was breathing.

Christ said it was dead.

Not struggling. Not weak. Not sick. Dead. The same word — *nekros* — that describes a corpse. The structure was standing, but the life had departed. The name remained, but the reality behind the name was gone.

And what follows is the remedy — and the remedy reveals the disease.

*“Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God”*

— Revelation 3:2

The things that remain. There were still remnants — elements of life that had not yet expired, components of the body that were about to die but had not finished dying. The death was not instantaneous. It was progressive, the same way the bones in the valley did not become very dry overnight. Life was draining out of Sardis by degrees, and the things that still had a flicker of vitality were about to go dark.

“I have not found your deeds completed.” The word in the Greek is *plēroō* — to fill, to complete, to bring to fullness. Their deeds were not full. They were empty — or rather, they were present but hollow. The form of the work existed. The substance of the work did not. Actions without life behind them. Deeds without the Spirit that would make them complete in God’s sight.

Then the command: “So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent” (Revelation 3:3).

Remember what you have received and heard. The word. The teaching. The apostolic message that gave Sardis its life in the first place. Christ did not tell them to seek a new experience. He did not prescribe a new method. He told them to go back to what they had received — the word they had heard — and keep it. Hold onto it. Obey it. The remedy for death is the same remedy it has always been: return to the word.

And repent. Turn around. The death was not something that had happened to Sardis from the outside. It was

something that had happened because they had let go of what they had received. The breath departed because the word was no longer being kept. The solution was to return to it.

Sardis is the church that looks alive and is not. It is the clearest image of Ezekiel 37:8 in the New Testament — structure intact, reputation in place, every outward sign suggesting a living body. And Christ, who walks among the lampstands and sees what the congregation cannot see about itself, pronounced the diagnosis: dead.

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### *Ephesus — The Love That Left*

The letter to Ephesus is in some ways more troubling than the letter to Sardis — not because the condition is worse, but because the condition is harder to detect.

Christ opened with commendation.

*“I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary”*

— Revelation 2:2-3

Look at that list. Deeds. Toil. Perseverance. Intolerance of evil. Testing false apostles and exposing them. Endurance for

Christ's name. Not growing weary. By every measurable standard of doctrinal fidelity and institutional faithfulness, Ephesus was doing everything right. They had not tolerated the false teachers. They had not compromised. They had not grown tired of the work. If you had walked into this church and evaluated it by its doctrine and its discipline, you would have found nothing to criticize.

Christ found something.

“*But I have this against you, that you have left your first love*”

— Revelation 2:4

One sentence. And it undoes the entire commendation. Not because the commendation was false — Christ acknowledged every one of those qualities as real. But because something underneath all of it had shifted. The love that had animated the deeds, the toil, the perseverance, the doctrinal vigilance — the love that had made those things alive — was gone.

The language is precise. They had not lost their first love, as though it had been taken from them. They had *left* it. The Greek is *aphiēmi* — to leave, to send away, to let go. It was a departure, not a deprivation. They chose to move away from it. The love did not disappear. They walked away from it.

And the consequence Christ warned of is devastating: “Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you

and will remove your lampstand out of its place — unless you repent” (Revelation 2:5).

Remove your lampstand. The lampstand is the church (Revelation 1:20). Christ would remove the church. Not reform it. Not relocate it. Remove it — take it out of its place entirely. A congregation that has the doctrine, the discipline, the endurance, the tireless effort, but has left the love that gave those things their meaning, is a congregation whose lampstand is in danger.

This is the condition that Chapter 6 described in the pause between Ezekiel 37:8 and 37:9. The bodies were complete — every structure in place, every component where it belonged. But there was no breath in them. Ephesus had the structure. The doctrine was sound. The false apostles were tested and rejected. The endurance was real. But the breath — the animating love, the first love, the thing that separates living obedience from mechanical compliance — had departed.

And the remedy is the same. Remember. Repent. Do the deeds you did at first — but do them from the love you did them with at first. Return to the word (“remember from where you have fallen”) and let the Spirit restore what the structure alone cannot supply.

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## *Pergamum — The Teaching That Kills*

The letter to Pergamum introduces a different stage of the death — not the absence of the word, but the corruption of it.

Christ acknowledged the difficulty of their situation first.

*“I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells”*

— Revelation 2:13

They were in a hard place. The text does not explain what “Satan’s throne” refers to, but the point is clear: Pergamum was a dangerous place to be a Christian. They knew it. One of their own — Antipas — had been killed for the faith. And in the face of that pressure, they held fast to Christ’s name. They did not deny.

But holding the name was not enough.

*“But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans”*

— Revelation 2:14-15

The word was being diluted — not from the outside, but from the inside. False teaching had taken root within the congregation. And Christ identified it by name: the teaching of Balaam.

The reference reaches back to Numbers 22-25 and 31:16. Balaam was a prophet hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel. When God would not allow Balaam to curse them directly, Balaam taught Balak another way to destroy them — by enticing the people of Israel to compromise. Numbers 25:1-2 records what happened: “The people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.” And Numbers 31:16 identifies Balaam as the source: “Behold, these caused the sons of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor.”

Balaam could not destroy Israel by opposing them. So he taught their enemies to invite them to compromise. Join us at the table. Eat with us. Worship with us. The attack did not come as a sword. It came as an invitation.

That is the teaching Christ identified in Pergamum. Not overt denial of the faith — they had already proven they would not deny. Something more subtle. A tolerance of teaching that blurred the line between faithfulness and compromise. Eating things sacrificed to idols. Acts of immorality. These were not minor issues of personal preference. They were the erosion of the word’s authority from within the body.

This is the same disease Jeremiah diagnosed in Chapter 4 of this book. “The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their own authority; and My people love it so!” (Jeremiah 5:31). The word was not absent from Pergamum. Christ acknowledged that they held fast to His name. But alongside the true word, false teaching was being tolerated — and tolerance of false teaching is not neutrality. It is the beginning of the famine. The word is still present, but it is being mixed with something else, and the mixture dilutes it the same way Amos described the early stages of the silence: not total absence yet, but scarcity. The real word is still there, but it is harder to find because it is surrounded by teaching that contradicts it.

Christ’s remedy was blunt: “Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth” (Revelation 2:16).

The sword of His mouth. The word of God (Hebrews 4:12 — “the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword”). Christ’s answer to false teaching is not dialogue. It is the word — the true word, the sharp word, the word that cuts between the true and the false. The remedy for a corrupted word is not less word. It is more word — the real thing, unedited, unmixed, wielded by the one who has the authority to separate truth from falsehood.

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## *Laodicea — The Dead Who Do Not Know*

The letter to Laodicea is the last of the seven, and it describes the most dangerous condition of all — not death itself, but death that does not know it is dead.

*“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth”*

— Revelation 3:15-16

Neither cold nor hot. Lukewarm. The image has been so frequently used in casual speech that its force has been blunted. But the context restores it. Cold water refreshes. Hot water heals and cleanses. Both serve a purpose. Lukewarm water is useless — it does nothing for the one who drinks it. Christ said He would spit them out — the Greek *emeō* means to vomit. The lukewarm church does not merely disappoint Christ. It nauseates Him.

Then Christ described what they thought about themselves and what He saw.

*“Because you say, ‘I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,’ and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked”*

— Revelation 3:17

Two lists. The first is Laodicea's self-assessment: rich, wealthy, in need of nothing. The second is Christ's assessment: wretched, miserable, poor, blind, naked. The gap between the two is total. There is no overlap. The church's view of itself and Christ's view of it share nothing in common.

And the most devastating phrase in the verse is not either list. It is the four words in between: "you do not know."

They did not know. The wretchedness, the poverty, the blindness, the nakedness — these were not conditions they were aware of and struggling against. They were conditions they could not see. They believed they were rich. They believed they had need of nothing. Their self-assessment was so far from reality that Christ had to tell them what they actually were, because they had lost the capacity to see it for themselves.

This is the final stage of the death this book has been tracing. In Chapter 3, the progression ran from scarcity to famine to silence to death. Laodicea is what happens at the end of that progression — when the silence has lasted so long that the people inside it no longer recognize it as silence. They have become accustomed to the absence. They have built a life that does not require the word of God, and that life feels complete to them. They are not searching for the word the way Amos described — "they will go to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they will not find it" (Amos 8:12). They are not even looking. They do not know they need it.

The bones are dry, and the bones do not know they are dry.

Christ's counsel to them is specific, and every element of it addresses one of the deficiencies they could not see.

*“I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see”*

— Revelation 3:18

Gold refined by fire — true wealth, tested and purified, to replace the counterfeit wealth they thought they had. White garments — the righteousness they lacked, to cover the nakedness they did not realize was exposed. Eye salve — the ability to see, to recover the spiritual sight that had been lost so gradually they never noticed it going.

And then, after the counsel — one of the most striking verses in the entire Bible.

*“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he will be with Me”*

— Revelation 3:20

This verse is frequently used in evangelistic contexts — preached to unbelievers as an invitation to accept Christ. But that is not who Christ was speaking to. He was speaking to a

church. His church. A congregation that bore His name and met in His honor and considered itself His body. And He was outside the door.

Christ was outside His own church, knocking. The one whose breath had given them life, whose word had assembled them, whose Spirit had filled them — He was standing outside, asking to be let back in. The church had become so self-sufficient, so convinced of its own wealth, so unaware of its own condition, that it had shut the door on the very one it claimed to follow.

And even here, the remedy was not abandonment. “If anyone hears My voice and opens the door.” If anyone. Even in a church this far gone, Christ was willing to come in to any individual who would hear and respond. The word was still being offered. The breath was still available. The door could still be opened.

But notice: it required hearing His voice. The word. Even the restoration of a church that had shut Christ out begins with hearing the word. The mechanism has not changed.

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### *The Refrain*

There is a detail in these letters that is easy to miss if you are reading for the content of each church’s condition. But it appears in every single letter — all seven, not just the four

examined here — and it ties the entire chapter to the thesis of this book.

Every letter ends with the same command: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:29, 3:6, 3:13, 3:22).

Hear what the Spirit says.

The word and the Spirit. In one sentence. In every letter. The Spirit is speaking — through the word of Christ, delivered to the churches, written down so that it can be read and heard and obeyed. The word is the content. The Spirit is the one speaking it. And the command is to hear — to have ears that are open, to receive what is being said, to do what the prophets and priests of the old covenant failed to do and what the royal priesthood of the new covenant is in danger of failing to do.

The remedy for every condition described in these letters — death, lost love, false teaching, self-deceived lukewarmness — is the same. Hear what the Spirit says. Receive the word. Respond to it. The mechanism that brought three thousand to life at Pentecost is the same mechanism that can bring a dead church back to life. The word goes out. The Spirit gives it power. Those who hear it and obey it live.

And those who do not hear it — those who have a name that they are alive, who have left their first love, who tolerate the teaching that corrupts, who believe they are rich while Christ stands outside knocking — those are the dry bones of the new covenant. Not scattered across a valley in ancient

Israel. Assembled in buildings. Organized in denominations.  
Named, structured, funded, and functioning.

And dead.

The question God asked Ezekiel in the valley is the question Christ is asking the church in these letters. And it is the question that hangs over every congregation in every generation, including this one.

Can these bones live?

That is where we turn next.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# Can These Bones Live?

We are back in the valley.

We have been here before. Chapter 1 set us down in the middle of it — the bones in every direction, very many, very dry. God walked Ezekiel through them and asked the question that has hung over every chapter since: “Son of man, can these bones live?” (Ezekiel 37:3).

Ezekiel answered: “O Lord God, You know.”

Ten chapters later, the question is still the question. But the reader who has walked the full road — from the garden to the valley to the upper room to Pentecost to the seven churches — now has something Ezekiel did not have when he gave that answer. Ezekiel had the question but not yet the demonstration. He could not say yes because he had not yet seen it happen. He could only trust that the God who asked the question knew the answer.

We have seen it happen. We have traced the answer from the first breath God ever breathed into lifeless dust to the last letters Christ dictated to His churches in Scripture. And what we have found is not complicated. It is not hidden. It is not a secret buried in the original languages or locked behind

technical scholarship. It is a pattern so consistent that once you see it, you cannot stop seeing it.

God brings dead things to life by two means — His word and His Spirit. And He has never used any other.

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### *The Pattern*

The book has walked through this at every stage, but it is worth stepping back now and seeing the full picture in one place — because the picture is larger than any single chapter could show.

In the beginning, before anything existed, the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters (Genesis 1:2). Then God spoke — “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3) — and what did not exist came into being. The psalmist saw both forces at work in that moment: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host” (Psalm 33:6). Word and breath. Command and Spirit. Both present from the first act of creation.

Then God formed man from dust — structure, lifeless material shaped by divine hands — and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being (Genesis 2:7). Two acts. Form and breath. The body was complete before the breath came. And the breath made the difference between dust and a man.

When a nation's bones dried out — when Israel lost the word and the Spirit departed and nothing remained but death in every direction — God sent the word first. “Prophecy over these bones and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord’” (Ezekiel 37:4). The word went out. The bones assembled. The sinews and flesh and skin appeared. The structure was restored. But there was no breath in them (Ezekiel 37:8). Then God sent the breath — “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they come to life” (Ezekiel 37:9). The breath entered. They stood. An exceedingly great army (Ezekiel 37:10).

When the risen Christ stood before His disciples in the upper room, He breathed on them — using the verb (*emphysaō*) that the Greek Old Testament had used for God breathing life into Adam and for the breath entering the slain in the valley — and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). Garden. Valley. Upper room. The same act.

When the church was born at Pentecost, the word was preached first — Peter's sermon, Scripture from beginning to end — and then the hearers responded, and they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Three thousand came to life in a single day. Word and Spirit. Structure and breath.

The pattern has operated at every scale — cosmic, national, individual. And it has always required both: the word and the Spirit, the structure and the breath, working together. Never one without the other. Never by any other means.

• • •

### *The Personal Scale*

But this pattern does not stop at nations and churches. It reaches into the life of every individual who has ever stood before God and needed to be made alive.

Jesus told Nicodemus — a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, a man who knew the Scriptures — “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Water and Spirit. Two components of one birth.

Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand this. He rebuked him for not understanding: “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?” (John 3:10). Whatever Jesus meant by “water and the Spirit,” it was something a man who knew the Old Testament should have been able to grasp. And water in Scripture is water. It is not a symbol for something else. When the text means Spirit, it says Spirit. When it means the word, it says the word. When it says water, it means water. When Scripture does use water figuratively, it always signals it — either with a qualifier like “living water” (John 4:10; 7:38)

or with an explicit explanation like “this He spoke of the Spirit” (John 7:39). Jesus does neither in John 3:5.

Faithful students of Scripture have read “water” here in other ways — as a figure for physical birth, or as a symbol for the word. The reading offered here takes water as water, because that is what the Ezekiel 36 background and the apostolic practice both point to. The disagreement is real, and worth naming; the reading stands on the texts.

What the apostles practiced confirms what Jesus said. When Peter stood before the crowd at Pentecost and told them what to do, his answer included both elements: “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Baptism — water — and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The same two components Jesus named to Nicodemus, now given as the normative call to everyone who heard the word and asked what to do. Not two separate events, but two aspects of the same act — the obedient response to God’s word and the life-giving breath of God’s Spirit. Both required. The promise, Peter said, extended to “you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself” (Acts 2:39).

The accounts that follow show the pattern at work. In several, every element is explicitly recorded: the Pentecost converts heard the word, repented, were baptized, and received the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38-41). The Samaritans

believed Philip's preaching and were baptized; then the apostles came and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:12-17). Saul of Tarsus received the word from Ananias, was filled with the Holy Spirit, and was baptized (Acts 9:17-18; 22:16). Cornelius and his household heard the word from Peter's mouth, the Spirit fell, and they were baptized (Acts 10:44-48). The Ephesian disciples heard the full truth, were baptized, and the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 19:1-6).

In other accounts, the text records the word preached and the hearers responding but does not mention every element. The Ethiopian heard Philip preach Jesus from the Scriptures and was baptized (Acts 8:35-38). Lydia heard Paul's message and was baptized (Acts 16:14-15). The Philippian jailer heard the word of the Lord and was baptized (Acts 16:30-33). After Peter healed the lame man at the temple, he preached Jesus and gave a call that parallels Acts 2:38: "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19). About five thousand believed (Acts 4:4).

No account contradicts the pattern. No account offers an alternative. And the promise of Acts 2:38-39 — which explicitly includes the gift of the Holy Spirit and explicitly extends to all whom God calls — gives every reason to conclude that what Peter established as the pattern on the day the church was born remained the pattern wherever the word was preached and received.

And Jesus Himself defined what true worship looks like using the same two elements: “True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers” (John 4:23). Spirit and truth. And what is truth? Jesus answered that in His prayer to the Father: “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” (John 17:17). Truth is the word of God. To worship in spirit and truth is to worship by the Spirit and the word — the same breath and the same structure that have produced life since the beginning.

The Father seeks people who have both.

You can have truth without spirit. This book has given that condition a name from the mouth of Christ Himself: Sardis. “You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead” (Revelation 3:1). Correct doctrine. Proper structure. No breath. A body that looks alive and is not.

You can claim spirit without truth. Jesus warned of people who would say to Him, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” — people who claimed Spirit-empowered activity, who used His name, who pointed to results. And His answer: “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matthew 7:22-23). They had energy. They had activity. They had what looked like the breath. But they practiced lawlessness — they had no regard for the word that should have governed them. Breath with no structure. Wind with no bones to fill. The result is not life — it

is movement without direction, energy without form, enthusiasm that has nothing to sustain it because it was never built on anything solid.

The Father does not seek one or the other. He seeks both. Because both have always been required, and the God who established the pattern at creation has never changed it.

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### *The Warning*

Paul saw what was coming.

Writing to Timothy — his son in the faith, the man he had trained and sent to lead the church at Ephesus — Paul issued a charge and a warning in the same breath:

*“I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction”*

— 2 Timothy 4:1-2

Preach the word. That is the charge. In season and out of season — when it is welcome and when it is not, when the audience is receptive and when it is resistant. Reprove. Rebuke. Exhort. The word spoken faithfully, regardless of the response. That is the job. That is what Malachi described as the priest’s

function (Malachi 2:7). That is what the royal priesthood of the new covenant inherited (1 Peter 2:9). Preach the word.

Then the warning:

*“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths”*

— 2 Timothy 4:3-4

Read that slowly. Every phrase is a stage of the death this book has been tracing.

They will not endure sound doctrine. The word becomes unwelcome. Not because it has changed, but because the hearers have changed. Sound doctrine — *hygiainō*, healthy doctrine, doctrine that is whole and uncorrupted — is no longer tolerable. The medicine is rejected because the patient prefers the disease.

Wanting to have their ears tickled. The preference shifts. The people do not want to hear what God has said. They want to hear what makes them comfortable. The word of God is replaced by the word of man — not by force, not by persecution from the outside, but by consumer demand from the inside. This is Jeremiah 5:31 repeated in the new covenant: “My people love it so.”

They will accumulate for themselves teachers. Not teachers God sends. Teachers they choose — selected to match

the desires they already have, curated to confirm what they already believe, hired to say what they already want to hear. The system of transmission that God established — His word given to faithful men who deliver it unchanged — is replaced by a system the audience designs for itself.

And will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. The final stage. The truth is abandoned. Not because it was unavailable — it was right there, the same way the book of the law was inside the temple in Josiah's day. But the ears have turned away. The people have chosen myths — stories that satisfy without requiring change, teaching that entertains without convicting, words that feel like the word of God but carry none of its weight.

Paul was not describing something that might happen. He was describing something that *will* happen — with the certainty of a man who knew the pattern and knew human nature and knew that the same forces that dried out Israel's bones would come for the church.

The question is not whether the time Paul warned about has arrived. The question is whether anyone recognizes it.

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### *The Book in the Temple*

Every generation has to answer the same question Josiah's generation answered — not once, but continually.

Is the book being read?

Not whether it exists. The word of God exists. Not whether people own copies. More copies of the Bible have been printed, distributed, translated, and made available than any document in the history of the human race. It is on shelves and nightstands and phones and tablets. It is closer to more people than it has ever been in any generation that has ever lived.

The question is whether it is being opened.

Whether it is being read — not browsed, not mined for comfort, not searched for verses that confirm what the reader already believes — but read. Whether the people who gather in buildings that bear God’s name are hearing the word of God proclaimed faithfully, in its fullness, without the editing that Malachi condemned (Malachi 2:9) and the selectivity that Jeremiah described (Jeremiah 5:31).

Paul told Timothy what the word is and what it does: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Four things Scripture is profitable for. Teaching — the positive instruction, the structure of truth. Reproof — the identification of error, the exposure of what is wrong. Correction — the restoration to the right path, the realignment with what God has said. Training in righteousness — the

ongoing discipline that shapes a person into what God intended.

Teaching and reproof. Correction and training. The word builds and the word confronts. It constructs and it convicts. It gives the structure and it removes what does not belong in the structure. A church that only teaches but never reproves has half a word. A church that only affirms but never corrects has edited the message the same way the priests of Hosea's day edited theirs. The word of God is not a buffet where the hearer selects what appeals and leaves the rest. It is the full counsel of God, and it is profitable for all four functions — not just the two that the audience finds pleasant.

The Bereans understood this. When Paul preached to them in the synagogue, Luke recorded their response: “Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

Two things. They received the word with great eagerness — they were not hostile to the teaching. They wanted to hear it. And they examined the Scriptures daily to see whether what they were told was true — they did not take the teacher's word for it. They checked. They opened the book. They compared what was being preached to what God had already said. And they did it daily. Not once a week. Not when a question arose. Every day.

That is the antidote to the valley. Not a new program. Not a cultural strategy. Not a method for church growth or a formula for relevance. The word of God, read and heard and examined and obeyed. That is how the book stays off the shelf. That is how the temple keeps the law in use. That is how the bones stay covered with flesh and filled with breath.

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### *The Answer*

Can these bones live?

The answer has always been yes. But only by the means God has always used.

His word spoken faithfully. His Spirit given to those who hear and obey — “the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him” (Acts 5:32). Structure and breath. Word and Spirit. The two-part mechanism that formed a man from dust in a garden and raised a nation from bones in a valley and brought three thousand to life in a single day in Jerusalem.

The mechanism has never changed. Not because God lacks creativity, but because the mechanism reflects who He is. He is the God who speaks and what He speaks comes into being. He is the God who breathes and what He breathes upon comes to life. His word is the structure of all reality, and His Spirit is the life of all that lives. To change the mechanism

would be to change Himself, and He does not change: “For I, the Lord, do not change” (Malachi 3:6).

The bones can live. They have lived before — every time God has spoken and every time the breath has come. And they can live again, wherever the word is proclaimed in its fullness and the Spirit is received by those who hear.

But we cannot make them live.

That is the final truth this book has to offer, and it is the truth that keeps the reader from turning the answer into a program. We can prophesy — we can speak the word as God has commanded us to speak it, faithfully, fully, without editing and without apology. We can open the book and read it and teach it and hold it out to anyone who will hear. That is our job. That is the priesthood’s function. That is what Ezekiel did when God told him to prophesy to the bones.

But the breath is not ours to send. The Spirit comes from God — from outside us, from above us, from the four winds — and He gives it when and where and to whom He chooses. We do not control the breath. We cannot manufacture it. We cannot produce it by our own effort or summon it by our own methods. We can only speak the word and trust that the God who has always sent the breath will do what He has always done.

Ezekiel prophesied as he was commanded. And the breath came. And the dead stood up alive.

That is the answer.

It has always been the answer. It will always be the answer. The God who asked the question in the valley already knew what He was about to do. He asked because He wanted Ezekiel to face the death honestly — to stand in the middle of it, to see how many there were and how dry they were — and then to trust that the voice asking the question was the same voice that could answer it.

“Son of man, can these bones live?”

“O Lord God, You know.”

He does.

## APPENDIX A

# A Note from the Author

This book did not begin with a thesis. It began with a question — the same one God asked Ezekiel — and the pattern emerged from the text as the study progressed. The connection between Genesis 2:7 and Ezekiel 37 led to John 20:22. John 20:22 led to Acts 2. Acts 2 led to the conversion accounts. The conversion accounts led to the seven churches. Each chapter uncovered the next because the pattern was already there, running through the entire Bible, waiting to be followed. Nothing in this book was constructed. It was traced.

Individual connections within this pattern have been observed before. The parallel between the creation of man in Genesis 2:7 and the resurrection of the nation in Ezekiel 37 has been noted. The three meanings of *ruach* — breath, wind, Spirit — are well documented. The link between Ezekiel 36:25-27 and John 3:5 has been discussed. The echo of *ruach* in the rushing wind of Acts 2 is widely recognized. These are not new observations. What appears to be new is the unified thesis — that the word and Spirit together constitute the single mechanism of life throughout the entire Bible, operating at every scale from creation to conversion, and that the absence of

either one explains why the bones are dry. The individual bricks existed. The building, as far as we have been able to determine, had not been built before.

One passage was deliberately set aside. Ezekiel 37 does not end at verse 14. In verses 15 through 28, God tells Ezekiel to take two sticks — one for Judah, one for Joseph — and join them into one. The promise is unification: one nation, one king, one everlasting covenant, God’s dwelling place among His people (Ezekiel 37:22-27). That passage points forward — but it answers a different question than the one this book set out to trace. The valley vision asks whether dead things can live. The two sticks ask whether divided things can be made one. Both deserve careful study. This book addressed the first. The second awaits its own.

Test everything in this book against Scripture. Every claim cites book, chapter, and verse so that the reader can follow the reasoning and verify it independently. If anything stated here contradicts what God has said elsewhere, it is wrong — and we want to know. The standard is not ours. It belongs to the workman Paul described to Timothy: “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

## APPENDIX B

# The Pattern at a Glance

God brings dead things to life by two means — His word and His Spirit. Both are required. The word provides structure. The Spirit provides life. Together — and only together — they produce what neither can produce alone.

Scale	Form / Structure	Breath / Life	Result
Creation	God forms man from dust	God breathes into him	Man becomes a living being
Restoration	Ezekiel speaks to bones	Breath enters from four winds	The dead stand
New Birth	Born of water (obedient response to the word)	Born of the Spirit	Enters the kingdom
Conversion	Word preached, hearers baptized	Gift of Holy Spirit received	New life
Worship	Truth (John 17:17)	Spirit	True worshipers
Church Born	Word preached (Acts 2)	Spirit falls (rushing wind)	3,000 come to life
Death	Word absent (Prov 29:18)	Spirit withdrawn (Ps 104:29)	Dry bones