

Earth's Ultimate Congregation – God's Kingdom Restored by Divine Regathering Through Resurrection

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[0:00] But we're going to turn now to our Bible reading for this morning. And if you don't have a Bible with you, we've got plenty at the side, at the back, please do grab a Bible. And we are in the middle of the book of Ezekiel.

So please turn to Ezekiel chapter 37. And Willie will be opening this up for us a bit later in the service. Ezekiel 37.

And we're beginning there at verse 1. That's page 724 if you have one of the visitor Bibles. Ezekiel 37.

The hand of the Lord was upon me. And he brought me out in the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley.

It was full of bones. And he led me there around among them. And behold, there were very many of the surface of the valley.

[1:07] And behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, you know.

Then he said to me, prophesy over these bones and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones, behold, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live.

And I will lay sinews upon you and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin and put breath in you. And you shall live and you shall know that I am the Lord.

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound. And behold, a rattling.

And the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked. And behold, there were sinews on them. And flesh had come upon them.

[2:11] And skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, prophesy to the breath. Prophesy, 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 may live. So I prophesied as he commanded me.

And the breath came into them. And they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

Then he said to me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel.

Behold, they say, our bones are dried up and our hope is lost. We are indeed cut off. Therefore prophesy and say to them.

Thus says the Lord God. Behold, I will open your graves and raise you up from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord.

[3:15] When I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, O my people. And I will put my spirit within you. And you shall live. And I will place you in your own land.

Then you shall know that I am the Lord. I have spoken. And I will do it, declares the Lord. The words of the Lord came to me.

Son of man, take a stick and write on it. For Judah and the people of Israel associated with him.

Then take another stick and write on it.

For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel associated with him. And join them, one to another, into one stick.

That they may become one in your hand. And when your people say to you, will you not tell us what you mean by these? Say to them, thus says the Lord God.

[4 : 15] Behold, I am about to take the stick of Joseph that is in the hand of Ephraim and the tribes of Israel associated with him. And I will join with it to the stick of Judah and make them one stick.

That they may be one in my hand. When the sticks on which you write are in your hand before their eyes, then say to them, thus says the Lord God.

Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone. And will gather them from all around and bring them to their own land.

And I will make them one nation in the land on the mountains of Israel. And one king shall be king over them all. And they shall no longer be two nations and no longer divided into two kingdoms.

They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things. Or with any of their transgressions. But I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned.

[5 : 22] And will cleanse them. And they shall be my people. And I will be their God. My servant David shall be king over them.

And they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey all my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob where your fathers lived.

They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever. And David my servant shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them.

It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them.

And I will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them.

And I will be their God. And they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel.

[6 : 23] When my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore. Amen. And may God bless his word to us.

Do open your Bibles, if you would, to Ezekiel chapter 37, the passage that Paul read to us. We'll get there eventually. But if we're going to properly understand this chapter of Ezekiel, then in fact, the whole of Ezekiel from chapter 34, right to the end of the book, which speaks about so much hope beyond the judgment of exile.

Then we need to step back and we need to see the context of where this fits in the whole unfolding story of the Bible. We need to grasp the huge significance of the exile in that history of God's plan of salvation.

Because the end of the exile marks the beginning of what the Bible calls the latter days. In the New Testament, often the last days.

That is, the days of fulfillment of all of God's covenant promises right from the very beginning. From the beginning of the former days. Indeed, from the very beginning of the world.

[7 : 48] God's promise going right back to Genesis 3 was to undo, was to reverse the great scattering caused by sin. And as the human story progresses in Genesis 1 to 11, you'll remember.

Mankind doesn't progress in humble faith, but rather in hubristic defiance of God. And so, the great scattering and alienation that's spoken about in Babel makes global and so obvious that sheer helplessness of the human condition.

But you remember that immediately after that, Genesis chapter 11, even after that underlining of human sin, comes immediately the wonderful promise of divine salvation.

God calls Abraham to be the progenitor of a whole new humanity. God's promise is that through his seed, all the scattered peoples of the earth would indeed be blessed.

And in fact, God promises to Abraham that he will be God to him and God to his seed, including a vast multitude of spiritual seed from among all the nations.

[9 : 29] And he promised them a home as an everlasting possession and an everlasting covenant. And what we call the Old Testament is, in fact, the unfolding of the story of that promise all through the former days.

And looking ever more eagerly for the fulfillment of these promises in the latter days when they would dawn. That term, the latter days, is first found way back in Genesis chapter 49, when the dying Jacob is blessing his sons and prophesying about the future for the twelve tribes in days to come.

In the latter days. In the eschaton is how the Greek Old Testament translates. That's where we get our word eschatology, the thinking about the last days. And way back then in Genesis chapter 29,

Jacob prophesied and spoke of the scepter of Judah never departing until he comes to whom it belongs, whom all the peoples shall obey.

Genesis 49. A bit later on in Numbers chapter 24, there's another very remarkable prophecy when a pagan prophet, Balaam, is hired by an antagonistic king to curse the people of Israel.

But Balaam finds himself only able to speak the words that God makes him speak. And he speaks about a star rising from Jacob, a scepter from Israel to exercise great dominion in the world.

[11 : 01] And Moses as well spoke of these latter days. In Deuteronomy chapter 4, even before Israel had actually entered the land of Canaan, he looked long to the future and said, because of your recalcitrant unfaithfulness, God will ultimately put you out of the land into exile.

But even then, so great is God's mercy, so great is his commitment to his covenant promise, that even from there, Moses says, in the latter days, you will return to the Lord your God and obey his voice.

He will not forget the covenant with your forefathers that he swore to them. Then at the very end of his life, in the great song about the future in Deuteronomy 32, that Moses tells the people, he promises that after the exile, and all of its horror, God himself, he says, will vindicate his people. He will have compassion on his servants when he sees that their power is gone. And he will show them that he alone is God. He is the one who wounds and heals, who kills, and who makes alive again.

And in that great day of the Lord, when he judges all his enemies, when he rescues and restores all his true people, God says, and the apostle Paul quotes this in Romans chapter 15.

[12 : 31] He says, Gentiles on that day will rejoice alongside his people. He repays those who hate them, and he cleanses his land and his people, says Moses.

And the result will be the fulfillment, at last, of all that God promised to Abraham and his seed throughout the world. What will be seen is what we sung about there in Psalm 47, that God is king over all the earth, that the princes of the peoples, the Gentile nations, will gather as the people of the God of Abraham in the latter days, when all God's promises are fulfilled.

And that was God's promise to Abraham. It was not just that his seed would inherit a little strip of land in Canaan. That was just a beachhead in the former days of waiting.

The apostle Paul is absolutely explicit in Romans chapter 4 when he says the promise to Abraham and his offspring was that he would be heir of the world, the cosmos. And the promise, he says, was guaranteed by God's grace so that all Abraham's offspring, not just those of the law, those of Jewish background and heritage, but all who are of the faith of Abraham will inherit that promise. He is the father of us all, says Paul. All who have faith in Christ, the promised seed. And as it is written, I have made you the father of many nations, says the God in whom he believed.

[14 : 09] And he goes on to say, the God who gives life to the dead and brings into existence the things that do not exist. Abraham's faith was in the God who gives life to the dead and who calls into existence, who creates things that do not yet exist.

And his faith was for a future forever with God, inheriting the world, even though as yet he did not see that. Hebrews chapter 11 in the New Testament is very plain about all of this.

It tells us how we're to understand the story of Abraham. In fact, all the saints of the old order and older days. They knew, says Hebrews, that they were exiles on earth.

They knew that the earthly land of Canaan was not their true home because they sought a better country, a heavenly one. The city they longed for was not an earthly Jerusalem.

But it was a heavenly one. It was a city with eternal foundations built by God himself. And that's why Abraham could obey God even in that extraordinary command when God told him to offer up his own son as a sacrifice.

[15 : 23] The seed of promise upon whom everything that God had told him depended. Put him to death. And he could do it, says Hebrews 11, because he considered God was able even to raise him from the dead.

Not even death could erase God's covenant promise. And indeed, he knew that the true fulfillment of that promise lay beyond death.

And that's why Hebrews 11 tells us that many saints in the former days were martyrs. they refused to recant their faith to save their lives.

Why? So that they may rise again to a better life. That's why Joseph, we're told, spoke about his bones at the end of his life and said, take my bones with you in the Exodus because he knew that

his bones had a future with the people of God, the God who gives life to the dead and who promised an inheritance of life with him forever.

That was the hope of Israel. It's what the Apostle Paul declares if you read in Acts chapter 23 to chapter 28 when repeatedly he's defending himself before the courts and the leaders because of his preaching of the gospel of Jesus.

[16 : 44] What God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, he says. It's with respect to their hope of the resurrection of the dead that I'm on trial here today.

I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down in the law and written in the prophets, having a hope in God which these men themselves accept that there will be a resurrection both of the just and the unjust, he says to the Roman governor Felix.

I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers to which our twelve tribes hope to attain. Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? He says to King Agrippa and his Jewish court. I am emphasizing this because many Bible commentators seem to find it incredible that anyone in the Old Testament had any hope of resurrection at all.

You might join me in being as astonished as Paul was in their ability or inability rather to see what was absolutely plainly that hope right back to the beginning with the patriarchs themselves.

[17 : 59] But it's interesting isn't it? If mantras are repeated often enough it's amazing how people just start to take things as settled fact or settled science. Despite all plain evidence right before your eyes to the absolute contrary.

But our world is full of that. Science says therefore it must be true. Well biblical commentators seem to be just the same. Scholars say so it must be true. But it's not true. So if you approach this chapter Ezekiel 37 knowing that it can't have anything to do with real resurrection because we know that the Old Testament had no hope of resurrection well then we may be able to convince ourselves that it's all just metaphor that it's nothing more than a vivid picture about bringing Israel back into the earthly kingdom and their earthly land once again.

But if on the other hand you believe the apostle Paul when he tells us that his gospel is saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass about the resurrection from the dead.

The resurrection of God's people following the resurrection of the Christ who being the first to rise from the dead would proclaim light also to the Jews and to the Gentiles.

If we believe Paul that that is what the Old Testament is telling us. But I think we'll be able very clearly to see that what this chapter is speaking about is the hope of Israel.

[19 : 28] That is what Ezekiel is setting before his people here. A hope that would be fulfilled after the exile of his people comes truly to its end in the latter days.

In the days of fulfillment. By the way there's a very similar phrase to the latter days in the very next chapter here in chapter 38 verse 8. The latter years it calls it.

But it's the same phrase. And Ezekiel is far from unique in this message that what is coming after the exile, what will be set in motion then by the return of Israel to their own land is something far, far more.

Isaiah says that the comfort, the true comfort to his people Israel is coming when God's great servant will come to sprinkle many nations and to usher in, well, a whole new creation and new heavens and a new earth.

When he says the dead will rise and sing for joy where death will be swallowed up in victory.

Prophet Jeremiah spoke in the same way about a new covenant whereby God would rebuild his city for his people and it would never be uprooted ever again anymore.

[20 : 40] And in this chapter you see Ezekiel is just giving his part of the picture really showing how the reign of God himself through his servant David, the true shepherd, the true king whose ultimate coronation would bring ultimate comfort to the world, ultimate cleansing to his people, how that would result in the ultimate congregation of all God's people on earth.

No longer scattered by sin, separated from God, at odds with one another, but rather regathered and reunited through resurrection.

It's true of course, this is not just a chapter trying to prove the reality of individual resurrection. No faithful Israelite ever doubted that really, as we've seen. What Ezekiel is promising here is

something far, far, far greater than that.

He's promising something on a cosmic scale. He's talking about a vast reconstitution of the people of God, from deadness to vivid life, to a great army restored, regathered, reunited, one people under one God forever.

Verse 10 here, made alive by God's Spirit. Verse 12, raised from their graves. Verse 21, gathered from the nations.

[22 : 08] Verse 19, made one in God's hand, out of which none will pluck them forever. And ruled, verse 25, by one king, David, my servant.

And knowing the intimacy of God himself dwelling in their midst, verse 27, my dwelling shall be with them forever, forever, forevermore.

See, this cannot just be a symbolic metaphor promising a soon return to Ezekiel's contemporaries that he's speaking to.

Because if it was that, it was a false prophecy. Most of them did not return, ever. They died in Babylon. It was nearly 50 years before the very first little group of those exiles went back under Zerubbabel.

It was another hundred years beyond that that they went back in greater numbers under Ezra and Nehemiah that we read about. Now, what Ezekiel is setting before his people, his generation, is once again the great hope of Israel.

[23 : 16] He's telling them that God's covenant promise is not destroyed, even by their dreadful unfaithfulness. He's telling them that what Moses said was true, that God is rich in mercy.

And that there is still hope beyond judgment, beyond the exile. He's telling them that there is a future for the people of God, that the promise of God is not just a promise to them, but is indeed God's promise to the whole world, and it will be fulfilled through his people as he's promised.

To quote Palmer Robertson, Ezekiel's message was that despite the judgments of the exile, they were still the elect people of God, by which the Lord's purpose for all humanity would be fulfilled. See, Ezekiel's task and the task of all the other prophets of the exile was to speak in the midst of that utter collapse, the utter carnage in the nation because of sin.

And yet, as Palmer Robertson says, to broaden the horizons of the future so that it embraced the servant role purposed for this nation from its beginning and at last realizing their God's worldwide progress of redemption.

[24 : 36] That is what the end of the exile signified, you see, the beginning at last of the latter days, the days of fulfillment, when all God's promises would at last come to fruition through Israel for the whole world.

So the return of the Israelites from exile would just be the first act in that final great restoration and renewal of humanity as a whole through resurrection.

The divine regathering and reuniting of his people under his rule to live in his presence forevermore. I've taken time and I hope I've made clear the wider context because many Christians are very confused about the significance of the land of Canaan and especially the modern secular state of Israel today that calls itself Israel.

Now whatever view you may have about the returning and the reforming of the state of Israel in 1948, I want you to see that it does not fulfill the expectation that Ezekiel gives in this prophecy here.

Ezekiel is talking about open graves, resurrection, new life in the Spirit, all the people bowing down to one Messiah King. And as Douglas Stewart says, when we read this in context of the Bible's real concerns, it is clear, he says, that this is a prediction of the eschatological new age, the last days.

[26 : 19] And the reality it envisions goes far beyond mere political considerations of a this-worldly sort. And nor is it merely a this-worldly return to the promised land then, in the decades after Ezekiel's ministry that's being talked about.

Israel did return, but never again as a nation, never again with a king, and absolutely none of the blessings that are foreseen in these chapters.

And that is because, again, as Douglas Stewart says, all of this that Ezekiel predicts stands for something far greater than the recreation of one of the world's smaller nations.

The end of the exile signaled the dawn of the new age, whose brightness could be seen only when Christ arrived, and whose fullness is yet to come.

And that is why, you see, these chapters are in our Bibles. The Apostle Peter tells us plenty that the prophets knew that they were prophesying about the grace that was to be ours, us who live in these latter days, when they were speaking about these days to come.

[27 : 31] It was for us. That's why Paul says that whatever was written in these former days, notice, was written for our instruction that through the encouragement of the scriptures, we, we might have hope.

So with all of that, then, by way of background, I know it's been a long introduction, let's look at the real encouragement and the real hope that there is for us in Ezekiel's promise of this great resurrection, this great reunification, and this great ruler he speaks of here.

First of all, you see, verses 1 to 14 speak, don't they, very plainly about a great resurrection. The great resurrection of God's people through the promise of God's Word and the power of God's Spirit.

The picture is very plain. It's a people utterly dead in their sins, but made alive by God's Spirit to know the Lord and to share in the life of God Himself.

Verses 1 and 2 depict a scene not just of death, but of death under God's curse. Vast swathes of bodies, unburied and scattered and shamed. Now, Jeremiah chapter 34, verse 17 and following, promised just such a judgment on Israel as a result of God's covenant curse.

[28 : 50] It's quoting from exactly what Moses says will happen in Deuteronomy 28. Their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth. And so it was, and this is the aftermath.

Bones, notice, very many and very dry. That is very dead. Death as God's judgment. Can these bones live?

Asks God. Well, you alone know, says Ezekiel, because he knows that only a divine miracle could possibly do that. But he knows that God wounds and heals.

God kills and makes alive. And that is God's sovereign command. Ezekiel, this mortal son of man, is to speak God's word of promise to the dead.

I will cause breath to enter into you and you shall live. The dead will hear the voice of this son of man and those who hear will live, to paraphrase the words of another.

[29 : 57] Breath. Ruach, the Hebrew word. It's the key word in these verses. Ten times. Mostly breath, but also it's there in verse nine. Wind. And of course it makes explicit, doesn't it, that this is the breath of divine life.

It's translated in verse one and verse 14 as the spirit of God. Because God's spirit alone gives life to the dead, calls into existence things which are not.

And with the word of promise, verse seven, the bones reassemble and they grow flesh and skin. But as yet, the bodies remain lifeless, you see. And so Ezekiel is told now to prophesy to the breath, to pray for God's spirit to come into them.

And he does. And now they come to life and they stand up, an exceedingly great army. Just like, isn't it, back in the Garden of Eden when God formed man from the dust of the earth and then breathed his breath into his nostrils to make him alive.

Well, here we have the same picture of the recreation on a grand scale of mankind in vast numbers. A great army. And by the way, don't miss the very magnificent picture of all of God's work in renewal in our world.

[31 : 20] The Son of Man proclaims God's promise, the gospel of hope, but only the spirit of God can give life. And God's word and God's spirit are inseparable, aren't they?

God's words are God-breathed, Paul tells us. And that's true in creation. It's true in recreation. Psalm 33. By the word of the Lord, the heavens were made.

By the breath of his mouth, all their host. And still today, it's the same thing, isn't it? The word of God is proclaimed and the spirit of God is prayed in to people.

And that's the work of revival and renewal in its beginning in anybody's life, but also magnificently it will be in its ultimate consummation. That's why the apostle Paul is constantly asking the church to pray for his proclamation of the gospel because he knows that his words need to be attended by God's breath.

He knows that the sword of the spirit is the word of God and it is wielded only ever in prayer. That's why our gatherings to pray as a congregation of God's people here is so, so important.

[32 : 30] If we want to see the word of God at work bringing people to life, we need the prayers to bring the spirit of God. And in verses 11 to 14, God tells Ezekiel very plainly that this great miracle is something that God is going to bring about, do you notice, for the whole house of Israel.

And that is always a term for all God's people. Now, yes, it did apply in a way to the exiles who felt as though they were dead and finished.

And it was an exhortation to them to trust God, to trust that he could reverse even a situation as hopeless as theirs. But what God says here, like what he said in the previous chapters, he puts it in such ultimate terms, doesn't he?

First, chapter 36, remember, spoke about restoring them to a place that would be like the Garden of Eden. And here again, this language is of recreation through resurrection.

God's spirit will be put within you, he says, and you will live and you will be raised from your graves.

[33 : 44] But who does he mean by you? Well, he's speaking not just to those exiles, but verse 11 is plain, to the whole house of Israel.

The whole house of Israel. And verses 15 to 23 explain the truly huge scope of what that means, because these verses speak about a great reunification.

The great unification of all God's people through his sovereign regathering by his own sovereign hand. The picture here is of people lost and scattered and defiled by sin, but being made clean and being made one.

As truly God's people forever in heart and spirit. The key word in verses 1 to 14 was breath, spirit. In these verses, it's the word one.

I think 11 times it's there in verses 15 to 24. And Ezekiel now is back to one of his acted signs, although for the first time it's not any longer about judgment, but it's about wonderful salvation hope.

[34 : 57] He's to take two sticks, or as the footnote says, probably better, two bits of wood that we used to write on. One for Judah's people, he says, and one for Joseph's, Ephraim, the nation's, the northern kingdom of Israel and its ten tribes.

But notice, each one of these sticks, he says, represents people of Israel. Now, those kingdoms were separated, you remember, after Solomon's reign. It was a terrible tragedy.

It was a ripping apart, a dividing of the household of God. But now, God himself is going to reunite them, that they may be, verse 19, one in my hand.

One. The great refrain, all running up to David's great monarchy was that all Israel would be united under God's king.

But you see, since the nation of northern Israel had been utterly destroyed in 722 BC with the Assyrian attack on them and the dispersal and the conquering, there had been no recognizable element left at all, not a hint of any of the remnant of that ten tribes.

[36 : 15] For over a century, they just no longer existed. It was quite unlike these exiles from Judah who'd remained in Babylon as a distinct entity, although albeit a forlorn people.

But not so in the northern kingdoms. They'd all gone, dissipated throughout the world, finished. The ten lost tribes, so-called, of northern Israel has been a fascination of many cranks over the years, not least the movement called British Israelitism.

You may have heard of that. The idea there was that these migrated north, found a way to the British Isles, and they really are ancestors. And the kings and queens of Britain are really sitting on the throne of David, and we're the new Israel of God.

Well, there's not a shred of evidence in Scripture, nor is there a shred of evidence anywhere else for anything like that at all. These tribes were utterly disintegrated. So how then could possibly such a reunion of those who are no longer even a people at all come about with the people of Judah?

It certainly never did after Judah's exile ended, neither politically nor ethnically, nor did it ever happen in any later history. And nor is today's secular state of Israel an image of any such thing.

[37 : 34] Of course, Jews have come there from all over the world. But if you want to insist on that as a literal fulfillment of this chapter here, well, we need to see literal graves opening, don't we?

And resurrection, and the Messiah King ruling over them all. That is not what you see in the state of Israel today, quite the reverse. No.

Notice what verse 21 says. God will take people from the nations and gather them from all around. That is all the world.

And make them one nation. I said there's a very similar verse in chapter 38, verse 8, where again, God speaks about in the latter years, in the last days, there will be a people in the land whose

people, singular, were gathered from many peoples, plural, upon the mountain of Israel. And now dwelling securely in the kind of Edenic bliss that was talked about in chapter 36. Again, this is speaking about the ultimate destiny for the earth, for all God's people.

[38 : 47] The Apostle Paul, in Romans chapter 9, explains this very helpfully for us. He quotes from another prophet, from the prophet Hosea, but in a very similar passage, when he says that it's the gospel of Christ that fulfills this great gathering of God's people from all the nations worldwide.

When those, he says, who were once called not my people will be called sons of the living God. That is, he says, those that God has called and gathered with his own hand, not, not from the Jews only, but also, says Paul, from the Gentiles.

And in that same chapter, he reminds us that from the very beginning, not all the children of Abraham are his true offspring, but through Isaac, through the seed of promise, his offering will be named.

Not by the flesh. It never was, from the beginning, merely an ethnic thing to belong to God's household, but by faith. Abraham's true seed share Abraham's true faith.

And Ezekiel here is clearly pointing to that ultimate fulfillment of all God's covenant promises, which would not fail. The reversal of the division that he speaks about is through the reversal of death.

[40 : 15] It's reunification through resurrection. He's lifting their minds, you see, far beyond the mere local and immediate to something global, to something ultimate.

That's where their trust should lie. He's announcing the irreversible beginning of the ultimate restoration of all God's kingdom in all the earth, as he has been all the way through from chapter 34.

And that's why this chapter ends that section from chapter 34 to 37 as it begun, with the promised divine rule of God's forever king.

Verses 24 to 28 describe a great reign, don't they? The great reign over all God's people by one king, God's own servant, his prince of peace, forever and ever.

Do you remember in chapter 34, God promised that all human rulers would be put to an end, and he himself directly would rule his people.

[41 : 20] I myself will be the shepherd, the king of my people. But that would be through, he said. Do you remember one shepherd, one king, through my servant David? Well, here that's repeated, and it's reinforced unequivocally, isn't it?

That that reign and that covenant piece of peace will be forever. That's the key word here, five times, forever. David will be king, verse 24.

By the way, in Ezekiel, remember, no human ruler has ever been given the title of king, all just ruler or prince. But this one will truly be the king. And he'll be king forever.

God will make this covenant of peace through him, and it will be, verse 26, a forever covenant.

Same word, eternal covenant, forever covenant. One king over one reunited people of God forever, cleansed forever, walking in his ways, walking under his rule in his place, his multiplying generations forever.

And God's dwelling place among them forever, verse 27. Notice he doesn't use the word temple, but the word is his dwelling, his tabernacle, his tent. God will dwell among them.

[42 : 35] He will tabernacle among them forevermore. That's the ultimate promise of the covenant. It's there in verse 27. It sums it up. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

And then, verse 28, the whole world will know that I truly am the Lord who sanctifies Israel, who makes all Israel holy. When my servant rules them, and my sanctuary is in their midst forever.

When was any of that ever fulfilled? Read all through the biblical history after the exile.

Read all other history of the five centuries or so following. You will find nothing at all of what you could call in any way a real fulfillment of these things Ezekiel is speaking about.

As Patrick Fairbairn rightly says, the most characteristic part of the description, the cementing, strengthening, beneficent rule of David had not even the appearance of a literal fulfillment in the post-Babylonian history of Israel.

[43 : 46] And that's why the later prophets of the return, like Haggai, like Zechariah, like Malachi, the last of them all, they kept pointing the Israelites forward in faith.

Rejoice greatly, daughters of Zion, says Zechariah. Behold, your king is coming to you. His rule shall be from sea to sea and to the ends of the earth. On that day the Lord will save them, the ends of the earth, as his flock and his people.

The Lord you seek will come to his temple, said Malachi, but he'll come as a refiner's fire to sift and to purify, to show who are the true Israelites and who are not.

And behold, I'm going to send Elijah before that great and awesome day of the Lord comes with a call to repentance, to tell you to embrace God's king, his shepherd, and know that he alone is the one who will gather his true people together as one.

And so at last came that Elijah, John the Baptist, the one who at his birth, his father sang.

[44 : 59] Do you remember that the Lord, the God of Israel has visited and redeemed his people at last, raising up a horn of salvation in the house of his servant David as he spoke by his prophets of old.

If you read through John's gospel, I think in particular, you see so very clearly how Jesus Christ claimed to be and was shown to be that king whose great reign we're reading about in these chapters in Ezekiel.

And how he began to fulfill and is now fulfilling still in abundance all that he promised. John's gospel opens, remember, with John telling us of John the Baptist, sent from God to bear witness to the one in whom was life, the light of men.

And that giver of life came to his own people, says John, and his own did not receive him. But to those who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, born of God.

I will set my glory among the nations, was Ezekiel's refrain, when my dwelling place will be among them. And John's gospel says, Jesus, the eternal word, became flesh and dwelled, tabernacled among us.

[46 : 21] And we have seen his glory as the only son of the Father. And he manifested that glory in wondrous ways. He spoke of God's dwelling, his forever temple as being now, his own body.

And many were drawn to him, even prominent theologians and teachers of Israel like Nicodemus. And Jesus spoke to him about this forever kingdom of life. And he said that to enter it, yes, you have to be born from above by the Spirit of God.

Don't marvel at what I'm saying. He says, are you the teacher of Israel and you don't understand these things? Haven't you read Ezekiel and the other prophets? And he spoke about this very same thing, the Spirit of God coming like the wind and breathing resurrection life.

That's what I'm doing, says Jesus. The wind blows. You don't know where it comes from. So it is with everyone being born of the Spirit. But the Spirit breathes his life into those who receive my word.

Not otherwise. Just like in Ezekiel. And Jesus said, whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the Son will not see life.

[47 : 37] But the wrath of God remains upon him. And John chapter 5, after Jesus miraculously raised the man up who had been crippled for 38 years with his single word, rise, He says to us, well, is like one of Ezekiel's sign acts.

Because a day is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. Whoever hears my word, He says, and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He's passed from death to life and does not come into judgment. And Jesus says, don't marvel at this. For an hour is coming when all who are in their tombs will hear His voice and come out and rise to life or to condemnation.

Do you see what Jesus is saying? The end has begun. The last days have begun. And in fact, it's already here now, the day when life can be assured through belief in my word before that final judgment comes.

And in John chapter 6, He says, everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life and I will raise Him up on that last day. It's the Spirit who gives life, He says.

[48 : 51] The words I speak to you are Spirit and life. But in chapter 8 of John's Gospel, He warns them, unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.

But if you abide in my word, you are my true disciples. And you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. You will never see that death as judgment for sin.

But the irony, the tragedy, was that so many Jews refused to see. You can't bear to hear my word, He said to them, because you're not Abraham's true children.

You're of your father, the devil. It was a murderer from the beginning. And indeed, they went off immediately and plotted to kill Him, showing that exactly what He said was true. And yet, so

obviously, was Jesus, the promised Son of David, that even blind men could see it in the very next chapter.

Jesus heals a blind man who falls at His feet and says, Lord, I believe, and He worships Him. And Jesus said, yes, for judgment, I have come into this world that those who do not see may see, and those who think they see are made blind.

[50 : 10] And in the next chapter, Jesus declares utterly explicitly all that Ezekiel spoke about God Himself stepping in to set aside all human rulers, all earthly shepherds.

When He said, I am the good shepherd, the true King. And I've come not to kill and destroy, but to give My people life, abundant life.

Indeed, I lay down My life for the sheep so that they may have life eternal. And He said, do you remember, I have other sheep not of this fold, not just these Israelites, and I must bring them in also so that they may all be one flock.

And I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand.

One stick in My hand. And in chapter 11, do you remember, wonderfully, amid all the grief around Lazarus' tomb, Jesus says to Martha, your brother will rise again.

And she says, yes, I know he will in the resurrection of the last day. She knew the hope of Israel.

And Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life.

[51 : 22] Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live. And Martha gets it, doesn't she? Ezekiel's words are being fulfilled. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.

And yet the authorities are more and more determined to put Him to death. But even as they do, do you remember, the high priest hating Jesus, just like Balaam, finds himself unwittingly prophesying, what, that Jesus would die not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

Isn't that extraordinary? And it's when they see the whole world going after Jesus. It's when Gentiles are seeking Jesus at the great feast that Jesus says, yes, now the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself. And He said this, says John, to show by what kind of death He was going to die, to gather all God's children into one.

And in the upper room, do you remember, just before His betrayal, He prayed to the Father for all of those who had believed in His Word and for all who are yet to believe the world over through the Gospel that He was committing to the apostles.

[52 : 41] He prayed that they might be one. So that they will know that you sent me and that you love them even as you've loved me.

What was Ezekiel's promise? I will gather them from all around and make them one and one king shall be over them forevermore. And then the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies. And at the cross, at last, John shows us how it was that that cleansing water would wash away His people's sin forever and the life-giving new birth of water and spirit would come.

It would come only, only, mingled with the precious blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Do you remember, out of His body flowed blood and water. And these things took place, John says, that the Scriptures might be fulfilled.

[53 : 43] The promise of life from the dead, the life-giving Spirit of God, the extraordinary, wonderful gift of the love of God. But until that day, none could yet fathom that God so, so loved the world that in order for His people not to perish in their sins, but to have that eternal life.

He must give His only Son on the cross Himself to bear away their sins so that Himself risen from the grave, He could then say to His disciples, remember, peace be with you.

And He breathed on them His breath and said, receive the Holy Spirit, the breath of God that brings life from the dead.

And not just them. Do you remember, He said immediately, as the Father sent me, I'm sending you out into the world to gather in and to go on gathering in My sheep that there will be one flock in My hand forever.

Tend My sheep, feed My sheep, was His words to Peter. Do you remember on the shore? That's what it means to follow Me. The great regathering has begun.

[55 : 11] Give your life to it. I will set them and multiply them and My dwelling place will be with them forevermore.

That's what God said through Ezekiel. That was the great commission that Jesus gave, wasn't it? Go, make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey Me as King and Lord.

Gather them into My one household, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit. That was God's purpose before the creation of the world. It's what Paul tells us in Ephesians chapter 1, to unite all things in Christ, not just in earth, but also in heaven.

People who were dead in trespasses and sins, Jews and Gentiles both, but now made alive together with Christ.

So that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace and the kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

[56 : 17] You see, friends, the church of Jesus Christ today is the place, the only place where people here and now through faith in Jesus have received that promised Holy Spirit of life.

A guarantee, Paul says, of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, our bodily resurrection. which we will do, he says, through Christ.

Christ is the firstfruits. But remember, he says to the Romans, if the spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies.

This is the hope of Israel. this is our hope. So let me ask you this morning, do you have that guarantee? The guarantee that the spirit of God will raise you to life on the last day?

Jesus says you can. The apostles say you can. But only if His spirit comes into your heart now, before that day.

[57 : 30] And only God can do that. So you must ask Him to. You must prophesy like Ezekiel to the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells us how to do that.

How to prophesy to the breath of life and to see that wonderful effect. And He says, very simply, you do that by believing in Him. That Christ, the Messiah King promised by Ezekiel here, that He is Jesus, the Son of God.

And He says, believe in Him. And He will breathe His life into you now so that you know Him as your Savior and as your God.

He will then raise you up on the last day with all of His people to dwell as His one people with Him forevermore.

Forevermore. Nothing less. Forevermore. this is the gospel of Ezekiel. And this is the gospel of Jesus Christ, God's King, forever and forevermore.

[58 : 45] Amen. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You that from the beginning Your Word has promised life, life from the dead. how we rejoice in our great Savior, Jesus Christ, the Son of David, in whom we can have assurance, guarantee of that life to come.

So Lord, may we know You now, we pray. and may our Lord Jesus Christ be all our righteousness and all our hope for that great day.

We ask it in His name. Amen.