

Homiletics Analysis: Ezekiel 37

Content & Intent

Broader Unit (Component of Ezekiel 33–48): Ezekiel 37 sits within the great restoration section of the book (chapters 33–48), which follows the fall of Jerusalem (reported in 33:21) and pivots from judgment oracles to promises of renewal. Chapters 33–39 form the near-term restoration sequence: return, spiritual renewal, regathering, and defeat of final enemies. Chapter 37 is the theological heart of this sequence — the hinge passage between the individual spiritual renewal of 36:24–32 and the national/political reunification of 37:15–28, and between the covenant promises of chapters 34–36 and their cosmic vindication in chapters 38–39. It does not stand alone from this sequence, but its claim is sufficiently complete to sustain independent analysis: the sovereign God who kills and makes alive is the only hope of a people who are, by every human measure, finished.

This Text — Content: The chapter divides into two distinct but unified oracles. The first (vv. 1–14) is the visionary narrative of the valley of dry bones: the LORD sets Ezekiel in a valley full of human bones — very dry, signifying long death — and asks whether they can live. Ezekiel defers to God. The LORD commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones; they reassemble, are covered with flesh, but remain lifeless until the breath/Spirit is commanded into them. The bones represent the whole house of Israel, who have declared themselves cut off and without hope (v. 11). The LORD's answer is direct: *I will open your graves and bring you up from your graves* (v. 12). The second oracle (vv. 15–28) is a sign-act: Ezekiel joins two sticks representing Judah and Israel/Ephraim into one. The LORD interprets: He will reunite the divided kingdoms under one king, one David, one covenant of peace, one sanctuary, forever. The nations will know that the LORD sanctifies Israel when His sanctuary is among them forever (v. 28).

This Text — Intent: God is speaking to a people who have pronounced their own death sentence and abandoned hope. The intent of this passage is not primarily informational — it does not merely teach that resurrection is possible. The intent is to assault and overthrow the despair of the exiles by demonstrating that *their assessment of the situation is irrelevant* — because they have forgotten who God is. God intends to produce faith in His sovereign life-giving power where only hopelessness remains. He is also binding that faith to a specific future: not merely individual survival, but full covenant restoration — unity, Davidic kingship, permanent sanctuary, and the knowledge of God among the nations. The passage is an act of prophetic confrontation against a theology of abandonment, and it demands a response of reoriented trust.

Subject Sentence: The God who raises the dead renews His people by sovereign grace alone.

Primary Claim: When God's people have declared themselves beyond hope, God answers not with encouragement but with resurrection — He alone can open graves, and He will, because His covenant name and His dwelling among His people are at stake.

Interpretive Evaluation

The central interpretive question: literal bodily resurrection or national restoration?

The dominant interpretive debate concerns whether the dry bones vision depicts individual bodily resurrection (a future eschatological event involving actual graves) or national/corporate restoration (the reconstitution of Israel as a people after the Babylonian exile). This is not a trivial distinction — it shapes both the theological claim of the passage and its canonical function.

The immediate interpretive context resolves this question clearly in favor of national restoration as the *primary referent*: God himself provides the interpretation in verses 11–14. The bones “are the whole house of Israel” (v. 11). They say “our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are indeed cut off.” The promised action is not “I will raise the dead” in a general sense but “I will open *your* graves and bring you up, O my people” — addressed to the exiles. The vision is an enacted metaphor for what the exile felt like (death, desiccation, separation from the land and from God) and what God promises to reverse. The national-restoration reading is exegetically demanded by the text's own interpretive apparatus.

However, the text's imagery exceeds what a merely nationalistic reading can contain. The language of *ruach* (breath/wind/spirit) deliberately echoes Genesis 2:7 (the LORD breathing life into Adam), and the imagery of graves being opened goes beyond what “return from exile” language normally requires. Paul in Romans 4:17 describes God as “the one who gives life to the dead” in a context explicitly drawing on Abraham's hope against hope — language that resonates with Ezekiel 37's structure. And the New Testament's treatment of Israel's restoration as a type of individual spiritual regeneration (John 3, Titus 3:5, Ephesians 2:1–5) suggests that while the immediate referent is national, the passage participates in a broader canonical pattern of divine life-giving that is not exhausted by the return from Babylon.

Reformed reading: The immediate referent is national — the reconstitution of Israel from exile — but the *theological principle* operative in the passage (God gives life to the dead; God alone does it; He does it by His Spirit and His word) is foundational to both individual regeneration and eschatological resurrection. The passage is not primarily a proof-text for either of those doctrines; it is a proclamation of God's sovereign life-giving power over what appears permanently dead, applied here to His covenant people. Preaching that

bypasses the national referent to leap immediately to “spiritual rebirth” misreads the passage. Preaching that confines it to a historical-political event forfeits its theological depth.

Dispensational reading — acknowledge and qualify: Dispensational interpreters often treat this passage as a direct prediction of the physical regathering of Israel to the land in the modern era, with the valley of dry bones representing ethnic Israel’s national reconstitution (partially fulfilled in 1948, awaiting fuller eschatological fulfillment). This reading rightly emphasizes the passage’s national and corporate dimensions against overly spiritualized alternatives. It also rightly holds that the covenant promises to Israel have not simply evaporated into the church. However, the Dispensational reading tends to postpone the passage’s fulfillment so thoroughly that it loses its immediate word to the exiles in Babylon — who were the first audience and whose despair was the immediate occasion. Additionally, the sign-act of the two sticks (vv. 15–28) speaks of Davidic kingship and permanent sanctuary in terms that find their fulfillment in Christ, the son of David, whose body is the true temple (John 2:19–21; Ephesians 2:20–22). A hermeneutical approach that defers all fulfillment to a future ethnic-political event struggles to account for these New Testament trajectories. **Qualify:** retain the national-corporate dimension; resist the deferral of all fulfillment past the first coming.

Pentecostal/Charismatic reading — acknowledge: Some Pentecostal exposition applies the passage to revival and corporate spiritual awakening — the rushing wind and the coming of the Spirit as images for Spirit-outpouring in the church. This reading captures something real: the *ruach* imagery is genuine and resonates with Pentecost (Acts 2:2), and the principle that only the Spirit can give life to what is dead is not foreign to the passage. However, framing the passage primarily as a revival promise imports a frame of reference the text does not supply. The passage is not about the church asking for revival; it is about God unilaterally acting on a people who have ceased to ask for anything. **Acknowledge the canonical resonance; resist reading it as a revival manual.**

Lutheran reading — acknowledge: Lutheran exposition rightly emphasizes the Law/Gospel structure latent in the passage: the exiles’ confession (“we are cut off”) represents the full weight of the Law’s verdict, and the vision of resurrection is pure Gospel — the LORD does not respond to their condition with instruction but with life. This structural insight is exegetically sound and homiletically useful.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 2:7** — The LORD breathing *nishmat chayyim* into Adam; Ezekiel 37’s *ruach* command deliberately echoes this, grounding Israel’s national resurrection in the same creative-life-giving act that produced humanity. God makes alive by His breath; this is who He is.

- **Romans 4:17–25** — Paul’s description of Abraham’s faith as faith in “the one who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” — hoping against hope, as good as dead. The structure of Ezekiel 37 (a people as dead as dead can be, God’s sovereign life-giving word, faith that rests on promise alone) is precisely the pattern Paul identifies as the *form* of saving faith.
- **Ephesians 2:1–10** — “You were dead in your trespasses and sins... but God, being rich in mercy, made us alive together with Christ.” The theological principle of Ezekiel 37 — death, divine initiative, new life — is the pattern Paul applies to individual regeneration. The passage is not *about* Ephesians 2, but Ephesians 2 shows that the same God who raised Israel is the same God who raises sinners.
- **Ezekiel 36:24–27** — The immediately preceding promise: “I will give you a new heart and a new spirit... I will put my Spirit within you.” Chapter 37 enacts and amplifies this promise visually — the Spirit who regenerates (ch. 36) is the same Spirit who resurrects (ch. 37). The chapters are inseparable.
- **Revelation 21:1–5, 22–27** — The permanent sanctuary and the dwelling of God among His people (Ezek. 37:26–28) find their eschatological consummation in the New Jerusalem, where God Himself is the temple and the nations walk in His light. What Ezekiel promises in embryo, Revelation 21 delivers in fullness.

Aim: To confront every form of spiritual despair — personal, communal, and cultural — with the claim that the God who opened graves in Ezekiel 37 has already demonstrated His life-giving power in the resurrection of Christ, and that no condition is too far gone for Him to restore.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
37:1	The hand of the LORD brings Ezekiel to a valley full of bones	“Hand of the LORD” = prophetic transport/vision; this is a formal vision, not a physical journey
37:2	The bones are very many and very dry	“Very dry” = long dead; no latent life; the despair is total, not partial
37:3	The LORD asks: “Can these bones live?” Ezekiel answers: “O LORD God, you know”	Ezekiel’s answer is not evasion — it is faith: the question is not for Ezekiel to answer

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
37:4–6	The LORD commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones: sinews, flesh, skin, breath will come; “you shall know that I am the LORD”	“You shall know that I am the LORD” — the divine-recognition formula; this is about the LORD’s identity
37:7–8	Ezekiel prophesies; rattling sound; bones come together; sinews and flesh appear — but no breath	The reconstitution is complete except for life; form without spirit
37:9–10	The LORD commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath/wind/spirit (<i>ruach</i>); breath enters; they stand — an exceedingly great army	<i>Ruach</i> carries all three meanings simultaneously; “exceedingly great army” — from hopeless dead to an overwhelming force
37:11	The LORD identifies the bones: “these bones are the whole house of Israel” — they say “our hope is lost, we are cut off”	The exiles have pronounced their own death sentence; this is the pastoral crisis the vision addresses
37:12–13	The LORD promises: “I will open your graves, bring you up, bring you into the land of Israel; you shall know that I am the LORD”	The grave-opening language is stronger than return-from-exile typically requires; echoes bodily resurrection
37:14	“I will put my Spirit in you, and you shall live... I have spoken and I will do it”	The promise is unconditional; rests entirely on God’s word and will; closes the first oracle
37:15–17	Sign-act commanded: two sticks — one for Judah, one for Joseph/Ephraim — joined into one in Ezekiel’s hand	The divided kingdom (since 931 BC) will be rejoined; the sign enacts what the word promises
37:18–20	The exiles ask the meaning; Ezekiel restates the sign	Typical prophetic sign-act structure: act, inquiry, interpretation
37:21–22	Interpretation: the LORD will gather Israel from the nations, bring them to their land, make them one nation under one king	“One nation... one king” — the political reunification is inseparable from the spiritual restoration

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
37:23	They will no longer defile themselves with idols; the LORD will save them, cleanse them; “they shall be my people, and I will be their God”	The covenant formula renewed; the cleansing is divine initiative, not human effort
37:24–25	“My servant David shall be king over them... forever”	The Davidic covenant reaffirmed; “my servant David” = a future Davidic king, understood christologically in the NT
37:26–27	“I will make a covenant of peace with them... an everlasting covenant... I will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore... I will be their God and they shall be my people”	The covenant of peace echoes Ezek. 34:25; Num. 25:12; Isa. 54:10; “everlasting covenant” = new covenant language
37:28	“Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore”	The divine-recognition formula closes the chapter — the ultimate goal is the display of God’s glory to the nations

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	37:1–10	The Vision: Dead Bones Made into a Living Army
2	37:11–14	The Interpretation: The LORD Opens Graves and Gives His Spirit
3	37:15–20	The Sign-Act: Two Sticks Joined into One
4	37:21–28	The Promise: One Nation, One King, One Covenant, One Sanctuary — Forever

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The God who raises the dead renews His people by sovereign grace alone.

Primary Claim: When God's people have declared themselves beyond hope, God answers not with encouragement but with resurrection — He alone can open graves, and He will, because His covenant name and His dwelling among His people are at stake.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] Stop calculating your hopelessness as though God were a factor in the equation. The exiles in Ezekiel 37 were not wrong about their condition — they correctly assessed the bones as very dry. What they were wrong about was drawing a conclusion from their condition without accounting for God. Their error was not despair about the facts; their error was treating God as irrelevant to the facts. Many Christians do the same: they accurately diagnose the deadness of a marriage, a church, a prodigal child, a culture — and then conclude that what is dead will stay dead. This passage demands a cognitive reorientation: no condition is outside God's capacity, and the God who opened graves in Babylon has already demonstrated His life-giving power in an empty tomb outside Jerusalem. The calculation that produces hopelessness has simply left out the decisive variable.

2. [Affections/Worship] Let the God who speaks to dry bones reawaken wonder and reverence in place of familiarity. Ezekiel's response to the question "Can these bones live?" is not a confident declaration but an act of worship: "O LORD God, you know." He does not answer; he defers — not out of ignorance but out of a right apprehension of who he is standing before. The vision that follows is designed to produce that same response in those who hear it: a God who commands scattered bones to reassemble, sinews to form, flesh to cover, and breath to enter is a God before whom casual familiarity is simply wrong. The passage invites — demands — a renewed trembling before the living God. Where worship has become routine and God has become manageable, Ezekiel 37 breaks the category. He is not a life-coach. He is the one who opens graves.

3. [Will/Behavior] Bring your honest despair to God rather than managing it privately or resolving it falsely. The exiles said out loud: "Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are indeed cut off." This is not the language of unbelief — it is the honest confession that becomes the occasion for God's response. God does not address the exiles while they are pretending to be fine; He addresses them in their declared despair. Christians who are managing private hopelessness — keeping the appearance of faith while internally having written off the situation — are denying themselves access to the God of Ezekiel 37. Concretely: name what feels dead. Say it honestly before God. The valley of dry bones was not a private embarrassment to be avoided; it was the place where the LORD showed up.

4. [Mind/Belief] Understand that the Spirit who regenerates is the same Spirit who will raise the dead — your future is as secure as Christ’s resurrection. Ezekiel 37 deploys the *ruach* of God to accomplish what is otherwise impossible. The New Testament identifies this same Spirit as the one who raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 8:11) and who now dwells in believers as the guarantee of their own resurrection: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” Ezekiel 37:14 — “I will put my Spirit in you, and you shall live” — is not ancient history. It is the present possession and future guarantee of everyone in whom the Spirit of God lives. The security of the believer does not rest on the believer’s grip but on the life-giving power of the indwelling Spirit.

5. [Will/Behavior] Pray for, work for, and refuse to give up on the reunion and restoration of what has been divided — because God is in the business of joining what has been torn apart. The sign-act of the two sticks is not merely a prediction; it is a commission of hope. The people of God were divided — Judah and Israel, north and south, separated for centuries. God’s answer is not “accept the fracture as permanent” but “I will make them one.” This has christological fulfillment (Ephesians 2:14–16 — Christ who “has made us both one, and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility”), but it also has concrete application: fractured families, divided churches, broken relationships that have been written off as permanently severed are subject to the same God who joined two sticks. Do not accept as permanent what God has not declared permanent. Pray and work accordingly.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Ezekiel 37 makes a definitive claim about the character of God as the sovereign Lord over life and death. He is not a God who supports the living and mourns the dead — He is the one who creates life out of nothing (Genesis 1, Genesis 2:7) and who raises the dead from graves (37:12–13). His life-giving power is not a response to human readiness or receptivity — the bones neither ask to live nor cooperate with the process. God commands; life obeys. This passage also establishes that God’s motivation for acting on behalf of His people is ultimately His own name and glory among the nations (37:28 — “the nations will know that I am the LORD”), which means His restoration of His people is not a concession to their merit but a display of His character. The everlasting covenant, the permanent sanctuary, the Davidic king who reigns forever — all of these are grounded in who God is, not in what Israel has earned.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Ezekiel 37 is one of the Old Testament’s most powerful demonstrations of the Reformed doctrine of sovereign grace applied at a

corporate-national level: total inability (the bones are dead and cannot will their own reassembly), divine monergism (every stage of the restoration is initiated and accomplished by God alone), and the Spirit as the exclusive agent of life (the bodies are useless forms without the *ruach*). The passage directly parallels and grounds the New Testament's language of individual regeneration — Ephesians 2:1–5 (“made us alive together with Christ”) follows the same structural logic — but it does so at the level of the covenant people, not just the individual. This matters for Reformed ecclesiology: the church is not constituted by individuals who chose to assemble, but by the Spirit of God who has breathed life into what was dead, gathering a people to Himself for His own glory. The everlasting covenant of peace, the Davidic king, and the permanent sanctuary all find their fulfillment in Christ, the true David and true temple, in whom the nations are now brought to know the LORD (John 17:23; Ephesians 2:20–22). Ezekiel 37 is, therefore, gospel before the Gospel — the shape of grace is already resurrection.

Main Takeaway

The exiles had done the math and arrived at zero. God's answer was not a revised calculation — it was an open grave and a standing army. The God who breathed life into Adam, who raised Israel from the death of exile, and who raised Jesus Christ from the dead on the third day is the same God who addresses every person and every situation that has been written off as finished. No marriage, no church, no prodigal, no culture, no soul is beyond Him — and the proof is not a promise written in the future tense but a resurrection already accomplished. Stop living as though the bones stay dry. He opens graves.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Bypassing the national referent to leap immediately to “spiritual rebirth.”** The most common mishandling of Ezekiel 37 is to treat the dry bones immediately as an image of the unconverted heart and preach primarily an evangelistic or regeneration sermon. While the theological principle resonates with regeneration and the New Testament deploys it that way, the text itself is addressed to the covenant people of God in exile — people who were already God's people and had declared their situation hopeless. Preaching that bypasses this referent strips the passage of its pastoral specificity. The sermon should move from the national referent to the broader theological principle, not the reverse.
- **Treating verse 3 (“O LORD God, you know”) as Ezekiel's evasion rather than his faith.** Ezekiel's deferral to God in response to the question “Can these bones live?” is sometimes read as uncertainty or diplomatic avoidance. It is neither. It is the right theological answer: the question of whether the dead can live is not a human question to answer — it belongs to God alone. Expositors should highlight this as

the posture the passage invites in the hearer: not confident calculation but awed deference to the God who gives life.

- **Using the passage primarily as a “revival text” for prayer and spiritual awakening.** While there is legitimate canonical resonance between the *ruach* of Ezekiel 37 and Pentecost (Acts 2), framing the passage primarily as a revival manual imports a frame of reference the text does not supply. The text does not depict the people crying out for revival; it depicts God acting unilaterally on people who have ceased to hope for anything. The sermon’s direction should be from God’s sovereign initiative to the people’s reorientation — not from the people’s prayer to God’s response.
- **Preaching the sign-act of the two sticks (vv. 15–28) as a detached political prediction without christological grounding.** The rejoining of Judah and Israel under “my servant David” finds its primary fulfillment in Christ, the son of David, in whom the divided people of God are made one (Ephesians 2:14–16; John 10:16 — “one flock, one shepherd”). Dispensational preaching that treats this passage as a prediction about modern Israeli political geography defers this fulfillment indefinitely and severs the passage from its New Testament trajectory. The “one king” and “everlasting covenant” and “sanctuary forever” language cannot be preached fully without reference to Christ’s first coming, the new covenant, and the church as temple.
- **Omitting the divine-recognition formula and thus preaching the passage anthropocentrically.** The phrase “you shall know that I am the LORD” appears in verses 6, 13, and 14, and the equivalent (“the nations will know...”) appears in verse 28. This formula is the governing *telos* of the passage: God is not doing this primarily to help the exiles feel better. He is acting for His own name, for the display of His glory, for the knowledge of Himself among the nations. Preaching that frames the passage primarily as God’s compassionate response to human despair without anchoring it in God’s sovereign purposes for His own glory misrepresents the passage’s ultimate claim.
- **Reducing the applications to “have more faith” or “don’t give up hope” — bare imperatives without gospel grounding.** The passage does not command the exiles to hope harder. God commands Ezekiel to speak, and God opens the graves. Application that ends with “therefore trust God more” without grounding that trust in the accomplished resurrection of Christ and the indwelling of the life-giving Spirit has confused the Law’s demand with the Gospel’s gift. The imperative to hope flows from the indicative of what God has already done — Ezekiel 37 does not tell the exiles to pull themselves up; it tells them that the one who opens graves has already spoken, and what He has spoken He will do.