

back in Jerusalem for Passover Week, ending with His own death on the cross, and then resurrection following a similar burial to Lazarus. Following the world order, everything becomes sick or wears out or goes wrong; but by contrast, turning to the Lord of life is always lifegiving.

QUESTION *Think of a time (or times) when prayers seemed to go unanswered and everything went pear-shaped - but later you saw God's higher purpose.*

Romans 8:6-11 – The hold of the flesh opposes the rule of God's Spirit

When we become Christians, the flesh nature tries to hold on

6 The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.

7-8 The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.

"Governed by the flesh" – the selfish and independent 'human' nature, resisting what God wants for us, is life-sapping, not life-giving.

9 You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ.

REFLECTION What, or who, is the power that made the resurrection happen – the dry bones brought to life, Lazarus emerging from the tomb, Jesus Himself raised to life on the third day? This teaching for Christians in Rome speaks of the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ in the same sentence (v.9). Jesus spoke the command to Lazarus' body and the Spirit of God re-created his deceased body as living. Our humanness gets in the way of what God intends, but the Holy Spirit is the one who kindles life in our human spirit and empowers us to live for Him – as we turn to Jesus and call Him Lord.

QUESTION *How do we make room for the Holy Spirit to give us His new life and empowering to live for Jesus? How do we make it difficult for Him?*

PRAYER Father God, as we come to You submitted to Jesus, we know that You are the giver of life. Left to ourselves we can only die back, but as we open ourselves to You we always find renewal. At this time, where the flesh so readily entertains the fear of death, we thank You that in You we have the opposite spirit of peace, joy and hope. May we be strong in the Spirit of Christ, and in our small way, lifegiving as You are lifegiving. Amen.

"Have the Spirit of Christ" – which comes by deciding to trust Jesus for your salvation and looking to Him as Lord. Telling Him (and others) of that intention underlines the decision; otherwise we can continue in a nominal assent which does not unseat the independence of the selfish nature, or allow room for the Holy Spirit.

10-11 But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of His Spirit who lives in you.

"He who raised Christ from the dead" – the Holy Spirit is the all-powerful life-giver, proved by the resurrection of Jesus. To the extent that we invite Him, we find Him empowering and life-giving.

The Living Word

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Bible readings for Sunday, March 29, 2020, with explanatory notes

Bible study on the Revised Common Lectionary passages for **March 29**
Prepare by reading the Bible passages beforehand – read again to reflect on the pulpit teaching

Theme: How the Holy Spirit brings our 'dry bones' to life

Ezekiel 37:1-14 – A vision of dry bones brought to life

John 11:1-45 – The miracle that resurrected Lazarus

Romans 8:6-11 – The hold of the flesh opposes the rule of God's Spirit

And also read: Psalm 130

Ezekiel 37:1-14 – A desolate vision of dry bones brought to life

The prophet calls the Holy Spirit to bring resurrection

1-3 The hand of the LORD was on me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "Sovereign LORD, You alone know."

"He brought me out by the Spirit" – God gave him a detailed, graphic vision.

"Valley... full of bones" – a battlefield graveyard which symbolises the spiritual death of the exiles. The vision underlines the promise of new life: "I will give you a heart of flesh... and I will put My Spirit in you...", Ezekiel 36:16-38.

4-6 Then He said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'

"Prophecy" – 'speak forth' a declaration in faith.

"I will put breath in you" – ruach means both breath and spirit.

• For further study: John 3:1-2. Jesus expected Nicodemus, knowing this passage, to understand the concept of a new spiritual birth by the Holy Spirit.

7-8 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

9-10 Then He said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'"

"Prophecy to the breath" – or 'speak in faith to the Spirit' is a Scriptural basis of the ancient prayer, "Come Holy Spirit". We can and should invite the fuller presence of God's life-giving Spirit.

10 So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army.

11-12 Then He said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel.'

13-14 Then you, My people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.' "

REFLECTION This is exactly what happens when by faith we ask Jesus to be Lord, and are born from above. This is an invitation for the Holy Spirit to enter, we come to life spiritually, and we recognise Jesus in a way we couldn't before, as our Lord. This passage is grounds for us to entreat God for renewal, and to speak the life of the Spirit into the 'dry bones' of institutional Christianity. What God wants is what we should be asking for, and in faith speaking out.

QUESTION *Sometimes things remain when really they have died. Where are the "dry bones" that God wants you to pray into new life?*

John 11:1-45 – The miracle that resurrected Lazarus

The seventh sign showing Jesus to be the Messiah of God

1-3 Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

"Bethany" – a village on the side of the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem.

4-7 When He heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when He heard that Lazarus was sick, He stayed where He was two more days, and then He said to His disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

"He stayed... two more days" – Lazarus needed a healing touch, yet Jesus delayed, which seemed uncaring. He loved the family but was obedient to God's timing, for His greater glory.

8 "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?"

9-10 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for

"I will put My Spirit in you and you will live" – at first, resettlement of exiles (Ezekiel was an exile prophet). Longer range fulfilment: the spiritual rebirth and life of the Holy Spirit experienced by the church following Pentecost.

• **For further study**, see John 3:5-8; John 11:25-26; Romans 8:9-17; Col. 3:1-4.

they see by this world's light. It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light."

"Walks in the daytime" – meaning doing what God wants and in His timing.

11 After He had said this, He went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

12-13 His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of his death, but His disciples thought He meant natural sleep.

14-15 So then He told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

16 Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him."

17-20 On His arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet Him, but Mary stayed at home.

"Four days" – after the soul had finally departed

the body, according to common folk belief.

21-22 "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give You whatever You ask."

23-24 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

25-26 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in Me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"I am the resurrection and the life" – meaning He is "I AM", Lord, over life and death, and also Lord of new and eternal life through believing in Him.

27 "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

28-31 After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to Him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

32 When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw Him, she fell at His feet and said, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."

33-34 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" He asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied.

REFLECTION Ezekiel, in his vision, was told to speak life to the dry bones, and saw them resurrected. Here Jesus follows what He has 'seen' in prayer and speaks life to a corpse wrapped up and buried in a cave, and Lazarus, miraculously resurrected, stumbles into view. This is the seventh sign recorded by John in which Jesus showed Himself, rather than declared Himself, to be Messiah. A short time later Jesus would be

"He was deeply moved... and troubled" – "a deep anger welled welled up within Him", NLT and Message. While empathising with Mary's grief Jesus took issue with the hypocrisy and unbelief of the bystanders, v.37.

35 Jesus wept.

36 Then the Jews said, "See how He loved him!"

37 But some of them said, "Could not He who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

38-39 Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," He said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days."

"Cave with a stone... across the entrance" – a typical tomb of a relatively well-off family.

40 Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

41-42 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. I knew that you always hear Me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent Me."

43-45 When He had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go. Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in Him.

"Many... believed" – as v.40; but other witnesses to the miracle reported Jesus' actions maliciously to the Pharisees in Jerusalem, v.46.