

# Adult Teaching Resources

March 29, 2020



## Lent / Easter / Pentecost—All Things New

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 —“A New Choice”

Genesis 12:1-4a—“A New Start”

Psalm 95—“A New Song”

1 Samuel 16:1-13—“A New King”

**Ezekiel 37:1-14—“A New Life”**

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# A New Life

## Ezekiel 37:1-14

### FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

### Bible Background

*“Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.’”*

It is easy to want to give up. Bad news, bad ideas, bad attitudes, bad luck, and bad “anything” can push us to want to roll over and play dead. We’ve all been there at some point in our life.

Today, we spend time with God’s people who not only wanted to roll over and play dead, they knew they were better off if they really were dead. God’s people had been forced out of their homes and their country. Instead of living in comfortable surroundings with their own leaders, they were in a foreign land surrounded by foreign leaders and gods.

We learn that with God, they could find life again.

### Opening

After everyone arrives, give each person a piece of paper and a pen. Ask everyone to think of a real-world situation where hopelessness is abundantly apparent. The situation could be something from their own life, from a movie, from a friend or relative, or something in their dreams that keeps them up at night. For example, finding out you have cancer at the time of giving birth to your first child; or losing both parents in an automobile accident; or having both children deployed into “hot” zones at the same time.

Have everyone write down their situation. Collect the sheets of paper and read them, one at a time. As you read them, ask the class to offer any words of hope or encouragement possible. They aren’t trying to fix the situation, but instead, offer something to help get this fictitious person through to the next day.

After all the papers have been read and the group has tried to find some hope, ask your class these questions:

- What seemed to be the recurring theme that brought about hopelessness?
- Were any of the situations something we could control, or were they out of our hands?
- What words did you hear that gave you a sense of hope for these situations?
- Were there any words that, in your opinion, actually made things worse?
- When you think about bad things like these actually happening, where do you think God is?

## Reading the Bible

Where did the Lord set Ezekiel down? (in a valley) What was the valley full of? (bones)

What did the Lord do to Ezekiel once he was in the valley? (he led him all around the bones)

What did God ask him about the bones? (Mortal, can these bones live?)

How did Ezekiel answer? (O Lord God, you know.)

What did God want Ezekiel to do and say to the bones? (God wanted him to prophesy to the bones and say, "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.")

How would the bones live? (God will cause breath to enter them; lay sinews on them, cause flesh to come upon them)

What happened when Ezekiel prophesied to the bones? (the bones came together as God said, but there was no breath in them.)

What did God tell Ezekiel to say to the breath? ("Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.")

When Ezekiel did as God commanded, what happened to the bones? (the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet.)

What were these bones? (they were the whole house of Israel)

What was God going to do for Israel? (open their graves, bring them up from their graves, and bring them back to the land of Israel.)

How will they know that the Lord will have spoken and acted? (God will put his spirit within them, and they shall live, and God will place them on their own soil)

## Making Connections

When have you "been there and done that" and had a word of hope and encouragement for someone else? What happened to you? What happened to your friend? What word did you give? How did you know if helped?

Who have you turned to for wisdom and prophetic words in your life? What is it about that person that makes him/her so special? What specific words have they given you that you continue to carry with you?

Our Lesson Writer calls Ezekiel both "priest and prophet." What do those two roles mean to you? How can one person be both?

Do you think God ever gives up on you, or other believers? Why do you say that?

When have things been so bad in your life that you couldn't see/find/hear/recognize God? What happened to turn things around? Looking back now, can you find where God was present? Where?

## Making Connections *continued*

How do you describe a skeleton? What is needed for a skeleton to have life? What is the most miraculous medical miracle you have witnessed? How did the doctors describe it? How do you describe it?

What power does the “spirit of God” have in your life? When have you experienced God’s spirit flow through you? What happened? What did you do?

When do you most need God? Where is God when you need God the most? How does God give you assurance and hope?

## So What?

Give each person a piece of paper and a pen. Ask everyone to think of a time in their life when they felt separated, or in exile, from God. It could be trying to live through an illness or situation listed at the beginning of the class, or it could be something totally different. Regardless, ask each person to write down a time in their life when they felt separated from God.

Collect the sheets, then read them out, one at a time. As each page is read, ask the class to give a prophetic statement from God, affirming that God is present and has not forgotten that person. Encourage your class to be creative with their answers, even though sometimes the best answer might be, “Do not worry. I am with you.”

After you have read all the sheets and the class has shared their ideas from God, spend some time discussing:

- How often do we feel distant from God?
- What do we need when we feel separated from God?
- Where can we find hope when we are in despair?
- How does the spirit of God work in our lives?
- When do we know all is well again?
- What does all of this say about us?
- What does all of this say about God?

## The Challenge

This week, pay attention to those around you and pray that God will give you a prophetic word to share to someone in need. Make sure your words come from God and not something just to fill up the silence. Sometimes, silence is the best response. Sometimes, we need to hear a word of hope.

## Prayer

*Loving God, we’ve all been in the valley where we can’t see you, where we feel hopeless, and where we want to give up. Thank you for this story of your spirit filling the bones with life. It gives us hope that no matter what we experience, you are with us and you want us to live and thrive. Fill us with your spirit this day so we can share your love with others. Amen.*

## Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**Who was Ezekiel?**—The prophet Ezekiel became active during the earliest years of the exile, even before the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. Most of the classical prophets were outsiders who spoke truth to power, whether people, priests, or kings. Ezekiel, however, was part of the powerful priestly circle when the Babylonians captured him and other leading residents of Jerusalem in 597 BCE, deporting them to southern Babylon. Ezekiel and other Jews were assigned quarters in a town that came to be known as Tel-Abib, not far from the city of Nippur (3:15). The town was near the Chebar, a tributary or canal associated with the Euphrates River.

In the fifth year of his time in exile, or 593 (1:2), Ezekiel was overwhelmed by a vision from God that changed his life and set him on a course of prophetic activity for at least the next twenty-two years. Prophecies in the book named for Ezekiel are often precisely dated, with the last one being in the 27th year of his exile, or 571 BCE (29:7).

Ezekiel was unlike any other prophet. While most prophetic books were the work of disciples who described their teacher’s prophetic activity in a biographical form, Ezekiel’s words are written in the first person, as an autobiography. And, while the historical context of other prophets’ preaching must usually be deduced from the content of the prophecy itself, Ezekiel is often careful to include precise dates and historical notes describing the setting of his prophetic pronouncements.

But, this is not the most notable thing about Ezekiel: his words and actions undoubtedly led many of his hearers to regard him as a certified lunatic. Ezekiel was prone to fantastic visions that included everything from angelic visitors on flying disks (chapter 1) to a valley of dry bones that come to life (chapter 37). In addition, Ezekiel seems to have adopted certain outlandish behaviors for prophetic purpose, some of which seem physically impossible. In 4:1-15, for example, Ezekiel was instructed to lie on the ground on his left side for 390 days without getting up, then switch to his right side for 40 more days. For the duration, he was to point his finger at a model of Jerusalem under siege and prophesy against it while also grinding assorted grains to make his own bread, to be baked over a fire fueled by cow’s dung. Who said being a prophet was easy?

While some commentators have suggested that Ezekiel was mentally ill or neurotic at best, it is not necessary for us to assume that Ezekiel was a madman. As demonstrated by Isaiah, who reportedly went naked for three years to symbolize Israel’s future fall (Isa. 20:1-5), and by Jeremiah, who walked around wearing a wooden yoke (Jeremiah 27-28), extreme methods may be required to draw attention to one’s message.

**Flying Saucers?**—Erich von Däniken’s *Chariots of the Gods* (1984) and Josef Blumrich’s *The Spaceships of Ezekiel* (1973) are among several works claiming that Ezekiel’s vision of

## Digging Deeper *continued*

God flying about in something that involved fiery wheels within wheels grew from a UFO sighting.

**Dry bones**—Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones may reflect curses that were typical of ancient treaties between a conquering king and vassal nations. Any who rebelled against the ruling king were to be cursed not only by death, but by having their bodies exposed to the elements rather than honorably buried. Assyrian kings like Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal often boasted of how they had defeated enemies and piled up their corpses, not allowing them to be buried. The dry bones could be seen as symbolic of Israel’s punishment for breaking the covenant with God (see Margaret S. Odell, *Ezekiel*, Smyth & Helwys Commentaries [Smyth & Helwys, 2005], 450, citing F. C. Fensham, “The Curse of the Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37:1-14 Changed to a Blessing of Resurrection,” *JNSL* 13 [1987]: 59–60).

Ancient Hebrews believed that all people went to a shadowy land called Sheol after death, but retained a tenuous contact with what remained of their bodies. Funerary inscriptions often warned potential grave robbers that they would be cursed if they disturbed the bones of the tomb’s inhabitants. The thought of one’s bones lying exposed to vultures and to the sun would have been exceedingly unpleasant.

**Lord GOD**—Attentive readers will note the unusual appearance of “Lord GOD,” when “LORD God” is far more common. The difference is this: translators use uppercase letters to indicate the divine name YHWH (possibly pronounced as “Yahweh”). The name commonly appears in combination with the word *Elohim*, a less personal name for God. “*Yahweh Elohim*,” then, would be translated as “LORD God.”

In a few instances, such as this one, the divine title *’Adonai Yahweh* appears. The term *’Adonai* is a generic word that means “lord.” It could be used of human masters or kings, as well as for the deity. To avoid redundancy, when the title *’Adonai Yahweh* appears in the text, we typically translate “Lord GOD” rather than “Lord LORD,” with the uppercase letters in GOD indicating the underlying name *Yahweh*.

**Four winds**—Ezekiel is not the only biblical writer to speak of the “four winds of heaven,” which also appear in Jer. 49:36 and Zech. 2:6, 6:5 as the agent of divine activity. The four winds are also mentioned in visionary sequences in Dan. 7:2, 8:8, and 11:4.

The primary image is not so much to portray four personified winds, but to indicate God’s power to call the wind/breath/spirit from the four points of the compass.

**Life and breath**—One of the psalmists also connected life, breath, and the presence of God. In Ps. 104:29-30, we read:

*When you hide your face, they are dismayed;  
when you take away their breath, they die  
and return to their dust.*

*When you send forth your spirit, they are created;  
and you renew the face of the ground.*

# The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

The Hardest Question is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

## What was it like for Israelites living in Babylon?

Abundant biblical testimony points to the sorrow experienced by those who wept by the rivers of Babylon as they remembered the glories of Jerusalem (Ps. 137:1). The book of Lamentations and sections of the book of Jeremiah speak of weeping and mourning for the loss of the land.

Yet, books such as Daniel and Ezekiel, along with encouraging advice from Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29) indicate that the people were swiftly settled into Jewish communities and integrated into the economic and political life of the Babylonians.

Recently a cache of cuneiform documents reflecting Israelite life in Babylon has come to light. More than a hundred small clay tablets – probably looted from archaeological sites during the tumult in Iraq, though the owner disputes it – suggest that the Hebrews lived normal lives and conducted business as usual while in Babylon.

A translation of the documents appears in a book by Laurie Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch (*Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer* [CUSAS 28: CDL Press, 2014]), and they are now on display in the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem.

The tablets are written in Babylonian cuneiform, though some Hebrew letters appear in the margins, possibly for filing purposes. Since most of the tablets are legal documents, they contain dates, the earliest of which relates to the 15th year after the exile began.

The documents employ a number of Hebrew names, some of which include theophoric elements like “Yah” or “El” (e.g., Gedalyahu, Shaltiel, and Netanyahu). The River Chebar – named by Ezekiel as the locus for some of his oracles – is cited in several of the tablets.

The tablets reflect legal transactions among Hebrew exiles living in a block of settlements between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. One of the towns was called *Al Jahudu*, which pays tribute (in Babylonian spelling) to the homeland of Judah, and might even be translated as something like “Jewtown.”

The documents include lease agreements for houses and land, receipts for the trade or sale of livestock and slaves, and instructions regarding inheritances. Their mundane nature suggests that whether they liked it or not, the resettled Hebrews were very much a part of the larger social and political network in their new home. Taking Jeremiah’s advice to “build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce” (Jer. 29:5), they made the best of their situation.

## The Hardest Question *continued*

