

# The Promise, Part 4 - A New Kingdom

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] today's bible verse is from ezekiel 37 15 to 28 and that can be found on page 869 of the church bible the word of the lord came to me son of man take a stick of wood and write on it belonging to judah and the israelites associated with him then take another stick of wood and write on it belonging to joseph that is to ephraim and all the israelites associated with him join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand when your people ask you won't you tell us what you mean by this say to them this is what the sovereign lord says i am going to take the stick of joseph which is in ephraim's hand and of the israelites tribes associated with him and join it to judah's stick i will make them into a single stick of wood and they will become one in my hand hold before their eyes the sticks you have written on and say to them this is what the sovereign lord says i will take the israelites out of the nations where they have gone i will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land i will make them one nation in the land on the mountains of israel there will be one king over all of them and they will never be and sorry never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms they will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses for i will save them for all for from all of their sinful backsliding and i will cleanse them they will be my people and i will be their god my servant david will be king over them and they will all have one shepherd they will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees they will live in the land i gave to my servant jacob the land where your ancestors lived they and their children and their children's children will live there forever and david my servant will be their prince forever i will make a covenant of peace with them it will be an everlasting covenant i will establish them and increase their number and i will put my sanctuary among them forever my dwelling place will be with them i will be their god and they will be my people then the nations will know that i the lord make israel holy when my sanctuary is among them forever this is the word of the lord thanks peter god thanks lakshmi for reading good morning saint silas if we've not met i'm martin ayres i'm the lead pastor here it's great to have you with us and we're continuing a sermon series in this book ezekiel so it would be a great help to me if you could keep your bibles open at ezekiel chapter 37 as we just follow that through together the second half of that chapter as looks we just read and you can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful as we look at that together so let's pray let's ask for god's help as we turn to his word heavenly father thank you for the gift of your word to lighten our eyes and our path we ask that your spirit will be at work in us now that you give us ears to hear minds that can understand and be reshaped and hearts that are moved to respond rightly to you and your promises for we ask in jesus name amen so we're thinking this morning about unity and that's that's the theme of ezekiel 37 um lots of us often don't stop to

think about how divided our world is and we've just been praying haven't we for considerable divisions all around our world think about the uh military activities of our own country and this week with rebel occupied yemen and divisions in sudan the human catastrophe in the gaza strip so that's out there in the world news but we also talk to people in our own church who have experienced conflict in those places and when people come to glasgow we find a divided city and on the curriculum in our primary schools and children read the book about glasgow divided city it's about the kind of um violence that goes on between people who see whether you're rangers or celtic as as a kind of clan to belong to and the kind of hooliganism attached to that um and people who see the label protestant or catholic as not to do with faith in god but to do with the kind of tribe they're from and the violence that leads to and the animosity and hostility in our city the book also addresses issues of um unfriendliness and animosity towards asylum seekers in some parts of glasgow we have racial divisions in our country and when there was the george george floyd murder in may 2020 um it led to lots of difficult very eye opening conversations um for people like me with people who are british born and people of color who talk about how they've been treated differently their whole lives uh because of their ethnicity so we have division and um there are divisions in our time um about even just our opinions are very divisive so when we use the language of culture wars about the divided opinions in america um we see that spilling over here that when it comes to issues people feel very strongly about like transgenderism or scottish independence or brexit um what's happened is that when we disagree with somebody we find it harder it seems today to see them as somebody who shares a common goal with us for society but disagrees on this issue and it's more common now to see them as an enemy because of their views and someone who needs to be removed or pushed out of the way and overrun so then the world out there is divided what do they see with the church well that reminded me of my favorite christian joke um it voted some years ago in the guardian as the most popular christian joke it's the one about the two men on a bridge you've probably heard it before um i was walking across a bridge one day and i saw a man standing on the edge about to jump off so i ran over and said stop don't do it why shouldn't i he said i said well there's so much to live for he said like what i said well are you religious or atheist he said religious i said me too are you christian or buddhist he said christian i said me too are you catholic or protestant he said protestant i said me too are you episcopalian or baptist he said baptist i said wow me too are you baptist church of god or baptist church of the lord he said baptist church of god i said me too are you original baptist church of god or are you reformed baptist church of god he said reformed baptist church of god i said me too are you reformed

Baptist Church of God Reformation of 1879 or Reformed Baptist Church of God Reformation of 1915? He said, Reformed Baptist Church of God Reformation of 1915. I said, you're a heretic, and I pushed him off the bridge. And, you know, that's the perception, isn't it, of the church, when people are on the outside looking in, and you can drive in Scotland to quite small villages or small towns, and you'll find kind of three or four church buildings at the crossroads in the village. And often they're all Presbyterian, actually. But it's not just a Presbyterian problem. And if you're like me, we tend to explain all of that away, saying, oh yeah, I know it says they're a church, but they can't be real Christians. And they're not really evangelical Christians.

But of course, evangelical Christians can be really divided. And in Scotland, in the last 10 years, one of the big divisions among Bible believers, evangelicals, has been those of us who have felt it was appropriate to leave the historic denominations as they have left historic Christianity and moved away from the Bible. And there are others who have taken the decision that in conscience, it's appropriate to remain in those denominations and seek to reform them and contend. And often those groups have fallen out with one another over that difference of view about the best thing to do.

So we live in a world full of divisions, but often the world will then look at the church and not see a unity that inspires them. So what does God say about all of this? Well, we're in this series with Ezekiel, the prophet. It's 587 BC, as he's making these prophecies, these messages that he's given from God.

[ 9 : 31 ] So this is long after God's people were given the promised land to live in. They were delivered there by Moses and then Joshua. God gave them this land. But over the generations, they became faithless. They rejected God. And the message through Ezekiel was that judgment was coming on the people.

In chapter 33 of Ezekiel, they were given the word that the city of Jerusalem has fallen. So this is a people who have come under the judgment of God, and they've gone into exile, far from home and far from God.

And to get the sense of how big the promise is here in the second half of chapter 37, we also need to understand that some generations before Ezekiel, some four centuries before his time, not long after King David, the kingdom of God's people was divided. Ten and a half of the 12 tribes of Israel rejected the rule of the Davidic king, the king in David's line in Jerusalem, and became a new different kingdom, the northern kingdom, which was called Israel at that time, and came to be called Samaria, because its capital was Samaria. In our passage, it's also called Ephraim. But that was the northern kingdom. And then the one and a half tribes that remained loyal to the king in Jerusalem, they were called Judah, the southern kingdom. So that division has been there for centuries, and at times they have been enemies of one another. Now, in Ezekiel's time, Jerusalem has fallen, the southern kingdom is going into exile. But now Ezekiel gets given these messages of hope, promises for those scattered people to put their hope in God and trust him for a wonderful future.

And our first point on the sheets for this morning is that with two sticks, God promises unity. So Ezekiel has to perform a sign act in verse 16. He's told by God, son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him. So that's the southern kingdom.

Then take another stick of wood and write on it belonging to Joseph, that is to Ephraim, and all the Israelites associated with him. So that's the northern kingdom. Of course, they don't exist now. They're in exile. Verse 17, join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand. And people are going to see Ezekiel perform that, and they're going to ask him what it means. And Ezekiel is to explain that there is going to be a united kingdom. Verse 20, hold before their eyes the sticks you've written on them and say to them, this is what the sovereign Lord says, I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they've gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation in the land on the mountains of Israel. So this is the next in a series of impossibly good promises from God. We've heard already that God promises in chapter 34 of Ezekiel that he is going to come and be the shepherd king that his people need. An extraordinary, impossibly good promise in Ezekiel 34. That there is going to be a leader, a king in the line of David, who was a man born in that royal line, who is God himself come to shepherd his people. Then in chapter 36 of Ezekiel, he promises that he will send his spirit to give his people a new heart so that their hearts can cling to God and be faithful to him.

[ 13 : 08 ] Then he promises new life for his people. First half of this chapter that we looked at last week, they feel like they're dead bones and God says he'll breathe his spirit in them as his word is preached and he'll give them a new life knowing him, loving him. Coming up in chapters 38 and 39, he promises a future where his people will never need to be afraid of enemies again because God will bring a great final victory and his enemies will be destroyed so that his people can live in safety with nothing to fear.

And here, this morning, we hear the promise of unity among the people of God. And these promises are wild. They are impossibly wild. But anything is possible for God. So we're going to look at three things about the unity he promises. The first is, it's a unity that takes a miracle. If you just look at the emphasis in verse 19, Ezekiel performs the sign of putting the two sticks together and then he has to make clear that in the sign act, he is embodying what God is going to do. In verse 19, I am going to take the stick of Joseph and join it to Judah's stick, says the Lord. I will make them into a single stick of wood and they will become one in my hand. And then in verse 20, I will take the Israelites out of the nations. I will gather them. I will make them one nation. And that's worth reflecting on because we might not see this promise of unity as quite so dramatic as the other promises that God makes.

Maybe we're a bit underwhelmed by the promise of unity. And perhaps fitting in with that, the sign act itself is pretty underwhelming. I mean, if you were one of the crowd who had been following Ezekiel around, you've seen him do some quite dramatic things. He spent a whole year lying on one side in public and he ate his meals off cow dung earlier in the book. He is eccentric. And if you've been with him around the time of last week, he would have said to you that he'd been taken off by the Spirit of God to this valley. And he was wandering around this valley of dry bones. And then he had to speak to the bones and they rose to life. So if you knew Ezekiel, you see him come out of his house the next day and you're thinking, what's he got for us today? This guy is wild. And then he comes out and he comes up in the town square and he goes like that. It's quite underwhelming, isn't it? As a sign act, it's kind of, okay, Ezekiel, what does that mean? Well, the people are going to be united. But it's good to realize that for those people at that time, this was unthinkable. That God would rescue the people and bring them back is inconceivable, implausible, but they need to trust God for that. But that the northern kingdom would be united with them, an unthinkable thing. And God wants us to know that this is genuinely impossible without miraculous divine intervention. But that's really vital for us to appreciate today for our world. Because one of the reasons that lots of us were so kind of thrown by Putin's invasion of Ukraine is that people thought we didn't think we'd see that in our times.

There is this kind of way that we're trained to think in the Western world that looks back at things like World War II and thinks, well, it wouldn't happen again. Maybe people were just quite violent back then. They were selfish. But now we're heading on the right direction towards an era that will eventually dawn of world unity and peace. And it's just naive to think like that, as though everyone just needs to catch up with some kind of Western liberal values and people will not be divided anymore.

Clearly, the world is not getting more peaceful. You look at Ukraine and Crimea, look at Yemen, the elections in Taiwan this week and the reaction of China to that, and wherever next that it happens, we're not moving in human strength towards an era of peace. And some people would say that in that, religion is the problem. That if we can just move on from religion that divides people, then the dividing walls will go and people will get on. But what we're seeing in the Western world as people move on from faith in God, in some cases, is that the divisions don't go away. New divisions form that are very entrenched and people argue with one another and fight with one another for things in a way that looks a lot like religious fanaticism. People find things to be very divisive about.

[18:21] And maybe it shouldn't surprise us so much that the world is so divided when we think about our own lives. Surely all of us have relationships in our lives that we find very difficult. People that we are in broken relationship with colleagues, people at work, where it's just hard for that relationship to work.

One of the sad things about my role in pastoral ministry is that I do sometimes end up in situations dealing with relationships that have got very broken and very difficult. And I've had the experience as well of being with families at the end of someone's life as somebody is dying and I'm involved for taking a funeral and arranging a funeral. And you meet a family that look respectable, but people have not spoken to one another for years. There's been, something's happened. There's been things said that shouldn't have been said. And people have not spoken. And they have to come together because somebody's died. But actually, the family is hostile towards one another. So for us today, as well as for Ezekiel's first hearers, this is a promise from God that is impossible and wonderful to hear from God, that he is going to do it. A miraculous gathering of a united people in the future. So how does it happen?

Well, our second point is that it is a unity under the rule of Christ. And we get the first glimpse of that in verse 22. As he says, halfway through, the Lord says, there will be one king over all of them, and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. And then verse 24 makes it clear who that king will be, the king to rule them all. My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. So there's going to be this descendant of David, this kind of true and better David. And in verse 25, the people are given a place to live in, and the Lord says, David, my servant, will be their prince forever. So when is this fulfilled? Well, 70 years after Ezekiel's time, the people were allowed to return to the land around Jerusalem. But the kingdom was clearly divided still. There was never a unification of the northern and southern kingdoms. And you can see that from Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, that when he is illustrating what it looks like to treat anyone in need as your neighbor and love them, even if they're an enemy, the shock is it's the

Samaritan, the enemy, who comes to help the man from Judah who is in need in that parable. But then Jesus himself meets the woman at the well outside a Samaritan village in John chapter 4. And when she is a Samaritan, meets Jesus, she says to him, realizing he's a prophet at least, that our people, we worship God on the mountain, but your people, the Jews, you worship him in Jerusalem. And Jesus says, a time is coming when all worshippers will worship God through me in spirit and in truth. She says, I know when the Messiah comes, he'll explain all things to us. He says to her, I, the one who's speaking to you, I am he. Through Jesus, people are brought together to worship God in the spirit and in truth. And then after Jesus ascends, he sends the apostles, we read in Acts about the apostles and

Jesus working through them to take the message about him out. They start in Jerusalem, they go through Judea, but in chapter 8, Philip goes to Samaria and he speaks to Samaritans, they believe, and because it's this unique moment of the gospel crossing a border, they don't receive the Holy Spirit until the apostles Peter and John go to Samaria, having heard there are believers there, and they lay hands on the Samaritans and they pray, and the spirit comes. And then, when you read Acts, this promise that seems so unthinkable of even the Samaritans will become part of the people of God and united, Jesus smashes it out the park because by the end of Acts, it's the Gentiles, the nations beyond Samaria who become part of the united people of God. And we see that being fulfilled in astounding ways today. In my first year here in Glasgow, some of you will remember that we had in our church, joining our church that year, Cami from Kenya, Angela from Ghana, Mari from Helsinki, Bella from Indonesia, Ike from

[ 23 : 25 ] Nigeria, Barbora from Prague, all people who had heard the gospel in their own countries and had come to Glasgow and came here as their church family. And one of those people was visiting recently, having been away for a few years, and when they looked round at St Silas at our church family, they remarked on how the noticeable thing for them was that we had become much more ethnically diverse in the years since they had been away. It's a great blessing to be able to see that diversity in our own church and celebrate that it's the gospel, it's the rule of Jesus that brings us together. And so wonderfully, even in Scotland, as we baptised Ronan and Will last Sunday night, even people from Scotland can hear about Jesus and join his global family. And seeing that it's a unity that Jesus brings shows us the limits of that unity as well, that the message all through Ezekiel, the big application of the book of Ezekiel is repent and live, turn back to God and find life. Put down your arms, stop resisting God's rule, and you'll find that he is the life giver.

So that means that it is, without repentance and faith in Jesus, there will be division across humanity.

And when we look at the world around us, we need to be realistic about that. So as we were just praying, we were praying for Christians to find ways to help be agents of reconciliation in places like Israel and Gaza, where there are generations of deep-seated resentment about wrongs that have been done.

And it's appropriate that we seek to help and mediate. But we should be realistic that the ultimate hope for lasting peace in the Middle East and anywhere is that people come to know Jesus. Because it's when we put our trust in Christ and we join God's global family, that we find the strength to be united with people who before were enemies. And what gets emphasized in Ezekiel is the permanence of that unity. Several times in the passage, twice in verse 25, we will live under the saving reign of Jesus together forever. It will last forever. So it's unity that takes a miracle. It's a unity under the rule of Christ. And thirdly, it's a unity centered on the presence of God. So as God moves on to describe this new kingdom, he says that he himself is moving in. We look at verse 26.

I will make a covenant of peace with them. It will be an everlasting covenant. And then verse 27, my dwelling place will be with them. That's the key to this new nation working well. And it's not just that God is kind of the key player, one of the key players. And him being there will sort of make other people kind of want to move in. Like John Lewis in a shopping center. So if you're opening a shopping center, the key thing you need is John Lewis. If John Lewis will move into your shopping mall, everyone else, every other shop will move in. And if John Lewis say, we're not going in, it's a disaster. Okay. But it's not like that here with the Lord in the kingdom of God, because more than that, the presence of the Lord in with his people changes his people. He will do a work in them to cleanse them and sanctify them, to make them like him. And that work of transformation will bring the unity among the people. He describes it as this covenant of peace, an everlasting covenant of peace. And that peace is so transforming, it binds us together. And we see the fulfillment of that in what Jesus came to do. So let's just look at that together. We're just going to flick on. If you just look in the Bibles at Ephesians chapter 2, which is on page 1173.

[ 27 : 40 ] 1173. So a New Testament letter. And it struck me, as Paul talks in the first half of Ephesians about the work of Christ and what he has done, he follows the same pattern as the chapter in Ezekiel 37. That in Ezekiel 37, we have a death to life miracle, bringing people to new life, and then a unity, bringing people together. Ephesians chapter 2. First, we have the death to life. Verse 1, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. Then over the page, verse 4, but because of his great love for us, God, who was rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved. So that's the kind of death to life miracle that God brings. But he does it to save us into a new community.

So look down at verse 14. It says of Jesus, for he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. By setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations, his purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two. And then here's the peace, thus making peace and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. So this extraordinary work that Jesus comes and the way the way that he brings that unity is because whenever there's a way to find God and to know God that is not wholly about God's grace to us, it allows us to be self-righteous about other people.

So a human religion, or even the way that people used to understand God's law, God's commands, creates division because there are haves and there are have-nots.

But when Christ comes on the cross, he makes a way for everyone of whatever background to be made right with God through him. And the ground around the cross is level ground. If you were someone who has the law of God, it convicts you of your need for the cross. If you're someone who doesn't have the law, you can be convicted by your conscience that you need reconciliation with God through the cross. And so as we come to the cross, we look at those who are different to us and we see them and what we have in common with them. We can, as we think about someone who would have been an enemy of ours, we think about how God has treated us in Christ and forgiven us of everything that we'd ever done wrong to make peace with us. And as we grasp the peace we have in him, we have the strength to make peace with those who were our enemies and take the dividing wall down between us.

There's neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. We're all one in Christ. And when God's people display that unity, we show God's wisdom and his grace and his presence with his people to the world. So the cash value of that kind of reality, that spiritual reality in Ephesians is that Paul goes on to challenge the believers, the Christians, to get on with the hard work of practical, godly living with one another. If you just look over to chapter 4 of Ephesians, he says in verse 2, be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love. So down to earth in how we're to live in light of these realities. Verse 3, make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Why? Well, seven ones in verse 4 and 5, there is one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

[ 32 : 02 ] So he's not saying make your unity and do it in your strength. He's saying see the unity that Jesus has done for you in his work at the cross and make every effort. Be kind to one another, forgive one another. Be humble, be gentle, so that together you can represent that reality. It's a great thing when in a church we rub up against people who out in the world, were it not for Christ, would be divided from us. It's a really good thing for us, even though a hard thing, when in our church small group or a serving team we're in at church, there are people who are very unlike us, people who even rub us up completely the wrong way. As we work hard at relating well to each other and seek to show unity in Christ in our diversity, we demonstrate that we have grasped that God is with us. We have God in them and in us. And we give the world a glimpse of the future kingdom that's coming when Jesus returns. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for these extraordinary gospel promises spoken through Ezekiel. And that thanks to the Lord Jesus Christ, we see that these humanly impossible realities have been fulfilled and are being fulfilled, that we have now a new shepherd because you have come to shepherd us in your Son. We have a new spirit because he has given us your spirit in our hearts. We have new life and as we hear today, a new unity. May we place more and more our confidence in your promise that one day in the future you will fully transform us so that we are completely free from sin. And from that day on, we will enjoy perfect unity together and with all of your people forever.

May we, by your Spirit, be strengthened to strive for that unity in our gatherings and in our church family today. And we know the world around us cries out for unity and longs for peace. And so we pray that people around us would see that it's here in your ordinary local church that unity is found. Here, true diversity, ethnically, economically, is seen along with the hostility has gone and we are one in Christ.

So would your Spirit grant new life to the people around us, drawing them to see Jesus as they see you are here with us and that they would find life and their welcome into your kingdom. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.