

Tomorrow's Church Today

Part 2

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (NIV)

¹ The hand of the LORD was upon 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.

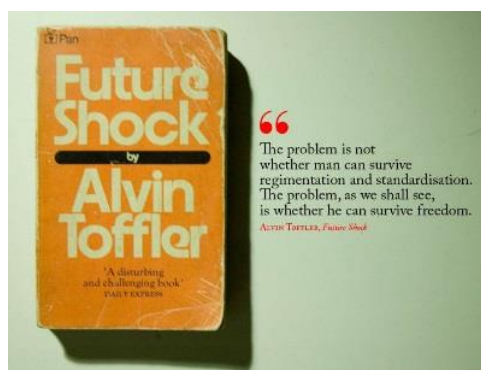
² He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³ He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!' ⁵ This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ 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.'" ⁷ 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. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" 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.

Through the week we have spent 50 hours in prayer and what I always hope will happen when we gather together in prayer is that we get some insight, some revelation into what God wants us to see and hear, and I think that's been happening. Particularly we have been asking God about the church God is seeking to build tomorrow and what God wants us to do about that today.

Now there are a number of approaches we can take in trying to glimpse the future. We could ask a futurist, someone who studies the future and makes predictions based on current trends. Or we could become futurists ourselves in the footsteps of the father of modern futurists, Alvin Toffler.



In the mid-1960s, Alvin Toffler and his wife Heidi began five years of research for what would become the best-selling book...



...*Future Shock*, which examined what happens to a society when change happens too fast resulting in social confusion with normal decision-making processes beginning to break down and people become afraid and losing confidence in the system – sound familiar?

But thousands of years before any futurists there was another approach to glimpsing the future, prophets, and these prophets did not exactly predict the future, rather they

announced the future which is a very different thing. Futurists look at the sociological trends of today and try to predict what tomorrow might look like but God's prophets announce tomorrow because what they are announcing is the word of our God, who is simultaneously in the, past, present and the future and who knows how the story is going to turn out. So God does not make predictions, God makes announcements of what he sees.

This is what God means when He announces to the prophet Isaiah:

I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.
(Isaiah 46:10)

One of the other important differences between futurists and God's prophets is that futurists are tracking dispassionate social forces which possess all the care and concern for us mere mortals of a runaway truck while God's prophets are announcing a future which God is preparing for people he loves. Which of those two processes appeals to you more, the runaway truck or the lovingly prepared future? God described the lovingly prepared future to the prophet Jeremiah in this way:

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11)

I read the work of futurists because I respect their intellectual discipline but personally I'm more interested in what the word of God says about our future because it speaks of a future that is in the hands of a loving God. There is a church in our future that God is seeking to build because that is one of the ways God leads his people. Abram, says God, I have a future for you, in that future you are the founder of a great people through whom the world will be blessed - and that future came to pass because God was in that future. Israel, says God, I have a future for you, in that future you will no longer be slaves but a free people living in a land flowing with milk and honey - and that future came to pass because God was in that future. People of the world, says God, I have a future for you, in that future, I, your creator will come and live here on this planet and in my suffering you will be saved and by my stripes you will be healed - and that future came to pass because God was in that future.

PUC, says God, I have a future for you...

and that future will come to pass because God is in that future

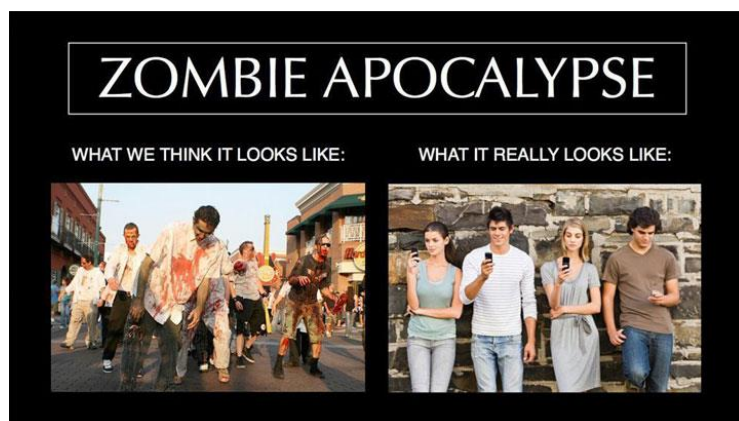
But what the Bible also teaches is that while God has a future for us, it is not a future that will come to pass without our cooperation. For whatever reason, God does not choose to play alone, God chooses to play with us. This is spelled out in the very beginning of the Bible as God chooses to gift humanity with certain reciprocal rights and responsibilities.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."
(Genesis 1:26)

What God has always made clear is that He honours our role of rulership and He desires to work with us in building the future. What is also clear in the Bible is that

we human beings have not always been the most cooperative of workmates and one of God's on-going struggles has been getting our head in the game. Which is one of the reasons why God speaks to the prophet Ezekiel through the incredibly dramatic vision of the zombie apocalypse.

Actually in Ezekiel the Zombie apocalypse looks more like this



The hand of the LORD was upon 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. (Ezekiel 37:1-2)

The hand of Lord is upon Ezekiel to shake Israel out of its paralysing faithlessness, because, as Ezekiel very well knows, God is not talking about bones, but about how God's own people have come to believe in their heart of hearts that Israel is as dead as those bones, that Israel has no future (Ezekiel 37:11). The purpose of this startling vision is to startle and awaken Israel's faith, because the necessary environment God requires to live and work with his people is faith.

...When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." (Matthew 9:2)

..."your faith has healed you." (Matthew 9:22)

..."According to your faith will it be done to you"; (Matthew 9:29)

...Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." (Matthew 15:28)

..."Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you. (Mark 10:52)

...Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." (Luke 17:19)

...Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has healed you." (Luke 18:42)

The big question Jesus asks

"Where is your faith?" (Luke 8:25)

Sometimes faith needs to be shaken back into life and the vision of the valley of dry bones is a real teeth rattler for a Jewish audience because Jewish people are very uncomfortable about death and they have lots of taboos around dead bodies. So you can imagine how they might feel about a whole valley full of dead bodies. You see this vision is deliberately disturbing and terrifying and powerful because God needed his people to snap out of their spiritual lethargy and to start to engage with God about the future.

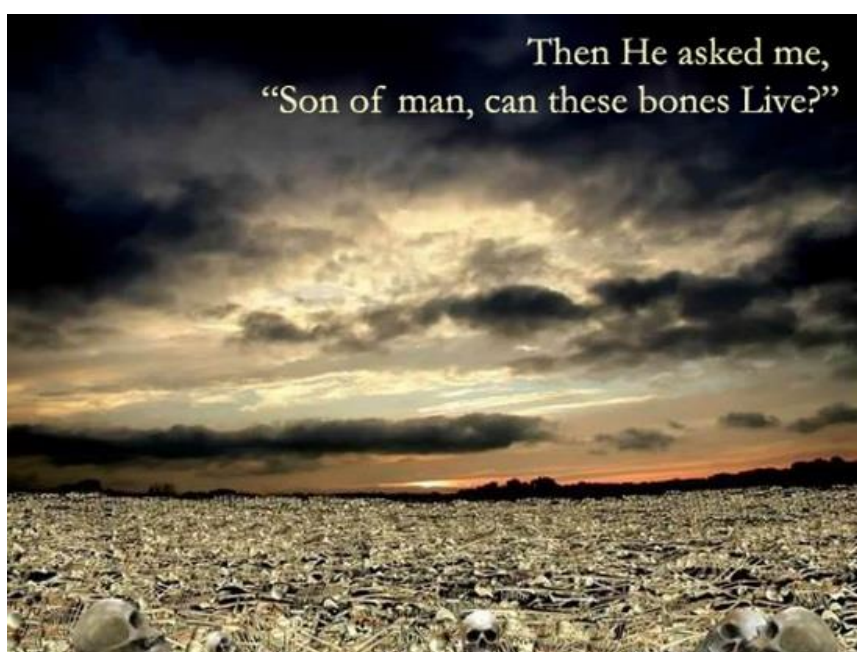
Then God asks Ezekiel the key question, "*Son of man can these bones Live*"?

That is the faith question – Will God restore Israel? Will he do it? Can He do it?

Christians regularly face this same question, particularly in these days, of shrinking church attendances - Will this church live? – What do we believe!?

- Here is Ezekiel's answer -

I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know." (Ezekiel 37:3)



Now is this a cop out answer? Is Ezekiel playing it safe? Is this Ezekiel's version of the "yes dear" answer? You know the "yes dear" answer, when we say to our nearest and dearest, "yes dear", not because we are agreeing with them but because we suspect that disagreeing may get us into a lot of trouble – "yes dear". *O Sovereign LORD, you alone know*; might that be an attempt to avoid the question. However the passage makes it clear that Ezekiel is really on to something here. God's response to Ezekiel is a very big yes. Yes, Ezekiel, you are right, I your God am the only one who knows the future, I am the only one who has a hand on the future, and to show you how right you are about this I'm about to give you one of the greatest prophetic experiences ever recorded in the Bible. You see to believe that God alone holds our future in his hands is the heart of faith because faith, like the future, are both gifts from God.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

What this means is that if you drag yourself to church, and your faith is just a pile of dry bones - That there really is nothing you believe in anymore and that pain and disappointments have seemingly stripped the flesh from your life – then you have come to the right place. Church is God's spiritual refrigerator where he keeps the gift of faith fresh and ready for you to receive. You don't have to beat yourself up about the state of your faith, because faith is God's gift to you and he offers it to you freely. You don't need to work yourself into a frenzy trying to have more faith, because faith is something that God wants you to have – and how does God do that? Well this is what the Bible says in Romans 10

*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" ... Consequently, **faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.** (Romans 10:14-15, 17)*

Paul teaches that preaching brings faith. Now there are a whole lot of people who would hear that and shake their heads and say what on earth are you talking about? Are you talking about that strange boring talk that happens in church? Surely that's one of the reasons why people don't go to church. But there is a deeper truth about preaching, a faith truth, that when preaching is working properly, when preachers are preaching the word of God with power and not just giving a talk or a lecture but are actually being conduits for the person and power of Christ, then throughout our history preaching has been nothing less than the undeniable voice of God speaking to people, speaking into people and bringing their faith alive. As Paul said

... because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. (1 Thessalonians 1:5)

This is what preaching is supposed to do –it is supposed to release faith in people through the power of Gods Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that we keep on preaching, believing that God will be faithful and that his power will be in the preached word speaking directly to people and convicting hearts. This is why God calls Ezekiel to preach or to prophesy to the dry bones, it is actually a call for Ezekiel to preach to a people who have lost their way because they have lost their faith

Preaching to the bones

⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!

⁵ This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.

⁶ 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.'" (Ezekiel 37:4-6)

God promises Ezekiel that he will see revival, a revival that God will bring and it will begin as God gets people's attention, as God gets people's heads back in the game.



During church last Sunday, a lightning strike blew up a small tree growing next to the path that leads down to the basement.

This is part of that tree, we found it next to the Jacaranda room. I've been looking at it all week and I've been wondering, was it just a weird coincidence or was God trying to tell us something. My first thought was that because the lightning struck while Glenda Downie was doing church news then maybe God was trying to tell us how sick and tired of church notices he is, you can see how that might be the case. However, as the week has gone on the thought that has grown in me as I've looked at this chunk of wood is that God wants to show his power to us. When the lightning struck last Sunday, some of us jumped a mile and went out to see what had happened and eventually all of us went out to see what had happened. It really got our attention. It reminded me of the day of Pentecost, when people wanted to know what had happened to the disciples, they heard and saw strange things and they wanted to know what was going on. It got their attention - but having got their attention the power of God then got hold of their souls and 3,000 people began to follow Jesus on that very day.

It could just be a coincidence of course, except there have been a few too many coincidences lately. Late last year that crazy heart shaped balloon that had been floating around the church ceiling since Easter suddenly decided to float down right at the beginning of a service of worship. And as it drifted down in front of me I saw the promise of God's heart of worship making itself visible and present in the worship of the church. Worship that is so much more than simply singing a bunch of songs but becoming a shared encounter with the Lord of Lords. Something you can't hype, or explain, or convince people about, because it's so real.

But why would God communicate with us in such strange ways? Well, for the same reason that God has always communicated in strange kinds of ways, in burning bushes, dreams, droughts, floods, visions, prophecies, parables, and oracles, because God has plans for us but he finds it hard to get our attention, and having got our attention he finds that our faith is not as big as his plans and so he must grow our faith.

In this season is God trying to get your attention? Is he speaking to you about where you are spiritually? Is he speaking to you about we are spiritually as a church? Is he prompting you to desire more of him, more of his power, more of his presence? If you find that the answer is yes why don't you stand with me and pray with me.

¹⁷ And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues;

¹⁸ they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly

poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." (Mark 16:17-18)

Some additional thoughts – What does Jesus teach about the future?

Glimpses of the future were always a part of the life of Jesus. Jesus knew that sometime in the future he was going to Jerusalem, and that he would be killed there (Matthew 16:21-28, Mark 8:31-83, Luke 9:21-22, 18:31-33, John 8:27-30) and that his death would save anyone who believed from death (Matthew 1:21, 20:28, John 3:16) and would unite anyone who believed in an intimate relationship with God (Matthew 1:23, Luke 15:11-32). Jesus glimpses of the future also involved his followers and the church. After the resurrection Jesus was having a chat with Peter and Jesus revealed to Peter a little bit about his future.

I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." (John 21:18)

In this little glimpse Peter hears that in following Jesus he will end up a prisoner. Which is what happens to him and while that was difficult, because of what Jesus had revealed, Peter knew that imprisonment was part of the plan and he was prepared and accepting. At the same time in that same conversation Peter points towards John and asks Jesus, well what about him? What's his future?

Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." (John 21:22)

This is a fascinating thing for Jesus to say. Jesus reveals to Peter, what we now know, that John will be the only disciple to die of old age, but the kind of snippy way that Jesus tells Peter, "*what is that to you*", also makes it very clear that the future is God's business and Jesus would prefer that Peter attend to his business which is the present. In other words Jesus is not encouraging us to seek out the future but at the same time Jesus does not teach that the future is completely hidden from us. We read in Mark 13 Jesus teaching that when His second coming is drawing near there will be some signs that will alert us to what is happening.

"Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near..." (Mark 13:28)

While at the same time not all of that future will be revealed to us

"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

Clearly all the Future is in God's hands, but at the same time we are called to be alert and watchful about the future.

Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. (Mark 13:32-33)

So, it seems that the Bible teaches us that the future is not something God wants us to obsess over, however God does from time to time choose to reveal something of

His future in order to help and to save us, this is what God tells Ezekiel is the purpose of prophecy

Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'
(Ezekiel 33:11)

God reveals the future to help us live in the present.

Is there anything impossible for God?

- When Sarah was 90 years old and God told her that she would bear a son, He reminded her..... *Is anything too hard for the LORD?* (Genesis 18:14)
- God reminded Jeremiah...
Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh: is there anything too hard for me?
(Jeremiah 32:27)
- The angel Gabriel reminded Mary...
For with God nothing shall be impossible. (Luke 1:37)
- Jesus encouraged His disciples...
...With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible. (Matt 19:26)

The title prophet literally meant announcer, they were God's announcers.

George Sweeting writing about how much prophecy there is in the Bible says this: "Over 1800 references appear in the Old Testament, and 17 Old Testament books give prominence to the theme of the return of the Lord Jesus." Eighteen hundred references in the Old Testament, to the return of Christ. "Of the 260 chapters in the New Testament, more than 300 references to the Lord's return: one out of every 30 verses. Twenty-three of the 27 books of the New Testament refer to this great event: the return of the Lord. For every prophecy of the first coming of Christ," to Bethlehem, as a babe, "there are 8 prophecies of the Second Coming of Christ." Now, put that on the sticky side of your mind for a minute.