

## **VISION FOR 2014**

If you were not here Wednesday evening for the devotional, you missed an uplifting time as we sang and prayed together and talked about some things—you might call them New Year's Resolutions—that could help this congregation get going and growing again. I think we are all agreed, we have been growing in the wrong direction long enough, and the New Year is a perfect time for us to turn this thing around. We need to renew our vision and recommit ourselves as Christians to really being what we are supposed to be, and doing what we are supposed to be doing. Amen?

I want to begin this morning by asking you to turn in your Bibles, or to turn on your Bibles, whichever applies to you, to **the 37<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ezekiel**. Ezekiel was a priest of Judah who along with many others in 597 BC was taken into captivity by the Babylonians. In addition to being a priest, Ezekiel was also used by the Lord to serve as a prophet to his people. As we get into the time of Ezekiel, the Jews have settled into what might be called a comfortable captivity. They apparently were allowed to work, to buy and sell and to build or purchase their own homes, animals, livestock, etc. While it isn't home, it also isn't too bad of a life, and for the most part the people are content and flourishing.

**In chapter 36**, God has Ezekiel prophesy to the mountains of Israel, which in effect meant prophesying to the nation of Israel. He was to prophesy that all of the things that Israel's enemies had said about them, about their defeat, their humiliation, would all be turned around and it would come back on them. In **verse 7**, it says, *"Therefore thus says the Lord God: I swear that the nations that are all around you shall themselves suffer reproach."* God then gave Ezekiel a message of hope for Israel. In **verse 8**, he says, *"But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to my people Israel, for they will soon come home."*

Well, the prospect of that seemed pretty slim but God assures Israel that the reason why He is going to do this is for his glory. **Verse 22** says, *"Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came."*

He goes on then to say in **verses 24 and 25**,

*"I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols. I will cleanse you; and I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."*

He then says in **verse 36**, "*Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I am the Lord; I have rebuilt the ruined places and replanted that which was desolate. I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it.*"

Well, such a hope as that must have seemed like an impossible dream even to someone like Ezekiel, which explains what happens in **chapter 37**.

Let's read together beginning in **verse 1 to verse 14**:

*The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. 2) And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. 3) And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." 4) Then he said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. 5) Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6) And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD." 7) So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8) And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. 9) Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." 10) So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.*

*11) Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' 12) Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. 13) And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. 14) And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD."*

Now, most likely this is supposed to be understood as a vision rather than being an actual event, but nonetheless, is there anyone who doubts that God could very well do such a thing as was pictured in this vision for us? I don't think so.

Is anything too hard for the Lord? The Bible tells us that there isn't and if God can make dry bones live again, do you think maybe He might be able to do something incredible with this little congregation of discouraged souls? I not only believe He can, I believe He is! Maybe like the reducing of Gideon's army, God has been getting us into a position where we realize more and more that He is our hope, our only hope! He is our strength and He is our reason to rejoice and be excited!

When I look out upon this congregation, I see a valley of dry bones. When I look out upon our city, and our nation, and our world, I see a valley of dry bones. As Ezekiel said, they are very dry. But what is that to God except an opportunity? Our dryness is an opportunity to show Himself as the one (and only one) in whom there is life. It is an opportunity for Him to show that He is the Lord, and that when he speaks, incredible things happen!

Strangely enough, I am really not all that discouraged about what's happened over the past couple of years. I'm not happy about it, but I am not inclined to give up on this great congregation. And the reason why I am not discouraged is because I see most of the fundamentals necessary for a great work already in place. I see some very dedicated people. I see a huge amount of love. I see a growing desire to be a people of the Word. There are a number of people who are truly hungering and thirsting for the Word here. I see leaders who have a heart and a desire to lead this church to greater things. I see facilities that are paid for and in which there is room to do almost anything we could envision. I see a community that is like the one that Jesus described as being a field white unto harvest. Read the last few verses of Matthew 9 and check me out on this. **Verse 36** says, "*When he (Jesus) saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'*"

I think that sometimes we read this verse and we think for a field to be white unto harvest there has to be lot of people who are hungering and thirsting for the Word, many people who are wanting to know what to do to be saved. But you don't have to have those things in order to have a plentiful harvest; not if you are a God who can turn stones into bread and cause dry bones to live again. The fields are white unto harvest because there are lots and lots of lost people, harassed and helpless. People who do not even know they are lost, or what that hunger and thirst is that they feel deep within them.

The vision I have for this church in 2014 is not based upon what plans and programs come from our elders. We need some plans. We need some programs. We need some structure, we need some leadership. We need those things, but I can tell you, that isn't what is going to turn this church around. The only thing that is going to turn this church around is the same thing that is going to make a difference in the lives of those people out there who are harassed and helpless. And you know what that is. It is the Lord! We need the Lord as much and as badly as any of those people. "Without Him," as the song says, "I could do nothing. Without Him, I'd surely fail. Without Him, I would be drifting, like a ship without a sail."

My vision for this church in 2014 is that we come alive; that we start becoming that light to the world around us that God intended for His people to be. If, as the prophecies tell us, the Law is to go forth from Zion, and if the Church is that New Jerusalem, then it is FROM us and not TO us that the gospel must go. We are the people, along with faithful congregations of God's people around the world who have been entrusted with not just the good news, but the greatest news in the history of the world. That news is that mankind has been given a real and living hope. In the face of so much that is evil and destructive, there is hope! Regardless of who you are,

where you were born, or what you have, or do not have, there is hope! There is a God, and there is a God who created you and the universe around you. There is a God who loves you, enough so that He willingly gave His only begotten Son to die on the cross for you. There is a way for every person to be born again, regardless of who they or what they have done; they can experience a new beginning. I am talking about the way of the gospel, and it anchored in the good news of Christ's coming, dying on the cross and being raised from the dead. It was spelled out for us in the simple teachings of Christ's New Testament

As the hymn suggests, "we serve a risen savior!" and that is incredible news. His resurrection was the first of millions upon millions of not just bones, but even the dust from which those bones were made, that will come to life again. While this world, from the devil's perspective is nothing but a death trap, God says, "*No, I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly!*" (John 10:10).

There are six things that I really want to stress this morning, as we get this year underway, and I really hope every one of you will take this message seriously. I want you to be a part of this great work, not just a critic. Critics are not hard to find and at a dime a dozen, they are way overpriced!

- We need people whose faith in God is strong and unflinching.
- We need people who are afraid to be lukewarm.
- We need people who love the Lord and do more than just say it; they show it in their obedience and in their commitment.
- We need people who have a passion for winning lost souls, and loving the ones that are already won. We need people who want to teach and practice the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth of God's Word.
- We need people who have come to grips with the fact that there is no salvation outside of Christ, that He and He alone is the way, the truth and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through Him. And we need people who know that until a person is baptized into Christ, he or she is still outside of Christ and still lost in their sins.
- We need people whose passion for evangelism is matched only by their passion for being everything God wants them to be.

Here are a few things I really hope, and pray, that we can work on this year and with God's blessings, see happen.

**Number one, I have a vision that in 2014 we will find us a young, dedicated, godly, faithful and evangelistic gospel preacher to come and work with us.**

For some time now I have been urging the elders to get such a man to come here and work with us. They are committed to making that happen this year. This is not to say that I am going to quit or move somewhere else. I hope to stay on, hopefully in a part-time capacity and concentrate on local evangelism. In the meantime, we all have to pull together and be praying about this matter diligently. There is someone out there that is just what we are looking for, and with God's help, we will get him here, and a new dynamic will be in place.

**Number two, I have a vision that in 2014, we will find a way to begin attracting young people and young families.**

I don't know what it is going to take, but I'm praying that whatever it takes, if it is not unscriptural, we will pull all the stops and go for it. We must not stop loving and appreciating our older members, but at the same time, we must reach out to more and more young people. We can do that through reaching out to kids, reaching out to teens, reaching out to young singles and young marrieds. I am sure there are a lot of things we could be doing to make this more youth-focused than it is.

**Number three, I have a vision that in 2014, we will see more and more Bible studies such as the one that began year before last that meets on Friday night.**

We need pockets of people all over this community who are getting together to study the Bible together, to teach the lost, to pray for one another, to get into each other's lives. What takes place every Friday night needs to be happening every other night of the week, and more and more they need to be aimed at teaching the lost, and not just the saved. We need to start turning our homes into mini-mission fields where people are continually being led to the Lord. I hope we can see some serious outreach to the Spanish and black people of Ponca City.

**Number four, I have a vision that in 2014, we will be able to appoint additional elders to oversee this congregation.**

Again, this is something that the elders themselves want to see happen, and it needs to happen. Elders are the most critical component of every congregation, more important even than the preacher. They are the spiritual shepherds of the flock and they need reinforcements.

**Finally, number five, I have a vision that every member here will find some way to get over, or go around or get past all of those things that they use for an excuse for not being more faithful, active, and involved.**

I pray that they will stop being angry and upset with their brothers and sisters, that they will start getting excited and manifesting loving, positive and cheerful spirits. Let's see if we can't make this church, the most loving, joyful family on earth; a home for every tired and hungry soul!

My vision is that we come alive in 2014; that we start singing like we've got something to sing about; that we start praying like we have something to pray about, that we start working like we are working on something that never going to end. I pray that we will die to self but become alive to God and to one another, and as we do, we will start growing like we have never grown before.

Invitation