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Ezekiel 37:15-18, 21-28 *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, 'Ephraim's stick, belonging to Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him.' Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand. When your countrymen ask you, 'Won't you tell us what you mean by this?' ...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 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 from all 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 fathers 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 numbers, 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.' "

Sin breeds division. It always has. From the moment sin entered God's creation it separated his creatures from him and each other. It started with Satan and his angels rebelling against God. It continued to separate when Adam and Eve believed the devil's deception and ate from the forbidden tree. Sin still divides us today on every level--spiritually, socially, culturally, politically. But where sin divides, the Lord of grace, compassion, and power has always been in the business of restoring and making whole, of reuniting and returning to one, not because we deserve it, but simply for his mercy's sake.

Sin has sliced and diced our hearts, our relationships, our society. It had done the same to the nation of Israel. Their idolatry and insolence had separated them from God. The competition between the two foremost tribes—Ephraim in the north and Judah in the south—eventually split the country in two and sparked two hundred years of rivalry and civil war. Now both Ephraim and Judah had been overrun by conquering empires and their people forcibly dispersed from their homeland to be scattered in Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, and beyond. If ever there was a Humpty Dumpty story of a people being broken beyond repair and unable to put themselves back together again, this was it. But if the Scriptures teach us one thing it's that the Lord remains eternally faithful despite our sin-separatedness. Since the fall into sin and to the very end of time he will never stop working to mend and to heal and make one what sin has broken. He didn't stop for the Israelites, and he won't quit for us. And the

mechanism whereby he brings us broken sinners back to himself and reconciles us to each other is by means of his gracious promises of what HE has done and is going to do for us in Christ.

The Lord commanded the prophet Ezekiel to bind these two sticks together in the presence of his people as a visible reminder of what his grace was about to work for them: some 70 years later the Persian king, Cyrus, would allow the Israelites to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and reconstruct God's temple. Old animosities would cease and they would be a people once more. However, God had much more in mind than merely a national rebuilding. He would restore their hearts to him again so that they would no longer fall backwards down that slippery slope of pagan idolatry. He still loved them. He would save them from their sins. He was still their God, and they were still his people. He would send one king to rule over his people—gathered from every land and place—and reunite them in himself forever. A king in the likeness of the great shepherd-king, David. The promised Messiah, Jesus Christ, was coming for them and has come for us! He is the Good Shepherd who recemented our break with God by means of his blood shed on the cross. Afterwards he rose from the grave and ascended into heaven from where he now rules forever as the king of our hearts and the king of all creation. Christ rules in the midst of his people, living in our hearts by faith, with our bodies as the temples of his Spirit (cf. John 14:16-21; 1 Cor. 6:19). His kingdom encompasses the globe. As the second half of the book of Ezekiel describes and the Book of Revelation depicts, on the Last Day he will visibly and permanently manifest his kingdom in the new heavens and the new earth. Then God will place his sanctuary among us and dwell with us forever, and all the nations will know that he is our holiness and salvation.

What an awesome God we have! In his Son, our Savior, Jesus we have the only one who make us one with him and each other in this life and forever.

Prayer: Lord God, you alone are good, you alone are faithful. We praise and thank you for exerting your grace and power to their utmost by sending Jesus to restore us to yourself and begin our reunion with one another. Break down our pride and remove our divisions. Rule in the hearts of your people everywhere that the world may see in us a glimpse of the brotherhood you want for us all and the perfect unity you have waiting for your believers in heaven. We ask this in the name of our King, Jesus. Amen.

My friends, this concludes our summer devotion series. I pray that this overview of Ezekiel has been a blessing to you, that God has used it to train you and me to speak as boldly and forcefully as his prophet in the midst of a hostile culture and an increasingly secularized Christianity. Yet we do so with the same confidence that it is the Lord who wins and changes hearts and lives through his powerful Word.

If you've enjoyed these devotions, our upcoming series allows you, the listener/reader, to determine where we will go next by submitting your personal questions that you want answered from Scripture. You can submit your questions anonymously on our Ascension website (at AscensionPlymouth.com) or on the daily devotions section of our Ascension App, and I will be addressing them in the coming weeks in our Answers from Above Podcast. I'm eager to see what questions you'll come up with! Until then—God bless!