



Study 4 Called to New Life

This study looks at God's invitation to us to be renewed in our lives and faith.

My Story

As a teenager I was involved in a very active youth group which ran many different kinds of programs. However I dropped out of the group for several months due to other interests. During that time, the church held a mission weekend which had a remarkable effect on the group. I returned to find the youth group quite changed. There was a hunger and thirst for spirituality that I had never seen before. People would get together informally in someone's home simply to sing songs and pray. The Bible Study had taken on a new dimension of genuinely seeking what God was saying. And there was a conviction about the gospel that led to many of the group becoming involved in Beach Missions and other outreach activities.

One night while camping with some of these friends, I sat on the beach and told God that I felt that I lacked something that my friends had. While there were no lightning bolts, for me it was a real 'God-moment' of saying yes to an invitation to new life. For some time I thought of that night as my conversion. Since then I have come to realise that it was one step in a lifelong journey of turning to God. There have been many other moments when I have felt God nudge me further into this experience of new life. Sometimes these steps have been gradual; other times God has given me a bit of a shove!

Discuss

- *Talk about some of the 'God-moments' in your life when you have sensed an invitation to new life from God. How did you respond?*
- *What has helped you to hear God's invitation over the years?*

God's Story

Read Ezekiel 37:1-14.

Valley of the Dry Bones

Few Bible passages are as vivid as this vision of Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet and priest living in Jerusalem at the beginning of the 6th century BC. He was taken into exile in Babylon along with many other Jewish leaders and their families following Nebuchadnezzar's defeat of the city. In the early part of the book, Ezekiel condemns Israel for idolatry and false religion and justifies God's judgment on them. Ezekiel believed that Israel had disobeyed God right from the beginning and deserved to be totally destroyed.



In the later chapters, God, through Ezekiel speaks words of comfort and hope to the exiled people. Read Ezekiel 36:16-30 to discover the words from God which precede this vision. The dry bones refer to the people of Israel, spread out in many places. The Hebrew word for "breath" also means "spirit". We are reminded of God breathing life into Adam. Only God can bring life and only God can restore life. The gathering together of the bones shows a new beginning to come: bringing the people of Israel from their many dispersed places back to their homeland.

On the one hand, Ezekiel's vision is about a real return to Palestine. God plans to bring an end to the people's physical suffering. On the other hand, as 36:26 says, God's concern is not simply to bring people back home again. Ezekiel's message promises a new heart and a new spirit, a restored relationship with God. God's plan is not to recover the nation as it was, but to give it a better future within God's purpose for the world.

Discuss

- *Talk about Ezekiel's vision. What does it say to you about the way in which God brings new life?*
- *What attitudes might the Israelites need to leave behind them in receiving this breath of new life?*
- *God offers the Israelites a new future, both spiritually - with a new heart and a new spirit - and politically - with the promise of a return to their*

homeland. Do we sometimes focus too much on 'inner' changes or too much on 'outer' changes? What does Ezekiel's vision say about this?

- *Imagine that you went to sleep one night and had this same dream. What might it be saying to you about your congregation?*

Read John 11:1-45.

Jesus and Lazarus

Read the passage, asking people to read these parts: Narrator, Mary, Martha, Jesus, Disciples, Thomas, Jews.

John is a brilliant story-teller. We feel the suspense of waiting, along with Mary and Martha, to see what Jesus will do. While Jesus isn't playing games with Mary and Martha, his delay gives overwhelming proof of the power of God. Jesus is more than an inspiring teacher or a great healer, he is the Son of God who comes to give new life.

Although the focus is on Jesus and not Lazarus, we cannot help but wonder what Lazarus' life would be like after this event. He is not raised to his old life, but to something new. He would be marked for the rest of his life as being different from other people.

At the same time, we can get caught up in the details of this miraculous sign and miss the bigger picture. For John, Jesus' actions always have a larger purpose. According to Barnabas Lindars, the reviving of Lazarus points ahead to Jesus' own death and resurrection. The tomb, the women, the waiting - all of these mirror Jesus' resurrection. John seems to be showing us that Jesus' raising of Lazarus from physical death gives proof that God can do something even greater: God can raise Jesus from death to resurrected glory.

Some onlookers tell the Pharisees what has happened. The Pharisees react by planning Jesus' death. In raising Lazarus, Jesus gives away his own life. John gives us a pointer toward the Cross, and an image of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Discuss

- *Talk about the characters in the story and the feelings and thoughts which they may have had.*
- *What seems most remarkable to you about this story?*

- *What does the story say to you about who Christ is? What does it say about the way in which he offers new life to people?*

Our Story

We cannot make new life happen. Only God can breathe newness and banish the old ways. We can be open to God. We can create spaces where God can be encountered. We can even be like midwives, being present when new birth takes place. Yet it is God alone who can take the dry bones of our lives and our churches and make them live. And the more that our lives are made whole by God's grace, the more we want to share this new life with others. For our community to be renewed, we must first wait on God with the 'stuff' of our own lives, listening for Christ's call to "come out!".

Discuss

- *If Jesus were to look at you and say, "Come out of there!", what would he be asking you to leave behind? What would he offer in its place?*
- *If Jesus were to look at your church and say, "Come out of there!", what would he ask you to leave behind? What would he offer in its place?*
- *Do young people today hear God's call to new life in different ways or different places than older people? What is the evidence of this?*
- *What would we need to do in order to help the next generation hear Christ's call to new life?*
- *Discuss this statement:*

"New life comes to us on its way to someone else."

William Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs*, Abingdon, Nashville, © 1993.

Prayer

Lord, these bones are tired. Please leave us alone.

Lord, this tomb is peaceful. Please leave us alone.

Lord, we know you love us just as we are, so why not leave us as we are?

Why would we want a new spirit and a new heart?

Lord, do we need a new spirit and a new heart?

Can you take away our tiredness?

Can you really make dry bones live?

Can you really open a door to a better way?

Lord, we are listening. Speak to us. Call to us.

Help us hear you. Help us receive you. Help us follow you. Amen.