

# COMING TOGETHER AS ONE

SERIES: KNOWING THE GOD OF  
JUSTICE AND HOPE



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Ezekiel 37:15–28  
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*Ezekiel 37:15–28*

If I asked you for words to summarize the past year, you probably wouldn't suggest "unity."

In fact, I recently saw a study published by the Pew Research Center that took a historical look at how divided American society has been over the past several decades. The research suggested that twenty years ago, people were evenly split on significant political and social issues with a normal distribution. But today, people are more clumped into extreme positions. People on the right are farther on the right. People on the left are farther on the left.<sup>1</sup>

The gaps between people on different issues have more than doubled in the past 23 years. We are a more divided culture in every way on every issue you could think of. Disunity is a plague in our culture. And it's getting worse.

We're in the middle of a series on the book of Ezekiel that we've called Knowing the God of Justice and Hope. That title comes from a phrase that recurs throughout this book. God says that the signs, the judgments, the prophecies and the promises are given so that "they may know I am the Lord."

After a huge section of judgment, the book has moved on to talk about the restoration of the nation of Israel. Last week we heard beautiful imagery from the first half of Ezekiel 37. We saw the driest of bones being brought back to the fullest of life. The nation of Israel would be resurrected.

But death wasn't their only problem. Just like our culture, theirs was a divided time. Two factions had dominated their identity for hundreds of years. Coming back to life wouldn't be enough if the factions remained. Any real healing would have to address the deep divisions that separated them.

That's what we'll see today. This morning we'll hear about the divided nation of Israel coming together as one.

We need to hear this message. Our culture is divided, but tragically, it isn't just the world around us. In some ways, it seems as if the people of God are as divided as they have ever been as well. Culture issues, political issues, and theological issues create camps and factions among us.

I'm convinced that of all the things that break the heart of God, division among his people is one of the worst. For a father to see his children fighting, tearing each other apart, disrespecting and insulting each other. This is one of the worst things. I fervently believe that God weeps over his divided people.

But today is the first Sunday of Advent. Today we begin to look toward the coming of the one who would restore all things back to the way they were meant to be. And as we heard earlier, our theme for this Sunday is hope.

Amidst all the division in our world and the division within the people of God, is it possible for us to have hope? Could God do something? Could he bring us together as one? Can he bring unity? To our families? To our church? To our churches together? What if we became known as a place where reconciliation and unity were the norms instead of a distant dream? What if God brought us together as one? What if the world noticed?

I'm not sure what can be done for our country or the world at large, but I do know that the healing of God begins within the kingdom of God and spreads to the world. If we are the church of Jesus Christ, then God can do something here.

And as we'll see from this passage in Ezekiel, when God does something among his people, it has an effect on the world around us. In this passage, God will give Ezekiel another sign-act: something for the prophet to do that gives a glimpse into what God himself will do. May we see God do a work of unity and may it give us hope for ourselves and our world.

## Two Sticks

Last week we saw dry bones coming to life. That was the first part of the healing of the God's people. Now we see the second part of that healing. First God brings his people back to life. Then he makes them one.

**Ezekiel 37:15-17:**

**The word of the Lord came to me: 16 “Son of man, take a stick and write on it, ‘For Judah, and the people of Israel associated with him’; then take another stick and write on it, ‘For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with him.’ 17 And join them one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand.**

The word for sticks here is the same as trees. Two parts of a tree. With two names on them. Judah was representative of the southern tribes. There were two tribes in the South, but Judah was the majority. Joseph is representative of the ten tribes in the north. By this point, the Ephraimites were the most numerous of the northern tribes.

These two sticks would be brought together as one stick.

My kids are starting to accuse me of making dad jokes. I'm not sure what they mean. I'm convinced that my humor is top-shelf, but they insist that any time I try to be funny, it's just "dad humor." I am their dad, so I guess it's hard to argue with that.

But I do remember a classic "dad trick" that I used to do when they were little. You know the one: where you hold your thumbs cocked at an angle and then lift one thumb so it looks like you can pull your thumb apart. It's a great trick. That look of amazement that shows you that you've successfully fooled a four-year-old. That is like food for my dad soul.

This is the kind of illusion that God gives Ezekiel to do. Hold these two sticks together, with your hand covering their division, so it looks like one unified tree. Look: the two have become one!

But God isn't tricking people. He is demonstrating what he will do in reality. He will make the two one. It's already pretty clear what he means by this, but God goes on to explain exactly what this symbol means in verses 18-22a.

**Ezekiel 37:18-22a:**

**And when your people say to you, ‘Will you not tell us what you mean by these?’ 19 say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am about to take the stick of Joseph (that is in the hand of Ephraim) and the tribes of Israel associated with him. And I will join with it the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, that they may be one in my hand. 20 When the sticks on which you write are in your hand before their eyes, 21 then say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from all around, and bring them to their own land. 22 And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel.**

Remember the history of Israel. Four hundred years before this time, God's people had split into two separate groups. Over time, their divisions had deepened into cultural, religious, and political differences. Those two factions fought wars against each other. They killed each other and pillaged their towns. The cycle of being wronged and taking revenge and being wronged again had been repeated so many times over so many centuries that to untangle the blame and hurt and history was impossible.

But now God says that he will join these two nations together. It's the same word used in the previous section when God joined bones together to resurrect His people. Now he's joining the two nations into one nation and placing them back in their land.

After impossibly joining bones one to another to make life, God impossibly joins two groups into one to make a unified nation. God will do the impossible.

Think of someone in your life with whom you've got some relational tension. Maybe it's a parent. Or a spouse. A child, a sibling, a co-worker, a friend or anyone else. The worse the situation, the better. Who is it in your life that you can't even imagine finding unity with? The hurt runs too deep. The issues are too complicated.

What reconciliation seems impossible?

I can't promise that God will heal that relationship. But I will ask you to pray for it. Ask God to do something there.

The imagery of the two sticks becoming one reminds me of what God said when he first introduced Adam and Eve. Jesus quoted that description in Mark 10:8 saying, “the two shall become one flesh.” The mystery of unity in marriage is one that is powerful and elusive.

Early on in my marriage, I worked really hard for us to be unified. I prayed for it. We talked about it. I tried everything that I could think of to make us unified. But something horrible happened. The more I tried to unify us, the more it seemed that I pushed us apart. My efforts turned into disagreements. Disagreement turned into conflict. The conflict turned into wounds that were hard to heal.

It took me a lot of marriage counseling to realize that I wasn't trying to make us unified. I was trying to make my wife more like me. I didn't want us to be one. I wanted her to be me. What I thought were efforts to unify us were mostly efforts to convince her that I was right.

That's not unity. That's becoming the same. God didn't say he would get rid of the tribal distinctions for his people. He didn't say he would erase their complicated history. He didn't say he would change all of their names to Israel. One stick would still say, Judah. The other would say, Joseph. But they would be one. They would be unified. That's incredible.

But how do you get there? How do you maintain your differences but come together? What unites you if you're still different? Once you've come together, how do you stay together? God answers some of those questions as the passage continues.

## One King

After describing the unity with the image of the two sticks, God explains how he'll make it happen.

**Ezekiel 37:22-25:**

**And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. And one king shall be king over them all, and they shall be no longer two nations, and no longer divided into two kingdoms. 23 They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. But I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God. 24 “My servant**

**David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. 25 They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever.**

Let's think again about this image of the two sticks. What would a long stick of wood represent in that time and culture? Perhaps we're being shown a sceptre. The staff of a king. So when God joins the two sticks together, he is showing us the staff of a single king.

And that's what he describes here: “one king shall be over them all”, “My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd.”

David had really been the only king who successfully united God's people into one nation. The first king Saul was mostly regarded by his own tribe. David's son Solomon coerced his people into forced labor which created divisions that would fracture when his son tried to take power.

But David. He led a unified nation. And so we have the hope that another will come in his name who will unify the nation under one king again.

When I first worked in software development, the director of our team was a bit scattered. He was the kind of manager that you would worry about encountering on your way to the bathroom. If you did run into him, it was very possible that your entire suite of responsibilities would be changed because of a new thought he came up with that morning. As a result, our team ran in many different directions.

But then a new director came. He came with another team that used to work on a different project. And somehow he managed to pull us together. To draw our separate expertise together with a single goal.

It's an incredible thing how a good leader can draw people together. Leadership unites people. It's hard to describe. People write books and teach seminars on it. How can one person do that?

But even when people are unified by the best leader, it's not a complete kind of unity. You're really only connected by your goal or your purpose or your cause. It's a kind of unity, but it's not full or complete. A king can unite a nation. But can a king build a people?

I think that's why there is one other part of the unity that God shows Ezekiel.

**Ezekiel 37:26-28:**

**I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. 27 My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 28 Then the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore."**

The "covenant of peace" has shown up before in Ezekiel. And the "everlasting covenant" is a powerful concept that shows up throughout the story of God's people. It was given to Noah, to Abraham, and to David. And then the prophets began to speak of a new "everlasting covenant." Ezekiel refers to God doing something new among his people.

Remember that when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, they destroyed the temple. The dwelling place of God's presence was gone. But what we have here is a beginning of the promise that God will once again make his dwelling place among his people. We'll see that in more detail next week when the glory of the Lord fills the sanctuary. But here we see that God will be present with his people.

A king can give organizational unity. But only change from within can bring inter-personal unity. Only the presence of God changing his people can make them from a nation into a people.

A King will unite them. God will live in their midst.

We have rules in our home for how to treat each other. With five children in our home, ours is a kind of kingdom that operates on systems and guidelines. And those things help. But my wife and I have noticed that when we leave the room, things can tend to break down. A common leader helps to bring unity. But it is our presence that really helps to draw our family together.

When we are there, present and engaged, we can moderate disputes, ensure justice, and bring peace to our tribe. Most of the time. OK -- some of the time.

Think again about that impossible relationship that you have. Think about how a single king and the presence of God might affect that relationship. Would it help?

Think about the fractures in our world, our nation, even our church. How would it help to have a single king and the presence of God? How does that change things?

## Unity in Christ

Ezekiel is given a powerful vision of restoration to a group of exiles in Babylon. First, God will bring them back to life. Then God will make them one.

A King will unite them. God will live in their midst.

And then an angel came speaking the words of an ancient prophecy to a young man descended from King David, "the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means God with us.)"

This son was born to be a new kind of king. He came to save his people: to bring them new life and to make them one. The New Testament is soaked with passages about the importance of unity among those who follow Jesus. But one of the most powerful ones is when Jesus himself prays to his father to ask for unity. Read a brief part of that prayer from John 17.

**John 17:20-23:**

**"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.**

Can you hear the emotion in this prayer of Christ? Remember how I said that the father weeps over the divisions among his people. Here we see Christ crying out, begging, for unity to heal those divisions.

Earlier this week I met with a group of Christian business leaders and pastors from the entire Bay Area—Gilroy to Marin County. From garlic to wine and everything in between. We were brainstorming ways that we can be a part of God making himself known in this crazy part of the world that we call the Silicon Valley. And this passage from John 17 was read. Why?

Because nothing halts the purposes of God as quickly as divisions among his people. Brothers and sisters, our enemy has won when we spend our time and energy arguing and debating and fighting among ourselves. The simplest trick of the devil is to turn God's people against each other.

When Christians are divided, it's like two neighbors arguing over the fence that separates them. Whose responsibility is it to repair? Is it on the exact property line? Didn't your children break that board? They have so much in common that they can't help but fight over the one thing that separates them. Meanwhile, in another neighborhood, people are suffering from sickness and disease. While we fight about our fences, the world around us is dying.

But they are also watching. The fracturing of Christianity hurts the reputation of the Gospel and discredits our witness.

Did you notice what was at the end of Ezekiel's promise of unity? "Then the nations will know that I am the Lord." Did you notice what Jesus prayed for the result of the unity of his people? "that the world may know that you sent me."

Here is the power of oneness: the unity of the church demonstrates the reality of God to the world. The unity of the church demonstrates the reality of God to the world. We show the world who God is when we are unified.

If our unity is supposed to demonstrate the character of God, how are we doing?

Not so well. If anything, we have a history of disunity. Much of the New Testament addresses the Jew / Gentile division within the early church. For almost one thousand years, the church held councils to deal with differing ideas and hang onto a king of unity within the followers of Jesus.

But then around the turn of the Millennium was the Great Schism that split the church into Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Five hundred years later, the Protestant Reformation split the Catholic church apart into dozens of splinter groups. Ever since then, there have been micro-reformations constantly. Churches split over doctrine, personality, methods, and carpet color.

Perhaps we need to think again about the restoration that God is describing in Ezekiel. Perhaps we need to think again about what it means to be one in Christ. Perhaps God is doing something in our midst that we need to recognize.

Here's the good news of the Gospel. We don't have to create unity. God has already done that. God's promise of unity in Ezekiel was founded upon two things. A King will unite them. God will live in their midst.

Anyone who professes Jesus as their Lord and Savior has made Jesus their king. If you believe in Christ, Jesus is your King. And when you professed faith in Christ, God sent his Spirit to live within you. The Spirit of God makes his dwelling place within his people. We are now his sanctuary.

For those who follow Jesus, we have a common king, and we have the presence of God in our midst. This isn't something we have to do. It's a gift we simply receive.

We can't change history. We can't reverse the Great Schism of 1054 or heal the fissures of the Protestant Reformation. We can't re-establish all the churches on Middlefield Road under one banner, much less our city or our world.

But we, each one of us, can recognize and act upon our unity in Christ with other believers. We can recognize that the lordship of Jesus and the presence of the Spirit makes us one. And we can live like that is part of what makes God known to the world. We can Live in the Unity of Christ.

There's a community in Kenya called Oltikampu. For decades, rival tribes had fought with each other over land and rights and perceived wrongs. No one was safe because violence was unpredictable. No one could really be prosperous. And children grew up victimized by their community's instability.

But then some pastors started to work there. They started to pray and talk about Jesus. And over time, things started to change. People came to faith in Jesus. A church was planted. Peace replaced division. That allowed The Kilgoris Project to start supporting a school in the area. Children were educated, fed, and healed. The community began to be revitalized.

I was in Oltikampu a few months ago. It's one of the most energized, joyful, Spirit-filled places I've ever seen. Because of the peace that comes from their love for Jesus and the presence of Jesus, they are experiencing healing. Their entire community has been transformed.

This doesn't just happen. Divisions and escalated disagreements are the norms. But when we live in the unity that Christ has already created for us, we have the opportunity to demonstrate something different.

This church is a diverse community. We have different views on who should be in the White House. We have different views on the priorities our national government should have. We have different views on how women ought to lead in a church setting. We have different views on what is going to happen when Jesus returns. We have different views on worship style and preaching methods and schooling decisions and financial choices and so many other things.

But we are not unified by those things. We are not unified by our agreement on every issue. We are unified because Jesus is our king and the Spirit of God is among us. That's it. We are unified because Jesus is our king and the Spirit of God is among us.

We need to live like it. We can have disagreements on all those things. We can talk about them and we should. We ought not to be afraid of talking about those issues or disagreeing with the person worshipping next to us. Because our unity is founded on something deeper.

And as we live in that unity, we experience the blessing that it brings. But we also demonstrate the character of God to the world. The world notices when we divide. And the world notices when we come together. Our unity in Christ declares the power of God to do the impossible. The unity of this family points to the love of the Father who unites us.

## Conclusion

It may be true that our culture is becoming more polarized. Opinions are shifting, and groups of ideas are shifting farther and farther apart. We need to be aware of this. We ought to be concerned. There may even be some things that we can do to help. But ultimately, this isn't our problem to solve.

The place where unity begins is where we have something to be unified around.

This morning we've seen a simple promise by God to a group of exhausted exiles in Babylon. God will act to unite the long-estranged factions of the nation of Israel. He will do so by sending them one king to unite them. And he will hold them together in unity by making his dwelling place among them.

If you believe in Jesus and are filled with the Spirit, then we have the only thing in this world that can actually unite different people together. Plenty of people talk about unity; everyone wants to come together. But you have to come together around something.

Jesus is our King. The Spirit of God is in us.

That relationship that you can't imagine being reconciled can be healed by the power of God. Divisions that have lasted for centuries can be healed by the power of God. We as a church can be unified around the person of the Jesus and the presence of His Spirit.

We aren't unified with everyone. This isn't a naïve hope that everyone in the world would just snap out of and realize that we're all the same and stop killing each other. This is an awareness that the God who created all of us has done something in history that can enable us to come together and stop killing each other.

He has sent his son to die. He has made him our king. He has reconciled us into a relationship with him and established a community defined by his presence. We can come together as one.

If Jesus isn't your king, make him your king. If you don't have the Spirit of God, receive Him as you believe.

If Jesus is your King and the Spirit of God lives in you, then live in the unity of Christ. Stop dividing. Come together. As we do that, the world will see the true character of God.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider." Pew Research Center, 5 Oct 2017. Web. 12 Dec 2017 <<http://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/>>