

## Dear Lord, Give Us a Vision Greater Than Our Division

*WHY WE NEED A VISION GREATER THAN OUR DIVISION. . .  
 AND A MISSION THAT WILL SUPERCEDE OUR DIFFERENCES*

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**E**zekiel was a strong witness for God. His name means "God strengthens." God was the source of his strength to witness during hard times. He was a priest and a prophet and a prisoner of war. But verse 3 says, "The hand of the Lord was upon him there." When the hand of the Lord is upon you, that's all you need.

The visions that Ezekiel saw were of God, not man. They came from heaven, not earth. When Jesus prayed, He lifted up His eyes to heaven. His prayer looked down the long tunnel of time. His vision was for the unity of all believers on earth.

I am using the word "vision" here in strictly the spiritual sense. God, give us a greater spiritual vision of what you want us to be. Help us be more visional, less divisional. Give us a strong vision that is greater than our shameful division! Grant us a mission that will supercede our differences!

In Chapter 37, in the Spirit of the Lord, the hand of the Lord set Ezekiel down in the middle of the Valley of Dry Bones. And some of you think your field of service is hard and barren! God told him to do what seems a very odd thing. "Prophesy to these bones...say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!'" So Ezekiel preached to the dry bones! Then God did a miracle. Breath came into the bones, life came into them, they stood on their feet like the army of the Lord, and God said to Ezekiel, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel." Not

half a house, not a partial house, but the whole house of Israel! This is key to understanding our text.

For many years Israel and Judah had been divided. Once they were one united nation. Once they rose up as one man and defeated all the enemies of Israel. Once they were the United Kingdom. But when Rehoboam, King of Israel, failed to listen to the wise counsel of his elders, the kingdom was divided. He formed the Southern Kingdom, consisting of Judah and Benjamin, known as Judah, while the 10 remaining tribes formed the Northern Kingdom, or Israel.

So here is Ezekiel, a hostage in Babylon (Iraq) since 597 B.C. (For perspective, at the same time, Jeremiah, also a P.O.W., was prophesying to Judah in their period of captivity.) And God gives Ezekiel a vision that is greater than their division. This is probably the most visual and instructive unity section in all of the Old Testament.

**First, notice the two sticks that became one stick.** "Take a stick for yourself and write on it: 'For Judah and for the children of Israel, his companions'" (v. 16a). Judah was the principal tribe of the Southern Kingdom. His companions were Benjamin, Simeon, and Levi. "Then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel, his companions'" (v. 16b). The house of Joseph comprised the two most powerful tribes of Israel, Ephraim (which sometimes stands for Israel itself) and Manasseh, the main body of the Northern Kingdom.

In essence, one stick, representing Judah; one stick, representing Israel. Remember, these kingdoms had been divided, separated for many years.

Ezekiel is then told, “Join them one to another for yourself into one stick, and they will become one in your hand” (v. 17). This is to symbolize unity, but that is all it is at this point, a symbol, because the sticks are in Ezekiel’s hand, not God’s hand...yet! Unity is not a gimmick to manufacture, it is a gift to be maintained.

“Keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

When Ezekiel’s companions in captivity asked the meaning of this object lesson, he was told to tell them that it was God who would take the stick of Judah and the stick of Israel and say, “I will....make them one stick, and they will be one in My hand” (v. 19). Notice: “One in MY hand.” The union of sticks was Ezekiel’s work but the union of nations was the work of God! The vision came from God. Unity comes from God. The two nations would become the whole house of Israel - in God’s hand.

**Second, notice the 10 “I wills” in our text,** beginning in verse 19 through the end of the chapter.

- I will take the stick of Joseph... v. 19
- I will join them with it... v. 19
- I will take the children of Israel... v. 21
- I will make them one nation... v. 22
- I will deliver them... v. 23
- I will be their God... v. 23
- I will make a covenant of peace with them... v. 26
- I will establish them and multiply them... v. 26
- I will set My sanctuary in their midst... v. 26
- I will be their God, and they shall be My people... v. 27

That’s why we pray, “Thy will be done!” Because the will of God *will* be done, no matter what may think, say or do. God is sovereign.

**Third, notice the 4 “ones” in our text.** “One” is certainly the biblical number for unity. Paul said, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Eph. 4:4-6). The magnificent seven. And here we find four more “ones”, the fantastic four.

- One stick (v. 19). When God took the stick representing Judah and the stick representing Israel, they became one in His hand. Just as a man and a woman become one flesh when they are joined by the Lord, so two can become one in the hands of the Lord.
- One nation (v. 22). God said, “I will make them one nation in the land...they shall no longer be two nations, nor shall they ever be divided into two kingdoms again.” One gets the idea that God prefers unity to division, a united kingdom to a divided kingdom. “How good and pleasant it is when brethren dwell together (not separately) in unity (not division).”
- One king (v. 22). God said, “One king shall be king over them all.” Loyal subjects to the king should not be fighting with each other. Soldiers may bicker in the barracks over minor things but when the call to battle comes, they must fight the enemy as a band of brothers. Our allegiance is to the King of kings and Lord of lords. *Come Thou Almighty King, help us Thy name to sing. Help us to praise: Father, all glorious, O’er all victorious, Come and reign over us, Ancient of Days!*
- One shepherd (v. 24). “They shall have one shepherd.” Psalm 100 says we are His people, the sheep of His pasture. The Lord is our shepherd. He is my shepherd, our shepherd, the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd of the sheep. We are the one flock, the one fold, of the one shepherd.

There are at least three possible fulfillments of Ezekiel’s prophecies. (1) They were fulfilled in the return of the Jews to Jerusalem after the captivity. This

has problems because only 50,000 returned, and the temple that was erected was so small in comparison to Solomon's temple that the people wept. (2) These prophecies are yet to be fulfilled. (3) These prophecies are spiritually fulfilled in the life of all believers, whether Jew or Gentile. Whether your view is past, present, or future, one thing is sure: the vision of Ezekiel, a vision that was from God, was for unity. Two sticks becoming one, two nations becoming one, one nation serving under one king, one flock following one shepherd.

And why a vision for unity? "Then the nations will know that I am the Lord..." (v. 28 ESV). The unity of God's people, brought about by God through Jesus Christ, sends a strong signal to the world Jesus came to save. In the first century, a pagan Roman emperor was forced to cry out in admiration, "Behold, how they love one another!"

**Fourth, notice the natural tie-in of Ezekiel's vision to Jesus' prayer for unity** in John 17. Jesus prayed, "that they all may be one...that the world may believe...that the world may know that you have sent me, and have loved them as you have loved me." On Nov. 22, 1963, JFK was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. In only a few hours the whole world knew that the young president had been slain. Yet 2000 years have come and gone and still half the world does not know that God sent Jesus Christ to die on the cross for their sins, that God loves them as he loves his only Son. Ezekiel's vision: A united nation that the nations may know. Jesus' prayer: A united church that the world may know, that the world may believe. It is my conviction that Christian unity is absolutely essential to world evangelism.

I recently read that the World Christian Database lists 9,000 denominations within the professed Christian community. The World Christian Encyclopedia lists a staggering 33,830 Christian denominations - and that is the 2001 edition.

"Physician, heal thyself." Let us look in our own back yard. We are a part of a unity movement that set out to unite all believers. Not long after the sto-

ried Cane Ridge Revival in 1801, Barton W. Stone and five other Presbyterian preachers dissolved the Springfield Presbytery, saying, "let us die and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large." That was in 1804. In 1809 Thomas Campbell wrote the Declaration and Address, an appeal for all Christians to unite on the name of Christ alone and the Word of God alone. He said, "The church is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one." He also said that division among the people of God was a horrid evil, fraught with many evils. He declared that division was evil because it was anti-Christian, anti-Scriptural, and anti-natural." On New Year's Day, 1832, the adherents of Stone and Campbell joined heart and hand and declared that they would be Christian only. They enjoyed sweet fellowship until the rigors of the Civil War took its costly toll. Churches in the defeated South were poor and could barely feed their families. Churches in the victorious North enjoyed better circumstances, and could even afford to have organs in their parlors, and soon in their church buildings. Other changes were also happening. In 1889, at a gathering of 6,000 Christians at Sand Creek, Illinois, Daniel Sommer declared that if certain churches persisted in the use of instrumental music in worship and the support of a newly formed missionary society that "we cannot and will not regard you as brethren." Letters and editorials, praising and excoriating Sommer, were fired back and forth. In 1906, data gathered among Churches of Christ for the US Census declared them to be a "distinct and separate people" from the Disciples of Christ. In 1927, the North American Christian Convention was formed, "independent" of the Disciple's International Convention, forming, in effect, the nucleus of the independent or conservative Christian Churches/Churches of Christ. One rolling river had become three separated streams. A movement that desired to unite all believers in Christ had ended up in division.

Since the 1930s there have been several efforts to renew relationships and encourage discussions among the separated streams. These efforts were led by men such as Bill Jessup, Ernest Beam, James DeForest Murch, Claud Witty, Perry Gresham, Leroy Garrett,

Carl Ketcherside, Don DeWelt, and others. Don DeWelt and Ken Idleman started the Restoration Forum in Joplin, Missouri in 1984. (We also began publishing *One Body* in the same year.) In February I attended Restoration Forum 24, held on the campus of Abilene Christian University, as a part of their annual Bible lectureship. Bob Russell and Rick Atchley spoke each day on six things we hold in common (a common plea, Savior, Scripture, plan of salvation, mission, bond). Ziden Nutt gave a PowerPoint presentation showing an encouraging number of projects we have been doing together in the last 40 years in kingdom projects. History was made when on the opening night of the ACU Bible Lectureship, President Royce Money invited Don Jeanes, President of Milligan College, to deliver the body of the evening message. Brother Money declared, "For those of us in the Restoration Movement heritage, I doubt if many people have looked at us in the last 100 years and said, 'Behold, how they love one another.' But we're going to do better in the next 100 years; we're going to better right now!...Unity for the sake of mission is essential if we are to successfully carry the light of Jesus into a dark world."

And that's what Jesus prayed for - unity for the sake of mission. Father, may they all be one...that the world may believe." Dear God, give us a vision greater than our division!

In my new book *Together in Christ, More than a Dream*, I quote nearly 100 brethren, past and present, on our need of a renewed vision for unity. These are spiritual statesmen who have made statesmanlike statements on unity. Here are but twelve.

Lynn Anderson – "We've been separated far too long over far too little."

Rick Atchley – "For 100 years we have served God apart. Only God knows what can do the next 100 years serving Him together."

G. C. Brewer – "Nothing should separate us from each other unless it is something that separates us from God."

Don DeWelt – "I'm going to write a book and call it 'Agree With Me or Go to Hell!' But then I realized Someone has already written that Book!"

Isaac Errett – "If men are right about Christ, Christ will bring them right about everything else."  
Harold Fowler - "It is pretty hard to keep kicking a dog that keeps licking your hand and by the grace of God, I, for one, am determined to be that dog."

Edward Fudge – "We do not disrespect the past by looking to the future. We are not responsible for our ancestors, but rather for our children."

Frederick Kershner – "Many are standing where we once stood, and may we not exercise the same forbearance with them as we once asked for ourselves?"

David Libscomb – "If we are in Christ, we cannot help being one with all who are in Christ."

T. B. Larimore – "I prefer to sit on the issues and stand on Christ."

Marvin Phillips – "Let us unite on things specifically taught and be tolerant on things sincerely deducted." "Let the Judge be the judge and let the Father run the family."

Seth Wilson – "We are brothers if we are children of the same Father, whether we like it or not. God wants us to like it and to act like it. And He wants me to say, 'If you belong to Christ, then I belong to you.' He wants me to feel this in my heart and to act in that manner."

In a little tract called "The Greatest Tragedy of a Thousand Years," the late Walter Stram wrote these words. "The two World Wars, with their terrible loss, were not as disastrous in their total results as has been the influence of the division, sectarianism, confusion and hatred in the church world. A life lost in war is a temporal loss, but a soul lost through sin brings eternal loss....division in the church world today is treason against Christ and presents a tragic stumbling-block to the non-Christian."

Stram closed his tract with this story. "A child was lost in the great Dakota grain fields, and scattering searchers failed to find the child. Finally they joined hands and combed the fields systematically. In the cold hours of the next morning they found the child - dead. The mother cried, 'O why didn't we think to join hands sooner?'"

Thomas Campbell made an impassioned plea for unity in his Declaration and Address. He said, "O that ministers and people would but consider that there are no divisions in the grave - nor in that world which lies beyond it - there our divisions must come to an end. We must all unite here. Would to God we could find in our hearts to put an end to our short-lived divisions here, so that we might leave a blessing behind us, even a happy and united church!"

Brethren, we are headed for the grave and that world which lies behind it. Brother Campbell was right. There are no divisions in death, in the grave, or in the world which lies behind it. He knows that - so does Brother DeWalt, G. C. Brewer, Isaac Errett and T. B. Larimore. Isn't it time to come to our senses and come to a consensus and unite here and now on the essentials, so that we might leave behind a happy and united church? A divided church plunges cold steel in the heart of Christ, turns away thousands from Christ, including some of our children and grandchildren.

I close my new book with this true illustration. On Sept. 11, 2001, our world was change forever. Radical Islamic terrorists hijacked four airplanes. Two of them were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York. The third plane hit the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. The fourth plane, United Flight 93, was headed for either the Capitol or the White House when something amazing happened. Some of the passengers made phone calls to

loved ones. From them they learned the fate of the other airplanes and realized the intended targets of the terrorists. Somehow they managed to storm the cockpit, resulting in the plane crashing in the quiet countryside of Pennsylvania.

One of those passengers was Thomas E. Burnett, Jr., who was able to call his wife Deena on his cell phone. He told her that he and some other passengers were going to try and stop the hijackers. He said, "I know we're all going to die. But some of us are going to do something about it." Deena later told a reporter from the Los Angeles Times, "I know without a doubt that plane was bound for some landmark and they saved many, many more lives than were lost on that plane."

Another passenger, Todd Beamer, spoke to a GTE phone supervisor. After asking her to recite the Lord's Prayer with him, Beamer said to his fellow passengers, "Are you guys ready? Jesus, help me. Let's roll!" The rest is history.

These brave souls came together in a selfless, redemptive manner. No one asked what denomination they belonged to or what another believed and practiced. The crisis was too great. Time was of the essence. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we who call ourselves Christians could unite in an equally selfless, redemptive manner to save those who have been hijacked by Satan and are hurtling for eternal doom?

Brothers and sisters, we are all going to die someday.

But some of us are going to do something about it!

Are you ready?

Jesus, help us!

Together in Christ, let's roll!

Victor Knowles' new book, *Together in Christ: More than a Dream*, is available from College Press, 1.800.289.3300 or [www.collegepress.com](http://www.collegepress.com)