

“The Valley of Dry Bones”

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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Introduction:

Most of us know that there is quite a science behind the study of bones. If I remember correctly, an adult has a total of 206 bones. I have read that newborns start with around 300 bones, but that a lot of those bones fuse together over time. Our bones range from the largest, the femur in the leg, all the way down to those three tiny bones in the inner ear that allow us to hear. Our bones have various connections—from the complex jaw to the hinge at our elbow, to the ball and socket at our shoulder. Our ribs protect the vital organs and are connected at the sternum. Years ago, we met a godly Christian man who had had heart surgery. His sternum became infected, so the doctors removed it—his ribs were just kind of floating, and as I remember it, he got a kick out of showing us the spot on his chest where you could actually see his heart beating! Bones are important. We know that forensic anthropologists and archaeologists can look at a set of bones and can sometimes determine a cause of death. In some situations, they are able to determine a person’s gender, and age, and race, and height, and even what kind of food a person ate, as well as when and where that person might have lived. In some circumstances, scientists are even able to determine what kind of healthcare a person received—from whether a broken bone was set properly all the way up to complex dental work or even to a serial number on a hip or knee replacement. Certainly we would agree that bones are able to tell quite a story.

With that in mind, I would invite you to think with me about a story from the Bible that is taught by using a valley full of bones as a very graphic illustration. We have been looking together over the past two months at some of the parables of Jesus, and although this morning’s passage is more of a vision, it does take the form of a comparison. The story is found in the Old Testament book of **Ezekiel**, and I would invite you to turn with me this morning to **Ezekiel 37**, to the account of Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones. **▶PPT▶** In our pew Bibles, the passage is found starting on **page 1360—Ezekiel 37**.

Historians and scholars tell us that Ezekiel was probably around 25 years old when he was taken into Babylonian Captivity. His father was a priest, and according to Jewish tradition, a son would train under his father and would start his own career in that field, fully trained, at the age of 30. However, from the very first verse of the book of **Ezekiel**, we find that at the age of 30, Ezekiel found himself not ministering in Solomon’s temple as we might have expected, but according to **Ezekiel 1:1**, he found himself, ***“...by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.”*** Certainly Ezekiel would have looked forward

to serving as a priest like his father—that is what he was trained to do, and yet due to the people's rebellion against God, plans changed, and God allowed the nation of Israel to be overtaken by the Babylonian army. Jerusalem was attacked, the temple was completely destroyed, and the few who survived were taken away as slaves to an area that is now known as Iraq.

And yet even though Ezekiel's plans had changed, it is interesting that he did not need to serve in the temple to serve God. But instead, Ezekiel found himself as a prophet, passing along messages from God to a group of Jewish exiles in a far off land, and as he is there in Babylon, he receives a powerful message from God. If you will, please look with me at **Ezekiel 37:1-14**...

¹ The hand of the LORD was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones. ² He caused me to pass among them round about, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley; and lo, they were very dry. ³ He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, You know." ⁴ Again 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 that you may come to life. ⁶ 'I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the LORD.' "

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then He said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, 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 come to life.'"" ¹⁰ So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life 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 has perished. We are completely cut off.' ¹² "Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³ "Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. ¹⁴ "I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken and done it," declares the LORD.' "

As we look back over these 14 verses, I would like for us to consider the situation Ezekiel was facing, I'd like for us to consider what Ezekiel was told to do about it, and then I'd like for us to consider that God's promise was eventually fulfilled. So, as we consider this passage in context, I'd like for us to look at the situation at the time, and then I'd like for us to us responsibly apply it to our situation here in Madison.

I. **First of all, though we notice in context and from the prophecy itself that GOD'S PEOPLE WERE OVERWHELMED IN A HOPELESS SITUATION.**

»PPT»

And again, it goes back to God's people being punished for their unfaithfulness as God allowed them to be hauled off into Babylonian Captivity. And to illustrate how bad it was, God took the prophet Ezekiel to a valley full of dry bones. I think we might agree that when we see a bone, something is probably wrong! In fact, I don't know about you, but I know that I hope I never see one of my own bones, because if I ever see one of my own bones, it probably means that something terrible has happened! At Halloween, we see skeletons hanging from trees as a way to try to frighten people. Generally speaking, seeing bones is not a good thing. Bones are meant to be covered, and when they aren't, then it usually means that something bad has happened. Bones are normally associated with death.

And when we think about the situation Ezekiel was addressing, it was truly a bad situation. For the Jews, it was especially humiliating for a body not to be very carefully washed and wrapped and placed in a tomb, but we find in Ezekiel's vision that the bones were not only exposed, they were very dry. Also according to **verse 2**, there were "**very many**" bones on the surface of the valley. We find out later on in the paragraph that the bones were scattered—in other words, the bones were not even connected to one another, but they were detached and scattered around. We can hardly imagine what might have caused this situation!

If these people had been sick or dying, perhaps there might have been some hope, and yet not only were they dead, but the bones were very dry and were scattered all over the surface of the valley—a hopeless and desperate situation.

It is in **verse 11** that we discover that the bones represent the whole house of Israel—they had been completely cut off, their bones had dried up, and their hope had perished. Certainly we think back to the reason for all of this—a promise made by God hundreds of years earlier as they had left the land of Egypt. Way back in **Deuteronomy 30:15-19**, God had said,

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the LORD your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve

them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants.

Of course, we know that the Israelites had failed to choose life—they chose death, and the results are pictured right here in **Ezekiel 37**. These people who had once been feared by the strongest nations on earth were now scattered like dried out bones in the valley. These people were not killed by famine—God had fed them manna in the wilderness. These people were not overwhelmed by a foreign nation—God was on their side. And yet just as God had promised, there were consequences for disobedience.

It has always been this way. God has always given mankind a choice—He begs and invites us to choose life, but He never forces it on us. And as James wrote in **James 1:15**, “...***when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.***” Or, as Paul wrote in **Romans 6:23**, “...***the wages of sin is death.***” They wandered away from God, they forgot the Law, and they died. The punishment was inflicted by God, but it was their decision. In fact, we have a summary of exactly how it happened in **2 Chronicles 36:15-17**,

The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy. Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand.

Some scholars have estimated that about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Jewish people were killed in the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, and that those who somehow survived were chained together and were forced to walk to Babylon, many hundreds of miles away. When they got to Babylon, they were put into forced labor. There are indications in the book of Ezekiel that they were forced to dig a canal across the countryside. They cried to go home, but there was no home to go home to, because Jerusalem was gone. It had been scraped off the face of the earth. We start to understand how hopeless the people were. Did you know that we have a song written from Babylon? Most of the Psalms are cheerful and encouraging, but in **Psalms 137**, we find that the Babylonians demanded that the Jewish people sing them some of their songs. They must have been known as a singing people, but they just couldn't do it under those circumstances. **Psalms 137**...

¹ *By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept,
 When we remembered Zion.*
² *Upon the willows in the midst of it we hung our harps.*
³ *For there our captors demanded of us songs,
 And our tormentors mirth, saying,
 "Sing us one of the songs of Zion."*
⁴ *How can we sing the LORD'S song in a foreign land?*
⁵ *If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
 May my right hand forget her skill.*
⁶ *May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
 If I do not remember you,
 If I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy.*
⁷ *Remember, O LORD,
 Against the sons of Edom the day of Jerusalem,
 Who said, "Raze it, raze it To its very foundation."*
⁸ *O daughter of Babylon, you devastated one,
 How blessed will be the one who repays you
 With the recompense with which you have repaid us.*
⁹ *How blessed will be the one
 Who seizes and dashes your little ones against the rock.*

A little bitter, I would say! Like a valley of dry bones, the nation was in a hopeless situation. But of course we know that God had not forgotten His people...

II. ...and that leads us to a second idea here, and that is: GOD GIVES HOPE THROUGH HIS WORD. **»PPT»**

In verse 3, we notice that God has a question for Ezekiel, *"Can these bones live?"* Of course, from a human point of view, the answer would be **"no,"** but Ezekiel very wisely says, *"O Lord God, you know."* As we learned in our parable last week, *"With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible"* (Matthew 19:26). And so at this point, the Lord commands the prophet Ezekiel to start preaching to the bones. The Lord has a plan, and it starts with His inspired word. The word of God has a way of changing us; it has a way of bringing hope to hopeless situations.

And so in verse 7, we find that Ezekiel obeys—he prophesies just as he was commanded. Whatever he spoke, he did not water it down, he did not try to improve on it, he did not go out there apologizing for it, he was not timid about it, but he prophesied just as he was commanded.

In the same way today, it's not our word, it's His word! We do not have permission to change it or water it down. Nevertheless, as Ezekiel starts preaching in this valley of dry bones, he hears a rattling noise—something was happening! And as he looks around, he notices that the bones are starting to come together, bone to bone. And as he continues preaching, he starts to see the ligaments forming, the muscles and the flesh, until finally the bones are covered by skin! He was then told to call upon

the wind, which he does, and according to verse 10, *“...I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.”* The plan started with the preaching of God’s word! The cure for death starts with the word—the same word of God that created the Universe, the same word of God that raised Lazarus from the dead.

We know that God’s word continues to be important today. The writer of Hebrews tells us that, *“...the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart”* (Hebrews 4:12). And so the question for us this morning is this: Are we listening to the word of God? Are we hearing it? And when we hear it, are we doing something about it?

And as we think about what happened here in Ezekiel 37, we realize: Ezekiel didn’t raise these people from the dead. This was God’s work. Yes, Ezekiel spoke, but the power was in the word of God. Through the preaching of God’s word, that which was impossible became possible. The word of God makes it all happen. Now, if Ezekiel had refused to say anything, those bones would still be there. But Ezekiel obediently preached the word, and amazing things started to happen. What an encouraging picture—not only for the nation of Israel, but also for Ezekiel—an encouragement to keep on preaching even along the banks of this canal in Babylon! God’s word has the power to change things. As Paul said in Romans 10:17, *“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.”* Hearing the word of Christ, then, is our only hope of going to heaven.

We learn from the Valley of Dry Bones, therefore, that the word of God is able to bring strength and comfort and power into a hopeless situation. As Jesus said in Matthew 24:35, *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.”* God gives hope through His word.

III. But before we close our thoughts on the Valley of Dry Bones this morning, we need to notice something else, and that is: GOD’S PROMISE WAS FULFILLED IN A VERY LITERAL WAY. In other words, God’s word gave new direction, and the people were brought back to Jerusalem. ▶PPT▶

And it is especially amazing that God used a pagan king to do it. The Babylonians (a world superpower at that time) were conquered by the Persians, and the new king, a man by the name of Cyrus, got the ball rolling. We read about Cyrus in the opening verses of Ezra (Ezra 1:1-4)...

¹ Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying: ²

"Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ 'Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴ 'Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.' "

In Ezekiel 37:12-14, God said that just like this vision, *"Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken and done it."*

And history tells us that the people did, in fact, return to the land, they rebuilt the temple and the city walls, and they learned to never again worship idols. God had a plan to purify His people, the people went back to worshiping according to the Law of Moses, and they were restored in plenty of time for the Savior to be born, resulting in our salvation, even today. God's promise was fulfilled.

Conclusion:

As we close, where do we fit in here? I know there are times when we feel like we are in a hopeless situation. And in the middle of it, like God's people in Babylon, we don't always see the big picture. Sometimes we get overwhelmed to the point where we can't see through to the other side. Some time ago, I read about a young lawyer who slipped into a deep depression. In fact, it even got to the point where his closest friends were keeping all knives and razors away from him for fear that he would hurt himself. It was bad, and in his journal, he wrote, **"I am now the most miserable man living. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell. I fear I shall not."** Perhaps some of you have been in a similar situation. There are times when life seems hopeless, and no matter how optimistic we try to be, we cannot see through to the other side. But when we get to that point, Ezekiel would encourage us to turn to the Lord, to listen to God. By the way, that attorney was a young man by the name of Abraham Lincoln. And thankfully, Mr. Lincoln found a way to come through on the other side of that.

Perhaps we look at a friend or a loved one, and we wonder if they will ever make the choice to follow God. Our responsibility is to listen to God's word, to realize that God's word brings hope even to the most hopeless of situations.

Perhaps we are bogged down in some kind of sin—maybe we can't see our way through it—God's word can bring hope to that situation.

Perhaps we look around us at the huge churches here in Madison with all of their basketball leagues and beautiful buildings and multimillion dollar benevolence programs, and we wonder whether we are really making a difference. Our role, though, like Ezekiel, is to keep on passing along the word of God. We don't have the power to bring life to the dry bones, but God's word does have that power, and all we can do is pass it on one person at a time. In the Valley of Dry Bones, our job is to speak up for God.

God's word tells us that we are dead, but in order to live, we must hear the good news, we must turn away from sin, and we must allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism is a reenactment of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, and it is at the point of baptism that our sins are forgiven. In **Colossians 2:12-13**, the apostle Paul referred to, ***"...having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions."*** If you have any questions, we would love to talk with you after this morning's service. If you would like for us to pray about a difficult situation in your life, you can write it down and bring it to the front. But if you are ready to be buried with Christ right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org