

BONES OF HOPE

SERIES: KNOWING THE GOD OF
JUSTICE AND HOPE



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Ezekiel 37:1-14
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Ezekiel 37:1-14

In Ezekiel 37:1-14, the hand of the Lord comes upon the prophet, the Spirit of the Lord sets him down in the middle of a valley, and he receives a horrifying vision.

Today, the hand of the Lord does not need to come upon you. You do not need to be brought out in the Spirit of the Lord and set down in the middle of a valley. All you need to do is reach out your hand and turn on your television, fire up your laptop, or grab hold of the phone in your pocket. You'll see horrifying images of what has happened to humans: what disasters have done to humans, what humans have done to humans.

The Lord calls Ezekiel to respond in a particular way to what he sees. How is the Lord calling us?

Valley full of bones

Ezekiel 37:1-2:

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. 2 And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry.

This isn't Ezekiel's first trip to the valley. Earlier, the hand of the Lord came upon him, he came to the valley, and he saw the glory of the Lord, whereupon he was instructed to act out the Lord's judgment against Israel, beginning with a siege against Jerusalem (Ezekiel 3:22). Now, in a horrifying vision, Ezekiel sees that the valley is covered with human bones. Given his prior experience, Ezekiel would most likely conclude that the vision corresponds to the siege and that the bones represent the remains of those who fought for Jerusalem.

Ezekiel doesn't just see the bones, he also, courtesy of the Spirit, walks among them. He thus is able to see two things: there are a lot of bones, and they're very dry. If this represents defeat in battle, the defeat is

overwhelming. If the bones are very dry, that means those who fought in the battle have long been dead. Moreover, the dead haven't been buried, which would be considered particularly shameful.

Way back when the Lord formed Israel in the wilderness, Moses warned it of such a fate if it persisted in idolatry: "The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You shall go out one way against them and flee seven ways before them. And you shall be a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. And your dead body shall be food for all birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away" (Deuteronomy 28:25-26). More recently, the prophet Jeremiah echoed Moses' warning (Jeremiah 34:17-20).

You don't need to be led around among a valley of very many very dry bones; the person holding the camera will do the walking for you, and he or she will show you everything. Some of you, no doubt, have seen such horrifying images not only on a screen but also in person.

What's the Lord's purpose in giving Ezekiel the vision?

Ridiculous question

Ezekiel 37:3:

And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, you know!"

Ezekiel, having received the grand tour of the valley, knows that the people who used to be supported by these bones have been dead, dead, dead for a long, long, long time. We also might imagine him to be devastated by the horrific images that he's seen. Yet the Lord chooses this time to ask Ezekiel a question—a ridiculous question, really.

Up to this point in biblical history, three individuals have come back to life, but only after recently dying, one in connection with the prophet Elijah and two in connection with the prophet Elisha (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37, 13:21). It would be unprecedented for a multitude of people to come back to life after having long been dead.

The Lord has given Ezekiel a daunting string of judgment oracles to preach. Only recently has the Lord begun giving him salvation oracles, which envision Israel's restoration on the other side of judgment. With the vision of a valley of dry bones, we're back to judgment again—apparently. What must be going through Ezekiel's mind? "Son of man, can these bones live?" How would you answer the question?

It would be presumptuous of Ezekiel to answer yes. The obvious answer is no, but it would be faithless for Ezekiel to answer no. Ezekiel says he doesn't know. But he believes that the Lord knows. Thus he answers, "O Lord GOD, you know."

Assaulted by images of devastation as we are, if you were to hear the Lord ask us something like, "Son of man, can these bones live?" how would you answer? Perhaps you think, "What a ridiculous question!" You might think the better question, in the aftermath of such tragedies, is, "Is there a God?" There are so many bones and they're so dry. The best you can do is answer, "O Lord God, you know." When I pray, one of my most frequent expressions is "I don't know." I don't know, Lord. You know.

Why did the Lord ask Ezekiel the question in the first place? Because he wants Ezekiel involved in what happens next.

Ridiculous order

Ezekiel 37:4-6:

Then he said to me, "Prophesy 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, and you shall live. 6 And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord."

The Lord not only asked Ezekiel a ridiculous question ("can these bones live?"), he also issued a ridiculous order: "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord." Uh, bones don't have ears. Nevertheless, the bones are supposed to hear from Ezekiel "the word of the Lord," which involves the Lord God telling the bones that they will come to life, complete with sinews, flesh, skin, and breath. When that happens, the bones (well, I guess they would be people again at this point) will "know that I am the Lord." Well they should!

In our hyper-connected world, we don't just see one image at one time; we see multiple images on an ongoing basis. One week a boat of refugees capsizes in the Mediterranean; the next week there's a flood in Houston; one week there's a mass shooting in Las Vegas; the next week there's a fire in the Napa Valley. One week there's a mass shooting in Texas; the next week there's a mass shooting in northern California. Unlike Ezekiel, we don't see one vision of one valley of devastation; we see a stream of visions of multiple valleys of devastation.

Is there anything that we're supposed to do? If we were to hear the Lord say, "Prophesy over these bones," we might answer, "Uh, which bones?" After all, we haven't seen bones in one valley; we've seen bones everywhere. The images of devastation are powerful, but if you see them all the time, and if you watch movies and television shows that convey such images, they can lose their power. You can become desensitized to images of devastation.

Nevertheless, the Lord says, "Prophesy over these bones." And what does Ezekiel do?

Bones come together

Ezekiel 37:7-8:

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them.

What does Ezekiel have to lose? He obeys orders: he speaks to the bones. Bones may not have ears, but Ezekiel does. He hears a sound, a rattling. Earlier, he surveyed the valley and twice used the word "behold" to introduce what he saw: very many very dry bones. He

uses the “behold” twice again to introduce what he sees. The second image is as unbelievable as the first image was horrifying: the bones come together, and they have sinews and flesh and skin.

The bones have bodies, but are the bodies inhabited by human beings? No. There was “no breath in them.” Did the prophecy fail? The Lord commanded Ezekiel to tell the bones that the Lord would give them both bodies and breath. Ezekiel does what the Lord asks, and the Lord gives the bones bodies, but he doesn’t give them breath. Breath seems to be a bigger deal than bodies.

Moved to action

Some, in response to a particular image, may feel called to do something about it. I have a friend who felt called when he watched a television news report on the orphans of Romania. William prayed, “Lord, if you want me to go to Romania and love those babies, I will.” He discerned that the Lord in fact was asking him to do precisely that. William raised support, moved to Romania, and began holding babies in orphanages. Once in Romania, he later felt the Lord calling him to minister in other ways. Twenty years later, William, now in his sixties, still single, is still in Romania, serving the Lord.

William, of course, is the exception (though he proves that it is not beyond the Lord to call someone to change the entire direction of his life through images on a screen). Many more, upon seeing images of devastation on a screen, will want to contribute to disaster relief by sending some sort of contribution.

I venture to guess that still more people will be moved to more substantive action not by seeing an image on a screen but by seeing something in person.

Such was my experience earlier this year in India. I had been to India several times to teach pastors and preach in churches. I’ve been doing this of and on for ten years now. I thought this year would be my last year. Then, when I was touring a school, I saw a woman working in a kiln, piling bricks on top of her head and carrying them in the hot sun, and I said to myself, “We need to keep teaching pastors in India.” So I’m planning to return at the end of January to teach a group of pastors in Hyderabad. Dan Westman will be joining me. It’s as if the Lord was saying to me, “Prophecy to these pastors.” I believe the word of God, breathed out in the past by the Spirit of God and illuminated in the present by the Spirit of God, heals the world.

Somehow, somehow, enter into some kind suffering. You probably don’t have to look very hard. You’re probably already in a valley with sufferers. The valley we live in, for example, has plenty of sufferers. The sufferings of the world are the sufferings of Christ. Paul, for one, wanted to share the sufferings of Christ (Philippians 3:10).

The answer to being desensitized to images of devastation is to become sensitive to the Lord. Build an interactive life with God so that you can become sensitive to him and to what he is calling you to do.

If you are somehow moved to do something, you might wonder, “Well, what good will it do? Whatever I do in the face of such devastation isn’t going to help. I can’t make dry bones live, and the dry bones are everywhere.” And if you manage to accomplish something—rather, if the Lord accomplishes something through you—it might feel something like rattling some bones together and maybe even creating a body, which might cause you some initial excitement, but really, what good is a body without breath?

Bodies come to life

Ezekiel 37:9-10:

Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, 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 may live.” 10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

Bones don’t have ears, but when Ezekiel spoke to them, in obedience to the Lord, they rattled together and were given bodies. Now the Lord tells him to speak to the breath, but the breath doesn’t have any ears either. Nevertheless, the Lord directs Ezekiel to speak for him and command the breath to “come from the four winds,” which indicates that the breath is present everywhere. The breath is commanded to “breathe on these slain.” Now we know for sure, the dry bones, which now have bodies, were symbolic of the remains of people who had been slain. If the breath does what Ezekiel commands, the breath will come, the breath will breathe, and the slain will live.

Ezekiel complies, the breath complies, and the bodies come to life. Not only do they come to life, they also stand on their feet as a great army. If the bones were the remnant of a bedraggled army that was devastated by the Babylonians, they have risen to become something they weren't before: a formidable force.

A person of hope

You don't give up because all you have to show for your efforts is a breathless body. No, you keep at it. God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy, and then to prophesy again. He didn't command Ezekiel to create bodies, much less breathe life into bodies. No: "Prophesy over these bones . . ." "Prophesy to the breath . . ." Ezekiel prophesied, and God created bodies; he prophesied again, and God and breathed into the bodies. Therefore, act or speak or pray, or act and speak and pray, and let God create the bodies and breathe into them, so to speak.

Take courage and work, and wait for God to fill the house with glory (Haggai 2:1-9). Plant your seeds, and wait for the harvest (Mark 4:26-32). Give Jesus your five loaves and two fish, and wait for him to feed thousands (Mark 6:33-44).

Rest assured that God wastes no act of kindness done in his name, no words spoken in his name, no prayer offered in his name, no sermon preached in his name (thank you Lord!). "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58). God enhances every effort, if not in this creation then in the new creation. What we do in this creation is linked to what God does in the new creation. God takes what we do and he uses it to heal the world. Note that he doesn't create bodies or breathe life into them until Ezekiel obeys him and prophesies.

You, therefore, are a person of hope. Enter suffering, yes, but as you do so, offer hope. More often than not, your very presence is a sign of hope for those who are suffering. Don't worry so much about the words. Worrying about what you're going to say can keep you from entering into the suffering of others in the first place. As you enter suffering more often than not, you offer hope.

Dark time

Frederick Buechner tells of an "especially dark time" in his life:

Then one day the phone rang, and it was a man I didn't know very well then though he has become a great friend since, a minister from Charlotte, North Carolina, which is about 800 miles or so from where I live in Vermont. I assumed he was calling from home and asked him how things were going down there only to hear him say that no, he wasn't in Charlotte. He was at an inn about twenty minutes away from my house. He'd known I was having troubles, he said, and he thought maybe it would be handy to have an extra friend around for a day or two. The reason he didn't tell me in advance that he was coming must have been that he knew I would tell him for Heaven's sake not to do anything so crazy, so for Heaven's sake he did something crazier still which was to come those 800 miles without telling me he was coming so that for all he knew I might not even have been there. But as luck had it, I was there, and for a day or two he was there with me. He was there for me. I don't think anything we found to say to each other amounted to very much or had anything particularly religious about it. I don't remember even spending much time talking about my troubles with him. We just took a couple of walks, had a meal or two together and smoked our pipes, drove around to see some of the countryside, and that was about it.

I have never forgotten how he came all that distance just for that, and I'm sure he has never forgotten it either.¹

The presence of the friend, more than his words, was what brought Buechner hope.

Now, what does Ezekiel's vision mean? The Lord, having given Ezekiel the vision, now interprets it for him—and for us.

Grave robber

Ezekiel 37:11-14:

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 is lost; we are indeed cut off.' 12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. 14 And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you

in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord.’

The bones not only represent Israelites who died in battle, they also represent “the whole house of Israel”—Israel as a whole, including the northern kingdom, which was conquered by the Assyrians some one hundred and thirty years earlier. All Israel, then, is in some sense an army.

But Israel doesn’t feel whole, much less like an army. Israel, first the north and now the south, has been devastated by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., respectively. Israel feels like—well, a valley of dry bones. It feels dried up, without hope, cut off—from her land, from her God.

The Lord commands Ezekiel to prophesy again, not to bones this time but to “them”—that is, the people who comprise the whole house of Israel. They have bodies. They have breath. But as Ron Ritchie, a former pastor of our church, used to say, “Just because you’re breathing doesn’t mean you’re alive.”

At first, the Lord comes off like a grave robber: “I will open your graves.” But what’s the treasure he’s looking for? He will “raise you from your graves.” The treasure is his people. In fact, he calls Israel “my treasured possession” (Exodus 19:5).

The feeling of death

The Lord isn’t speaking about literal death; he’s speaking of the feeling of death. Note that the metaphor of dry bones was applied to living people (verse 11). The Israelites feel dead, as if their bones have dried up, as if they’ve been buried. To Israel, the exile is like death. The Lord, then, is speaking of a spiritual revival, which involves the return from exile and the gift of the Spirit.

Earlier, Ezekiel said that the Lord “set me down in the middle of the valley” to see the dry bones. The verb translated “set down” in verse 1 is the same verb that is translated “place” in verse 14. First, the Lord “placed” Ezekiel in a valley of dry bones; now the Lord promises to “place” the Israelites in their own land. He transforms death in the valley to life in the land.

What’s to say, though, that life in the land won’t turn into death in the land, and exile again, for that matter, because the people refuse to follow the Lord? If bones are covered with sinews and flesh and skin but have no

breath, they become lifeless bodies. Earlier, Ezekiel was told to prophesy to the “breath,” the breath complied, and the bodies came to life. The word “breath” is the same word that is translated “Spirit.” To be revived—to come to life spiritually, to stay alive spiritually—Israel needs the Holy Spirit, and the Lord promises to put his Spirit within his people.

‘Receive the Holy Spirit’

After some seventy years in captivity, the southern tribes returned from exile, in fulfillment, at least in part, of Ezekiel’s prophesy. However, the return matched neither his expectations nor the expectations of other prophets, who envisioned the return from exile as a new exodus.

When John the Baptist began baptizing men and women in the Jordan River, however, reenacting the exodus, the greater return from exile—the return to God—was underway. When Jesus came on the scene, he began remaking Israel, calling twelve disciples to match the twelve tribes of Israel, journeying from north to south to make Israel whole again.

After his death and resurrection, he breathed on his disciples, the way the breath came into the dry bones in Ezekiel’s vision, and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). Israel was dead spiritually, but Jesus brought it back to life, pouring out his Holy Spirit on all his followers, Jews and Gentiles alike, reconstituting Israel as the worldwide people of God. The land where God’s people live finally becomes the whole earth, the new earth (Matthew 5:5, Romans 4:13, Revelation 21:1). In the end, God will not bring us into the land *per se*; he will raise us from our graves and bring us into a new world.

Listen to Paul: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you” (Romans 8:11). Or listen to Jesus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (John 5:25). Talk about hope!

You were in the valley

Why should you enter into the suffering of others? Because you were in the valley once too, weren’t you? Or you will be. Or you are right now. You’ve probably felt dead, or your will feel dead, or you even feel dead

right now: dried up, without hope, cut off. Suffering in this broken world is our common lot. Some suffer more than others, but we all suffer. So many people around here look like they're doing really well, but for many of them, if you scratch a little beneath the surface, they're suffering emotionally.

But maybe Jesus met you in the valley, or maybe he'll meet you in the next valley, or maybe he's meeting you right now, in the valley where you are. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

A little dry

Earlier this year, I was feeling a little depleted when I attended a daylong retreat with about twenty others, mostly pastors. Coincidentally enough, the retreat leaders had us mediate on the passage we just worked through today: Ezekiel 37:1-14. In the afternoon, I was sitting on an outdoor patio at the Jesuit Retreat Center in the hills of Los Altos, overlooking the valley, reflecting on the text, connecting it to my life, feeling a little dry—probably more than a little dry.

I saw some movement off to the left, in the distance. It was a deer. I thought of getting up and walking toward it, because, for some reason, I really wanted a closer look at it, but for some reason, I didn't. I stayed in my chair. A few minutes later, I looked to the left, and the deer was gone, I thought. But it wasn't gone. It had moved closer to me, and was just behind a bush in front of me. I could hear it, but I couldn't see it, and it couldn't see me. I remained absolutely still. It came out from behind the bush, walking toward me. It was a doe.

Finally, when she was about five yards away from me, she realized my presence and froze. I didn't move, and neither did the doe. We locked eyes for about ten seconds. Finally, the doe walked away, unconcerned by my presence.

I had been feeling dry, but I felt that the Lord, through Ezekiel 37 and the coming of the doe, was saying something like, "It will come," or maybe, "I will come."

Do you know what's come to me? The book of Ezekiel. I had never really thought of studying and preaching these texts before, but in doing so, the Lord has come to me, and I feel revived.

What came to me—the book of Ezekiel—I give to you.

Endnotes

¹ Buechner, Frederick . *Listening to Your Life*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1992, 310.