

What makes someone a good public speaker? What is it that draws your attention and keeps it? What does there need to be for you to listen and get something out of their message? Some speakers really know how to get you sitting on the edge of your seat while they pull you along and deeper into their story so you feel like you are experiencing it the first time with them. Others know a few solid jokes to put you at ease and wanting to be their friend. Some really know how to pluck your heart strings and emotions so you feel what they feel. We know what makes a bad speaker bad. That's usually not too challenging to point out. But trying to nail down what makes a good speaker, that's a little more difficult. For one, it's all very subjective. What I find intriguing you might find boring. What keeps your attention might put me to sleep.

We want to think about this because we have a message that is begging to be shared. Peter preached it on Pentecost: *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* After quoting the same verse, the Apostle Paul asks the question in Romans 10:14 *"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"* In other words the Good News of Jesus who died for us and rose again needs to be spoken, it needs to be preached so that more and more people are brought to faith.

We know that we should share it more often. And we want to share the Word with more people. We want people to come to church regularly to hear this Good News again and again. That's what a Christian wants to do because a Christian follows God's will and desire. And God's will is that all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). We want to preach, share, speak God's Word because that's what Christians do. But how? By the end of this sermon, if you pay attention, I will have revealed to you how to be an effective preacher on your own. Not in a public, stand up in front of a crowd setting necessarily, but you will know how to share God's Word to an individual so that it works.

To accomplish this we go with Ezekiel led by the Lord to the middle of a valley filled with bones. In this vision we start walking back and forth all around this valley and through Ezekiel's eyes two things catch our attention. The valley is filled with bones—there's a great many of them—and those bones are very dry. In other words, a lot of dead bodies were here at one point, and they may have been dead for a long time because the bones are very dry. The Lord then asks a very peculiar question, *"Can these bones live?"* It's peculiar because anyone with an ounce of reason would have been able to see there was no life in them. They were dead, dry bones. But Ezekiel responds, *"Lord, you alone know."* Then the Lord tells Ezekiel to prophesy—speak the words God

gives him—to these bones and say: *Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!* <sup>5</sup> *This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.* <sup>6</sup> *I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'*

This is what God tells you and me to do: speak His Word. He doesn't tell us to speak to dry bones, but flesh and blood people. He gives you and me that promise that his Word will always be effective—it won't return empty but will carry out its purpose. We are told that the Word changes hearts, does these miraculous things that we simply cannot explain. We've seen examples of it in our own lives: a man who lives a life of sin, a general wild man hears God's Word, is brought to faith, and has a complete change of heart, mind, and attitude. Or, someone who knows little to nothing of God's Word starts learning it and that spark grows to a heart on fire for the Lord. But for every one of those amazing stories we have more than enough other examples where it seems more like we were talking to the skeleton hanging in the biology classroom or doctor's office. From what we can tell or see nothing happened. It wasn't necessarily that you didn't present the message well enough; they just refused to listen. We're really good at remembering all of those times and really good at forgetting or downplaying how crazy and inexplicable it is when we do see the Word visibly work. And what happens when we do that? We are less willing to share the Word. We start feeling defeated and wonder, "What are we supposed to do?" We become experts on all the reasons why it's a lost cause or someone else should do it.

Ezekiel was well acquainted with this. His work as God's prophet did not seem very successful. He had preached and preached some more for the people of Israel to change from their sinful ways. He had warned them time and again what was going to happen. But they didn't listen. There was as much a reaction as one would expect coming from preaching to a valley filled with dry bones.

And still Ezekiel does as God commands. As we hear him speaking there's another noise that starts and becomes louder. A rattling sound as bones come together (rap your knuckles together, hear that noise, now imagine that being a valley full of bones coming together). Skeletons are formed. Inexplicably, seemingly from nothing, tendons were fashioned, muscle and sinew began covering the bones and connect, and then skin covers the bodies. But they were still empty, lifeless corpses. There was no breath of life in them. It seemed like it only partially worked.

Don't we see that too when we share God's Word with others and with ourselves? God's Word is spoken, actions are changed for a time. But then they fall back into the pet sin. Or, they recognize what they are doing is wrong, but have little to no desire to

change refusing to see the big problem with the sin. That's also what happens if we only share the Law. It curbs actions; might keep you on the straight and narrow. It tells you what you are supposed to do. And it works for some time because they might be afraid of the consequences. But the heart is not changed. The attitude and the core problem was not fixed, so the actions only are good on the outside. Inside it's still dead. Maybe you recognize that with yourself too how on the outside it looks fine and no one would guess what you struggle with in your heart. How frustrating it is when we do all that work—we are patient, caring, loving, we did the hard work of showing what they were doing is wrong, we share God's Word and love with them—and it seems like an individual has had a change of heart. But it's only for a little while. Or they were just going through the motions, saying and doing what you wanted to hear and see. It can feel like we are just adding to the pile of reasons of why someone else should do the work of sharing the Word as God commands.

Back in the valley of bones, God promised he would put breath into these bodies and they would come to life. So, the Lord tells Ezekiel again, *Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'* ”<sup>10</sup> *So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.* Nothing short of a miracle. That which was dead is alive. But it wasn't because of Ezekiel's great speaking skills or some hidden super-power that brought these bones together and created life. No, it was the spoken Word of God.

It would be this same Word that would bring life back to the people of Israel. After their homes were destroyed, after they saw the temple go up in flames, after they were dragged away to live in a foreign land, with foreign people, in a foreign culture, strangers without a home, they felt like they were the dry bones. All hope was gone. They were cut off from God and abandoned by him—or so they thought. Now Ezekiel's job was to speak the Word again, to prophesy: they who were dead and buried—so-to-speak—would be brought out and given life. They would be returned to their home land. The Lord would put his Spirit in them and they would live. This prophecy would be partially fulfilled when Israel returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, to their homeland.

This prophecy continues to be fulfilled today. It's possible that the Apostle Paul had this valley of bones in mind in Ephesians when he quite clearly tells us how we were dead in sin. On our own we already lost before we began; from the moment of conception we are dead in sin. When Adam first fell it seemed that all hope was lost. Sin cut us off from God so that we had no life in us. We were dead, dry bones. We couldn't try and make a decision for Jesus or accept him into our lives—dead, dry bones can't make decisions like that. We couldn't do something to make ourselves alive—dead, dry bones can't make themselves live again.

But God sends his Spirit through the spoken and written Word to give life to dead, dry skeletons of sin like you and me and makes us alive in Christ. It wasn't because of the individual who first spoke or shared the Word to you that you were given life in Christ. No, it was by the power of the Spirit working through that Word and baptism so that you were made a new creation, one that is a living, breathing child of God.

At that Pentecost with Peter and the followers of Jesus, God fulfilled his promise to send his Spirit on the people. Men, women, children were given the Spirit to share the good news that Jesus died for our sins and gives us life with him. How were the dead, dry bones given life? How were the 3000 people brought to faith at Pentecost? How were you brought to faith? That same Spirit was poured out on you and that Spirit continues to work through the written and spoken Word of God shared by you. Saving souls, bringing the dead in sin to life, doesn't come from your personal capabilities. It comes from the Spirit who works through me in spite of my mumbling lips and despite my sometimes incoherent thoughts. It's not because of how well you present it, show it, the great illustrations you can use, or something else that brings someone to faith and changes hearts. It's the Spirit working through the Word. God doesn't tell you that you have to bedazzle people with your brilliance, leave them wowed as a gifted speaker, or be the most knowledgeable individual. He calls you to be faithful and to trust, putting your confidence in him that he will fulfill his promises. He tells you to preach, to speak so that the Good News is heard. How do you become an effective preacher, sharer of God's Word as we want to be? Simply share it, speak it, and know that the Spirit works. Amen.