

The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³ He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

I said, “Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”

⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! ⁵ This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ 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.’”

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

⁹ Then he said to me, “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.’” ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

¹¹ Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ ¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.’” (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

Life-Creating Word

There we stood at the funeral home. As we were giving our last respects my Grandpa said, “That’s what you look like when you are dead.” Grandpa could be that way. At the time I thought Grandpa was just trying to ease the tension. As the years have gone by I’ve thought back to that time in grade school, looking into the coffin and grandpa’s statement. He’s right. The body is just there. It will not move on its own. It cannot do anything. There’s no breath of life in it. That’s what you look like when you are dead.

A valley full of bones; that’s what Ezekiel sees. The Spirit of the Lord led him out in a vision and sets him down in the middle of this valley. As he walks around Ezekiel sees many bones everywhere scattered all over the ground. It quickly becomes apparent these bones have been here for a while. They are very dry. There is absolutely no life left in them. That’s what you look like when you are dead a long time.

And this is how the people of Israel were feeling. They were saying, “**Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.**” They felt like there was no life left in them. Their strength is gone. As they look towards their future, there’s no hope. There’s no changing their situation. They are stuck and never getting out. All hope is up in smoke—vanished. They felt cut off, abandoned by God, left to rot and decay far away from him in Babylon.

To a certain point, they weren't wrong. But they had no one to blame except themselves. Because of their self-serving pride, they had been knocked down. They abandoned their first love, the Lord. They hoped going through the motions would be good enough and the Lord wouldn't notice that their hearts weren't into it. They cheated on the Lord and were unfaithful to him serving themselves and other gods. The Lord had sent prophets with warnings. The people ignored them. They listened to what they wanted to hear. They put their hope in other people. They trusted in the strength of other nations. And now here they are in Babylon. Their temple was gone. Their homes and livelihoods were up in smoke. They were cut off from the land of the promise. Sin and its consequences had separated them from their God.

To a point, you know that feeling too. It can be hard to find the strength to carry on with another day resisting sin and temptation. At times it's hard to find the strength to stand up for what you know is right. When you look to the future, how much of our hope is wishful thinking? What if things don't get better? What if you don't get out of that situation? What if you don't find the answers you want or direction of what to do? Sometimes we feel cutoff. Cutoff from friends because of distance or because you grew apart. Cutoff because of something they said and did. Cutoff because you are living with the consequences of your own lost patience, misunderstanding of the situation. You thought you knew what was best; it wasn't. You were just trying to help! They took it the wrong way. We can feel cutoff, abandoned by God, when life's plans aren't working out. We feel cutoff when you've fallen into that sin again. You might put on a hard exterior that nothing phases you. You hide behind a smile and everyone thinks everything is fine. But inside you feel as brittle as dry bones.

As Ezekiel continues his stroll through the dry bones the Lord speaks, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

Logic, human reason would say one thing. Ezekiel knew better: "Lord, you alone know." To which the Lord responds, "Prophecy—speak my words—over these bones: Hear the Word of the Lord, **'I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶I 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.'**"

How foolish Ezekiel must have felt, even if it was a vision. What good would speaking words do to make dead things alive? Still Ezekiel does as the Lord commands and what God's messenger is supposed to do: just speak the message.

Then Ezekiel hears it. What must have started as a slight rattle grows into a loud ruckus. Ezekiel looks and, behold: He sees thigh bone connected to the hip bone, hip bone connected to the back bone, back bone connected to the...The bodies fill out. Skin stretches out. They looked almost alive! But they weren't. The breath of life was not in them. It was like a body in a casket—all connected but no life.

The Lord speaks again: "**Prophecy to the breath—to the wind—the Lord says: Come, breathe into these slain that they may live.**" And when Ezekiel speaks the Word of the Lord, the breath comes breathing life into these corpses. They stand up on their feet—a vast army. Don't think of

this like the army of the dead or a valley full of zombies. Those that had been slain—had been dead—no longer were. They were alive.

The Lord doesn't set us in a valley with a large amount of very dry bones. He has set you into this world. As you walk about in this world you see people who look alive; they are breathing, walking, talking. But inside they are very much like you. Some are really struggling with it. Others don't realize it. Many simply don't want to think about it. They are looking for hope and struggling to see it. They are trying to find strength in so many ways. But they too, by nature, are dead in sin and cut off from life.

Concerning them God asks us as he told Ezekiel: "Can they live? Speak my Word and they will." And instead of responding, "You know, Lord." We say, "I know, Lord." I know I'm not the right person to be talking about those things. I know they aren't going to listen; we've tried that before and instead of positive results we saw worse. I know they aren't going to listen; look at their lives. I know because look at the mess of this world. Look at everything that we are dealing with in life. The Word is not going to be enough. There has to be something more. I know because it still hasn't fixed all of my own personal issues and struggles I am feeling. "I know, Lord, if only you did this, if only the situation was more like that. Why don't you do something like this or what if you, Lord, did that?" As if we think we know better of how to breathe life into the apathetic, lack-of-care, dead in this world.

Let's take a step back for a moment. Where were you when the heavens were made? Where were you when he stretched out the sky and put in the starry hosts? Where were you when that very same Word was spoken and all came into existence out of nothing?

The reality is, if God wanted to bring life to those dead bones in Ezekiel's vision in any other way, there's nothing stopping him. The one who could use rocks to sing his praises and donkeys to spread messages could use whatever method he wants. But he didn't ask your opinion, mine, or anyone else. He chooses to work through spoken Word from the mouth of sinful human beings to bring life to dead bones.

That is, after all, what he did in you. For us who are born dead in sin, it was the spoken Word that gave us life. It maybe already was when mom brought you to church when she was pregnant with you. Or, it was when you were brought forward a dead creature of sin and given life when washed with water and the Word at your baptism. It may have been a friend who spoke to you God's Word at a time when you did not expect it. Maybe it came from being invited to God's house. Whenever it was doesn't really matter. In the end, who spoke the Word isn't of utmost importance either (at the same time we are eternally grateful for them!) What brought life wasn't the person, how fluently they spoke, how charismatic they were in speech, but the power of the one who is behind the Word. Through the spoken or read Word of God the Spirit creates life.

It cannot be from my own thinking or choosing or accepting that brings me life. Dead people can't do anything; look again in the casket. The Lord works to open our graves and brings us up from them. Through the Word, the Spirit brings you to the cross of Jesus where you died with him. It was that Spirit who carried you through the Word into Jesus' tomb. And it was that Spirit

who brought you out with Jesus on Easter morning. Through Baptism you were raised with Jesus, declared holy in God's sight, set apart as God's child. You are no longer dead; you have life in Jesus' name. You are no longer cut off; you are brought into this community of holy ones—the communion of saints. They, like you, have been washed in the blood of the Lamb Jesus. Together we are that vast army standing on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as our cornerstone. We have the sure hope that one day he will rip open our own graves and bring us to be with him forever. All people will know He is the Lord.

Until then, do not let your hearts be troubled. That Spirit who was poured out on Pentecost all those years ago continues to be poured out on us today. When your work of sharing God's Word isn't producing the fruit we would like to see, the Spirit reminds you, "It will not return empty but always carries out its purpose." When sin's consequences sow seeds of doubt, the Spirit works through that Word to lead us to repentance and through spoken Word you hear: "Your sins are forgiven." And they are. When past sins and current temptations plague you the Spirit assures you, "You are not your own. You were bought at the price of Jesus' blood. I, the Holy Spirit dwell within you. Sin does not control you. You have a new life freed from sin for service in this world."

And as that Spirit continues to be poured out onto us he works through us to share the life-creating Word in this dead world. How exactly did the Word bring life to you? We don't know. But the Spirit worked just as Jesus promised. How does it work to bring life in this dead world? We don't know. But God promises that it will. And the Spirit chooses to work in us and through us who have been made alive to speak it. He gives you the message; share the life-creating Word. Amen.