

*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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”*

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

*<sup>4</sup> Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘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<sup>[a]</sup> 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.’”*

*<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.*

*<sup>9</sup> 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.’” <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.*

*<sup>11</sup> 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.’” <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. <sup>14</sup> 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 NIV2011)*

### **Sermon Theme: Life Given to the Lifeless**

It's not hard to imagine that since death came into this world mankind has been on the hunt for the answer to prolong life. From the adventures to find the Fountain of Youth, the quest for the Holy Grail, the study of alchemy to discover and produce the Philosopher's Stone to possess the Elixir of Life, mankind has been trying to defeat death. And, yet, no amount of drugs, medicines, machines, anti-aging genes and molecules discovered to try and prevent it, the fact is that—unless Jesus returns first—the end will come to each and every one of us in death. And that's what death is: the ultimate end. You know that when life is done, it's done. It's gone. There's nothing more you can do. The body grows cold, the color drains, and, no matter how well the funeral director does with the body, at best the individual only seems life-like. But it's a sad representation of the time when life had once filled that body. Once death has taken hold with his cold, heartless grasp it is final.

The prophet Ezekiel knew this when the Lord's hand came upon him and led him to middle of a valley. This valley doesn't have any sign of life in it. As he was led back and forth, all around he saw—as the original language seems to describe as—a jumbled mess of a great many bones on the floor of the valley. And these weren't fresh bones either. They were very dry. It's almost like if Ezekiel tried to pick one up, it would crumble into dust through his fingers. Completely lifeless.

The Lord asks him a very strange question, "*Son of man, can these bones live?*" Ezekiel knew that once death came it was supposed to be final. Once life was gone, it wasn't coming back. But instead of answering the question as we would assume, Ezekiel turns it back, "*Lord, you know.*"

Then the Lord tells Ezekiel his plan. He tells Ezekiel, "Prophecy" or speak to the bones and tell them exactly what I am going to do to them. Speaking about the bones God says, "*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.*"

So, Ezekiel does what God tells him to do. And when he does there's a rattling noise as the jumbled mess of bones come together. Like a body jigsaw puzzle, picture a bunch of skeletons being pieced together piece-by-piece, bone-to-bone. And then, just as the Lord had said it would happen, tendons soon connect and flesh appears filling out the bones. Once that was completed skin spreads over them to cover the flesh beneath. They looked life-like.

But there was no breath or life in them. These bodies were still lifeless.

The Lord tells Ezekiel to prophesy again. Make no mistake who gives life. And again the Lord fulfills what he said he would do: breath enters, life is given. The bodies stand up on their feet—a vast army. Don't think of this as an army of zombies or the undead. The lifeless had been given life.

But this isn't just a cool story or dream that Ezekiel was having. This is the message that The Lord wants Ezekiel to share with God's people. Ezekiel had a difficult job. God sends Ezekiel to the people of Israel to warn them to change or else. Because of their many sins, because they worshipped false gods, because they did not do as God had commanded them, they were going to be sent into exile. They would be ripped out of their homes and deported to a strange land among strange people. And that's what happens. Over-confident in themselves the Israelites had ignored the warnings of the prophet Ezekiel and kept living in their sins. They believed that as long as they had Jerusalem and the temple they were more-or-less invincible!

But then the warnings became reality. The Babylonians came. They ripped the people out of their homes and deported them to the area of what is modern-day Iraq. Jerusalem lay in ruin and the temple was destroyed. Those bones in the valley, the Lord says, are the people of Israel. They saw what had happened and were crying out that their hope was gone. They were cut off. God had abandoned them, forgotten his promises, and all was lost. As a nation they were lifeless; as good as dried bones.

Do you ever feel like you are those lifeless dry bones? Can you relate to the people of Israel feeling cut off with all hope gone? You may not have been ripped out of your home recently, but a loss of a loved one can feel like they were ripped out your life. You may not be forced to live in a strange place but it can feel like a strange place when the kids aren't listening, mom and dad just don't seem to get it, and another argument has taken place between you and the ones you love. Your city and temple aren't laying in ruin but sometimes life seems to be in shambles. You fight to get ahead but more piles on. You fight against the old pains and new ones come along. Sickness wears you out more and makes you feel your age. Carefully laid out plans for life have been scattered and all but ruined. You aren't a literal pile of bones, but sometimes it feels like you are just floating along in life, going through motions with little purpose or drive, just taking up space. Especially now with COVID-19 it can start to feel this way even more. No, we may not face the same exact problems as the Israelites but the faith of all of God's children is constantly under attack. Either it's by overconfidence—thinking you are fine when you are not—or despair—believing that there is little to no hope.

To his people, to you, the Lord speaks these words. He has not forgotten or abandoned you. You are still his people. Yes, they were unfaithful chasing after love for themselves and other false gods. But the one true God, the Sovereign Lord remains faithful. As he had shown to Ezekiel with the bones, he would do the same for the nation of Israel. He would raise this dead nation and bring it back to their land. He would not leave them to rot. Notice the Lord says: **I will, I will, I will**. It has nothing to do with the Israelites. This is God's promise that he will fulfill. And we know that God fulfills this promise. He brings his people back and from this group of people comes our Savior Jesus.

Take comfort because though we have been unfaithful to God chasing after the idols of money, work, status, peace in the family, and so many more, God remains faithful. He speaks his promises to you: I will do this for you.

But why does he need to? Because, by nature, Paul says in Ephesians 2: *you were dead in your transgressions and sins*. There is no spark of goodness, not a hint of light, nothing that is not corrupted and rotting. It sounds harsh and something that should be left to only age appropriate groups. But this is the cold, hard, truth. Lifeless we were unable to do anything that actually pleases God, is pleasing to him, deserving nothing except being cut off with no hope. This is the truth for everyone! The cute, pink-cheeked, innocent looking baby is dead in transgressions and sin. The growing toddler and child: sinners who by nature are lifeless. The teenager with so much potential in life: as filled with life as a bunch of dry bones. From the hard-working mother to the always working father: still by nature unable to work to please God. The kind grandma and grandpa: not pleasing in God's sight on their own. You and me: lifeless. The only proof we need of this truth is the fact that people of all ages, all backgrounds, all walks of life, the seemingly good to the morally corrupt—in the end we will all die. The

wages—the consequences, the payment, the result—of sin is death. Death that cuts us off from life making you what you were already by nature: lifeless.

Lifeless bones are not able to give themselves life. Lifeless by nature because of sin we are unable, incapable of bringing ourselves life. You must be given life. So that's what God does. It wasn't a special power that Ezekiel had that brought those bones together and gave them life. It wasn't the bones own desire, accepting the words he spoke or choosing to become human again. It was God using Ezekiel as his mouth-piece, working through the spoken Word that gives life to the lifeless.

It is God and God alone who works through his Word and gives you life. This life doesn't come from some good within you—we were those bones: unable to help ourselves, lifeless, dead in our sins. The life doesn't come from you deciding it's time to become alive for Jesus! No, it's because God did not leave you to rot in the grave. You are his people. As he would not abandon Israel he does not abandon you. He sent his Son Jesus who met face-to-face with death at the grave of his friend Lazarus. But death has no power here in the face of the almighty God. Jesus is the resurrection and life and shows how he is when he raises a lifeless, empty corpse back to life.

It's that same Jesus who goes to the cross and experiences death itself for you. On that cross your sins died with Jesus and were buried with his lifeless body in that tomb. But death could not contain him. On the third day Jesus was raised to life again leaving your sins buried in the grave so they do not follow after you. Jesus is the resurrection and the life who guarantees that you who believe in him will live even though you will die. Death is falling asleep for God's people where you will wake with him in heaven. Whoever lives and believes in Jesus will never die.

By faith this eternal life is already your personal possession. As God worked through his prophet Ezekiel he worked through pastors and teachers to speak to you his life-giving Word. He put his Spirit in you in the waters of baptism which gives life to the lifeless. By such simple means you have been made new. You were darkness; now you are light. You were dead, and now you are alive in Christ.

Yes, as we wait for the end there will be struggles and difficulties for God's people; times when you feel cut off and abandoned. But, as Paul said in Romans, *our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us*. For God's people death is not the end. At death the hope for eternal life becomes our reality. As we inch closer to Calvary to our Savior's death on the cross remember that is not that end of the story. Sin was defeated on that cross. Death lost its sting at the empty tomb. And life is given to the lifeless. Amen.