

Can These Bones Live?

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14

**By Pastor John H. Noordhof
Williamsburg Christian Reformed Church**

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People of God: A gruesome scene is presented before us in this vision of Ezekiel. It's a dismal scene of death. No dignity of burial. Instead, a valley full of human bones baked white and dry on the desert floor. The vultures had finished their work and the hot sun had bleached the bones that remained. A valley of dry bones.

It's a sad commentary upon human history that we can easily imagine what this scene must have been like. Because we have seen pictures of the mass graves of Auschwitz. We've seen the killing fields of Cambodia, with bones and skulls stretching to the horizon. We've seen pictures of the Rwandan genocide. We've seen the wreckage of the Twin Towers, where the remains of nearly 3000 people became dust. These pictures are not just in our history books, they are on our newscasts. Images of mass death.

Can these bones live? The Lord asks Ezekiel that question. In this vision of Ezekiel, we see this valley of dry bones and know that it represents death in all its finality and horror. Can these bones live? Can the bodies coming out of the ovens at Auschwitz live again? Can the pieces of people buried at Ground Zero re-assemble and return back to a normal life?

Of course not. From a human perspective, our answer would be a resounding no. We cannot bring people back from the dead. Not even with the wonders of modern medicine. We can easily cause death. But once death happens, nothing we can do can reverse it.

Can these bones live? As Ezekiel stood there, taking in that gruesome scene, he must have surely thought to himself: Of course, not. But since it is God who asks this question, Ezekiel is wise enough not to provide the obvious answer. He answers, "O Sovereign Lord, you alone know." Ezekiel

has seen enough of God's actions to know that all things are possible with God. Only God can give life to dead bones.

After all, it is God who gave life to them in the first place. It is God who gave life to humanity at the very beginning. In Genesis 2:7, in the creation of man, we read: *the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being*. At the very beginning, God took the dust of the earth and formed man by breathing into him, the breath of life. Human life is only possible because of divine inbreathing. The breath of God gives life.

That's true not just for the beginning of humanity, it's true for all human life. It's true for every human being born into this world, whether Christian or not. We are all given the breath of life from God. Many people do not recognize this fact. Many think we are here by chance, or through some mindless process of evolution. But it is God who gives us life. Thankfully, we can see this life all around us. The breath of life.

What a contrast to this valley of dry bones Ezekiel sees. Here we have the opposite. Here we have death. Not just physical death. Also spiritual death. As verses 11-14 indicate, this valley of dry bones describes the spiritual condition of God's people at the time of Ezekiel. It was a time when God's people were in exile. Jerusalem, the city of God, and the temple, the dwelling place of God, were destroyed. God's people had become the living dead. Their life was sucked away from them. They were like this valley of dry bones.

It's like humanity apart from God. Sure there is some life left. Humanity is busy in the creation. But what are the actions of sinful man producing? A creation groaning under the burden of sin and evil. Where human diseases like cancer, AIDS and malaria end human life prematurely; where suicide bombings are a regular part of life in Iraq and Afghanistan; where the debt of Greece threatens the Euro, and the world economy.

Add to that the genocides: Auschwitz, the killing fields of Cambodia, Rwanda, the Sudan. Sinful humanity has created plenty of valleys of dry bones. Sinful humanity is a valley a dry bones.

What is true at a corporate level, among nations and people, is also true at a personal, individual level. Apart from the grace of God, we are spiritually dead. Left to our own devices, we would be just be a set dry, dead bones. Outwardly, we might seem to have life—able to enjoy some of wonders and pleasures of this creation. But a life, apart from God, is like becoming this valley of dry bones.

Can these bones live? Not by human means. But with God all things are possible. As God breathed into us the breath of life in the first place, God

can breath into us the new life we need after being infected with the virus called sin.

Can these bones live? Not by human means. But by divine means. God brings life to this valley of dry bones. How does God do this? It was a two-step method. First, Ezekiel is called to preach to these dry bones.

I don't know what Ezekiel thought when he heard that. As a preacher, I would wonder the sanity of what I would be doing. Can you imagine preaching to dry bones? Ah, bones, listen to what I have to say. You are going to come together. You're going to be reattached, fitted with tendons, flesh and skin. The breath of life will enter you. Then you'll know who is the Lord. Imagine saying that to a bunch of lifeless bones. A little crazy isn't it?

But maybe it's not as crazy or rare as might think. Some suggest that preachers do it all the time. We preach to the dead. Oh, not the physical dead in the graveyard. But to the spiritually dead, sitting in the pew. After all, apart from the grace of God, we would all be spiritually dead. Because of the effects of sin, we need new life brought into us. And one of the ways, God does this is through the preaching of Word.

The preaching of Ezekiel is the first step. It is life giving. In II Timothy 3:16, when Paul describes the Word of God, he describes it as God-breathed. It is through the preaching of the Word of God that we are woken up from our deadness in our sin.

But the preaching of the Word is only the first step. A second step is required. When Ezekiel preached the bones came together. Tendons and flesh appeared. And skin covered them. But there was no breath. There was no life. So Ezekiel was told to preach to the breath and to call the breath of life to enter into them. He did. Breath came and entered these bodies and they became alive. A repeat of Genesis 2. As God gave the breath of life in the beginning, so now the breath of life re-enters these dry bones.

Breath. It is a word repeatedly used in these verses. The Hebrew word for breath is *ruah*. Ruah can be translated as breath but also Spirit and even as wind. So when these words appear throughout this passage—and they appear many times, they are all the same word. It is from the context that you determine whether it is best to translate it as wind, breath or Spirit.

What it means is that when we read about the breath entering into these dry bones, we must think of more than just air entering in, we must think of the Spirit entering in. The Spirit is the breath of God that gives life to dry bones.

That's why the preaching of the Word is not enough. It is the first step. But in itself, it is not enough. The Spirit must take that Word to revive the soul. To lead us to repentance and forgiveness. To lead us to faith and

obedience. The God-breathed Word and the life-giving Spirit work hand in hand to give us the breath of life.

This is the message of hope given to God's people in the days of Ezekiel. In verses 11-14, God applies this vision to his people. They may feel as if they are dead, as if they are like these dry bones. But God says to them, he will revive them. He will put his Breath, His Spirit, in them and they will live. They will be restored and live once again as God's people in the Promised Land.

On the day of Pentecost, in which God's Spirit descended upon all of God's people, this promise in Ezekiel reached its complete fulfillment. Because at Pentecost the Spirit came upon the church, breathing into God's people new life.

In John 20:22, we have an interesting description of what Pentecost is all about. It was the evening of Easter, the day of Resurrection. Jesus appeared to his disciples huddled behind locked doors. Jesus offers them God's peace and sends them into the world. Then we read in verse 22: *And with that he (Jesus) breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit.*

Jesus breathes new life in us through the Holy Spirit. That's what we celebrate on this day. Through indwelling presence of the Spirit, we have new life. A life free from the burden and condemnation of sin. A life free from the prospect of eternal death. A life freed to serve the Lord with our whole being.

Pentecost is about the breathing of new life that is needed by every single human being. We need new life because our lives have been affected by sin.

Can these bones live? Can this body and who I am really and truly live? Can who you are truly live? In Ezekiel 37, it is God who asks the question. He also ends up answering it. Can these bones live? Yes, they can. And God shows it by bringing those dry bones back to life.

In the beginning, God breathed into man the breath of life. And though sin has caused humanity to become the living dead, dry bones, Jesus breathes on us so that we can receive the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of life. That's what we celebrate on this Day of Pentecost.

Can these bones live? Are you alive in Christ? It doesn't matter how dead to God you may have been, it doesn't matter how often you got drunk or what kind of illegal drugs you took, you can be given new life through the Spirit and put aside those deeds of darkness. It doesn't matter how long you have neglected to attend worship or to read from the Bible, you can be given new life in the Spirit, filled then with the desire to worship and read the Word of God. It doesn't matter if you just been going through life, not really focused on God, you can be given new life in the Spirit, eagerly willing to

serve in his Kingdom. Can these bones live? Through the breath of the Spirit, you certainly can.

That's true not just of individuals, but also of the community of faith. Remember that in this vision of Ezekiel, the application is given to the whole people of God. They were in exile because of their sin. They had become a valley of dry bones. But God gave them new life.

After the death of Jesus, the disciples lost all sense of purpose and hope. They hid behind locked doors. But with Pentecost and the breath of the Spirit, the church became bold. The disciples preached the good news of Jesus Christ out in the open. Pentecost breathed new life into the church.

Can these bones live? Sometimes, an institution can forget the heart of its mission. The church can neglect the call to preach the good news of Jesus; sometimes because debates about minor, insignificant things saps our time and energy; sometimes because scandal as we've seen in the Catholic Church exposes rot within the church; sometimes because in the push for certain causes, the central message of Jesus is neglected; sometimes because routine and custom just settle in—for a variety of reasons, the question can become: Can these bones live?

We certainly can. Indeed, God makes sure his church, his people, is equipped and empowered by the Spirit. The Spirit breathes into the church new life. And we can demonstrate that new life through such programs as Love South Dundas, VBS, and all the other programs the church is involved in. We can show that new life in how we pray and care for one another. We can show that new life in how we seek first the Kingdom of God.

Can these bones live? Through the Spirit, they certainly can. Amen.