

HOPE FROM HOPELESSNESS

1 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, “Prophecy 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, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, 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 prophecy 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.’”

This is a vision, not an historical event. It happened while the people of Judah were already in exile in Babylon and the descendants of the people of the northern tribes had been in exile for a long time—more than a hundred years. The Jews of Judah didn't think that they had any hope. But God had promised that they would return. He had spoken it through Jeremiah, and this was carried further along by Daniel, and now it was time for Ezekiel to speak up and give the people hope as well. This vision was a promise of hope from hopelessness.

The Lord didn't just show Ezekiel a vision. He picked him up and dropped him into the middle of it. And the vision changes along the way, so that in the beginning the bones are in this valley, scattered and unburied as if defiled, left there in the sun to rot and bleach after a terrible battle, but later on, God talks about the bodies as men who have died but who have also been buried and are going to come out of their graves. Sometimes visions are like that: a part of a vision only serves the vision for a while, but then it has to change as the vision progresses and the message is explained.

God calls the prophet “Son of man,” which is a reminder of our humanity, and it introduced a question to be looked at from a human point of view: Can these bones live? Ezekiel had to answer, “You alone know that, Lord.”

But God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy or preach to the bones. At this point, the message from God carries our minds back to the days of creation, when God spoke and things came into being. God formed man from dust, and he formed woman from one of man’s bones, but these things did not come to life until God breathed the breath of life into them.

So first, the Lord had Ezekiel speak to the dry bones, and then something happened. There was a sound, and our translation says it was a “rattling sound.” That’s a good translation if the point of view is the bones and what was happening to them as they began to come together, rejoining bone to bone. And in the vision, this was a miraculous event that could only have been accomplished by God.

When I was at Northwestern College, my science professor, Professor Bode, gave us a test once on the bones of the human body. The adult body has a little over 200 bones, and he had all of the bones of a skeleton spread out on tables with numbers, and he gave us sheets of paper numbered 1 to 200, and we had to name them all. But naming them and putting them together correctly are two different things. But imagine putting together a thousand, or ten thousand, complete skeletons that were jumbled together out in a valley somewhere. And the miraculous part is getting all of one guy’s bones correctly into his body, so that all of my ribs are still my ribs, and all of your ribs are still yours, and so on. I passed my science final, but God was showing us just how perfect and powerful he is—think of this same thing happening on the Last Day, when it will happen again, not just to ten thousand, but to ten thousand billion, or whatever the final total of the world’s population over the course of all of human history combined.

But I said that the sound could have been something else. That’s because this word, **ra’ash**, often means the rushing, shaking sound of an earthquake, like the sound the apostles heard at Pentecost. That rushing sound was like “the blowing of a violent or powerful wind” (Acts 2:2). This reminds us of the power of the Holy Spirit, because the same word in Hebrew is used for “breath,” “spirit,” and “wind,” even though those are three different things. But each one means an unseen thing that has power and is moving.

The bones came together. The tendons came together—the tendons attach bones to muscle; when you eat a chicken, that’s the soft part you can’t chew and don’t want to swallow. Then the muscles came together, the body’s system of ropes and pulleys that make your arms and legs work. Ezekiel doesn’t mention the organs and blood vessels and lymph system; he doesn’t need to. We get the idea. The correct innards of each of those thousand or ten thousand skeletons were reformed, replaced, re-stretched, and ready to start working once again. And over it all, the skin^a came together, the body’s largest organ of all, covering them so that they looked human once again.

^a In my original manuscript, this was misspelled “sin.” The irony deserves a mention!

Then the command came to prophesy to the breath, and the breath entered into each one of them, just as God has breathed the breath of life into Adam and Eve in the beginning. And in the vision, they came alive. The whole vast army stood up on their feet.

How much had each of those bodies participated in this resurrection? Not a bit. Not one little bit. This is a picture of spiritual restoration, conversion; it's what happens at baptism. What was spiritually dead is brought to life through no power of its own, but just as life is given from God, so also faith, spiritual life, is given from God through the preaching of the word and the work of the gospel.

Now the vision changes, as we noticed before. God talks about them coming out of their graves, even though in the first part of the vision there were no graves. But now God is speaking to lifeless Israel in captivity in Babylon. Your spiritual deadness will change. You will be brought back to faith, The dry bones stood for the deadness of Israel's faith and the hopelessness of their captivity.

When the nation of Israel came back from the captivity (not long after this vision was given to Ezekiel), there was no resurrection of those who had died in exile. In fact, not even everyone came back who had gone away. Long after the return, Esther and her uncle Mordecai and many other Jews were still in Persia, and remained there. So the resurrection here is a reminder of our physical resurrection, but the vision isn't primarily about the physical resurrection. It's about spiritual resurrection, the coming of faith, like it came at Pentecost, which comes through the preaching of the Word of God to ears that are dead to faith, bodies that are lost in the corruption of sin, hearts and souls that are condemned to everlasting death.

The physical resurrection will come. You and I will be brought out of our graves or wherever our bodies will lie, and whether bones or ashes or dust, we will live once again in flesh that is perfect, flesh that resembles our bodies here on earth, but which is so glorious and so perfect that it will be like comparing a Christmas bulb or a small candle to the light of the sun.

Imagine, just for the moment, the state of your conscience. Think of the sins that trouble you, the failures of the past, the laws broken, the rules ignored, the Commandments of God that condemn every part of your life and mine. But by the power of Jesus' death and resurrection, all of that is scrubbed clean so that no guilt remains. We will have not even one tiny crumb of shame left in our hearts. We will be so different in our consciences that it will be exactly like everything else in the resurrection: We will have gone from death to life. From shame to glory. From guilt to perfect and everlasting innocence.

When you hear the wind blow, or your husband snore, or the rattling of sticks, or the creaking undercarriage of your car, or a child's toy, remember Ezekiel's vision and God's promise. Our God gives hope from hopelessness, life from death, and faith through the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord. That is God's glorious gift to you. Share it with the people you love. Amen.