

Ezekiel 37:1-14
The Festival of Pentecost
Finding Freedom in Forgiveness
Hear the Word of the LORD

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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.’”

About six hundred years before our Savior Jesus died and rose, one of His prophets named Ezekiel was living with the children of Israel in Babylon where they had been carried into captivity. Now, when the Babylonians conquered Israel it didn't all happen in one fell swoop. At first, only the king, his soldiers and advisors, and the Jewish nobility were carried off—men like Daniel and his three friends who would be of benefit to the Babylonian empire. The common people were left behind. Many, both of those who had been taken captive and those left behind, held out hope. While Jerusalem stood, there was a chance—small though it might be—that the new king, could lead an army to rescue them. Even greater still, for a faithful few, was the hope that while the Lord's temple remained in Jerusalem it stood as testimony, as it had since their father Solomon built it, that God would not abandon His people.

In 586 BC Jerusalem fell. The walls were broken down, the city was plundered, the temple of the LORD was ransacked and demolished. For the exiled Israelites, this was a huge blow; it felt like the wind had been knocked out of them. In verse 11 of our text from Ezekiel 37 we get a sense of how the exiles were feeling. “This is what they say,” God tells us, **Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off** from our land and our God.

For many of them that was true. They had been cut off from their land. They had been cut off from God, because they had forsaken Him and had rebelled against Him with lives of their sinfulness and depravity, so He had handed them over to King Nebuchadnezzar and allowed them to be taken into exile. Perhaps you don't fall into that category—those who have rejected God and consequently have been cut off from Him! But we do all rebel against Him, each time we act out in sin, don't we? Then, Satan uses the guilt of those sins to drive us away from Jesus and His gospel and to try to get us to feel and to cry out like the exiles, "My hope is gone! I am cut off!" If that happens to you, if you've felt that way or if you feel that way... you're wrong! God's message to His people through Ezekiel was that He had the power to restore them, from Babylon to Israel, from spiritual apathy to vigorous faith, even from death to life. That's what He does through His Gospel of forgiveness!

More likely though, you find yourselves not in the seemingly hopeless despair of those exiles who had rejected God and were reaping the punishment they deserved, but rather burdened by the kind of despair that was being experienced by Ezekiel and the other faithful exiles. "My job is to share God's Word with these people—these people who were so wicked and rebellious against the LORD that our nation has fallen, and we have been carried off into exile?" It seems to me that Ezekiel's despair came less from the question of whether there was any hope for him and more from the fear that there may no longer be any hope for his people.

Can we really put ourselves in Ezekiel's shoes? Has our nation fallen? We haven't been hauled out of our homes and carried in chains into exile by foreign invaders. But has our nation fallen? America stands. The freedoms and liberties which for centuries have allowed God's church to flourish in this country remain largely intact to this day. But, each day, we also see and hear things that discourage us, don't we? Immorality, greed, violence, profanity, idolatry, and every other form of godlessness are present all around us. "My job is to share Jesus with these people?" Can there really be any hope for them?

Ezekiel records for us what God did for him when he had those thoughts running through his mind. **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. 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. He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"**

There is no shortage today of movies or television shows that have skeletons, zombies, Frankenstein monsters or all sorts of other not-quite-dead creatures. But that's not real, is it? That's only on TV. If we went out to the field here and found a couple of dead bodies and I asked you, "Can these bodies live?" you might check for vitals—breath or a heartbeat—but finding none, what answer do you suppose you would give me? If a person is dead; they're dead. They cannot live, right? The valley that Ezekiel was taken to was filled, not with bodies, but with bones—bones that weren't even skeletons anymore but were dried up and disconnected. **Can these bones live,** God asked him. And while a negative response wouldn't have been surprising for anyone to hear, Ezekiel's answer is different. He shows faith in the unlimited power of God. **Sovereign LORD,** he said, **You alone know.** If it is your will to give them life again, then who am I to say you cannot do it?

Then God told Ezekiel to preach to the bones in the valley and tell them, **Dry bones, hear the Word of the LORD! I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. 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.**

So Ezekiel did as the LORD had commanded him and everything God had said came true. The bones came together and tendons, flesh, and skin appeared on them and covered them. God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath and he did; and the breath came and filled them with life and they stood before him a vast army of people.

Then God said, **these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ 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. Then you, My people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. 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.’**

600 years later, another group of prophets was gathered together in a room in Jerusalem. Around them was a city filled with thousands of people. What hope remained for those people? Those Jews who had taken Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, the promised Messiah and handed Him over to the Romans to be brutalized and crucified. “My job is to witness Christ to these people?” What hope could there be for them? But Jesus had told these apostles of His to go to those very same spiritually dead people and make disciples of them, bringing them from spiritual death to life in much the same way that Ezekiel had done with the valley of dry bones, by standing before them and prophesying, **Hear the Word of the LORD.**

On Pentecost, those disciples heard a sound like the rushing of a loud wind, the powerful breath of the life-giving Spirit, they saw a visible sign of His presence with them as tongues of flame that came listed above their heads, and then they went and did just that, proclaiming to the people gathered in Jerusalem, **Hear the Word of the Lord.** And hear it they did, each one of them in their own native tongues heard the message of the law and the gospel preached to them that day. We heard the beginning part of their message already this morning, I’d like to share a little more with you from later in Acts 2: ²² **Jesus of Nazareth, Peter explained, was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through Him, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross. ²⁴ But God raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him.... ³⁶ let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.... ³⁸ Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (That breath which gives life even to the dead.) ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call”.... ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day (Acts 2).**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as you look at the evil of the world around you, of your own people in your own country, do not despair: “There’s too much wickedness, what can I do, there’s no hope for these people!” There was wickedness already when God sent out His apostles, there was wickedness at the time of the prophets, but He used them, none-the-less, to accomplish great things for His kingdom! The LORD your God stands next to you in this valley or wherever you are, and He asks you, “My child, can these dry bones live? Can these people around you find freedom in forgiveness as you have?” The temptation will be to say, “No. The wickedness around me is too great. What could possibly be done, what could I do to bring life to these people.” Do not despair or give in to that temptation, look to those ancestors of our faith

and heed their examples: Ezekiel, who put his trust in God's limitless power and said, **LORD, You alone know**; Samuel, who came when God called him and said, **Speak, LORD, for Your servant is listening** (I Samuel 3:10); Isaiah who eagerly answered God's call saying, **Here am I, LORD, send me!** (Isaiah 6:8); Peter and the apostles who boldly proclaimed the forgiveness of sin through faith in Jesus as the Savior. Look to God Himself, for His direction in what to do.

"Go," the LORD answers, "prophesy to the bones—the spiritually dead and the spiritually weak around you. Tell them, 'hear the Word of the LORD!'" What was true for Ezekiel, Samuel, and Isaiah, what was true for Peter and the others on Pentecost, will be true for you as well. There *is* hope for the people God is sending us to, if they hear the Word of the Lord. As you answer God's call to proclaim His Word to captive souls, arming yourselves against the captor with the armor of God and the Sword of the Spirit—with Jesus and His gospel—you will be victorious. God will send His breath of life into the hearts of those people and bring the freedom of life to the dead through His message of forgiveness.

Pentecost is one of our most celebrated days in the Church because it is, in essence, the birthday of the Christian Church. Today, we celebrate the success of the message preached by Peter and the Twelve, and generations of those who followed them. Today, we celebrate the spread of that message through Judea, and Samaria and to ends of the earth. Today, we celebrate our crucified, risen, and ascended Lord and Savior, who has called us to take our place in His Church and to share in its glorious purpose and who sends us His Spirit, the Breath of Life, to strengthen and invigorate us to that end.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Your faithful people, and kindle in us the fire of Your love.

Amen.