

Good News for Dead Men (and Women too!)

Here's a question I would like you to think about this morning. Have you ever been so low that you felt that your life was essentially over, that all hope was gone? I know for a fact that some of you have been there. Death took the one you loved more than life itself. A broken engagement left your heart desolate. Unfaithfulness and divorce devastated your home. Someone betrayed or otherwise mistreated you to the point that you became the prisoner of bitterness and hate. Your sin caught up with you so that you despised the person looking back at you from your bathroom mirror and felt that God could never forgive you. Or perhaps it was a devastating illness or prognosis that put you in that well of despair. It's possible that someone here is at that dark place right now.

The context for our Scripture passage found in Ezekiel 37, is that the whole nation of Israel was at such a point in its existence. The people's crops and flocks had been stolen or destroyed. Their homes had been reduced to rubble. Many of their loved ones had been killed and those who survived had been taken into captivity, enslaved, and/or exiled to foreign countries. All hope was gone.

But then, from among the exiles in Babylon, God called a man to preach, a prophet who would—as it were—light a candle to dispel the darkness. The prophet's name was Ezekiel and he had a vision to share.

Ezekiel 37:1-3 give us the beginning of that vision: *“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?’ I said, ‘Sovereign Lord, you alone know.’”*

We notice several things here. First, we notice that Ezekiel credits his vision to the Lord-- “The hand of the Lord was on me.” Second, we notice that what Ezekiel initially sees is a picture of total annihilation; it is a valley filled with unburied human bones, picked clean of flesh and baked in the sun. Third, we notice that God asks Ezekiel a strange question, *“can these bones live?”* to which Ezekiel responds, *“Sovereign Lord, you alone know.”*

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I love Ezekiel's answer. His reverence for the Lord is absolute. By addressing the Lord as *“Sovereign Lord,”* Ezekiel is saying that the Lord rules over everything and can do anything He pleases. **Ezekiel's God is absolutely unshackled. He is the God of miracles.**

In Ezekiel 37:4, God invites Ezekiel to participate in the miracle He is about to perform: *“Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!’”* When we imagine ourselves in Ezekiel's place, we can feel the absurdity of the situation. Imagine how silly it would feel to be giving commands to a pile of dead bones! If it would be me I'd certainly be looking around to make sure no one else was watching or listening, lest my insanity be discovered.

But, Ezekiel 37:7-8 record Ezekiel's response and the result: *“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. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.”*

But, of course, God wasn't finished yet. Verses 9 & 10 tell the rest of the story: *“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.’”* So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.”

The rest of Ezekiel 37 applies Ezekiel's dry bone vision to the people of Israel. Just when they have been fully persuaded that all hope is gone, God has decided to do a new thing among them. They are like a valley of old dry bones, but God will breathe new life into them and raise them up a great nation once again. For His own name's sake, God will do this miracle.

When we turn our attention from Ezekiel 37 to John 11, we discover another seemingly hopeless situation. Jesus' friend, Lazarus, has died. Lazarus' sisters, Martha and Mary, are devastated. They are also angry at Jesus for not preventing their brother's death. They both accuse Jesus of negligence by saying to Him, *“If you had been here, our brother would not have died.”*

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Besides that, Lazarus has been in the grave four days—a significant amount of time. The NIV Study Bible text note says: *“Many Jews believed that the soul remained near the body for three days after death in the hope of returning to it. If this idea was in the minds of these people, they obviously thought that all hope was gone—Lazarus was irrevocably dead.”*

In other words, Lazarus was as dead as the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision. And, no one at the tomb of Lazarus, except Jesus, held out any hope that anything could change. Wise in the ways of the world, everyone knew that death was final. Maybe there was an after life and maybe there wasn't but one thing was for sure, they would never see Lazarus alive in this world again.

John 11:35 says, *“Jesus wept.”* When we read all of John 11, we certainly know that Jesus didn't weep because He was sad. He knew all along that Lazarus' death and Martha and Mary's grief were not final. He knew all along what He was going to do and what the results would be. No, Jesus wept for the spiritual blindness of the mourners and for the spiritual blindness of His friends Martha and Mary. He wept because they believed He had failed them. Jesus wept because although He knew they loved Him, they did not yet realize fully Who He was.

And that insight also has relevance to us, doesn't it? I mean how far does our faith in Jesus take us—especially in those low moments in our lives? Do we dare to believe that He and not our circumstances has the final word? Can we find His light in our darkness? Do we believe that He is sovereign, the almighty God? Do we believe that He is the Creator of all Who ever lives to create and to recreate His creation? How big is our God? Does our God match the God we find in the Bible, or is our god too small?

Martha and Mary were good women. They welcomed Jesus into their home and into their lives. They were Jesus' friends. They believed in Jesus. But there was a problem, wasn't there? Their faith, like ours often, didn't go far enough. In the moment of their deepest darkness, it was found lacking and Jesus wept for them and for us.

But here's where we need to see and hear Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus. Jesus asks, *“Where have you laid him?”* You see, we tend to

be protective and secretive about the deepest wounds in our lives. But Jesus, if He is to do us any good, needs to be given access. Our faith is too small so we are afraid to hope. We hide our pain and cover our shame. Yet Jesus says, *“Where have you laid him?”*

So, finally, Jesus approaches the tomb of Lazarus and gives an order: John 37:39 reports His words: *“Take away the stone.”* Can you hear Him saying that to you? I know you don’t want to bring it up again, but it’s time for healing, time for forgiveness, time to let go, time to let My light into the darkness. **It’s time for resurrection.**

Martha is our spokesperson here at the tomb. The rest of John 37:9 reads, *“But, Lord,” said Martha, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”*

Maybe that’s how we feel. Our wound has been with us for so long that it has festered and rotted all the flesh around it. The stench in uncovering it is too odious to fathom. We resist His command to take away the stone. Martha resisted, but finally allowed Jesus to have His way. The stone was removed, the stench let out.

Then Jesus gave another command. This time He spoke as Ezekiel spoke. Ezekiel spoke to dry bones but Jesus spoke to Lazarus. I picture this a little bit like the command given on the old Price Is Right Television Game Show: *“Come on Down!” “Lazarus, come on out!”* And, he did!

Can you imagine the thrill and the chill that came over the crowd that moment? Every hair must have been standing on end! The holy shivers were racing up and down each spine. Every mouth hung open; no intelligible word could be spoken. And then the weeping and the laughter began to be heard together. Awesome cannot half express it. Holy fear dawned upon all who were close enough to see. Jesus is the Christ, Holy God made flesh—standing and ruling among us. Not even death can ignore His command.

Then a further command is given, this one directed to the audience: In verse 44, Jesus says, *“Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”* I think there are two reasons Jesus commands this. One, He wanted the people to know it was for real. He wanted them to touch Lazarus, to feel the life in his limbs, to see the expression on his face. It was an

experience they would never forget. The second reason Jesus told them to untie Lazarus was to give a lasting reminder that we Christians are charged with helping one another out of bondage. We are midwives of the new birth in others. Jesus gives new life but we must nurture and reinforce it. We encourage one another in the healing and deliverance Jesus brings into our lives. We guard one another lest the Devil steal what the Lord has given. This command is a reminder that: **We all need one another to survive.**

Finally this morning, we look to Paul’s words found in the eighth chapter of Romans. I would have you notice especially verses 10 & 11: *“. . . if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of His Spirit who lives in you.”*

Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones and the resurrection of Lazarus, though fascinating and awe-inspiring may seem very far away. We may wonder about their relevance for us today. But here’s the good news. The One Who gives life to dry bones and calls Lazarus forth from his tomb, actually lives inside every true follower of Jesus Christ. The same Spirit that raised Lazarus, and Jesus, too, from the dead is living in everyone who has received Jesus into their lives as personal Lord and Savior. Because this is so there is nothing now that can defeat us. As Paul says in Romans 8:37, *“we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”*

Everyone who knows the Spirit must learn to call upon Him in every need. But, if you don’t yet know His presence within you, then I say ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. Ask God the Father through God the Son to send the Holy Spirit into your life, open the door and let Him in. The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead will live and reign in you. If you’ll give your life to Him there is nothing too difficult for Him to do for you.

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**Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:17-27,
Romans 8:6-11**

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