

“Can these dry bones live?”
Ezekiel 37:1-14

Ezekiel's message comes to the nation of Israel at a time of great confusion, political complexity and unrest. That is because at this time, Israel had already been taken into exile by the Babylonians and have been there for a significant amount of time. His prophecy was aimed at a people, a community, who were forcibly removed from their home, but more than simply addressing the issues of their physical hardships, those issues that affect their current physical reality, Ezekiel's prophecy deals with a people, a community, who have broken faith with their God. And of course Ezekiel makes the reason for the exile clear. It is because of the faithlessness of the people towards God and their continued failure to live as God's renewed humanity. Over and over again Israel has been warned about the coming judgement of God, they have been called to worship Him and no other god, they have been constantly called to repentance and they have not responded nor have they heeded God's warning to them through the prophets... and now, more or less 5 years into the Babylonian exile, Israel is facing the consequences of their unfaithfulness.

Understandably at this point in time, the nation of Israel is feeling completely hopeless, completely helpless and simply forgotten by their God. This prophetic image that Ezekiel uses is vitally important, both for the nation of Israel there and then but I want to suggest that it is vitally important for you and me here and now. Why? Because it highlights two very specific things: The human condition and the grace of God.

Israel's current situation, this human condition, their anxiety, their helplessness and their hopelessness is represented here by this valley of dry bones. The image itself is that of the aftermath of a great battle in which many people had fallen, a battle which took place sometime ago, and what's left, if we look at this outside of God's great power and grace, is an utterly hopeless situation where there can be no survivors, no hope of resuscitation, no hope that some will live and thus it's not simply the bodies of the fallen laying within the valley but the dry bones of the fallen. It is a symbol for the consequences of God's ultimate judgement upon his unfaithful people and what that separation from God could feel like. Their current situation is not because God is trying to spite them, it is not because God wants to play some kind of practical joke on them, it is not because God is unfaithful or unsympathetic towards His people. It is because of this human condition, which they had chosen, that they found themselves under God's judgment. We too, because of this human condition, as part of the human race, can so easily find ourselves in this valley, facing the hopeless, helpless and forgotten emotions. I am sure that we have all, at one point or another in this life, felt like we were in some kind of exile. We have those moments in life where we feel like we have been forgotten by the Lord, times where we feel the pressure of life is building up around us to the point where it seems like there is no hope, where it feels like we are completely helpless and alone. It sometimes feels like there is no life in these bones, as if they were dry.

But hear the words of the Lord, from His own mouth, a self-declaration of His own character in Joel 2, **“He is (that is the Lord is) gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love...”** And God, as this prophecy continues, demonstrates this in the most profound and awe-inspiring way, calling to mind Man's creation in Genesis 2. This is not creation but rather re-creation or maybe, if you prefer the term, restoration of God's people. **“Son of man, can these bones live?”** Now you tell me, if you were in Ezekiel's shoes, standing in this valley and all around you were the dry bones of a past battle, what would your answer be? More than likely it would be an emphatic no, maybe we would choose the same answer as Ezekiel in that, ‘well I'm not entirely sure, but maybe you'd know if they can or not’. Let me tell you, these bones can surely live. This is the grace of God at work in the lives of His people, those who are called by His name.

The Lord tells Ezekiel to prophesy to these bones, an action that at the face of it makes no sense whatsoever because they are inanimate, there is no life in them, yet Ezekiel obeys the Lord and behold, they began to move... tendon and flesh appeared on them, skin covered them and wow... what a sight that must have been... but no wait, the Lord does not simply leave it there. What good would it do if that was the last of this incredible vision? Partial restoration? No, God again commands Ezekiel to prophesy, now not to the bones but to the breath. The Hebrew term here is *ruach* literally meaning breath, wind or Spirit. The same term is used in Genesis 1:1-2, **“In the beginning God created**

the heavens and the Earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God (the *ruach* of God) was hovering over the water." The very Spirit of God, present at the moment of creation, is the very Spirit that entered God's people as He restored them in Ezekiel's vision, it is this same Spirit of God that came upon God's people at Pentecost, and that same Spirit that indwells each of us.

You see, each one of us have to deal with this human condition. This condition that, when left unchecked, leads to dire consequences. It will lead us to an eternal separation from God, it leads us to judgement and condemnation, a life outside of God's great grace... it amounts to one simple verse, Romans 6:23, "**The wages (or the consequences) of sin is death**". But the Lord asks, "Can these bones live?" The Lord, as 2 Peter tells us, does not want "**anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.**" He is calling, wanting us to answer Him, wanting us to receive Him... He wants to bring us out of that valley, to bring us out of our graves from death into life not simply as partial restoration, but into life eternal. The question is how will we respond? In faith, the same way as Ezekiel responded to the Lord's command, or will we remain in that valley? Will we accept God's call, or will we run from it? Will we accept life, or will we settle for death? The choice is yours.

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