

Bones Holding Bibles

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We know from Scripture that Ezekiel was a great prophet who moved mightily in the Spirit. In Ezekiel 37, God gave him a vision that I believe holds a timely message of spiritual awakening for the dry church of today.

Like most Old Testament prophets, Ezekiel served Israel's king. This often meant traveling with the king's army and having to witness the horrors of war. Ezekiel saw a lot of carnage no person should ever have to see. Yet soon he would behold a vision that would surpass anything he'd seen before. This vision would be from the Holy Spirit — and Ezekiel testifies, "The hand of the Lord was upon me" (Ezekiel 37:1).

In this life, we're going to witness a lot of difficult things. Several weeks ago I prayed with a mother who lost her 22-year-old son, who had died suddenly — a young man I'd known since he was two. Year after year, I see marriages fall apart. I see drug addiction destroying young lives in their prime. As I drive to my office each day, I think of the 80 percent of our city's population who don't know Jesus.

When God created humankind, we were never meant to experience the sinful things that befall us. Yet, even being witnesses to tragedy, we rest in God's hand as Ezekiel did — and the Bible says no power can pluck us from it. This truth has to be established in our hearts. If we are to do battle with the dark forces that come against our families, our young people and our communities, we have to know we are constantly protected and watched over.

God told Ezekiel, "Sit down and behold what I want to show you."

The Lord told him, "I am about to perform an amazing work — yet you won't be able to grasp it with your human understanding. You need my Spirit to reveal to you what I am going to do."

The Hebrew word for "sit down" in Ezekiel 37 is the same word found in Luke 24:49, when Jesus instructed his disciples, "Stay [sit down] in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." The meaning in both instances is, "Lay down your plans and strategies. Then wait on me to fill you with my power."

I'm convinced the church today desperately needs to hear this word. How often do we plan seminars, concerts and conferences for the year — events that won't make a difference unless Christ breathes life into them? Only when the Holy Spirit fills us will we have something real to give.

In the vision God showed Ezekiel, he led the prophet into a valley filled with dry bones. "(He) set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many...and...they were very dry" (Ezekiel 37:1-2). What an awful scene — a vast stretch filled with skeletons as far as Ezekiel could see.

Maybe like Ezekiel you've wondered, "God, all I can see before me are difficult things. Why are you leading me through this dark valley?" It is because in the valley of dry bones, there is no other source of life. We have no breath of our own there, no power or strength. The valley of death brings us to a place of total dependency. I've had one of the hardest years of my life in 2013 — yet, looking back, I thank God for every moment of it. Amidst all of my life's dry bones, I see that God had orchestrated a place where my life ends and his life begins.

The valley of dry bones in Ezekiel's vision reveals two things to us: **First, it represents the condition of God's people.** I love Christ's church. I can't study enough about it or pray enough over it. It is God's greatest vessel on earth to express his nature and show his power.

But I also have a burden for the church. And today many churches are filled with dry bones. This isn't a criticism — it is what it is, a reality. As Christians, we can grow dry before we know it. Jesus put it this way: "I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first" (Revelation 2:4). We can go through the motions yet inside have no life at all.

The second thing I see revealed in Ezekiel's vision of dry bones is our culture. At one time we were a nation

that honored God. Seventy percent of Americans once professed Christ and attended church. The latest statistics show that number is now eight percent. This describes the condition we're living amidst — one of spiritual darkness. We reside in a valley of dry bones.

How can a dry-bones church — one that's lifeless, prayerless, lukewarm — ever speak to a dry-bones culture? It can't happen unless our spirits are revived, awakened by the Holy Spirit.

God asked Ezekiel, "Son of man, can these bones live?" (Ezekiel 37:3).

What a penetrating question. God asks the same of us today: "Can the dry bones in your situation come to life? Can your rebellious child be revived? Can your unsaved loved ones be brought to Christ? Can schools be so filled with my breath that they are radically changed?"

It's a question of faith: "Do you believe this can happen?" It's also a question of desire: "Do you want this to happen? Are you grieved by the dry bones in your life?" If your answer is no, that's a sign of dryness — a lack of spiritual unction over the dark condition of the world.

Here was Ezekiel's answer: "O Lord God, you know" (37:3). This was a response of trust: "Lord, only you know these things. You've given me a vision of horrific death. Are you suggesting these bones can live? Is it really possible?" The very question had aroused Ezekiel's faith. It was what God was waiting to hear. And he does the same with us to arouse our faith.

"Then he said to me, 'Prophesy over these dry bones'" (37:4). Once our faith is engaged — once we've waited on God and he has stirred our faith — he calls us to action. He asks us to "prophesy" — that is, to address our dry — bones situation in faith. We're to speak life into our families, believing God empowers our words. We're to speak life on our jobs, knowing God holds us in his hand no matter how dark the environment. To do this, first God has to breathe his life into our being: "Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live" (37:6).

God did just that for Ezekiel. The prophet testifies, "So I prophesied, as I was commanded" (37:7). Can you say this about your walk with God? "I spoke blessings and peace into people's lives. I also said difficult things. I said everything the Lord wanted me to say, and through it all I knew he was with me." That is the power of the proclamation of the gospel.

What happened when Ezekiel prophesied in faith? "There was a sound, and behold, a rattling" (37:7). The word "sound" here echoes Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit breathed new life into the disciples at Pentecost. Ezekiel witnessed something similar: Suddenly, all the dry bones on the valley floor were animated, filled with life. They came together to form living bodies: "I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord" (37:6).

Even as the bones miraculously came together, there still was no life in them.

"I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them" (Ezekiel 37:8). What a tragic scene. I think of so many churches that have every program and strategy in place — but not the life. So many of us have seminars, conferences, books, websites, CDs, podcasts; meetings for men, for women, for moms, for dads, for children, for teenagers, for singles, for marrieds. We mean all of these things for good — but unless God's Spirit breathes into them, they are for naught.

In fact, these things have the subtle power to rob us of the life God desires for us. As we go through the motions of church, we're deceived into thinking we are spiritual. It may look like dry bones are hooking together, but in reality they lack the life-breath of God. I would trade 1,000 worship services and 10,000 strategies for a single breath from his Spirit. Only God can breathe life into what we do — *that these dry bones might live*.

"Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath'" (37:9). The Hebrew word for "breath" here is *ruach*, meaning the Spirit of God. Once again God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy. The first time he was to prophesy to bones, meaning people. But this second command is to prophesy to God himself — to *ruach*, the Holy Spirit.

What is God saying in this verse? He's telling us that preaching to each other isn't enough. Articulating doctrine isn't enough. **We can't just speak to man about the things of God. We also have to speak to God about man, with a burden for man** — to beseech God to act. God calls for men and women of faith to cry out for him to enter

their situation and change things. Only a move of God's Holy Spirit can bring life. Our eyes can't see, our ears can't hear, our mouths can't speak anything of him unless he first animates us.

When he does this, the results amaze us: "I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and (the bones) lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army" (37:10). God's breath brings us to our feet with boldness. The same thing happened in Acts 2: "Peter, standing with the eleven" (2:14). The gospel that Peter proclaimed at Pentecost was no different from the gospel he knew. Now he stood up and spoke it with power from on high.

That is the life God is poised to breathe into us — the kind that brings dry bones alive, that brings life to a darkened, despairing environment. At the beginning of this message I mentioned the 22-year-old who died suddenly. His funeral was terribly sad. Yet that same week, my wife, Kelly, and I met with the young man's girlfriend, who had discovered his body. As we prayed for the young woman, life entered her. She stopped us in mid-prayer to cry, "Oh, I feel goodness inside. I feel better!" We had the privilege of leading her to the Lord.

Out of chaos, Jesus produces life. Out of ashes, he produces beauty. And into a horrific situation that the enemy means only for destruction, Jesus breathes new life.

Have you grown cold in your walk with the Lord? Wait on him, asking him to once again breathe his Spirit into you. Are there lost people in your life who need salvation? Pray and prophesy that God will breathe life into their dry bones. He awaits your response of faith.

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