

August 6, 2023
Getting Out of Death Valley!
Ezekiel 37:1-14

Sometimes we find ourselves in “interesting” places, emotionally, spiritually, even physically. Life doesn’t go as planned. Unexpectedly, we lurch from crisis to crisis. Accidents happen. Or we wake up one morning and realize we’re vaguely discontent, anxious, or angry. We may feel like we’re lost in life, in our relationships, in our walk with God; we don’t know where to turn. Is there any way forward? Any hope?

The prophet Ezekiel is in such a place. He and many Jews are in exile in Babylon. People go through the motions of religion, but it is empty. They talk about God, but it’s only talk, no action. The rich get richer; the poor get poorer. Businesspeople, political leaders, and religious leaders are dishonest and cheat their own people. They have “hard hearts,” “stubborn hearts,” “sick hearts.” There is no compassion. No justice. No integrity. No mercy. No love.

Ezekiel has a vision of God abandoning the Temple in Jerusalem. God has left the building. He’s left His people. Where’s God when life hurts? When you’re in the darkest valley? Is there anything hope? Any future?

37:1 "The LORD took hold of me, and I was carried away by the Spirit of the LORD to a valley filled with bones. 2 He led me all around among the bones that covered the valley floor. They were scattered everywhere across the ground and were completely dried out. 3 Then he asked me, 'Son of man, can these bones become living people again?'"

"O Sovereign LORD," Ezekiel replies, "you alone know the answer to that."

Then God says to Ezekiel, *4 "Speak a prophetic message to these bones and say, 'Dry bones, listen to the word of the LORD! 5 This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Look! I am going to put breath into you and make you live again! 6 I will put flesh and muscles on you and cover you with skin. I will put breath into you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'"*

God – the Sovereign Lord – CAN bring life, even in the dead places. *"I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart" (36:26).*

God CAN put His breath, His Spirit, into us and make us alive again.

Like Ezekiel, we can find ourselves in hard places. We wonder if there is any hope. We ask, “Where’s God when life hurts?” Can these bones become living people again? Personally, I can feel that way. As a church, we can feel that way. Is there any way forward? Is there any hope?

God promises Ezekiel, *"I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart"* (36:26). God can give us new life as well. Is that for real? Can God actually do that?

Jesus says, *"If you love me, obey my commandments. I will ask the Father, and he will give you an Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth... He lives with you now and later will be in you"* (John 14:15-17). God's personal presence will be within us.

In Acts 2, at Pentecost, we see the fulfillment of this promise: *"Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit ..."* (Acts 2:2-4). God's personal presence will be within us.

Paul writes, *"We know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love"* (Romans 5:5). In his great chapter on the Holy Spirit, Romans 8, Paul adds, *"You received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, 'Abba, Father.' For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm we are God's children"* (Romans 8:15-16). God's personal presence is within us.

As I pray about this passage, I keep asking God, what are **some of the areas where I, personally, feel "dead"**? My annoyance about crisis after crisis? My frustrations with unanswered prayers? My anger and stress with some of the things in my news feed?

I need the Spirit to breathe life into my soul, mind, and heart again. Can God do that? Can He help me deal with my anger, frustration, and disappointment? Absolutely. Unfortunately, He doesn't always "fix" all my problems. But His presence is within me. When I ask Him for patience, grace, and strength to carry on, inevitably He does so.

What are **some of the areas where church feels "dead"**?

Jesus talks about dead bones in Matthew 23, as He is speaking to the religious people of his day, Pharisees and teachers of the law. These are the church-y people. They were great at teaching the letter of the law. They taught the authority of Scripture. They were the culture warriors of their day. They wanted to "religious-ize" their nation and see their beliefs become the law of the land. Wonderful. Right?

To these religious folks, Jesus says, seven times, *"What sorrow awaits you ..."* (other translations say, *"Woe to you ..."*). Look at Matthew 23:27-28 *"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs – beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with **dead people's bones** and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness."*

As in Ezekiel's day, religious people talk a lot about the Law. But they don't live out God's love and grace. Religion has become twisted into a legalism that spiritually kills people. A faith that should bring love, joy, grace, welcome, mercy, hope, peace, and compassion becomes judgment, anger, intolerance, discrimination, and death.

Interestingly, when Jesus does have opportunity to enforce the law and punish a woman caught in sin – a serious sin, adultery – He doesn't jump on that bandwagon. Instead of bending down to pick up a **rock** to stone her, He challenges her accusers, "*Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone*" (John 8:1-7).

Later, when Jesus does bend down to pick up something, it's a **basin** and **towel** to wash His disciples' dirty feet. "*Since I have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you*" (John 13:14-15). One pundit says, "*It's hard to throw stones when you're busy washing feet.*"

What is our faith in Jesus all about? According to a recent survey of young adults who had left the church, 32% said they did so because church members "seemed too judgmental or hypocritical." 29% said they "didn't feel connected at church." The study cites several specific reasons Millennials, younger adults, stop attending church:

1. Irrelevance, Hypocrisy, and Moral Failure

We need the Spirit to breathe into us a counterculture of integrity and grace. It's a bit strange to call things like integrity and grace countercultural (even within the context of church culture), but they are. Jesus said that it would be by our fruit that people would recognize us. If we live lives of integrity and grace with each other and outsiders, our church will become a magnet, not a repellant.

2. God Is Missing in the Church

People go to church looking for God, but they can have difficulty finding him. Instead, they find politics, anger, culture wars, judgment, and outrage. We need the Spirit to breathe new life into us, so people find God – His love, mercy, compassion, and care.

3. Legitimate Doubt Is Prohibited

We need the Spirit to breathe into us grace so we can have honest conversations.

4. They're not Finding Community

Despite a growing epidemic of loneliness, only 10% of young adults report finding genuine community at church. We need the Spirit to give us eyes to see and ears to hear people – especially the new people – among us. One of the reasons behind the explosive growth of the 1st Century church was the way they loved each other and the world. Love – community – should be a defining characteristic of the local church. Nobody should be able to out-community the local church. Again, Jesus is our example. If we loved the way Jesus loved, people would line up out the church doors.

God CAN do miracles

Ezekiel goes on, ^{37:7} *"I spoke this message, just as he told me. Suddenly as I spoke, there was a rattling noise all across the valley. The bones of each body came together and attached themselves as complete skeletons. ⁸ Then as I watched, muscles and flesh formed over the bones. Then skin formed to cover their bodies, but they still had no breath in them."* God said, "⁹*Speak a prophetic message to the winds, son of man. Speak a prophetic message and say, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, O breath, from the four winds! Breathe into these dead bodies so they may live again.'"*

"So I spoke the message as he commanded me, and breath came into their bodies. They all came to life and stood up on their feet—a great army." (37:10)

God says, ¹¹*"These bones represent my people. They are saying, 'We have become old, dry bones—all hope is gone. Our nation is finished.'* ¹²*Prophesy to them and say, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I will open your graves of exile and cause you to rise again. Then I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ When this happens, O my people, you will know that I am the LORD. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live again and return home to your own land."* This will all take time.

When we pray to God, the answers may take time, too. Often things don't change with one prayer. Or the snap of a finger. Or even overnight. Or even over a week, a month, or a year. It's a process. It takes time. When you break a bone (let alone become dead bones), it's a weeks long process of healing. Even when the bone heals, it takes more weeks of physio to get back your strength and range of motion.

"I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you," God says. *"I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart"* (36:26).

When we pray about the dead places in our lives, or our church, it all can take time, too. We pray. We believe. We need patience. We keep the faith. We stay patient. We step forward in faith. God CAN bring life back into even the most dead, dry bones, but it's a process. It takes time.

In the meantime, *"Let the Holy Spirit guide your lives ... The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control ... Since we are living by the Spirit, let's follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives"* (Galatians 5:16-25). How can I let the Spirit guide my life? How can I follow the Spirit's leading in every part of my life? Not sure? When in doubt, just live with a little more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That's a great start.