

Can These Dry Bones Live?

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (NIV84)

¹ The hand of the LORD was upon 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, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy 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, "Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, 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 whole house 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: O 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.' "

What do you think of when you hear the name "God the Holy Spirit?" Do you have a clear picture in your head of who this is, or is it really fuzzy, like some kind of ethereal being that you can't quite picture?

The Holy Spirit is probably the least "photogenic" of the Triune God. God the Father, you can picture him. He looks like an old man with a big grey beard, grey locks of hair, and a white robe. God the Son, we have all those pictures of the Jesus with the brown hair and a beard, blue eyes, and a slight smile letting you know that everything is all right. But the Holy Spirit? What does that look like? Does he look like a ghost? Would I be scared if I could properly imagine his presence?

And what does the Holy Spirit do? We used to call him the Holy Ghost. Is he meant to scare me or something? I know that God the Father created the world and created me, that's an easy job description. I know that God the Son fulfilled the role of substitute by obeying God's laws perfectly for me, dying for me, and rising from the dead. But this Holy Spirit guy, he's kind of hard to pin down.

Today we celebrate the Day of Pentecost, and it's a day to see what the Holy Spirit can and does do. What the Holy Spirit can do starts with this vision given to the prophet Ezekiel. "The hand of the LORD was upon 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." (verses 1-2)

What are these bones that were very dry? Thankfully, we don't have to go around guessing at what this vision of the valley of dry bones means. The Spirit of the LORD tells Ezekiel, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.'" (verse 11) Why are these bones so dry? What hope is gone? What are they cut off from?

Ezekiel was one of many Jews to be whisked away off to Babylon around 600 B.C. before the destruction of Jerusalem. Although the Babylonians had not torn Jerusalem's walls down brick by brick yet, the writing was on the wall. It was going to happen. This was the end for the Jews. The Jews put their trust in the dynasty of King David. They were told by prophets long before Ezekiel that the scepter would not depart from the tribe of Judah, the tribe David is from. From David's lineage, a king would come who would rule forever. He would conquer nations and vanquish foes.

No matter how bad things got, the Jews would look to this promise and their hope would live. But now look at things. They were taken from their promised land. The king of Judah, David's descendant, couldn't protect them now. Before long they would hear the truth that Jerusalem is destroyed and there is no longer a king from David's family sitting on the throne. The loss of the king meant that the promise God had made to send a Savior King could no longer be fulfilled. Their hope was completely dead, completely dried out, no hope for resuscitation.

When does our hope in the LORD die? When does our hope resemble those dry bones in the valley that Ezekiel was looking at – bones completely devoid of even a chance to live?

When prayers for healing, for relief of suffering, for finding work or for providence go unanswered, it's like our hope dies a little bit. I wanted God to take care of this, but he's not. As more pain, more suffering, more bad gets piled into my life and the lives of those around me, I'm wondering if God is ever going to make good on his promises. The less I see him answering and acting upon my prayers, the more I move away from him. I separate myself from God and his Word. I cut myself off from the only thing that can nourish my hope in him.

Just as the body needs nourishment to live, so does our hope in the LORD. Our hope needs to be filled much like our stomach does, we just notice the spiritual hunger less quickly than we notice our physical hunger. Or think of our hope as a fire that needs to be fed. Pull a coal or a timber from a fire, and what's going to happen to it? The flames will grow smaller and smaller, the embers glow less and less until the coal or timber is no longer burning. That's what happens to us when we remove ourselves from the fire of the Holy Spirit, from the word of the LORD that he works through. The longer we are removed from the Word of the LORD, the colder our hope glows until it dies and dries out, just like these bones that Ezekiel saw. Our faith dies and dries out when we separate ourselves from Word of the LORD.

"Can these bones live?" the Spirit of the LORD asked Ezekiel. Put a skeleton in the ER and tell them to help you, to make this person live again, and you are going to get some strange looks and probably be asked to leave, thinking that you are pranking them. Any doctor looking at these dry bones in the valley, any person looking at them, knows that these cannot come back to life.

But Ezekiel's hope is not completely extinguished. He answers the Holy Spirit, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know." (verse 3) Then the Spirit of the LORD said to Ezekiel, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!'" (verse 4) Ezekiel preached and the impossible happened. The bones came together. Tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them. What was completely dead now has bones and flesh and sinews. These bones are now bodies.

But the Holy Spirit is not done. He told Ezekiel to prophesy again, this time to the breath. "So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army." (verse 10) The dry bones that were completely devoid of life are now living.

As much as we immediately want to think that this is a picture of the LORD's promise to raise all the dead back to life, this is not what this means here. The Holy Spirit is raising something else from the dead for us. He is not opening literal graves for the Israelites, but he is bringing the sure and certain hope of salvation for his people back from the dead.

The kingly line was gone. Their hope in the Messiah who would save them was gone. It was dead as they felt the punishment for their sin. Now the Spirit of the LORD is telling Ezekiel to tell them, "You will return. I will bring you back to the land of Israel where I said I would fulfill my promise of sending a Savior for you. I will settle you there. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live. (verse 14) Your hope will live." "Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD." (verse 14)

The Word of the LORD that Ezekiel prophesied brought what was completely dead and devoid of life – these dry bones – back to life. When they had no hope, no possibility of salvation, their hope was made alive again by the Holy Spirit. God would still do what he said. They would be saved. The Messiah would come. They had reason to rejoice even as Jerusalem fell and the king from David's line was exiled. Their hope in the LORD lives!

When our hope is dead, deader than these dry bones in the valley, the Holy Spirit can bring our hope back to life. He resurrects our hope in him as our Lord and Savior by his Word. When my plans have failed and all my best strategic thinking gets me nowhere, the LORD says, "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11) When dementia takes the mind of my loved one, the Word of the LORD says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) Jesus himself said in our Gospel reading, "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:26-27) Our hope lives again after being made alive by the Word of the LORD.

I don't know if you are a dry bone today or not or if your hope in the LORD is dwindling, dying. If you are, if your hope in the LORD is dead, if you are being tempted to let your hope in the LORD die and stop feeding yourself with the Word of the LORD, then listen to what the Holy Spirit does. He comes to you through the Word, through all the sermons preached, through the Bible stories we teach, these hymns that we sing, the Bible we read at home. He gives you these promises specifically for these times when your hope in the LORD is dead or dying. The Holy Spirit gives these to you to raise your hope in the LORD back to life, to trust in him that he will make good on his promises and that he will save us even when it seems impossible.

Search the Word of the LORD for his promises to us. As you do, the fire of the Holy Spirit will rekindle your faith. He can and does bring it back from the brink of death and even when it is well past that point, to the point of being a dry bone, the Holy Spirit makes our hope live. Will these dry bones live? By the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of the LORD, yes! Amen.

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