

Hope to a Hopeless People

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (NIV)

¹ 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. 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, "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, breath, from the four winds 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 people 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: 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.' "

The LORD gives Ezekiel a vision, and it's pretty grim. "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." (verses 1-2) The LORD asked Ezekiel, "Son of man, can these bones live?" (verse 3a) The answer seems pretty obvious. They're very dry bones, been decomposing for at least a month, maybe years. They're going to turn to dust. There's no hope for life in this valley of corpses.

The LORD explains what Ezekiel is looking at: "Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.'" (verse 11) This vision was given some time after 586 B.C. while Ezekiel was living in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem's walls had been broken down. The temple was looted and smashed. No more sacrifices or offerings were made. Their worship halted. The holy city was nothing but a pile of rubble. What hope did the people have now that God would still fulfill his promises to them? How would the Messiah come if their temple was destroyed and they were exiled from the Promised Land? The people sunk into a deep depression, thinking that God had abandoned them, that their life had no purpose, no worth, no hope.

Most of us, if not all of us, have not experienced exile from our homeland due to war, but I think we can understand depression and hopelessness. Depression is more than just having moments of grief or sadness. It's a perpetual sadness that you can't really figure out why you have it, and, medically speaking, it lasts longer than 2 weeks. One person described their depression this way: "Depression's like being trapped in a snow globe. I swim at first, wanting to get out and fight. I hear people tapping on the outside of the glass trying to free me. But, eventually the cold and numbness take over. The taps faint as I drift toward the bottom, cold and empty. I can't lift my feet to trudge through the snow and water. Who can I talk to about depression? No one. I'll stay alone." (Jess Holland. <https://finds.life.church/can-talk-depression-part-1/>)

I've never been officially diagnosed with depression, but I know that I've had extended periods of time of sadness in my life where I couldn't break out of the funk and didn't exactly know why it was happening. Most recently, it was this past fall. And my depression was rather specific to my profession. I had a happy home life. Loved being with my family. Been working out very consistently, eating a little healthier. My personal devotion life, time in God's Word, was strong; I didn't just read God's Word to prepare for things here at church. Things were okay at church. We were doing better than surviving. People here were supportive of me. Admittedly, I was frustrated over what was happening with COVID and how we had to respond, but that wasn't the source of my depression. It got to the point, though, where I honestly considered what I would need to do to change careers. Maybe you've been in the same place.

Different things for different people bring on depression, things like lack of control for one. This has been exacerbated by COVID because we had so many mandates and rules put into place in our lives that we have had no control over. We couldn't control getting sick or how people acted, reacted, or talked about the situation. Lack of control led to lack of purpose, that I couldn't do anything to really affect change, make life better for others. Feeling a bit useless, we isolated ourselves, kept people at an arm's length because we knew that we weren't happy and didn't want to be a drag on their lives and we didn't want to let on that

something was wrong with me. Without purpose or worth and being all alone, the desire to escape grew. That's where the suicidal ideation starts. Give me a way out! The thought enters: If I end my life, maybe the suffering, the isolation, the burden would all stop.

Those ideations, those thoughts, are Satan's lies. He wants you to believe that running away, isolating yourself, will make things better. But the truth is that it won't solve the problem; just delays dealing with it, often compounding it because now you have cut off the people who can support you while you are alone. Satan wants you to believe that your life has no purpose, meaning, or worth because then you will entertain ending it, thinking that it makes no difference, and might actually free people from you being a burden on their lives. He wants you to believe that death is your friend. The truth is that death is your enemy, the one Christ came to destroy. If you harm yourself, you will hurt people so much more deeply than the hurt you feel right now and the survivors may have just as hard of a time coping with your suicide as you do with your hopelessness. Satan only wants pain and suffering for you. He cares nothing for you. He will tell you anything to nudge you farther down a path of dark depression.

We are not immune to Satan's attacks. Christians can be depressed. We're broken people living in a broken world. Elijah, Jeremiah, Jonah, and other believers in the Bible expressed their depression and suicidal thoughts. Are we better than them? Do we just need to toughen up and pull ourselves out of our depression, stop talking about our feelings? What does God say?

In a valley of hopelessly dead corpses, the LORD asked Ezekiel, "Son of man, can these bones live?" [Ezekiel] said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know." (verse 3) Ezekiel knew that with the LORD, there was hope in the midst of hopelessness. Then LORD said to Ezekiel, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. 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.'" (verses 4-6) "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 LORD gave life to these hopeless, dry bones, and brought them back to life!

It's not really a picture of the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day, but a moment of spiritual resurrection, a resurrection of hope. The LORD said, "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.'" (verse 14) It was a renewal of his promise to bring them back to the Promised Land so that the Messiah would still come and save them from their sins. God the Holy Spirit gave life to their dead hope.

That same Holy Spirit has raised to life hope in us. When we were conceived, when our lives began, they began spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins. But, motivated by grace, undeserved love for us, God the Holy Spirit made us spiritually alive through the means of grace – through the message of how God loved us first, gave up his one and only Son who lived perfectly for us and then sacrificed himself on the cross to take away all our sins – including the times we believed Satan's lies and entertained ending our lives. He resurrected spiritual life in you, just as he did for these Israelites in Ezekiel's day, just as he did with the 3,000 people on the Day of Pentecost who were added to the number of believers through Peter's preaching of God's Word and baptism.

For the person listening who is currently fighting depression, maybe even thinking about ending their life, here's what God says to you: Satan wants you to believe that no one cares about you, but it's a lie. God cares about you. He cared about you enough to make you, to give you all that you have from your daily breath to your clothes to your home to your food to your family to your friends. He didn't wait for you to get your life together, but loved you first, promising before you were ever created that he would crush Satan and his lies, deliver you from eternal death and give you eternal life with him. God came for you. Jesus lived for you, keeping all of God's commands with you in mind, every second of every day. He died for you so that all your sins would be taken away, forgotten, never brought up again. He rose from the dead for you so that you would know that this perfect and everlasting life is yours by what he has done for you. That's how much God cares about you. And then he put a guy up here on a Sunday morning to tell you that he too cares about you. No matter who you are, you have at least 2 people caring about you and probably many more than you realize.

So, talk to God who care about you. Express yourself, your thoughts, your feelings, to him. He knows your heart and mind. He'll get you, get what you're suffering. Send those dark thoughts to hell because God loves you and cares for you always. Talk to a trusted friend. Understand that wrestling with these thoughts and ideas does not have a quick fix. You will have dark days, but light comes in the morning. Jesus is that Light, the Light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome. Nothing can separate you from the love and care that God has for you. He promises that one day your depression and suicidal thoughts will end, and he always keeps his promises.

For the people holding in their depression and suicidal ideation: I know that there are some of you who probably think that this is not something we talk about in church. You look around, and everyone pretty much looks put together. So, I must be the only one wrestling with this. We need to change this mindset. Yes, we're always going to try to put our best foot forward, always going to try to look put together. I don't think anyone noticed last fall that I was depressed about being a pastor. We can hide this well. But I talked to people: my wife, trusted friends. We shared God's Word. We prayed. I got good advice. It took time, but it was worth it to talk about it.

For those hearing that someone is depressed and has contemplated suicide: don't freak out. You're not there to give them a pep talk with a bunch of cliché phrases you've heard or fix their depression with one sentence and then move on. They need you to listen, actively listen. Acknowledge and validate what they're going through. Spend time with this person, even if you aren't always talking or giving some kind of a solution. Show them that you care. Pray for them, and, maybe even more importantly, pray with them. Ask God the Holy Spirit to bring them hope in these hopeless situations. Share the God who loved you and them first and continues to do so every day and holds to his promise that nothing can separate you from his love.

There is so much more that can be said for people who feel like they are in a hopeless situation of depression and think that death is a way out. I'm not claiming that this one sermon will fix everyone's depression, including my own. But what I will claim confidently and proudly is that God loves you, cares about you and for you every second of every day. God the Holy Spirit has given you spiritual life. Your sins are forgiven. You are perfect in God. Measure your value in Christ's life. Feelings are temporary, but God and the life he gives is forever. He makes hopelessly dry bones come to life, giving you hope today and for the future. Amen.

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