

# Our Resurrection Hope

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, it's not just my privilege to lead you in worship today, but it's also my privilege! to open God's word with you this morning. You might notice that the passage for today, Ezekiel! 37, is also what George DeVice preached when he was here two years ago. But the beauty of scripture is that, like Abraham Heschel said, it's like a diamond, and as you turn it around in your hand, you see different facets of it. And so hopefully we can see a different facet of this passage from Ezekiel 37 as I preached from it this morning. If you're turning in a pew Bible, it's on page 648 in the Brown Bible or page 857 in the Maroon Pew Bible. If you brought your own, go past Jeremiah, past Lamentations. If you've gotten to Daniel, you've gone too far. I'll be reading Ezekiel 37, 1-14.

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the spirit of the Lord and 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 on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry.

And he said to me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, you know. Then he said to me, Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones, Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinew 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.

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling. And the bones came together, bone to its bone. And 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.

[ 2 : 24 ] Then he said to me, Prophesy to the breath. Prophesy, Son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God, Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live. So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

Then he said to me, Son of man, These bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost. We are indeed cut off.

Therefore prophesy to them, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you to the land of Israel.

And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord. I have spoken.

And I will do it, declares the Lord. Many of us have heard this story before. Many of you, two weeks ago, if you were here.

[ 3 : 53 ] But even if you haven't heard it, you might recognize how odd it is. Ezekiel is spirited away to a valley full of very many, very dry bones.

It all seems a bit dark. But as it progresses, we see, through the work of the Lord, how God can turn this desolate valley full of death into a vision of hope for his people.

This vision of hope stands out even more by digging into a few questions that might come to mind as we read this passage. How did Ezekiel end up here? How did Israel end up here?

Why did God show Ezekiel this vision of a valley full of dry bones? Why were the people of Israel saying their bones were dried, their hope was lost, that they were cut off?

To understand why God's people needed this vision of hope, we need to understand how he came to this point where the Spirit of the Lord whisked Ezekiel away to this valley of dry bones.

[ 4 : 59 ] To answer these questions, we can zoom out and turn back a few pages to understand the larger context that Ezekiel found himself in. This wasn't the first time that the hand of the Lord was

on Ezekiel and that the Spirit brought him somewhere.

The first time the hand of the Lord was on Ezekiel occurs in the very first verses of the book, in Ezekiel 1, 1-3. In the 30th year, in the fourth month, and the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Kabar Canal, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

On the fifth day of the month, it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin, the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel, the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the Kabar Canal, and the hand of the Lord was upon him there.

This passage provides additional contextual clues that help us understand the bigger picture of how Ezekiel found himself in the Valley of Dry Bones. In the first three verses of Ezekiel 1, we find that Ezekiel is in the land of the Chaldeans by the Kabar Canal.

These verses add another detail that allow us to place Ezekiel in the biblical timeline with some help in the book of 2 Kings. It's the 30th year, presumably referring to Ezekiel's age, and it's the fifth year since the exile of King Jehoiachin.

[ 6 : 31 ] The Kabar Canal was in the middle of the Babylonian Empire, far from where Ezekiel was born and raised in and around Jerusalem. And being in exile by the canal was probably very far from what Ezekiel hoped he'd be doing when he was 30.

As a priest, this would have been the age where he had entered temple service. But instead, he was sitting by the Kabar Canal among the exiles. You see, Ezekiel was born, when Ezekiel was born, 30 years before his call to prophetic ministry, it was a little over halfway through the reign of King Josiah.

Bible history nerds might recall that King Josiah was one of the last good kings of Israel. As 2 Kings 22 says, he was the last king who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and walked in all the way of his father David.

To top it off, Ezekiel was born at a very auspicious time. Right around the time he was born, the book of the law had been rediscovered while the temple was being restored.

Although Josiah appeared to be on a good track, when his secretary read him the book of the law, Josiah realized just how in trouble the kingdom of Judah was. He commanded the priests and the secretary to go inquire of the Lord for me and for the people and for all Judah concerning the words that were found in this book.

[ 8 : 05 ] For great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us because our fathers have not obeyed the word of this book to do according to all that is written concerning us.

God's response through the prophetess Huldah probably provided limited comfort to Josiah when his secretary and the priests went to inquire of her.

Although God's wrath would be delayed until after Josiah's lifetime, it would still come. Even though Josiah was doing his part to bring God's people back in the right direction through his religious reforms, he had a long way to get there.

He came in on the heels of the reign of his grandfather Manasseh, the poster child of her doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord. During Manasseh's reign, he had rebuilt the altars to the gods of the people that Israel had displaced when they conquered the Promised Land.

Manasseh and Josiah were polar opposites, and Josiah had his work cut out for him, returning people to the Lord. As commentator Chris Wright has written, it was one thing for Josiah to eradicate idols from high places, but it was another thing to remove idolatry from the hearts and minds of the people.

[ 9 : 26 ] We see this in the prophecies of another prophet who was in Jerusalem around this time, Jeremiah. Jeremiah had already been prophesying for several years by the time Ezekiel was born.

In Jeremiah 7, he calls out the people for breaking the covenant. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, stand in the gate of the Lord's house and proclaim these words.

Eat and say, hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord God of hosts, the God of Israel, amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place.

Do not trust in these deceptive words. This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave your fathers of old forever.

Behold, you trust deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, we are delivered?

[11:05] Only to go on doing all these abominations. Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?

Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. Go now to my place at Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did there because of the evil of my people Israel.

And now, because you have done all of these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke persistently to you, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer.

Therefore, I will do to the place, do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you, and to your fathers, as I did at Shiloh.

And I will cast you from my sight, as I cast all your kinsmen, and all of the offspring of Ephraim. And that's exactly what happened.

[12:09] Thirteen years after the discovery of the book of the law, and the beginning of Josiah's reforms, Josiah was killed in battle against Egypt at Megiddo.

From there, the kings of Judah returned to their previous ways, executing injustice, oppressing the vulnerable, and shedding innocent blood.

After a short period of subservience to Egypt under Jehoahaz, Babylon came onto the scene and brought Judah under its control. From then on, Judah went between times of subservience and times of rebellion against Babylon, until around 598 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar had decided that he had enough, besieged Jerusalem, and carried away Jehoiachin and thousands of other Judeans, including Ezekiel.

Fast forward five years, and you find Ezekiel among the exiles in the land of the Chaldeans by the Kabar-Kanel. But Nebuchadnezzar didn't take away everyone from Jerusalem.

Instead, he replaced Jehoiachin with his uncle Mataniah, and he named him Zedekiah. Meanwhile, Ezekiel prophesied from afar, calling God's people back to obedience to him.

[13:29] But it was of no avail. After, five years after his call to prophetic ministry, and about ten years after the initial exile, Zedekiah rebelled against the Babylonians, and after a year and a half siege, entered Jerusalem, utterly destroyed the temple, and took the remaining people to exile, except the very poorest.

God had done what he said he would do. The land vomited out his people. They were in exile. Instead of trusting in the Lord and obeying him, the people trusted in the temple, the symbol of the Lord's presence.

And they faced the consequences that God had warned his people about many years earlier before they entered the promised land and taken possession of it, when he said to them, If you will not listen to me and will not do all of my commandments, if you spurn my statutes and if your soul abhors my rules so that you will not do all of my commandments but break my covenant, then I will do this to you.

I myself will disappoint you sevenfold for your sins. I will lay your cities waste and will make your sanctuaries desolate and will not smell your pleasing aromas. And I myself will devastate the land so that your enemies who settle in it will be appalled at it.

And I will scatter you among the nations and I will unleash the sword after you. And your land shall be a desolation and your cities shall be a waste. And that's precisely what happened.

[15:02] Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and exiled the people of Judah. We're told that Ezekiel hears about the fall of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 33 when a fugitive from Jerusalem comes and tells him of the city's fall.

And that's at this point that Ezekiel's prophecy transitions from warning and woe to help and hope for God's forlorn people. And that brings us back to Ezekiel 37 and a better understanding of the mindset of God's people at this critical juncture in their history.

Through their disobedience, they had fallen from God's favor and had faced the consequences of their covenant disobedience. But if you're familiar with that passage on covenant curses in Leviticus, you'll know that the last word isn't curse.

Curses are not the final word. The final word is a word of hope, a word of restoration. Hope is something that God's people needed during the time of Ezekiel, and it's something that we continue to need today.

Thankfully, many of us, many Christians today, don't find ourselves in the dire situation that the kingdom of Judah found itself in nearly 2,600 years ago.

[16:25] But there are still things that happen in our lives that tug and tear at our hope. Conflicts all over the world, in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Africa. Senseless killings closer to home, like the one that happened at an enunciation church in Minneapolis.

Not to mention the daily struggles that we face in our lives that remind us that this is not the way the world is supposed to be. All of these things tug and tear at our hope, but we need to remember that the God we believe in, the God that we come here to worship every Sunday morning, is a God stronger than death.

A God who has overcome death.

And that's what we're invited to see through the eyes of Ezekiel in this vision of the valley of the dry bones. This vision comes in a section of Ezekiel so full of hope that several commentators, like Chris Wright and Dan Block, call it the gospel according to Ezekiel.

After 32 chapters of doom and destruction, the prophet's tone changes and his vision shifts to the future. Let's take a closer look.

[17:48] The vision is broken up into three parts. In verses 1 through 6, we get the setup. We see the action happening in verses 7 through 10.

And in verses 11 through 14, we get an explanation and a promise. As I mentioned at the start, this is not the first time that God's hand was on Ezekiel or that he was brought somewhere by the Spirit. And I wonder if that's something that Ezekiel was used to after his five years of prophetic ministry, getting snapped up by the Spirit of the Lord and taken somewhere else.

And what a strange place to be set down, a valley full of dry bones. I wonder what Ezekiel would have thought. Could this be the valley where Josiah had his ill-fated battle with Pharaoh Necho in the army of Egypt?

Perhaps it was one of the many other battlefields from Judah's long history. Two things are certain. There were a lot of bones, and those bones were very dry.

[18:51] The sea must have been stunning and sobering for the prophet. And if it weren't stunning enough, what happened next sure was. God asks Ezekiel a question. Son of man, can these bones live?

Can they live? If you're an outdoorsy person and you've gone on enough hikes, you've probably come across a skeleton before. Now, imagine it's a human skeleton and that it's spread as far as your eyes can see.

And ask yourself this question. Can these bones live? What would you say if you were Ezekiel? Sure, there were times in the past where through God's power, a prophet restored somebody to life that had recently deceased.

But that was on a person-by-person basis. It wasn't an entire valley full of dry bones. Bones scattered all over the ground. It would be a miracle just to get all the bones for a single person back together, much less restored to life.

Ezekiel gives the only response he could. Oh, Lord God, you know. God knows if these bones can live. God's shown Ezekiel a lot to this point, but nothing like this.

[20:06] Not an entire valley full of dry bones that have laid around in the elements until they're completely dry. And, you know, there's various levels of dry, but a passage from Ezekiel 19 helps us really understand what Ezekiel means when he calls these dry.

It uses the same word. But the vine was plucked up in fury, cast down to the ground. The east wind dried up its fruit. They were stripped off and withered.

As for its strong stem, fire consumed it. Now it is planted in the wilderness in a dry and thirsty land. Withered. Completely dry.

Completely lifeless. God knows if these bones can live. And God was just starting. God continues by telling Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones.

To the bones. Can you imagine? This is remarkable. Up to this point, Ezekiel had a live audience. Now God commanded him to speak to bones.

[21:11] And I hope you didn't miss what God said at the very end of his command to Ezekiel when he told him to prophesy to the bones. Then he said to me, prophesy over these bones and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

Thus says the Lord God to these bones, Behold, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live. And I will lay sinew upon you and will cause flesh to come upon you and will cover you in skin and put breath in you and you shall live.

And you shall know that I am the Lord. It's not enough for the vast pile of bones just to be put back together en fleshed and restored to life.

They need to know something. They need to know what they've needed to know since God called them out of Egypt centuries before. They need to know who the Lord is.

They need to know who the one true God Almighty is. But this isn't new to Ezekiel. This is what God has been telling his people through Ezekiel for the last 36 chapters of the book.

[ 22 : 28 ] This is something God will continue to tell his people through Ezekiel on and on and on. And it's not just the people of Israel that God is trying to get this message through to.

It's all of the nations. We see this in the chapters surrounding Ezekiel 37. That through God's mighty power, he wants the nations to know that he is the Lord.

And this shouldn't be a surprise to any of us. This has been the plan from the beginning when God called Abraham out of the nations so that all of the nations would be restored to God through his people.

God had been speaking to his people for centuries, and his stiff-necked, stone-hearted people had not listened. Something needed to change. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

One person was listening, Ezekiel. And he did as God had commanded. So I prophesied as I was commanded.

[ 23 : 30 ] And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling. And the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them. And flesh came upon them, and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, prophesy to the breath. Prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, thus says the Lord God, come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain that they may live.

So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. God does the impossible.

God restores life. Bone connects to bone. Sinew connects to bone. Flesh covers them. Skin covers them. But they need something else.

So God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath. It was one thing to prophesy to something that used to have years. It's another thing to prophesy to something that's never had years at all.

[ 24 : 38 ] But again, Ezekiel does as he's commanded. He prophesies to the breath. And I wonder what it would have sounded like for the breath to enter all of those bodies at the same time.

If that didn't give Ezekiel the chills, I'm sure seeing this exceedingly great army rise to their feet would have. How amazing, how astonishing, that this once vast pile of bones through the power of God stood up an exceedingly great army.

And thankfully, we're not left for very long to wonder who these people are. Then he said to me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel.

Behold, they say, our bones are dried up and our hope is lost. We are indeed cut off. Therefore prophesy and say to them, thus says the Lord God, behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people.

And I will bring you into the land of Israel and you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people.

[ 25 : 54 ] And I will put my spirit within you and you shall live and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord.

I have spoken. I will do it. God's people were at an all-time low. After years of disobedience, God had had enough and the kingdom of Judah faced the consequences of the rebellion.

With the Babylonians as his tool, God had destroyed the temple, devastated Jerusalem, and scattered his people among the nations. And now they were wondering what's next.

How could they possibly come back? How could they possibly be restored? They were as good as dead. They were as good as a vast valley of dry, with their bones.

And God comes to them in this moment. He meets them in their exile and gives them the hope that they need. If you take a closer look at the last couple of verses of this passage, you might notice some parallelism.

[ 27 : 05 ] Twice the promise to restore his people to the land, and twice God states that he will be known through what he's done. Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you into the land of Israel, and you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people.

And I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord.

I have spoken. I will do it. Praise the Lord. I said I was getting ahead of myself earlier. Well, we've gotten there.

God's people needed to change, and it was clear based on their history that this wasn't something that they were going to do themselves. They needed God. They needed a God who could restore them.

They needed a God who could breathe new life into them. They needed God with them, his indwelling spirit. And that's exactly what God was promising to do.

[ 28 : 21 ] His word was as good as done. Ezekiel's hope was for a people restored to their land and restored to their God. We share that same hope, but our hope is even greater.

Ezekiel saw a vision of national resurrection, a restoration of Israel. We have a crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ, the first fruits from the dead.

Those dry bones in the valley heard the voice of Ezekiel. We look forward to when the words of Jesus in John 5 become a reality, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.

For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. and he has given him authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of Man.

Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

[ 29 : 35 ] The resurrection in and of itself is not our hope. In the passage in John, we see that both those who have done evil and those who have done good will rise when they hear Jesus' voice.

It's not the resurrection, but what happens after the resurrection. In Ezekiel 37, the prophet looked forward to the restoration of his people to their land. For us, it's the promise that we hear in Revelation of a new heaven and a new earth and what comes with it.

A restored relationship with God, God's kingdom fully consummated. Restoration to the way things were meant to be before humanity's first rebellion in the garden.

So the story of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones isn't necessarily about the resurrection itself, though it does play a vital role in the development of that idea. The story of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones is about a much more fundamental hope of restoration to God.

Judah had disobeyed the covenant, they had not been loyal to God, and they received the punishment they deserved. Defeat in battle, the destruction of the temple, exile in their land.

[ 30 : 52 ] Judah had turned away from God, and God had turned away from them. But there is more to the story. God promised to turn back to his people, after all, he is a God of steadfast love.

He wasn't just any God, he was their God, and they were his people. And even though his people had turned from him and faced their just punishment, he wouldn't turn away from them forever.

God would not only turn back to them, he would give them what they needed to be near to him. He would send his spirit and plant it deep within them. He would give them new hearts, replacing their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh and a new spirit, his spirit.

And this gift that he promised to his people is his promise to us as well. For those of us here and now, it can be challenging to maintain our hope with wars across the world, uncertainty in the economy, and the loss of friends and loved ones.

There are so many things that can riddle away at our hope. And in times like these, we need stories like the Valley of Dry Bones, stories where God does the impossible, stories that restore our hope.

[ 32 : 09 ] There are some big problems in the world, but our God is bigger. Our God who spoke the world into existence, who breathed life into the very first humans, who took a tiny nation and made it a beacon to the world.

A God who restored a vast valley filled with an army's worth of desolate dry bones through the words of a prophet can surely bring new life to his world and his people.

We have hope because we know that God will do what he says he will do. He has spoken. He will do it.

Let's pray. God of hope, thank you for this vision of hope that you provided to your people through the prophet Ezekiel.

I pray that even in the darkest moments of our lives, through the work of your spirit, our comforter, we might maintain our hope in you. Be near to us in the coming week through all of our joys and challenges we face.

[ 33 : 21 ] Guard and protect us through your spirit and help us maintain our hope that it is only possible through the death and resurrection and the promised return of your son, Jesus Christ.

It's in his name that we pray. Amen.