

Them Dry Bones

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[0:00] Amen. Amen.

Now, if you, for whatever reason, happen to disbelieve, Raymond, that our Old Testament reading is talking about the resurrection, you are about to get a whole sermon on it. This morning, in Ezekiel, we get the vision of the Valley of Dry Bones.

Now, the text, I'm sure, is familiar to most of us. But have any of you, by any chance, ever actually seen a Valley of Dry Bones? Anyone?

Now, I have to admit that I haven't. In 21st century America, we don't really have a whole lot of dryness in much of our country and much of our surroundings. Certainly not here in central New York, where we just finished getting an absurd amount of snow dumped on us, and now we're getting cold rain every day.

And on top of that, I'm guessing that relatively few of us have seen, dry or not, a vast expanse of exposed human bones. Now, considering how much contemporary Americans don't like to think about the reality of death, we would probably think of mounds of dry bones as incredibly distasteful.

[1:51] What is up with all these dry bones? What's that about? Now, I would have to venture to guess that for most of us, the closest we have ever been to a Valley of Dry Bones is having witnessed what is left over after all-you-can-eat wing night.

But, the prophet Ezekiel lived, of course, in a different time and a different place.

He lived in a time when on the surface, things looked really, really hopelessly bad. I mean, think about how the timeline unfolded. Things were relatively good under the reign of King David for Israel.

Although David was an imperfect man and an imperfect king, he was devoted to the one true God, and when he sinned, which he sometimes did grievously, he would repent and he would return to the Lord.

Now, David's son Solomon, who was known for his wisdom, on the one hand, and was David's successor to the throne, was, on the other hand, something of a different sort, wasn't he?

[2:56] He ended up compromising with idolatry, with the worship of false gods. And from Solomon's reign on, things generally went downhill.

The kingdom ended up divided. We see a succession of ungodly, wicked, pagan, unbelieving kings, idolatrous kings.

And then it gets even worse. In come the ungodly Babylonians. And many of God's people are carried up into exile in Babylon, which was an unruly land that was ruled by an ungodly king.

Sorry, an ungodly land, not an unruly land. Now, at this point, things looked pretty bad. This is the context in which we find the prophet Ezekiel having been carried up into exile in Babylon.

We see the ruin that follows idolatry, follows apostasy, follows division, follows exile. Not a good thing, is it? But that is not how the story ends.

[4:12] And if we were tempted to think so, our passage this morning about the valley of dry bones reminds us that God always gets the last word, even when things seem absolutely hopeless.

Always. Think about the significance of the valley of dry bones as it must have appeared to Ezekiel. Certainly to him it must have been a sign of physical, spiritual, national desolation.

God's people had, for the most part, proven unfaithful to their covenant with God. Many of them were in a foreign land. God's people had suffered the unthinkable, subjugation to the ungodly.

And even worse, they realized that it was God's righteous judgment for their unfaithfulness. They're in something of a predicament, aren't they? But, in the midst of despair, in the midst of decay, in the midst of death and desolation, the Lord speaks to the prophet Ezekiel.

Sure, it seems like God's people are hopelessly dead. Sure, the rescue of God's people from their predicament would be just as impossible as the restoration of life to the dead.

[5 : 34] But God is in the business of doing things that appear impossible, isn't he? Ezekiel sees that valley of dry bones.

But what does God say to Ezekiel when he sees it? Let's look at the promises of God, promises of newness of life, and promises of salvation.

Read in chapter 37, beginning in verse 3. He said to me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, you know.

Now, in the natural sense, what do you think? Do dry bones live? No. But can God give life to the dead? I think you already know the answer to that, but if you don't, we're about to see it demonstrated.

Verse 4. Then he said to me, Prophecy 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.

[6 : 46] And 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 know that I am the Lord.

God is telling Ezekiel to prophesy. To prophesy about nothing less than the incredible reality that the Lord can give life to the dead.

He can take dry bones. He can resurrect them. He can take bones, lay sinews upon them, put flesh upon them, cover them with skin, and put the breath of life in them.

How can that be? How do these bones live? I've never seen that happen before my very eyes.

Bones have no power to reconstruct themselves.

That's just not something that happens. With all the knowledge we have of modern science, our best efforts still fall short. We can't bring dead, dry bones to life. How and why can this happen then?

[7 : 47] Because the Lord can do all things. He is determined to demonstrate His power. He is determined to demonstrate His character.

And He is determined to demonstrate His victory in bringing the dead to life. So what does Ezekiel do? It's unimaginable.

Such a demonstration of the power of the Lord may be. He's obedient. He prophesies as the Lord instructed him. What happens next is absolutely amazing.

So I prophesied as the Lord commanded, and as I prophesied, there was a sound. Behold, a rattling. And the bones came together. There, 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. So Ezekiel prophesied, and something amazing happens.

[8 : 49] The dry bones take on sinews, take on flesh, take on skin. Where there were nothing but dry bones before we now see bodies. But it doesn't end there.

We see in verse 9. Then He said to me, prophesy to the breath. Prophecy, 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 to them. And they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. The demonstration that we see here is marvelous.

The Lord God, who created all things through His Word, who created man from the dust, is able through His Word to restore bones to life, to breathe His Spirit into them, give them life again, even after they have returned to dust and bone.

God is not only able to create, He is able to redeem from death. And that is incredible. But what does this vision mean?

[10 : 03] What is it all about? What are these bones? Well, we get the very answer we're looking for to that question in verse 11.

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 clean cut off. So now we see, these bones are God's people. The people of God's covenant. The people of God's promise. And they are not in good shape.

Even the bones themselves, if somehow bones can talk, are saying that all hope is lost. They are dead. Really dead. They are cut off.

But God has an answer to these dead, dry bones, doesn't He? Verse 12, 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.

[11 : 13] 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.

What does God say to His people even when they're dead, even when they're nothing but dry bones, even when hope seems lost? Here's what He says to them.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Not even death, my people, will keep me from keeping my promises to you. I will demonstrate my power in you.

I will raise you from your graves and give you everything that I have promised you. Because I am the Lord, I am the Almighty, and what I say I will do, I will do.

Well, I think that settles it, doesn't it? In the midst of despair, in the midst of hopelessness, the Lord speaks to Ezekiel.

[12 : 13] How could these dry bones not live the Spirit of the Lord, the one whose life itself is being put within them?

How could God not keep His promises to His people when He is able and determined to do it? How can we possibly doubt that God can raise the dead to life and do all that He has promised when He has spoken and He said that that's what He will do?

Can you doubt it and is there anything that can stand in the way? We think about these words in the time and place of the prophet Ezekiel.

Now certainly this promise was for the house of Israel, as the text tells us, in that time and in that place. But I think we would be mistaken to think that it has no meaning for us here and now.

I would venture to say that it means everything to us actually. Because God's faithfulness, God's victory, and God's salvation are everlasting, are they not? The valley of the dry bones speaks to us.

[13 : 31] Maybe not at first glance. We haven't literally been carted off into exile. We aren't confronted with the kind of turmoil that the Israelites experienced.

But, does that mean that we are in a much different place? Looking at our world today as believers, is there any sense in which we can relate?

I actually think that we can. Because we live in a time where in some ways things are looking pretty bad. We don't have to look beyond the news headlines to see that some of our brothers and sisters in Christ are suffering under the oppression of militant Islam and ungodly governments around the world.

People in our world today are being evicted from their homes, are being kidnapped, are being beheaded, and are being burned alive for their commitment to Jesus. Some are, of course, literally being forced into exile.

Some are dying, returning ashes to ashes, dust to dust, because of their faith in Jesus. Looking around the world, it is not an exaggeration to say that there is at least a valley's worth of the bones of those who have given their lives for Jesus.

[14 : 52] Now, for us in the West, we certainly are far from martyrdom, as far as I can tell, but there is a kind of spiritual dryness and death that is settling over us that we need to take seriously.

Secularism is on the rise. There is more open hostility to our Christian faith in the culture and in public discourse than I think we as Christians could have predicted just a few years ago.

And we are faced with some frightening temptations, all rooted, of course, in the temptation to give up and lose hope. Do we try to give in, try to conform to the culture around us and so submit ourselves to a kind of gradual spiritual decay?

Is that what we do? Or do we retreat and circle the wagons, escape into the fortress and put up the drawbridge in hopes that we won't suffer defeat if we go on the defensive?

Do we resign ourselves to acting out of fear and out of despair and letting that direct our witness to a world that needs Jesus? Is that what we do? No. Now, if dry bones can't come to life, if the dead cannot live, if death really reigns supreme, one of those options might make sense to us.

[16 : 15] But can dry bones come to life? Or let's look at our own lives individually for a second. Is this time in Lent reminding you of the depths of your sin?

Reminding you that in and of yourself without Jesus, you were dead and without hope. I hope that it is. And if it's not, we're probably missing the whole point about this Lent thing.

We, of course, kick this time off by remembering that we are dust and will return to dust. Our bodies are decaying. The burden of our sin is greater than we can imagine.

So great that we have no hope of pulling ourselves out of its grip. We look at ourselves. We take a long, hard look and we wonder, can these bones live?

Can these bones live? Not on their own. Not on their own power. But the raising of dead, dry bones to life didn't depend on the bones, did it?

[17 : 24] Our Ezekiel passage should be enough to convince us of that. We live in a world that is full of dry bones. A world that is in captivity.

Not much different than Ezekiel's world, really, is it? And we're talking about a kind of captivity that at the end of the day is much greater than captivity to earthly nations and worldly powers.

It goes deeper than that. As Paul tells us in Ephesians 6, for we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

We're talking about captivity to sin, to death, and to the devil. And how can we hope to stand victorious against that?

Brothers and sisters, there is only one answer to that question, and that is found in the power and promise of God. That is found in what Jesus has done.

[18 : 38] That is found in the power of the Holy Spirit sent into these dead, dry bones that they may live. What is God's promise to his people?

How will he bring their dead, dry bones to life? How can we escape the snare of sin, the grip of death, captivity to the evil one? How do we escape that?

Two words, Jesus Christ. I was preparing for this sermon this week, happened to be reading Martin Luther's great work, The Freedom of a Christian.

And I suspect if you're thinking about going to sin, you'll probably hear a little bit about him as we commemorate the anniversary of the Reformation. But Luther writes really vividly of what Jesus has done for his people, for those who have faith in Jesus.

Luther writes, He shares in the sins, death, sins, death, and pains of hell, which are his brides. As a matter of fact, he makes them his own and acts as if they were his own and as if he himself had sinned.

[19 : 52] He suffered, died, and descended into hell that he might overcome them all. Now since it was such a one who did all this, and death and hell could not swallow him up, these were necessarily swallowed up by him in a mighty duel.

For his righteousness is greater than the sins of all men. His life is stronger than death. His salvation is more invincible than hell. Thus, the believing soul by means of the pledge of its faith is free in Christ, its bridegroom, free from all sins, secure against death and hell, and is endowed with eternal life and the salvation of Christ, its bridegroom.

Luther, I think, said it far better than I could. As a personal aside, not long ago, this praying morning prayer, Mia was next to me on the couch.

I get to the Apostle's Creed, and she looks up from what she's doing, and she says, Daddy, why did Jesus go down into hell? He didn't do anything wrong.

So, my four-year-old asked me that question, and immediately my head fills with all of the ways I could overthink that and over-explain it.

[21 : 24] I thought for a second, I said to her, baby girl, Jesus did that to rescue us, and left it at that.

He died, and he descended to the dead, and he rose again to rescue us. So, what is it that keeps dry bones dead?

The power of sin, the reign of death, captivity to the devil, but Jesus has paid the debt for our sin. Jesus has defeated death.

Jesus has crushed the head of the devil, and trampled all the powers of hell under his feet, and he stands victorious. Do you believe it? The benefits of all he has accomplished are yours through faith in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

This morning, it's your faith in him. And, if our faith is in Christ, we have the promise of the Holy Spirit giving us life, even when our outer man is dying.

[22 : 36] Because even as our outer man is decaying, our inner man is being renewed day by day by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life. And we have the guarantee, because

Jesus is risen, that even if these bodies of ours return to the dust, even if they are reduced to dry bones, Jesus will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body when he comes again.

We will be raised from the dead because death could not hold Jesus, and so it cannot hold captive those who are in Christ. Is that what you believe?

If you believe it so fully that you are willing to give your life everything you have in service to that truth, to live as though it is all that matters, because it is.

Now how we live that out, what our individual call-ins are, the details will differ somewhat between each one of us. But I do know this, the Lord will let you know how he would have you live out your faith in the gospel if you ask him to show you.

This morning, will you do that? We can do that with confidence, because the hope we have in Jesus is certain.

[24:01] We have the promise of the Lord God, the same God who told Ezekiel, I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord. We look at our lives, we look at our culture, we look at the fallen world around us, and it's easy to get discouraged when we see dry bones.

But we have to ask, can these bones live? Yes, only by the power and promise of God. Can these bones live?

Only by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Can these bones live? Yes, only by the power of the Holy Spirit. Can these bones live?

Yes, only through faith in Jesus Christ. These bones can live, and will live. Jesus will have the victory, because He is the resurrection and the life.

And so we have the guarantee that every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father, and we will share in His victory through faith in Him.

[25:07] thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.