

New Life Through the Son of Man

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- [0 : 0 0] Heavenly Father, we come to your word now for guidance, for inspiration, for hope and light.! Please speak to us and lead us in your ways.
- ! And he leads them.
- They're in these dark tunnels. They don't know the way. There is no light whatsoever. And then they hear or sense and smell an evil presence coming towards them.
- And it is a vast spider. And it feels as if all hope has gone. And all lights have gone out. Unfortunately, they have the light of erindiel.
- A light to shine when all the lights have gone out. But where do you look for hope and light when all hope has gone? I guess it depends on the situation, doesn't it? Maybe if there's a health problem coming on, you might think, OK, well, I've heard that bad news, but I'll get a second or a third opinion.
- [1 : 3 2] I'll try that new treatment. With financial problems, you could go cap in hand to an old friend. You could try working four jobs just to get yourself out of a hole.
- In many cases, there may be just a little hope left, even if it's only a dreamer's hope. There may be something we might try just one more time. But what about when all those hopes have been exhausted?
- When the death certificate has been issued? When the bailiffs have evicted you from your house? When that final light of a dimly lit candle is blown out by the breeze and you've no more matches?
- What do you do then when darkness envelops you like a cloak? Well, that's our theme for today. It's fourth Sunday of Advent.
- And for that, we are turning to the book of Ezekiel. I don't know whether you know much about the book of Ezekiel. It's one of the major prophets in the Old Testament.
- [2 : 3 4] And largely for the first 33 chapters or so, Ezekiel's job is to describe God's holy and righteous anger on his own people. It is a hard and brutal read.
- God's people had been wicked and unfaithful. Spiritually speaking, they had been serial adulterers with foreign gods. And unbelievably, even though many of them now were in exile, they showed no sign of humility or repentance.
- So Ezekiel explained that God would come. His warnings over the years would finally be enacted and he would come with severe judgment and holy wrath, even on those who called that he had once called to himself.
- There are an uncomfortable read, those chapters. But whilst the judgments were severe, strangely, as I said, God's people seemed to be unmoved. Ezekiel began his ministry in exile.
- He was one of the first group of people who were taken from the Holy Land into exile in Babylon. And while they were there, this group of people seemed to think, well, it'll be all right.

[3 : 44] After all, we're still alive. And they were. They were largely well treated. They were told to settle down and live out their lives. And they still had this hope that somehow God would come in a miraculous way, as he had done many times before.

There would be a great military reversal, a quick return and everything would be all right again. But in chapter 33, verse 21, that hope died.

A lone survivor makes his way from Israel to Babylon with the horrific news of the complete and utter destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

And that light of hope is blown out. But as hope died and the people started to mourn, something rather extraordinary happens.

All of a sudden, Ezekiel's tone changes. And actually, the remainder of the book is full of hope. Yes, God's judgment has fallen.

[4 : 45] The people had been killed or exiled. The city walls were broken down. The temple had been destroyed. But now, as the time of utter darkness had come, when all hope had been lost, God was on the move again.

And as Ezekiel explains over the coming chapters, the leadership would be renewed.

God would step in again and take charge. The land would be renewed and would flourish once more. And the enemies of God's people, those who had gloated over their destruction, well, they would be brought to account.

And most wonderfully of all, when God's people were returned back to the land, he would come again and make his home amongst them. Everything they thought they had lost would be coming back.

It is a moment of extraordinary hope. Now, as we've seen with some of the other Old Testament prophecies we've looked at over the last few weeks, it's sometimes hard to draw a straight line between the word of prophecy in one single event.

[5 : 52] Because the words of prophecy always have some clear meaning for the first recipients, but they almost always have some fulfilment in the coming of Jesus. And they also have some fulfilment for us today as well.

And here we see something even beyond that. We see an echo, a foretelling in some ways of what will happen when Jesus comes again. So we're going to try and hit all of those over the next few minutes.

Hope for God's people then. That's something at the time of Jesus. Hope for us. And that eschatological hope, if you want a long word for today. Something that points us to the return of Jesus.

But before we get there, we need to understand the starkness of the situation. The darkness of Ezekiel's vision. Because unless we understand how bleak things were and how helpless the people were, we won't understand the wonder of God's divine intervention.

I've been racking my brains on this, but I can't remember. But in my mind, I can picture a scene from a film. And it's in a big farmhouse somewhere. And there are a group of people.

[6 : 57] And they're sitting down to eat a meal that's been cooked for them. And they go, oh, this is lovely. This is fantastic. And someone says, well, what is it, chef? And he says, oh, it's rabbit stew tonight.

Oh, rabbit stew. I like a good rabbit stew. And then it dawns on one of them that this particular rabbit might be the one that had become their pet over the last few weeks. And one after another, they put down their knife and fork, rather sick and upset with themselves.

And then one wit asks a question. I don't know, he says, do you think it's worth calling a vet? Well, it's a moment of dark humour.

Made me laugh. Because, of course, there is no hope for the rabbit now, isn't there? That hope has long gone. Throughout the Old Testament, there have been a few occasions when dead people rise again.

They normally happen after the prayers of a man of God, Elisha or Elijah. The two examples. But just as with the miracles of resurrection, Jesus performs as he raises people back to life again.

[8 : 09] The dead person concerned had only recently died. On one occasion with Jesus, they're on their way to their funeral. Lazarus, of course, had been in the grave for four days or so.

But they all still had flesh on their bones. The bones were still moist. Bringing people back from the dead is an astonishing act of God.

A wonderful, incredible miracle. But it was only the breath of life they needed. The body was still there. Well, the vision Ezekiel sees is far worse than that, isn't it?

It's worse than even the rabbit's situation. Because Ezekiel is brought out into a middle of a valley that was full of bones. In verse 2, he's led backwards and forwards through them so that he can see very clearly that there is no sign of life amongst what's left of this great army of people.

In fact, there's no sign of flesh either. The bones are dry and brittle. The people these bones belong to are long dead. So it's a huge credit to Ezekiel's trust in God that when God asks him a question that says, Ezekiel, can these bones live?

[9 : 23] That Ezekiel doesn't burst out laughing and say, you've got to be kidding. Of course they can't. Look at them. Nothing here to live. There's no life here. Even wild dogs couldn't come in and find any nourishments.

But what's his answer? End of verse 3. Sovereign Lord, you alone. There was no point calling a paramedic. But when Almighty God moves, well, nothing is beyond him.

Well, what's Ezekiel seeing as he has this great vision of this valley full of bones? Who do these bones represent? Well, verse 11 at the end of the passage gives the answer, doesn't it? Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel.

They say, our bones are dried up. Our hope is gone. We are cut off. Isaiah doesn't see the ruin of the people in Jerusalem who had died.

He's looking at, thinking of that, seeing those in exile who are feeling as if they are as dead as these bones. Cut off from their land, cut off from the temple.

[10 : 30] They also knew that they were a long, long way away from God. God was no longer with them to bless and protect them and bring life. His presence, if it was there at all, was in judgment and wrath and suffering.

Those living in exile in Babylon may have been physically alive, but spiritually, they felt like these bones, dry, dead, without any semblance of real life in them at all. But God is a God who brings life to the dead.

He can create out of nothing. And so, he tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. That is, declare God's word to them, Ezekiel. What's that word where verse 4 and 5 and 6 tell us?

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.

[11 : 37] And as the passage goes on, Ezekiel proclaims God's word and there is a noise, a rattling sound as the bones come together. The head bone connecting to the neck bone. The neck bone connecting to the shoulder bone.

The shoulder bone connecting to the backbone as they hear the word of the Lord. If you've ever wondered where that old spiritual song comes from, it's here. Ezekiel 37.

Them bones, them bones, them dry bones. Hear the word of the Lord. And once the bones are joined together, there are sinews and tendons and flesh appear on them.

Skin covers them. It's astonishing. But there's still a problem, isn't there? Because now they look like people. And perhaps they look like a people who are just lying down for a nap or they're sunbathing in the desert sun.

But no, they're still dead. There was still no breath in them. Verse 8. So Ezekiel is told to prophesy again.

[12 : 38] Verse 10. To call for God's life-giving breath to come from the four winds and to breathe life into those who were utterly dead that they may live. And as Ezekiel spoke these words, an amazing thing happened.

Breath entered them. Verse 10. They came to life and stood on their feet a vast army. And it's then that Ezekiel gets the significance of the vision.

The time would come when God's exiled people would be brought up from their spiritual graves back in exile and taken back to the land of Israel where other parts of his prophecy tell us that God would come and live in their midst.

And that incredibly is what happened. And it is incredible because Israel has been taken over by an immense foreign power, far greater and far more powerful than they are.

And yet God moves in the heart of a number of rulers. Artaxerxes, Cyrus, Darius. And after 70 years of exile, the people are not only allowed to go home but they are given the resources to rebuild the temple again, to rebuild the city again.

[13 : 51] If you want to read that, read the book of Ezra and Nehemiah, you'll hear the story there. And as the chapter goes on, as the later chapters of Ezekiel explain, this was not simply a geographical finding of life.

It wasn't, God wasn't simply interested in saying, well okay, here's a bunch of disobedient people a long way from me, well, I'm going to have mercy, I'm going to pick them up and I'm going to plonk them back in their land again and lead them to it.

Now his plans are far greater. God wants to breathe his spiritual life back into them again. It's not just a physical revival to a place nor a social and political revival to a great nation once more.

this is a spiritual reawakening because verse 27, my dwelling place will be with them, I will be their God and they will be my people.

Friends, God never rescues us, never rescues anyone with the intention that they would simply go on their way again without him. He rescues people as he did in the Exodus from Egypt, as he does in the Gospel of Christ, so that we might be with him, that we might know him, that we might enjoy him, serve him, obey him, having his breath, his life, his spirit within us.

[15 : 17] Well, that must have been such a glorious message for God's exiled people to hear. After all of those gloomy predictions and pronunciations of judgment and destruction, here was a light in the darkness.

Here was a real hope. the hope they could barely have believed was possible. Look how dead they felt. Look how dead they were. Not just dead, but buried.

Not just buried, but with no flesh left. And of course, in that state, there was nothing they could do to get home.

There was nothing they could do to reverse their spiritual decline, but God gave words to his prophet Ezekiel. And Ezekiel proclaimed the word of the Lord. And as he did that, God did his work, putting flesh on their bones, breathing his own breath into their lungs, putting his own Holy Spirit within them and giving them true life.

So firstly, this is a passage of great hope to those who first heard it. Despite their persistent disobedience, God was not finished with them yet.

[16 : 28] In fact, he had a great purpose in store. Of course, as the time goes on and the city is rebuilt and the temple is restored, by the time Jesus comes, people have not really changed very much, sadly.

the city is there, the temple has been built, Herod's temple was one of the wonders of the world. The daily and annual sacrifices were re-established, the things were far from perfect.

Once again, the nation was being dominated by a foreign power. And once again, those people who were in power loved it far more than truth and justice.

Hypocrisy was rife. God's people were back in the land, back next to the temple, but they were still far from God. So by the time of Jesus, it's as if still that the first part of Ezekiel's prophecy had come true and yet they had no life.

They were in the right place, doing the right kind of things. They had flesh, if you like, they looked good, but there was no spiritual life there. They needed a new world, that second part of the prophecy to come.

[17 : 47] And what did the angel tell Joseph in that gospel reading? God was on the move. The virgin would conceive and give birth to a son who would be called Emmanuel, which means God with us.

We see the new life coming as Jesus comes, as God comes to dwell with his people, come to deal with their sin once and for all. and of course then at the end of his life, as Jesus heads back up to heaven, his promise is that the Holy Spirit would come, that God would be with his people forever.

God's Spirit living in those who trust in Jesus as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come, guaranteeing, being a foretaste as well as the closeness, the intimacy that we will one day enjoy with God when he comes again.

So history shows how Ezekiel's words have been fulfilled over the past. They were a glorious encouragement for God's Old Testament people that we start to see a greater fulfillment at the time of Jesus.

But what about us? What have they got to say for us today? Well, firstly, I've got two things here. Firstly, they point us to the possibility of a true spiritual awakening or indeed a reawakening as God breathes his life into us.

[19 : 20] As I said, it's interesting that halfway through Ezekiel's preaching, the people look good but they still have no life. It's very possible for us to be in that situation today, to look as if we're spiritually alive, to look as if we're trusting in Jesus, because we're doing all the same things that other true disciples of Jesus are doing.

Week by week, we turn up in church. Week by week, we serve in some way on the rotas. During the week, we try to be kind and compassionate. Maybe we're even ordained, we're standing up here giving a sermon, wearing a dog collar.

It's very easy to look like a Christian without having that true spiritual life with him. But whilst we may fool other people, God is never thought.

He knows the truth about where our hearts really are. And although it is possible sometimes to deceive ourselves, I suspect that if we are truly honest, we will know whether this applies to us this morning.

We'll know if we have truly repented of our sins. we'll know if we have truly entrusted ourselves into God's care, seeking to follow Jesus with every part of our lives, we'll know that.

[20 : 45] And we'll know that because the evidence will be there. You'll look at your life and you'll see that the sin that crops up from time to time grieves you. You'll see evidence that God's word delights you.

You'll see evidence that God's people matter to you. That your actions and words show your obedience to God in situations. Sometimes when it's hard you'll be able to look at those things and say there are signs here that I truly am following Jesus.

Don't look for perfection and think if I'm not perfect I'm not a believer. You won't find it. You won't find it. Only Christ is perfect. But if you truly belong to Christ, if God has breathed his new life into you so that you have been born again then the evidence will be there and you'll know.

But if you've never taken that step, if your religious life or all the things around church, it's really a matter of obedience to a set of rules or just a social activity or a habit than a living faith, then the wonderful message of Ezekiel chapter 37 is that God now stands ready to breathe his life into you afresh.

and all you need to do is ask. Just admit your sin and your failures. Believe that Jesus died in your place and ask for that new beginning.

[22 : 15] Use the words of that great hymn if you like. Breathe on me breath of God. Fill me with life anew. And he will. You can't breathe that life into you yourself however hard you try.

You can't earn a place in God's family by good works or religious devotion. In our natural state we are as dead as those dry bones Ezekiel looked at. God's spirit can breathe new life into the spiritually dead.

And if you know that you need that this morning then please don't go home until you've asked. If you want someone to pray with you then find someone sitting next to you and they would be delighted to do that on show.

If you've never taken that step that new life is available for you today. And the same is true for you if you think of your spiritual life and you think well actually my love for God has grown cold over those years.

I've been trying to follow God but it's just become harder and harder. And it might be because some sin has taken hold and it's drawn you away. Maybe your heart has grown hard and unforgiving.

[23 : 29] Someone who's hurt you in the past and you can't let that go and so the distance between you and the Lord has grown as a result. Maybe love for the things of this world has overtaken your devotion to Christ.

Your Bible remains closed during the week. You don't want to talk to God anymore except for a few brief words on a Sunday morning. Or maybe fears and doubts have crept in.

Maybe you've come to love the praise and love of people more than fellowship with God. You know what God is requiring of you but you know how costly it will be and you don't want to change.

Whatever it is that has caused your heart to grow cold, whatever road has led your Christian life to become a drudgery and a hobby rather than your greatest joy, then hear the words in this passage this morning.

The God who breathed new life into those dry bones Ezekiel's vision can breathe new life into your spiritual life today. A fresh beginning.

[24 : 34] A true encounter with God. That's what's on offer here. And that's true for individuals and whole church communities. I was listening to a short interview earlier in the week of a pastor who took over a number of churches in a remote Welsh valley.

Many of the churches were closed. One that wasn't had a handful, and I mean a handful, six or seven people attending. But God has brought new life there in an amazing way.

They've seen over 80 baptisms of adults in the last five years. They regularly have a congregation of 300 now. God is on the move in that valley. The church up a hill, miles from anywhere, but God is on the move.

Because the God we follow is a God of revival, a God of new life who can breathe new life into sleepy Christians and almost dead churches. So often we settle for a lukewarm faith, a weak experience of God, maybe because we don't think we deserve anymore, but that is not true.

Christ suffered and died for us to bring us to God, that we might enjoy all the benefits of his passion. We do not need to be sleepy, comatose Christians.

[25 : 58] God can renew us, inspire us, and change us so that like these dry bones, we can stand up as a mighty army ready to love him and serve him and enjoy him in this life and in eternity.

he will begin that work today if we ask him. If you need that revival in your own heart today, then again ask him.

Don't go home until you have. Spiritual renewal and revival are possible no matter how dead we might be. And then we get Ezekiel pointing us even further forward.

because in these verses as well, there's a reminder of that glorious hope we have, not just for this life, but for eternity. When we die, if we are a Christian, our souls go to be with God straight away.

We are at peace in his perfect presence. But when Jesus comes again, there is a new resurrection. There is a physical remaking of the world and all of creation.

[27 : 09] and to enjoy that, we will need new bodies, physical bodies. Bodies that no longer age or creak or wear out and die.

We'll be able to throw those glasses away. Take out those hearing aids. Push those wheelchairs and melt them down into something useful.

There'll be no more blood pressure pills or cancer drugs, no more doctors or hospitals, no more morgues or graveyards because death itself will have died. It's hard to get our head around that kind of idea, I think.

But Jesus is not just the means to that, he is also the model for that. Jesus is the means to our final resurrection because he is the first fruit as he was raised from the dead.

That's what St. Paul writes. The first born from the dead because he was raised if we are joined to him by faith, we will be raised too.

[28 : 10] And he is the model for our resurrection. Paul goes on to say that Jesus' resurrection body, although it was different to what we have and gloriously so, it was still physical.

Think of the accounts of Jesus' resurrection, how he was able to walk and talk and eat and drink, to have barbecues on the beach with his friends, to be hugged by those who wanted to hug him.

And our resurrection bodies will be like that too. So picture this. If this morning you're thinking, you know what, on those communion days it's hard for me to walk down to the communion rail, there will come a day when you can look forward to running at full pelt into the arms of Jesus.

If your eyesight is poor and you can't see the glory of God's creation anymore and the faces of your loved ones seem blurred, be in coverage, on that day you will be able to see Jesus face to face, perfectly with eyes that no longer need any help.

If your energy levels are dropped and you can no longer serve him as you once did, don't fear, one day your energy levels will be unlimited and with a perfect sinless will, we'll all be able to serve him as we truly desire.

[29 : 29] That is a glorious hope, isn't it? I'll do that again. That is a glorious hope, isn't it? It is. It is a hope good enough to stir our hearts to praise, to strengthen our weary souls.

On those dark days it's glorious enough to chase the clouds of hopelessness and despair away. When life is hard, when the aches and pains of sick and aging bodies start to get too much, think on this.

The God who is able to put flesh on dry bones, to breathe new life into them. Let that hope of future resurrection stir up your trust and faith and hope once more.

What have we seen there? New life for the spiritually dead now through the work of the spirits available to all of us today. New life in the future for the physically dead when Jesus returns to bring in his eternal kingdom.

The God of life. The Spirit brings life. If you need a new spiritual awakening then call out to him today.

[30 : 40] If you need a new birth, you've never come to him before, then ask him today. You're in the right place. And God's the one with the power to do all those things and more.

Let's pray. Father, we pray for your refreshing today. For your spirit of life to breathe through this place.

To touch our hearts afresh. Would you know each of us and what we need from you? Please come and do your work.

That we might be that mighty army standing ready to serve and praise you with all we have. And are we looking forward to that day of resurrection to come?

Renew our hope, renew our life, Lord, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Bluetooth Bluetooth Bluetooth Bluetooth Bluetooth!

[31 : 55] ! Bluetooth!