

The God who Gives Life to the Dead

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 November 2014

Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 0 0] As we stand, let us pray. Father, we thank you and we praise you for the hope that we have in Jesus Christ. We pray that this hope will strengthen us, will inhabit us, so that we live for your glory and that your Holy Spirit will strengthen us.

Give us grace to do that. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Please be seated. Well, it's great to be with you today as we continue our sermon series on Ezekiel, this great book that teaches us how vast God is and how vast his hope and his strength and his power is.

And this passage that we just heard read from Ezekiel 37 is probably, in fact, undoubtedly, is the best-known passage in Ezekiel. And I noticed that Terry is here, so we could sing Dem Bones if we wanted to.

And there are many songs, there are many sermons written about Ezekiel 37. And there's a good reason for it. And I think one of the things that it gets to is the heart of the gospel, the heart of what we have in Jesus Christ, the hope that we have in God.

It's a passage that really dramatically portrays complete hopelessness. And in the same passage, God promises a hope that is beyond any hope that this world could imagine or give.

[1 : 3 6] And this is critical for us as human beings because hope affects our human condition deeply. We fall into despair if we have no hope, but we are enlivened when we have it.

And I don't know if any of you have known people or you have experienced yourself lost hope, you know, perhaps because of depression or because of breakup of relationship or because of financial loss.

But there is real, there's almost a paralysis. It is debilitating. There's a sense of being pressed down and unable to move forward.

And in Psalm 31, David vividly describes this lack of hope. And it is a God-given description, I think, because we see we are not alone when we experience it.

He says, Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress. My eye is wasted from grief, my soul and my body also. For my life is spent with sorrow and my years with sighing.

[2 : 4 2] My strength fails because of my iniquity and my bones waste away. And of course, we're hearing about bones in our passage today. God's word through David is deeply insightful.

It reveals our human condition. That there is no strength. It's almost impossible to physically move forward. But David knew that there, in this situation that he found himself in Psalm 31, as he's thinking about it, as he's writing about it, praying about it, he knows there's no earthly hope.

And what he does in that Psalm is he turns to a hope that is outside this earth. He embraces the unseen hope from God.

And he says, a number of verses down, But I trusted in you. I trust now in you, O Lord. I say, You are my God. My times are in your hand.

That is a leap of faith. It is embracing hope that he does not see. And in the end, he says, he looks back on the situation. He says, I said in my alarm, I'm cut off from your sight.

[3 : 55] But you heard the voice of my pleas for mercy when I cried to you for help. And therefore, love the Lord, all you saints. Love the Lord.

Love that hope that he alone can give. And he ends by saying, Be strong. Let your hearts take courage. All you who wait on the Lord, who embrace this hope.

Now, Israel, in the two centuries since David, had faced fear and difficulty. The kinds of things David experienced.

But, instead of clinging to God's hope, they chose to more and more cling to the hopes that this world had to offer. And so they clung to the gods of the nations around them.

And actually gave things of great value. Even human life. Sacrificing human life to them. So that they would prosper. They clung to the hopes of armies.

[4 : 55] Of powers around them. To protect them from the superpowers that were threatening them. And they clung to wealth. As a way of having hope.

And the way they would do it, sadly, was to acquire money and lands by cruelly exploiting the poor. Just so they could have, the powerful could have security.

And so as a result of abandoning God, abandoning his hope, as a result of the horrible injustice to their own people as they were clinging to these hopes that the world had to offer, God has brought the people of Israel to the place of hopelessness at this point in Ezekiel.

It's so hopeless that even God is against them. And just shortly before this vision, Ezekiel has had news that Jerusalem has been destroyed. The temple has been destroyed.

Everything that was, that would say anything about their relationship with the living God as God's chosen people are wiped off the face of the earth. Even the people are taken out of Jerusalem, making it close to a ghost city.

[6 : 10] Now they're completely without hope. The idols they had made sacrifices to had failed them. The military alliances had crumbled.

And the money that they had made through exploiting others had been completely ransacked. There was no nation, no wealth. All of their false hopes were dashed at this point in Ezekiel.

And now even God was their enemy. You can't get more hopeless than that. And that's the context for this vision that we heard read.

It's the third and last one in Ezekiel. And if you turn to verse 1 in that passage of chapter 37, you see that God brought Ezekiel into a middle of a valley that is full of bones.

And God's hand actually leads him through all of these bones that are just scattered, thousands, probably millions of them in a very random fashion, just thrown around.

[7 : 12] They're bleached in the sun and any sign of life has been obliterated. It was a sign that David would have recognized when he said in this vision of despair in Psalm 31 that bones are dried up.

But God explains in Ezekiel in verse 11, if you jump down, Son of man, he says, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are indeed cut off.

And indeed, if you are cut off from God, you are without hope. That's what they know. Ezekiel would have shared in that despair. He would have been devastated by the news of Jerusalem, the end of his nation.

Yet God said the most extraordinary thing to him as he walked through the valley of death with God in verse 3. God asked him, Son of man, can these bones live?

In other words, can there be hope for a nation when all her false hopes have been stripped away and even their hope in God is gone? The human answer is, of course not.

[8 : 21] But because it's God who asks, Ezekiel says a very wise thing. He says, O Lord God, you know. You know.

And God says another shocking thing. He commands Ezekiel to prophesy over the bones and to say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Now this is a strange sight.

I know that there are many preachers who have sometimes preached to pretty lifeless congregations. But Ezekiel here is speaking to death itself. He is preaching to bones.

And millions and millions of them. And in that preaching, God promises this extraordinary thing in verses 5 through 6. He will bring life to those bones.

And immediately, you see, during his preaching, preachers would love to see this as they're preaching sermons, people come to life. These scattered random bones in the valley come together, bone connected to the proper bone.

[9 : 29] And then there was sinew on them and then flesh upon them and then skin covers them and so the body is complete. But there's a moment, look at verse 8 at the end, when the bodies that are complete have no breath in them.

And there's sort of this moment of suspense. Will they live? And so God says to him, prophesy again, preach again. Preach to the breath, prophesy.

And you can see in verse 10 that breath came into them and they lived. And it says, they stood on their feet, a vast and exceedingly great army.

Now Ezekiel, in that moment, sees powerful hope completely taking over utter hopelessness. It is a shocking sight.

It's dramatic. It is wonderful. It's a transformation beyond anything he could expect. And God tells him what it all means. He says that he will recreate a non-existent people against all human wisdom and expectation.

[10 : 37] You see, God has taken away the hope of his people so that he can restore a hope that is real. A hope that is everlasting. A hope that actually transforms them.

And I want you to know, I want you to notice as we look at this passage and come near the end of it, that it's very, it's striking what has happened. That God could have just said a word and immediately that valley would have changed and been transformed.

transformed. But for some reason, he chooses to speak through Ezekiel. And his Holy Spirit, his breath, in that preaching, brings life in stages as Ezekiel is speaking God's word.

And it is a word for us today that his Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, very powerfully gives life and hope through his word.

In fact, this is the most powerful way that the Holy Spirit comes into our lives and fills us and gives life. It is through his word.

[11 : 44] And the way that the Holy Spirit fills you and comes into the lifelessness in your life and the lifelessness of this world is as we embrace the promises that we find in God's word.

I want you to listen to the promise. Verse 12, look at this. Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. I will bring you into the land of Israel. 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 and then you shall know that I am the Lord. I have spoken and I will do it.

It declares the Lord. You see, the Holy Spirit causes God's word to do what it says. Yes, those promises were for Israel, but they are fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

You know, he brings us into his land, into God's place, into his kingdom of God when Jesus rules us, when we receive his rule into our lives.

[12 : 56] He places the Holy Spirit within you as you receive that word. And he will open your graves. He will raise you from those graves to new life, to a resurrection body that will be in God's presence.

Well, we will know God as our God and we will be his people and God will dwell in the midst of us forever. This is the promise that was for Israel and that is the promise we have in Jesus Christ.

This is the hope that outshines all other hopes we may be tempted to follow. It is the hope that actually shapes our lives, that moves us to live for him in this world, to bless this world in ways we could not possibly bless it if we did not have that hope that God has promised to us.

And notice that God says, I do this so that you will know that I am the Lord, that I am God. The question we have this morning is, do you know that God is Lord over all the things that are lifeless in this world, over all that is lifeless in your life?

He is the one who fills you each day with his life-giving Holy Spirit, the breath of God. And today, God is calling us to embrace that hope and to ask ourselves in what areas, in what relationships or situations in your life do you feel despair or lifeless?

[14 : 23] Like you could say with Israel, our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are indeed cut off. And we are called to ask God to speak his word and to breathe his spirit into new life, into those areas, into our relationships, into the situations in our life.

Listen to his voice. May the God of grace give us strength to embrace that hope, to walk in real hope as we obey him.

And I want to close by praying a prayer from the book of Common Prayer that speaks of receiving and embracing God's hope in his word. It is a hope that gives life that we are to fully throw ourselves onto as David did.

Let's close our eyes and pray. This is from the second Sunday in Advent. Blessed Lord who has caused all Holy Scripture to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that by patience and comfort of thy holy word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which thou has given to us in our Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen.