

The God who Gives Life to the Dead

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Preacher: Rev. James Wagner

[0 : 01] Please pray with me. I want to give to your people gathered here this day an increase of your grace. And we would truly hear your word to us.

And that we would receive you with our whole heart and soul. And in so doing we might bear forth the fruit of your spirit, the very character of your son and our savior.

In his name we pray. Amen. I too would like to begin by welcoming our junior youth.

That is, as Jordan said, the grades 7, 8, and 9. They comprise what we call CTC. And I must admit, I'm still trying to work out what CTC means.

I don't know if you're with me on that. Does it mean Christian Teen Church? Or does it mean the cool teen church? Or, I don't know. But it's great to have you with us this morning.

[1 : 06] And I do have a task for you this morning while you're listening to this message. The adults can, you know, be up to this task as well. But if you would, just read through those 14 verses again.

And count how many times you read the word, behold. Okay? And then after you've done that, just kind of think. Try not to get lost in that while I'm preaching.

But I do want you to try to count over this past week the number of times in your household you use the word, behold. Behold. And then if that isn't too much to ask after you're listening to this sermon, I want you to think through some other words that you might use instead of behold.

Behold. And if you come to me afterwards in the back in the narthex, there's another word that I bet you didn't use in your household this week. If you tell me how many times behold shows up in those 14 verses, and then another word that you might actually use instead, whoever comes up with the word that I'm thinking of, I'll invite your family over to our house for dinner sometime in the next month.

Is that good? Okay. My wife's sitting back there. I haven't actually gotten permission from her this yet. But she's a great cook, and she loves to entertain, and it'll be great to have your family over.

[2 : 27] Okay? But you do have to match the word that I've come up with, so there you go. Well, now, one of the things about the youth is that it's sometimes said that they are our future.

No one actually ever said that when I was in grades 7 through 9. And that probably says as much about me as the other generations. But I think that that is a lot of pressure to put on youth, to somehow picture them as our hope.

I think that from birth all the way up to 100, we're all the future and the hope to a certain respect.

Although, mind you, our hope really does lie somewhere else.

And for those who are followers of Jesus Christ, it is rooted in him, his life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and his return again. And so we're going to turn now, actually, to these 14 verses of Ezekiel chapter 37, and find out where our real hope lies.

Because this people, the house of Israel, the people of God, are really utterly hopeless in many respects. They, as you know, actually have been transported over 1,300 kilometers away from their home in Jerusalem.

[3 : 35] Some of them thought they still had hope when they were there, because Jerusalem was actually still standing. And then Jerusalem was decimated. And so, too, was their hope.

And so now they're actually left hopeless. Even in their own words, down in verse 11, we read that they say, Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We are indeed cut off.

That's a great description of hopelessness. There's actually more to it as we proceed from here. But this is a really important message for us to hear today, and as we continue to try to complete this passage, or this book of Ezekiel, because we've heard a number of things about our Lord, the God who pursues us, who is the God of glory, who is our lover, who is the one who grieves over us, woos and warns us, takes pleasure in giving us life, judges justly, whose name is sacred.

But today we're going to hear about the God who gives life to the dead. And if the dead aren't hopeless, I don't actually know who is. You don't get any more hopeless than that, that when you're dead in many respects.

So let's look at this. I think we're going to see, actually, that the God reveals hope to us in these verses in three ways. And they're really easy to remember. This is for you CTC students as well.

[4 : 49] God reveals his hope to us through his presence. He also does that through the power of his word and spirit, and then also through his promise. So his presence, his power, and his promise.

First of all, then, what about the presence of the Lord, and why does that bring us hope? Well, this begins with, in verse 3, this question.

We'll skip the first two verses and come back to that. But the Lord raises this question to reveal his presence to Ezekiel when he says, Son of man, can these bones live?

Seems like kind of an odd question, doesn't it? Actually, one might have actually expected Ezekiel to raise some questions. And we, too, actually have lots of questions on our mind as we move in and out of life, don't we?

And go from one day to the next, one season to the next. Questions come out of our hearts. They're on our minds. We want to ask God of those. But in this case, the Lord is the one who's asking the questions.

[5 : 49] And sometimes that's the case in our life, too, when we stop and we're quiet and we listen. We hear a question that's actually coming to us from the Lord. And so the Lord raises this question with Ezekiel and says, Son of man, can these bones live?

He does give an answer. But before I get to that, let's explain why he's actually asking these questions. Up in verse 1, we see the hand of the Lord was upon me, was upon Ezekiel.

And not only was the hand of the Lord upon him, but it brought him, it led him, and it set him among these dry bones. And so there we actually have the presence of the Lord with Ezekiel.

His hand was upon him. He was upholding him. Or as we say here at St. John's, he was gripped by the grace of God. He was in the real presence of the Lord. And so he asked this question, and Ezekiel then responds to this question with these words.

He says, Oh Lord God, you know. How else was he to answer? Was he to answer yes? Was he to answer no? Or was this just kind of resignation and submission to the Lord, the Lord who actually created in heaven and earth, and he created man, man who was put in form but didn't have breath, and then breathed that in him.

[7 : 06] We'll come to that later. But, oh Lord God, of all people, you are the one who knows. He resigns that to him. And of course, what else could he say?

Because he's in this valley of, as we affectionately know, dry bones. But it's more like a basin of bereavement. It's more like a valley of the shadow of death. No, it's actually really more like the valley of death.

It's a death valley. If there ever were a death valley, this would be it. But no, it's the spirit who has actually brought him there and who is with him in death valley.

And so the presence of the Lord is with Ezekiel in that very place. So too, we at some time see ourselves in something of a death valley. Places where it's dark, where there's anxiety, where there's frustration, where there's difficulty, where there's despair, where there's just total suffering. Seems like life is completely hopeless. And right there in that place, sometimes the place that the Lord has actually brought us, or maybe he hasn't actually brought us there, but nevertheless, his hand is actually upon our life more than we would ever guess.

[8 : 16] We sometimes think that actually how can the absence of life be a place where there is the presence of the Lord? But these first three verses testify, I think, to the reality that the Lord's presence can be with us when things just seem to be nothing but death.

Therein is the Lord and his presence, there to give Ezekiel some hope. That's the first thing. The second thing, then, is the Lord brings hope to Ezekiel, and also a message of the same to the Israelites with a proclamation.

Right? Follow down with me to verses 4 and 9. Verse 4 says, comes through a command from the Lord to Ezekiel, and he says, Prophecy over these bones and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

That's the first command. The second command is this, Prophecy to the breath and say to the breath, Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.

The Lord issues these two commands for him to prophesy, and that prophesy comes out in two parts. One is a proclamation, and the other is actually a prayer. Right?

[9 : 35] So it's interesting what happens. So he goes ahead and he prophesies over the bones, and you know what happens. The bones, they receive flesh, and sinew. It's kind of a crash course in human anatomy. And all of a sudden, what do you have?

Right? You've got bones that are now bodies. Looks great, doesn't it? So it's going from bones to bodies, and pretty soon we know, as we follow the story, that there will be life.

But at this point, they're not. They're just actually corpses. And so what used to be a cemetery is now a morgue. Right? Sooner we'll get to life.

I'm sorry. I forgot to share with you that this passage is as gruesome as the first vision was glorious. We're familiar with this passage more than any of the other ones, probably.

Maybe chapter one. But this is a really gruesome passage. We need to come to grips with actually what's going on here. Right? This is very dire. They're desperate.

[10 : 31] They're hopeless. And the Lord, in the midst of this, is bringing a message of hope. But it is like a morgue. And I don't know about you, but I'll take bones, I think, over a morgue any day.

Right? Some people are content in working in these fields, and pathologists, and palliative care medics. I love what they do, but there's no kind of getting used to something like this for me.

So here we have, that's the first prophecy, and he prophesies over them. Right? Which is like a proclamation, so that they become bodies.

The Lord doesn't actually leave it at that point. He tells them to prophesy again. And this time, the prophecy isn't a proclamation. It's more like a prayer. Because it's not over the bodies now.

He says, prophesy to the breath. And that's what he does. That's exactly what he does. 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.

[11 : 41] It's not a great picture of hope the Lord gives his people. And as he prophesies to the breath, which is the same word that's used for the spirit, the spirit of the Lord, who brought him and led him and set him in this valley of death, this is the same spirit that he's prophesying to, praying to, that then brings the breath into the body, so that they have life.

And it's got to take you again back to the creation narrative, doesn't it? Where God creates Adam. And then out of that form of creating him, not a live body yet, he breathes into Adam, and then he comes to life.

But all prophecy points backwards, and also forwards. It draws our attention to Jesus after his death and resurrection, and he appears to his disciples in John chapter 20.

And there in chapter 20, he says to his disciples that he'll breathe life into them. His Holy Spirit, he will breathe out. And in so doing, that whoever they forgive will be forgiven, and whoever they don't forgive will not be forgiven.

And they are in his life as well. In so far as we know that we're forgiven, then we're freed for service in his kingdom. They're in his life, knowing, knowing that we're captives, as it were, set free.

[13 : 02] Knowing that we're in the dark, and now in the light. Knowing that we're as good as dead, but he gives us life through forgiveness. And also, as you think about this breath that he prophesies to, and then actually fills the body, and brings them to life, can't help but reminding you of that great story, me of that great story, the lion, the witch, and the wardrobe.

And give credit to one of our staff this week, as we were studying the Bible, Mary L. Jones. And then also my daughter as well, who helped me find this, though I remembered it, but just didn't know exactly where to go, or as fast.

I guess there's a little hope in that. The younger generations can be a bit faster, than the older ones. But listen to this. You may remember this, that the white witch, with her wand, will touch the animals, will touch the animals, and they will turn to stone, right?

And so there are all these stoned animals, as it were, throughout, strewn throughout the, sorry, that's not how it came out in the first service. That is kind of what happens when you get stoned, though.

You really, that's a name that works, or a word that works. Here we go. This is what happens when Aslan actually breathes on the animals. Hush, said Susan.

[14 : 22] Aslan's doing something. He was indeed. He had bound and up to the stone lion, and breathed on him. Then, without waiting a moment, he whisked round, almost as if he had been a

cat, chasing its tail, and breathed also on the stone dwarf, which, as you remember, was standing a few feet from the lion, with his back to it.

She continues on, and then, oh, Susan, look, look at the lion. We skip over to the next page. Of course, the children's eyes turned to follow the lion, but the sight they saw was so wonderful that they soon forgot about him.

Everywhere, the statues were coming to life. The courtyard looked no longer like a museum. It looked more like a zoo. Creatures were running after Aslan and dancing around him till he was almost hidden in the crowd.

Instead of all that deadly white, the courtyard was now a blaze of colors. Glossy chestnuts, sides of centaurs, indigo horns of unicorns, dazzling plumage of birds, reddy browns of foxes, dogs and satires.

Yellow stockings, and crimson hoods of dwarves, and the birch girls in silver, and the beech girls in fresh, transparent green, and on and on it goes.

[15 : 48] That's what the Spirit of the Lord does when he fills us with his life. Those of us who are dead in our trespasses and sins, he brings to life through the life and the death of Jesus Christ.

And gives us now every reason to have hope. Hope where hope is really lodged. Not a kind of a false hope that false prophets were proclaiming to the Israelites before Israel, before Jerusalem, was raised.

No, now they're getting a picture of really where hope lies. Well, it doesn't stop there then. Come to the verse 11, and we see now the promise that's actually fulfilled which gives hope after we know the presence of the Lord is with us, but also his empowering word and his empowering spirit.

The Israelites, knowing that their bones are dried up, their hope is lost, they are indeed cut off, are now ready to hear again as they've been hearing all the way throughout Ezekiel something that's repeated three times in these 14 verses.

As a result of this, the Lord says in the way of a promise that you shall live, I'm in verse 6, and know that I am the Lord. Put me then down in verse 13, and you shall know that I am the Lord.

[17 : 18] And again for emphasis in verse 14, then you shall know that I am the Lord. Do you know that he is the Lord?

That's what he wants. That's why he gives you hope. Hope isn't an end in itself. It is so that you will know that he is the Lord. I just love even the construction of this.

I am the Lord. It's like saying the Lord is Lord or I am the I am. The Lord revealed to God's people as they left Egypt and their exodus revealed himself to them as I am.

I am the I am. That's what this is again. That's what he wants. That's what he wanted then. That's what he wanted when he was revealing this to Ezekiel. That's what he wants us to know now. He wants us to know that he is the Lord.

Jesus is the Lord. That will be the great promise. There are other promises in this as well, but that's the ultimate one. He does say actually back in verse 10, and they lived and stood on their feet in an exceedingly great army.

[18 : 25] And then there are other two promises that I think that are somewhat related to this. And he says that they will raise them from their graves and that he will bring them into a land of Israel. And then also in verse 14, I will place you in your own land.

As far as I can tell, even after Ezekiel's time, Israel didn't end up with a great army. Even now, they don't have that great of an army.

Certainly they have an army, and other countries in the world do as well. But they're not exceedingly. This is a description of the Lord's promise actually to his people, struck way back with Abraham in that covenant, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and ultimately we'll see it when he returns again to fulfill his promise as he judges the living and the dead and gives us a land where we can live and know our place there.

And this is a given. This is a guarantee. Because verse 14 ends with these words then. I have spoken and I will do it, declares the Lord.

What he says comes to pass. What he says comes to fruition. And I think this is a great encouragement for us in the world in which we live in. I don't know where your hope quotient is right now, where your hope level is right now, with yourself or with your friends or with your family or with your work or with this country or the world in which we live in.

[19 : 53] Do you have hope? What does that hope look like? Do you feel like things are a dead end for you or a dead end for us? This message comes along and this hope which is guaranteed in the future where we'll have this land with the Lord as he returns and creates a new heaven and a new earth, that hope that we have impacts the way we live now and how we're full of this life that he gives as he gives us this word through his spirit and gives us his spirit through his word and dwells in us and gives us this life.

This one last thing then as we think about this. Ezekiel is a prophet and as far as I know not too many of us are prophets but one of the reasons this gives me hope is because I think that we can actually all be a part of prophecy.

We can all proclaim the word of the Lord. Few of us actually do it up front here but all of us can do it throughout our life. Proclaim God's word, share God's word with other people, those who are believers, those who aren't.

We proclaim the word of God but we can also pray that the Lord would give his spirit, that he would send his spirit, that he would reveal his spirit and that we would receive his spirit.

We can now in our places wherever it is that we're at be a part of this kind of prophecy and I hope, I really hope, I mean that, that that's the case for us.

[21 : 21] That we would increase in the grace of the Lord as I prayed earlier and that as we receive his word we then relate that word of his by his spirit to others and in this world in which we live in which is as good as dead apart from Jesus' hope.

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.