

Can These Bones Live?

The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

I said, “Sovereign Lord, you alone know.”

⁴Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!’ ⁵This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath^{al} enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶I 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.”

⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

⁹Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” ¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

¹¹Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ ¹²Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.’” NIV 2011

I am sure you have driven through a neighborhood or city like this. It is run down. It is a victim of urban decay. Houses that were once occupied by proud, hard working people who painted them every other year and tended their lawns with great care, are now decrepit. Their current occupants do not have the means or desire to fix them up. Others are vacant or were condemned and long since torn down. Factories that once were productive lie empty and worthy of the wrecking ball. Shops which sold all sorts of goods have long since closed. Do you know of a city or neighborhood like this? I grew up in a city like this. It is sad. Will they ever come back to life? Will they ever achieve the greatness they once had?

This is the situation pictured in our text for today. The Israelites were once a proud nation. They flourished under David and Solomon. But that was centuries ago. The Israelites who first read Ezekiel’s letter were living as exiles in a foreign land. It may have been the Babylonians who carried them off, but it was the Lord who did this to them. They turned their backs on the Lord. He turned his back on them. This once proud people lamented in exile. Their houses and cities lie in ruins. The temple is destroyed.

But God had a message of hope for his people. He promised them he would raise them up once again. Today we celebrate Pentecost, the day God poured out his Holy Spirit on his people. Today we see how he raises us up and see how he can make even dry bones come alive.

I. Can these bones live?

When we look at the world, we see many positive things. We see amazing things. We see imagination. We see people thinking of new and interesting things. We see potential. Maybe the kid is a natural at music or sports. Maybe a person is a whiz with numbers. We see ambition. We see hard workers who achieve great things only because they put their mind and muscles to work. Today we have computers that fit in the palm of our hands that can access information from across the world. Not too long ago it took a warehouse of expensive machines to do a fraction of that. We see energy. Think of all that mankind has done and can do.

What does God see? He sees potential, but only to sin and rebel. He sees imagination, but only to make up new gods. He sees energy, but only like the energy of an ant hill where the ants are busy all summer but die in the winter. We see ambition and achievements. God sees a valley of dry, dead bones. *The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I said, “Sovereign Lord, you alone know.”*

Friends, we need to learn to distinguish between the physical and the spiritual here. The Bible helps us understand the difference when it uses the word “flesh” to describe our physical attributes, and the word “breath” or “spirit” for the spiritual. Take the human body. It has physical aspects like flesh and skin and muscle and bones. But if there is no breath in the body, no life, it is dead. Now let’s take that to our spiritual lives. We have physical lives which include not only our bodies, but our minds and ability to think. But if we have no spiritual breath, we are dead. That is what Paul meant when he said in Ephesians chapter two, “**You were dead in your sins and transgressions.**” The sinner is physically alive, but spiritually dead. When it comes to the true God, when it comes to faith, he is as dead as a valley of dry bones.

Just as dry, dead bones can’t come to life on their own, we could never come to life spiritually or believe in God. Can these bones live? That is the question God asks, and you got to like Ezekiel’s answer. He says that only God knows. Only God can make dead bones alive. And friends, that is exactly what God has done for you. He has made you alive. He did this with the Holy Spirit.

II. God alone makes dry bones alive.

⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!’ ⁵ This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath^{of} enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ 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.” ⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

Once, his disciples asked Jesus if anyone can be saved. His answer was simple. With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. God alone can create. He created the world and everything in it. Likewise, God alone can make us spiritually alive. Note here how God does it. He told Ezekiel to speak and told him exactly what to say. When he did, God fleshed out the bones and then breathed life into them. This isn’t the only example of this. Remember when Jesus visited the tomb of his friend Lazarus? While the tomb was sealed up, and after Lazarus had been dead for four days and already in the process of decay, what did Jesus do? He simply spoke, “**Lazarus, come out.**” I ask you, did Lazarus’ ears hear those words, and did his brain process them and send impulses to his muscles to walk out? No, he was dead. It was the power of Jesus that put life back into Lazarus. It wasn’t the mere words. I mean, go ahead, say the same thing at a cemetery and nothing will happen. It was the power of God through the words that put life into Lazarus.

So it is with the spiritually dead sinner. Even the mere syllables of God’s Word would fall on deaf ears. So how is it that we come to believe and live? The power of God, in particular the power of the Holy Spirit. He is the power in and through the Words that make dead bones alive and makes believers out of unbelievers.

And he comes to us through this Word of God. “**Prophecy,**” God said to Ezekiel, and he says the same to us. “**Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the Word of Christ.**” Take Baptism, for example. Here we have an infant one or two weeks old. This child does not understand the English language, at least not to the point of logically figuring things out. Yet, what does God tell us to do? Baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is not the water that does anything, but it is the Word of God used with the water. And what happens? This child is born again, is made alive in Christ, and believes in Jesus no differently than you or I. It is the power of God through his Word that does such miracles in children, in adults, in all of us.

Friends, I want to walk away with two very comforting things today based on this text. First, look at what your Lord has done for you and to you. God doesn’t want a valley of dry bones. He wants an army of believers. It is for this reason he sent his Son Jesus to be the Savior. We are valley of dry bones because we came from dust and return to dust. This is the curse God pronounced on mankind who rebelled against him. We suffer and die and are condemned justly because of our sins. So Jesus came to undo that. He came to offer himself as a sacrifice once and for all to pay for our sins.

But it will do us no good unless we believe, so God takes care of that, too. He works faith in our hearts. He makes us spiritually alive and well. Spiritually our bones now have tendons and muscle and a covering of skin, internal organs, and finally the breath of life. We are not machines. We do the believing. But think of the firepit in the back of your house. The wood will not spontaneously burst into flames. You put a match to it and then it burns. The Spirit is that match, and more, he continues to feed the fire through God’s Word. We owe him a lot.

Now, being alive, we can walk and talk and work and run and sit and do all sorts of things spiritually. We actually believe in God. We can actually worship him. We can actually do spiritual things like pray. Do unbelievers pray? Sure, but like dead men praying to dead gods. We pray as living children to a living Father. And we can love as God loved us, speak as God speaks to us, not merely with Words, but from believing and living hearts that mean it. We can use our hands to serve our neighbor, but not because our brains send impulses to our hands to function, but because faith in God sends the attitude to love as God first loved us. That is what it means to be alive spiritually.

And not just you or me. This is a picture of what God is doing for his Church. Pentecost is also the birthday of God’s Church. Once the world was only a valley of dry bones. Today we see the Spirit breathing life into people. And his Church only grows bigger and bigger. Everyday new believers are added to those alive today and those who will be raised back to life. The world doesn’t see it. They don’t appreciate it. Before their blind eyes God’s kingdom is growing and will outlive all of them.

I don’t think it is a coincidence that the word for breath, both in the Greek and Hebrew, is “spirit.” Memorize that. God the Holy Spirit is God the Holy Breath. He breaths life into us, making a valley of dry bones into an army of believers. . We are alive spiritually. So, go out and live. INJ Amen.