

“When Hope Is Gone”

Introduction: If I were to ask you to list a handful of situations which you would consider to be hopeless, my hunch is that you would have no trouble coming up with at least two or three. For me, there seems to be no hope for an end to long fighting that has been going on for centuries in the Middle East. There seems to be no hope for the political gridlock that now exists in Washington D.C. to ease. There seems to be no hope in getting enough people to take stewardship of God’s good creation seriously. On a more personal level, we probably know of a marriage or two for which there seems to be no hope of reconciliation, or an unemployed friend for whom there seems to be no hope of a job, or a loved one who seems to have no hope of ever embracing Jesus. Whatever your hopeless situation, this next chapter of Ezekiel has something to say to you.

Now, this vision we find in chapter 37 is often the first thing that comes to mind when the name Ezekiel is mentioned. However, it might come as a surprise to hear that God gave this vision to Ezekiel not to help him teach the Israelites in exile about their hope for bodily resurrection. It does point us to that, eventually, but in its context, it was given to help a people, who had come to think of themselves as the living dead, without hope, without God in the world, know that God still had a future for them as a people, that God was determined to love them and accomplish his purposes through them.

This vision invites us to ponder that when all hope seems gone there is still hope for the future because of the God who can bring life out of death. Let’s think some more about the kind of death the Israelites were experiencing, and then how God communicates his hope to them, as well as to us.

I. In the Valley (vv. 1-3)

A. It was field trip time again for Ezekiel. On his last visionary excursion, the Spirit of the Lord had taken him to the Temple in Jerusalem. There Ezekiel saw the horror of the idolatry being practiced, the horror of the departure of the glory of God from both the Temple and the holy city, and the horror of the upcoming defeat and destruction of the Israelites by the Babylonians. Just how grim circumstances had become can be seen in the vision Ezekiel is now given of a valley full of dry bones. The picture is of a vast army that has been defeated. One of those sad, grisly, battlefield scenes from the Civil War comes to mind as I try to picture it. But these were not just slain corpses after a battle; these were the dry bones of a people long dead. Scavenging birds and animals, as well as the bleaching power of a hot sun, had done their jobs. That these bones were unburied also means that they had not been properly prepared for any kind of future resurrection at the end of time, emphasizing the fact that they had not just been victims of a battle, but also of divine judgment on their sin. Just to make sure that Ezekiel understood the depth and breadth of the problem, he was led by the Spirit in his vision back and forth among the bones, cementing in his heart and mind the hopelessness of the situation.

B. This situation, we learn toward the end of our passage, was the living death of life in Babylon in exile. Due to their intentional and persistent rebellion against the ways of God and his call upon their lives, the people of God had lost their homes, their land, their Temple, and even their relationship with God. Even though they were still living, they were as good as dead. They may as well have been living in a cemetery. Hope was gone. As Ezekiel strolls, or maybe tiptoes through this valley of death and despair, God asks him, “Can these bones live?” What a question! How would you have responded?

C. Worth nothing is that you don't have to be physically dead to be dead! Writing to the church in Ephesus, Paul puts it this way (2:1-2):

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live, when you followed the ways of this world . . .

This takes us quickly out of exile in Babylon and drops us right into our very lives. Sin destroys all that God desires for us, for others, and for our world. Living in opposition to God's ways and purposes brings about a death in our relationships, with God, with ourselves, with our neighbor, and with creation. Thus, the question remains: Can these bones live?

Ezekiel, wisely, bounces the question back to God. He certainly had the knowledge not to deny God's ability, but he certainly wasn't sure if God had the desire. "Sovereign LORD, you alone know."

II. Re-created through Word and Spirit (vv. 4-14)

A. What we see next is that God indeed has the desire to restore his people and keep his purposes for the world moving forward. The bones would be brought back to life through two means: God's word and God's Spirit. And so, first, Ezekiel spoke God's word to the bones. As he did so, they began, with what I assume was a great rattling noise, to be knit back together, everything connecting in its proper order and place, covered, in the process with tendons and flesh.

As we see the life-giving work of God's word here I think of a couple of places where the NT writers refer to the word in this way. One is in Hebrews: "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (4:12). Here we see the ability of God's word to "lay us open" so, like a good surgeon, he can cut out all that is harmful. A second is found in 1 Peter where we see the restorative work of the good physician by means of his word: "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1:23).

B. To this work of the word God adds the empowering presence of his Spirit, calling on Ezekiel to "prophesy to the breath," calling upon the Spirit (the word for "breath") so that these now breathless figures might be filled with the life of God. For it is the Spirit who grows fruit in us, that we might take on more and more of the character of Christ. It is the Spirit who develops gifts in us so that Christ's body, the church, might be strengthened, and it is the Spirit who empowers us to bear witness to the goodness and glory of God in the world through our words and our deeds.

The life-giving power of the word and Spirit takes us back to creation where God spoke creation into being and then breathed the breath of his life into that first man, so that the human being would become a being filled with the life of God (Ge. 2:7).

C. God goes on to describe for Ezekiel (who must have been dumbfounded as he watched this scene unfold), that this all pointed to the bringing of his people out of the grave of exile, planting them again in their land, and continuing to work his purposes for renewal and blessing in the world through them. Worth noting is that this vision took place somewhere in the 580's BC and that God's people would return from exile, a few decades later, in 538 BC, just after the Persian conquest of Babylon. However, in the 580's, Persia was hardly a cloud on the international political horizon, and Babylon

looked unbeatable (cf. The New England Patriots!). Only the power of the God who could bring life out of death could have proclaimed, and fulfilled, such a future hope.

D. So where does this leave us? Well, I left us dead in our transgressions and sins...Is there any hope?! What the valley of dry bones points us toward is that in the resurrection of Jesus, we, too are made alive. Back to Paul's word to the Ephesians:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live, when you followed the ways of this world . . . Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of God's wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. [2:1-5]

God's wrath, his righteous opposition to all that is unjust, to all that brings death, demands that a just penalty be paid. Graciously, this penalty was paid for as Jesus by Jesus who lay in the valley of death for our sakes. And, as he was raised from the dead to new life, so too are we as we hold on to him by faith and receive the gift of his Spirit. We are not dry bones any longer but living, breathing, Spirit-infused children of God. Yes, we still wait for the redemption of our bodies from this sin-tarnished world where things fall apart, people get sick, and hurt one another deeply. Yes, we will still have our worries and have accidents and make wrong choices. Yes, evil will often seem to have the upper hand. But we can still have hope because, as the Israelites in exile would see, the God who brings life out of death is determined to love us and stick with us, no matter what.

E. Peter captures this hope for us in his first letter to a group of Christians who are living in the Roman Empire amid all of its pagan ways. Peter identifies these Jesus followers as "exiles," as they were experiencing the challenge of living amid socially hostile and even physically violent rulers and neighbors. To these "exiles" Peter writes to remind them of their living hope:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

What gets us through the grief of trials, of seemingly hopeless situations? What helps us persevere as we come to realize that this world is not really our home? What can give us the confidence that God is still determined to use us as his people, the church, to accomplish his purposes in the world, poor and sinful though we may be? The resurrection of Jesus testifies that our living hope does not float on the clouds of wishful thinking but springs from a tomb that once held the body of a crucified Messiah and is now empty. It testifies that God has the power, and the willingness, to bring life out of death, forgiving our past, setting us free from the things that bind us, providing us with power for our present, and giving us hope for our future. It is an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade.

May we turn regularly and often to the life-giving truth of God's word and the life-giving power of God's Spirit, that he might breathe new life into our dry bones.