

# A Walk Through A Spiritual Cemetery

## **Ezekiel 37: 1-14 (Lent 5 - March 29, 2020)**

The hand of the LORD was upon me. He brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley, which was full of bones. He had me pass through them and go all over among them. There were very many on the valley floor, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Son of man, can these dry bones live?" I answered, "LORD God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.' " This is what the LORD God says to these bones. I am about to make breath enter you so that you will live. I will attach tendons to you. I will put flesh back on you. I will cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you will live. Then you will know that I am the LORD. So I prophesied as I had been commanded, and as I was prophesying there was a noise, a rattling, as the bones came together, one bone connecting to another. As I watched, tendons were attached to them, then flesh grew over them, and skin covered them. But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the wind. Prophecy, son of man, and say to the wind that this is what the LORD God says. From the four winds, come, O wind, and breathe into these slain so that they may live." So I prophesied as he commanded me. Breath entered them, and they came back to life. They stood on their feet, a very, very large army. Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They are saying, 'Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We have been completely cut off.' Therefore, prophecy and say to them that this is what the LORD God says. My people, I am going to open your graves and raise you up from your graves and bring you back to the soil of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live. I will settle you on your own land, and you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD."

There is something interesting about walking through a cemetery. I know that might sound a little weird since there isn't much to see except headstones with flowers and mausoleums. As a student of history I like to find the oldest stones and read the dates of the person's life and what is written on them. Yet no matter what you see on the surface, it's what's underneath your feet that makes cemeteries morbid places to be - graves, rotting human bodies, and bones. No matter what the headstones and mausoleums say, the truth of a cemetery is clear. It is a place filled with death. None of those people whose names are written on those stones are going to live again in this world.

As we hear God's Word for our focus this morning, we take a walk with the prophet Ezekiel through a cemetery where a vast army seemed to be slaughtered and their bodies were just laying there rotting away. Walking through this cemetery we find out it is a vision describing Israel's situation as a nation as well as their spiritual state. but before we take that walk through this cemetery, we need to understand what Israel's situation is.

Jerusalem had fallen. The armies of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, had destroyed the city and with it all the hopes of Judah. Most of its people were taken away into exile away from their homeland to Babylon. God's people were defeated, without power, captive to a world power that had no concern for their hopes or the promises of God's Word. God warned them this would happen because of their spiritual rebellion against him worshipping other gods and repeated refusal to listen to the prophets he sent to call them to repentance. They were as good as dead. With Jerusalem and its temple all but destroyed, the danger was no longer stubborn and proud rebellion, but quite the opposite - hopelessness and despair. It was to these people in Babylon the prophet Ezekiel was called to proclaim the hope of God's forgiving grace and promised salvation.

So the Lord led Ezekiel to this valley. Picture in your mind that you are walking with Ezekiel through it. As he walked through the valley observing what was there, Ezekiel notices that these bones aren't just dead as if they had recently been slaughtered in battle. All of the flesh has rotted away and leaving nothing but dry bones in the hot sun. They are so dry that it appears one gust of wind could reduce them to dust. Then the Lord asked Ezekiel a question that he must have thought was pretty strange. "Can these dry bones live?"

It is quite obvious that there was no way these bones were going to live again. There was no breath in them, no flesh, no organs, nothing to hold them together, and these bones were drier than dry. So Ezekiel answered, "Lord God, you know." As the Lord responds we begin to see that what had appeared to be a hopeless situation was anything but hopeless. God was going to restore these bones and breathe new life into them. **(read vs. 4-5)** That is exactly what Ezekiel did. He spoke as commanded and God's power was seen at work. There was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones started coming together - bone connecting to bone with tendons and flesh appearing on the bones, but there was no breath in them. Without breath, no matter how much flesh is on your bones, there is no life.

Think back to the Garden of Eden when God made man. He formed Adam out of the dust of the ground, but it wasn't until God breathed the breath of life into him that he lived. In a similar picture, those once dry, decaying bones had been given the means to be alive as flesh covered them, but there was still no life in them. Again the Lord commanded and Ezekiel spoke this time to the winds. **(read vs. 9-10)** What does all this mean? What is God trying to tell his people? What is he telling us? First of all the dry bones are a picture of what sin has done to the sinner. **(read vs. 11)**

Israel was in exile cut off from their homeland seeming like they would never return. Their repeated sin and rebellion against God had made them spiritually dead separated from him unable to save themselves leaving them as dry dusty bones decaying away in despair. Did you hear the despair of the people of Israel in exile? They who had laughed at God's threatening judgment at their spiritual rebellion were laughing no longer. Suddenly they had begun to wonder if their rebellion had forfeited all of God's promises? "Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We have been completely cut off," they said. Had sin made God's promises null and void? Had their rebellion canceled the promise of being God's special people, including the promise to be the people from whom the Lord would bring a Savior for the world? Such questions plagued them as they sat in exile. That's what sin had done to Israel. "Can these bones live?" God asked. Without the power and grace of God, no they couldn't. Are we any different?

During this current health crisis It may feel like we are in exile separated from the life we really want to live, but we are not in exile away from our homeland. Yet that doesn't mean sin hasn't had similar results on us. Like these dry bones of Israel, our sins cut us off from God. Sin separates us from God stripping the life out of us. "The one who sins will die," God says. Walking through a cemetery or seeing a casket lowered into the ground that becomes obvious. However, separated from God by those sins we deserve a much greater death, a spiritual death exiled forever from God's presence. We cannot raise ourselves from death to life. We are without the hope of life. Without the mercy, grace, and power of God, like those bones in the valley, we cannot live and without any hope of life when the breath of earthly life leaves us. In fact that is what the Apostle Paul speaks of in Ephesians 2, **"You were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked when you followed the ways of this present world."** (vs. 1-2)

Notice what Paul said. Dead is what you and I were. We were dead in sin, lifeless like those dry bones because of our sinful disobedience to God's commands, but now just the opposite is true of us. Paul continued just a couple verses later, **"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us,**

**made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in trespasses. It is by grace you have been saved!” (vs. 4-5)**

Look at what the grace, mercy, and power of God would do for the despairing people of Israel and we begin to see what God is his grace, mercy, and power has done for us. **(read vs. 12-14)** The vision of a valley filled with dry bones ends with life in those bones. God had breathed life into them. God was going to breathe life into lifeless Israel. Did you notice what tender phrase God calls them twice in the verses I just read? “My people.” What amazing words of grace! God had every right to wash his hands of stubborn and rebellious Israel. But he was going to keep his promises. Although military defeat and exile should have marked the death of Israel as a nation, God would restore the people to their homeland. There, in their own land, God would bring a Savior for the world just as he promised to be the means through whom sinners are raised from spiritual death to spiritual life. Truly such grace would lead them to acknowledge that God indeed was the Lord - the God of free and faithful grace.

Our sins should have been the death of us. The sinner will die, but because God kept his promise to restore Israel, we have a Savior to raise us from spiritual death to spiritual life. He says to us, “My people, see what I have done for you by my grace, mercy, and power!” Jesus gave his own life for the sins of the world on the cross. He is the resurrection and the life who rose from the grave victorious over sin and crushed sin’s curse of death. Those who believe in him live even though they die an earthly death. However as the bones in that valley had been given the means necessary to live, breath still had to enter them in order to live. Jesus is the Savior of the world. He is the one through whom we have the tendons of sin’s forgiveness and the flesh of salvation. Yet the only way we are given the breath of life is through the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit to breathe faith into our hearts. Here we see his life-giving power through the tools of Word and Sacrament.

While we are under this “safer at home” order, my wife and I are talking about painting our kitchen and living room. In order for the paint to get from the can to the wall, I need some kind of tool. I suppose if I wanted to I could paint with my hands or take an old rag to wipe the paint on the walls, but that really wouldn’t make sense. It would be better if I chose to use tools like paint rollers, brushes, drop cloths, and painters tape. To paint, you need to choose the tools which you think are best for the job.

God the Holy Spirit could certainly work faith in hearts in any way he wants with whatever tools he wants, but he has chosen to use the tool of Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper to work faith and strengthen it in the hearts of his people. Through those tools we are brought out of spiritual death to spiritual life in Christ. As a result of the Spirit’s work of faith in our hearts, we are given hope and certainty in the face of death, hearing and believing the words of Jesus. “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in me will, even if he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never perish.” (John 11:25-26)

Walking through a cemetery is what Ezekiel did. There he saw a valley filled with dry bones which by the power of God was raised to life, a vast army. It was a vision of Israel being raised from the death of exile and spiritual death of sin to restoration in their homeland and spiritual life. When we walk through a cemetery we see all the signs of death - headstones with dates of birth and death. In Christ we are raised from spiritual death to spiritual life by the Holy Spirit through faith. We will live even though our headstones will record a death date. We were once dry, dead, lifeless bones with no hope of life. Now we are a vast army alive in Christ Jesus. That gives us hope, comfort, and certainty every day of our earthly life that our life here is not worth comparing to the glory of eternal life that awaits us. Amen