



The God Who Turns Skeletons into Soldiers Behold Our God! – Read the Bible for Life Series #39

Ezekiel 37

Pastor David Sunday

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This is the vision that came to the prophet Ezekiel when the people of God were in exile in Babylon, suffering God's discipline for their years and decades of unrepentant sin. It's a vision that gives hope of God's reviving power to renew and restore His people.

Let's read Ezekiel 37:1-14:

¹ The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. ² And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. ³ And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD."

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰ 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 Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD."

This is God's living Word and we thank Him for it.

It was a dreary February morning nine years ago when I had just left Alexian Brothers Hospital after making a visit to someone from our church. I was on my way to Wheaton to meet with a man in his early 20s whose parents attended our church. I had been meeting with him for several months—we had been reading the Gospel of Mark and were talking about spiritual things. This young man had grown up in the church but the gospel had never ignited in his heart. He knew the Bible but years of college and pursuing worldly things had left him cold, skeptical and spiritually agnostic.

I remember calling Kate that morning as I was driving down 355 on my way to Wheaton. I told her I was feeling quite discouraged myself that morning as I didn't feel like my meetings with this young man were going anywhere. We'd been meeting for quite some time and it seemed like nothing was happening. I told Kate, "I have nothing to offer him. I don't even know if it's worth my time to continue these meetings." She told me she'd pray for me. In fact, she did pray for me over the phone. To be honest, I didn't have enough faith at the moment even to utter much of an "Amen" to her prayer. I went into the meeting at Starbucks in Wheaton and we talked about the glorious truths of justification and sanctification. We were studying in the Book of Romans that morning.

When the meeting was over, I got back into my car thinking nothing had happened—on to the next thing. Later that day, Kate got a call from the man's mother saying her son had come to faith that morning in Starbucks. God's Word and God's Spirit powerfully collaborated that morning to ignite life—to bring new life into one who was spiritually dead. God's Word and God's Spirit working together turns spiritual skeletons into soldiers of the Living God.

I don't know where you're facing spiritual deadness. Maybe it's with someone in your family—a son, daughter, spouse, brother or sister. Every time you talk to that person about Christ, the gospel or the Word, there's this glazed-over look. There's no response. It just feels like death, death, death and you wonder, "Will this ever change?"

Maybe it's when you look at our culture as I did this week while I was working out and listening to the news. I was hearing about the Chick-fil-A controversy and the dialogue going back and forth about it and I thought, "There are very many dry, dead bones in our culture." It seems like the death is growing, not shrinking.

Maybe you look within your own heart and find you're a lot like the church in Sardis from Revelation 3 that Jesus spoke about. You have a reputation for being alive but as you

look within your own heart you have to say, “There’s a lot of death here. I don’t feel a whole lot of affection for God. His Word is not that compelling to me. Even the songs we sing, they’re great but my heart is not engaged with this Truth.” As you look within yourself, you see spiritual deadness. If you feel like you are living in a spiritual Death Valley, Ezekiel’s vision is a powerful word from God to you.

Think about the context for a moment. It has been 12 years since 10,000 Israelites were carried off to Babylon and they are living there as exiles. During those 12 years, there had been false prophets who had proclaimed, “This time of discipline is going to be short-lived. We’ll all be back in the land in no time—no problem.” There is also a true prophet—Ezekiel—who has been impressing upon the minds and hearts of God’s people the severity of their sin and the reality of God’s judgment. Then one day—the fifth day of the tenth month in the twelfth year of exile according to Ezekiel 33:21—he hears a knock on his door. A fugitive from Jerusalem arrives with a distressing message. He says to Ezekiel, “*The city has been struck down.*” Jerusalem has been destroyed.

This news comes as a devastating blow to the exiles in Babylon because now what they thought might have been a short-lived, temporary vacation in Babylon is starting to look like a prolonged judgment with no end. They wonder, “Has God given up on His people? Has God’s Kingdom come to an end?” You may have noticed in reading the Book of Ezekiel that it’s after chapter 33 when God starts coming to His people with the message of hope—the gospel truth—the good news. We see an example of that message when God says to His people in exile, “*And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh*” (Ezekiel 36:26). God’s people were resistant to hearing the words of judgment and correction and didn’t really believe it was true, but now that they’re really under the heavy hand of God’s judgment, they’re just as resistant to the gospel. They do not believe that’s true, either.

In Ezekiel 37:11, we see how the people of Israel are speaking of themselves. They are saying, “*Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.*” They’ve become old, dry bones. All hope is gone. They are defeated. They’re having a hard time believing the gospel. From their perspective, there’s too big a gap between God’s promises and reality. They have no life, no vigor, no capacity to resuscitate themselves to turn this situation around, no resilience and no power to press on; it seems to them like they have no future. Spiritually speaking, they are dead.

That's when God gives this powerful vision to Ezekiel. It's a vision designed to captivate our hearts and renew our hope in God's power to revive those who are facing spiritually deadness. This vision confronts us with three probing questions in the face of spiritual deadness:

1. Can the Lord give life to the dead?
2. How does the Lord give life to the dead?
3. Why does the Lord give life to the dead?

Can the Lord Give Life to the Dead?

Let's look at Ezekiel 37:1-3 to answer this question. It's easy to say theoretically, "Yes, God can do that," but what happens when you are face-to-face with your own spiritual deadness? What happens when it seems like sin is much more powerful to you than the gospel? Do you then believe, "This situation is hopeless?" or do you believe the Lord can give life to the dead precisely where you are encountering deadness?

Look at what God does in verse one. The Spirit puts his hand on Ezekiel, brings him out and sets him down in the middle of the valley and it is full of bones. Ezekiel looks around and all he sees are skulls, rib cages, femurs, knees, ankles—not just a few here and there, but everywhere his eyes could see. The valley was full of bones!

For a priest who was not even allowed to touch a human corpse, it had to be a ghastly sight to walk to and fro through the dry bones of this Death Valley. This scene of slaughter depicts what is arguably the lowest point in Israel's history. It is showing Ezekiel in very vivid, grotesque imagery that *"the wages of sin is death"* (Romans 6:23). Notice what the prophet tells us about these bones in verse two, *"...there were very many...and behold, they were very dry."* In other words, death has spread all over the place and it's been holding on for a long time. These bones are absolutely dry.

This is the reality of the situation in which Ezekiel is called to minister. God is saying to him, "I'm going to put you in a place of ministry where there is not the faintest sign of life. I'm going to ask you to preach My Word here in this hopeless situation. I'm going to put you down in a place where you will find yourself utterly beyond yourself. Yes Ezekiel, you're a great preacher, but your preaching alone isn't going to change this. Yes Ezekiel, you know how to administer but there's no program, no structure, no new initiative you can take that's going to turn this valley of dry bones—this huge valley of skeletons—into an army for the living God. Ezekiel, if any life is going to happen here in this place of ministry, that life is going to have to come from above."

I've heard it said that there are three great prerequisites for gospel ministry. The first is humility. The second is humility. And the third is—guess what? Humility. You need to learn to depend entirely on the God Who is able to give life to the dead. It's not your gifts, your eloquence or our programs. It's not what we can do that will bring life to a culture that is spiritually dead. It's not your efforts as a parent that will bring life to your child. It needs God's working. We are dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). That's Scripture's diagnosis of the human condition. We don't have any spiritual life in us. We don't have any obedience, responsiveness to God, desire or ability to do what God requires. It's just like the words of this song:

I was blinded by my sin
Had no ears to hear your voice
Did not know Your love within
Had no taste for heaven's joys

(“O Great God” by Bob Kauflin)

That's the human condition and that's where we are called to do gospel ministry. It is always in the context of spiritual deadness. God puts His servants into these situations to show us our own utter inability to change a thing. We need to become instruments of His redeeming grace.

God puts Ezekiel down in this valley and asks him a question in Ezekiel 37:3, *“Son of man, can these bones live?”* He doesn't offer a resolute, “Yes God, these bones can live by Your mighty power.” But I think his answer is pretty good—He acknowledges God's sovereignty. *“O Lord GOD,”* he says, *“you know.”* The NIV and NLT say, *“O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”* He doesn't look at that valley of dry bones and offer total pessimism in his response. He doesn't say, “It's hopeless. Why even bother opening my mouth? I'll never know any life or hope in this situation.” He doesn't look at himself in his spiritual deadness and say, “I might as well settle for mediocrity. Nothing's going to change.” No, he looks to a God Who is sovereign and says, “You know. I can't change this situation, but Lord, You can. You know.” We should do the same. *“O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”*

Then God tells Ezekiel to put his faith in His sovereignty into action. What Ezekiel acknowledges here is the truth that God says of Himself in Deuteronomy 32:39, *“See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.”*

If we're going to be in the ministry of the gospel, we have to have absolute confidence that He Who is the Creator of life and made everything out of nothing is able to

come into this situation and bring life where there is death. God knows what He is doing and He is a God Who is able to give life to those who are dead.

That is the answer to the first question. The Living Lord is able at any time to give life to those who are dead.

How Does the Lord Give Life to the Dead?

This question is answered in Ezekiel 37:4-10. “Ezekiel, you confessed that I’m sovereign. You called Me Lord God, the sovereign Lord. So in My sovereignty I can do anything.” We must never use the sovereignty of God as an excuse for inactivity. Have you ever done that? Have you ever confused faith in God's sovereignty with fatalism? “Well, God’s in charge, let’s see what He does.” No! Faith in God's sovereignty should move us to faith-filled activity. We act in faith because He’s sovereign.

Now that Ezekiel has affirmed his trust in the sovereign Lord, the Lord has something for Ezekiel to do in verse four, “Preach, Ezekiel.” Preach to what? “Preach to this valley of dry bones.” We know the human ear has many bones in it, but I’ve never yet seen a bone that has ears. “Bones can’t hear but You’re telling me, ‘Preach to the bones!’?”

Erwin Lutzer—the pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago—sometimes teaches a preaching class at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. I’m told that early in the semester he likes to take his students on a field trip. He loads them all into a van, brings them to a cemetery, plants them down in the middle of the cemetery and then says, “Who wants to preach?” Of course, no one does so he preaches in the cemetery. He says, “This is what God is calling you to do as a minister of the gospel. He’s calling you to preach to the living dead. He’s calling you to preach in a situation where your preaching in itself cannot affect any change apart from divine action.”

God uses preaching. Preaching is the instrument that God uses to bring life to the dead but preaching is not the cause of the life. Verses five and six make it clear God is the One Who gives the life. Look at Ezekiel 37:5-6:

Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.

God is saying, “I am the cause of new life coming to those who are dead, not the preacher.” It’s God Who gives life—but God uses his Word. The world looks at the message of the gospel and says it’s foolishness but 1 Corinthians 1:21 says, “...it pleased God

through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” God uses the preaching of His Word—that which is foolish in the eyes of the world—and through that preaching God brings life.

Look at what happens in verse seven. Here’s where you want to start singing, “Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.” You have to imagine this scene and hear the music of it. Verse seven says, “*So I prophesied as I was commanded...*” I can imagine what Ezekiel is thinking, “A bunch of dry bones? Okay.” Then he starts to preach, “Dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord,” and all of a sudden he starts hearing this rattling, clickety-click! The knees, the ankles, the rib cages and the skulls are all coming together with loud clattering. All over the valley, the dry bones that are all scattered about are becoming skeletons. They’re forming life with sinews and muscles coming to them and then flesh and skin. They become this well-organized group of skeletons out in this valley. Imagine the scene. It’s such an amazing picture!

God is at work whenever His Word is proclaimed. Friends, wherever there is spiritual deadness the only hope and resource we have is the Word of God. That’s why we dare not say, “We need somehow to connect with the culture so we’re going to accommodate by watering-down or marginalizing the Word.” If you abandon the Word of God, doubt its power and truthfulness and water-down its message, you will have no hope of ever seeing spiritually dead people come alive as worshippers of Jesus Christ. It’s only accomplished through His Word.

That’s why we as a church are committed to the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. That’s why the Word is prominent in our services together and in every ministry of this church. Without the Word, there can be no spiritual life.

Notice something in verse eight. Ezekiel has preached, the dead bones start moving, they are structured and joined together, they take on muscles and strength and are covered with skin—but a vital ingredient is missing. We see it at the end of verse eight, “*But there was no breath in them.*” They are literally out of breath—no breath and no life. Colin Smith says, “At this point in the vision, all that had happened was that under Ezekiel’s ministry, the graveyard was better organized!”

There’s something instructive there for us. Notice there are two phases here of this army of dry bones—these skeletons—becoming an army of soldiers for the living God. A church can be well-organized, unified, rich in resources, outwardly very attractive—the soldiers had skin and flesh—and yet still be lacking in life, spiritual power and vitality.

Let me say something here that you need to chew on—a church can even be very biblical but still be lacking in life. Something is still missing. It takes more than sermons to give life to a church. God uses sermons and preaching—don't water-down the Word. Don't do what the liberal churches do and say, "We're beyond the Word," because when you're beyond the Word, you're in death. There's no life there. It takes more than preaching. The dead don't come to life through good preaching alone. It takes more than good biblical teaching to bring our children into a living, vital, obedient relationship to Jesus Christ. The teaching is crucial but it takes more than that. It takes more than sound doctrinal truth for your friend who is spiritually dead to come alive as a worshipper of Jesus.

It is not because there's some inadequacy in the Word. The Word is not the problem; the Word is the solution. The Word is alive. God wants us to understand something about his Word. —God's Word brings life in collaboration with God's Spirit. It's the two working together. God uses the preaching of his Word but it must always be done with a vital dependency upon God's Spirit. There is an inseparable connection between the Word of God and the Spirit of God, just like there's an inseparable connection between my words right now and my breath. If I stopped breathing, I wouldn't be able to talk to you. There's an inseparable connection between God's Word and His Spirit.

So along with the ministry of the Word, God wants us to see that we're dependent upon His Spirit. That's what is happening in verses nine and ten. There's no breath in these skeletons. Then God says to Ezekiel, "*Prophecy to the breath* [call out to the breath]; *prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.*"

Now in this passage, the same Hebrew word *ruwach* is used ten times and it is translated in three different ways. It can mean breath, wind or Spirit. This text is showing us that the Holy Spirit is to our spiritual life what breath and oxygen are to our physical life. "Ezekiel, you've preached the Word, it's doing its work, but now you need the Spirit to come and give life." Isn't that what we sing in this worship chorus?

Then Your Spirit gave me life
Opened up Your Word to me
Through the gospel of Your Son
Gave me endless hope and peace

("Oh Great God" by Bob Kaufflin)

Remember at the original Creation how God created man? God formed man out of the dust of the ground but still the man was not alive. So what did God do? He breathed

life into him by His Spirit. The same thing is what needs to happen spiritually. God forms bodies out of the dry bones through His spoken Word and then He breathes life into them. Life comes from the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Life. I think God wants us to understand this because He wants us to have an active, vital, conscious dependence and reliance on the Spirit.

How do we show that we really see our need for the Holy Spirit to do His work? We pray. We earnestly cry out to God. By prayer, we show that we are not trusting in our activities. It's possible to think, "You know what, I can do this ministry. I can handle this." When we're prayerless, we become powerless because it's through prayer we express our dependency on the Spirit.

That's why we gather monthly for a time of concerted prayer on the first Wednesday night. Please don't consider that optional. If you cut out prayer from our church, you cut out life. Please make it a priority to come to these prayer meetings to cry out to God for your children, for our youth, for our community, for our nation—that God would come upon the ministry of His Word, breathe life into it and give life to those who are dead. Come and earnestly admit to God, "We need Your Spirit in this church. We need Your reviving power."

"It is the Spirit who gives life," Jesus says, *"the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life"* (John 6:63). How does the Lord give life to the dead? He does it by His Spirit through His Word. When God accompanies the preaching of His Word with the powerful breathings of His Spirit, then a congregation of skeletons rises up as a vast army of soldiers of the Living God.

Why Does the Lord Give Life to the Dead?

This question is answered in Ezekiel 37:11-14, but we saw it first at the end of verse six, *"you shall know that I am the LORD."* We see it again in verses 13-14 where he says it twice, *"And you shall know that I am the LORD...you shall know that I am the LORD..."* God declares, "This is why I'm doing this." In Ezekiel's day the promise was, "You will not remain in Babylon forever. I will take My captive, exiled people, bring them back to the Promised Land and they will experience physical and spiritual prosperity there."

In our Read the Bible for Life plan, we're reading the Book of Daniel and will see how he read from Jeremiah's prophecy that the people would be exiled and then brought back to Jerusalem. In Daniel 9 he starts calling out to God for the restoration of God's sinful

people. Then in the following weeks, we will see through Nehemiah, Ezra, Haggai and Zechariah how God did bring the people back into the land and they did experience that restoration.

Psalm 126 describes how the nations said to God's people, "Oh the Lord has done great things for you." God's restored people say, "Yes! The Lord has done great things for us and we are glad!" The reason God does this for His people is He wants them to know, "I'm the Lord. I'm the Living God Who loves you, cares for you and gives you life when you are dead. I want you to trust Me, worship Me and acknowledge Me as the One from Whom, through Whom and to Whom are all things. I want you to know that I am the Lord."

Since this is the reason God revives and restores His people, it gives me hope that God is eager to do this kind of work. He is eager to give life to us in our deadness. He is eager to resurrect and revive us because it brings glory to Him. God's Word and God's Spirit are brimming with life, hope and power even where things seem totally hopeless to us. Therefore let us pray with confidence in a God Who is eager to restore and revive us where we are dead. Martin Luther said, "Prayer is not our prevailing on God's reluctance. It is our laying hold of God's willingness."

Jesus Christ, God's Son, came down into this world of death—the Valley of the Shadow of Death. He went into the Valley of Dry Bones. He died on the cross, was buried and raised from the dead so He could give the life of His Spirit to all who trust in Him. Listen to the promise of Romans 8:11, *"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you."*

Right now, God is here. He is present to give life to you who are dead. The Bible says in Ephesians 5:14, *"Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."* That's God's Word. You might be like a dry bone right now but God says to you, "Wake up! Rise up! I will give you life." You might be in a place of great sluggishness where unbelief has been prevailing spiritually. God says to you through Ezekiel the prophet this morning, "I want to revive, quicken and enliven you. I want to turn you from being a spiritual skeleton into a soldier of the Living God." His Word and His Spirit are able to do that.

Let's call on the name of the Living God together.

God, I thank You for the power of Your Word. It is living and active; it gives life through Your Spirit. We thank You that Your Spirit is alive and present today. We thank

You that He is in our midst just as He was 2,000 years ago when He came upon Your church at Pentecost. We thank You that over and over again, when it seems like spiritual death is prevailing, You have come in great might and power and revived Your church and Your people.

Lord, we think of some of our sons and daughters who need the life-giving power of Your Word. I pray that You would do for them what you did for Scott at that Starbucks in Wheaton nine years ago. Lord, shine into hearts. Give the light of the knowledge of Your glory in the face of Christ. Cause those who are dead in sins to rise up in newness of life. Lord, I pray where unbelief and spiritual deadness is getting a hold of the hearts of Your people, that through Your Word and Spirit that You would stir these embers into a flame. Cause us to be ablaze for You. Mobilize us, Lord, as Your church. Help us be a bold army whose battle cry is love, reaching out to people who are in darkness.

Lord, there is death all around us but You've given us words of life. We pray that we would be fully engaged in the mission You've given us as Your people and fully confident in the power of Your Word and Your Spirit to bring about change for Your glory that we may know You are the Lord. We praise You and ask You, Living God, to breathe new life. Oh Breath of Life, come sweeping through us. Revive Your church with life and power today. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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