

The Valley of Dry Bones

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[0 : 00] Okay, as Derek said, we're in a series just now on Ezekiel, not the whole book, but just pictures, very graphic pictures, the high points of Ezekiel.

So if you open your Bible or look at your paper or flip open your app at Ezekiel 37, let me just read the first verse to get some focus.

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.

There's a sense of hopelessness in the culture just now, and anybody who is reading the culture can see moments like extinction, rebellion, and although they're offering a degree of ecological hope in the midst of chaos, there's always that pervasive sense of menace.

That things are not going to end very well for the planet. And then politically, of course, we've got the Brexit debacle, which just goes on and on and on with a sense of political hopelessness.

[1 : 06] At least we have Donald Trump coming tomorrow. So there is some good news, and there's a degree of hope, he says, somewhat cynically. However, hope is an integral part of the gospel.

We as people of the church and people of faith and people of Jesus have faith and hope in our very DNA. And so what we offer, and hopefully in this congregation and in our life and in our message, is something which goes against the hopelessness of the prevailing culture.

Indeed the very church of Jesus Christ is born out of hope. You remember the key figure, Abraham, Romans 4, against all hope, Abraham in hope believed.

Remember how Sarah was 90 years of age, and Abraham was 100, and of course the child was born and the seed of that child are here in our very building tonight.

And so we see that hope is very much part of the church. You look at the early church and you look at this hopeless, ban, this ragtag group, eventually of Jesus, and at the end, the 11 men and a group of women as they move forward, and yet God took that disparate, crazy bunch of people and from it the church of Jesus Christ was birthed in a shockingly hopeless human situation with persecution, with a message which was patently ridiculous, that a man dying across was a messiah and he would redeem the world and yet out of that great picture we have of course the glory of the church.

[2 : 48] And so we find that that's our message of hope. But isn't there sometimes a discontinuity between the hope that we profess and the facts that we see round about us, especially in the church?

And I was preaching fairly recently to a very, very small church. There was 18 people in front of me and the whole atmosphere seemed to scream out hopelessness.

The very dry ragt was screaming that there is no hope in this situation and that's not an uncommon scene in the church in Scotland today.

So what we have here is this passage and it's dealing with hope in a context of hopelessness. I don't know if you are familiar with this story.

There's a pretty famous song, Dem Bones, Dem Bones, Dem Dry Bones, here, the word of the Lord. But I spoke to four or five younger folk this evening.

[3 : 52] None of them had heard it. So Dem Bones, Dem Bones clearly belongs to a golden age, which those of you who are fresh young lunes and lunettes have never heard of.

But that's how most folk are introduced to this passage. Dem Bones, Dem Dry Bones, hear the word of the Lord. So what we have here, you've heard this story over the last few weeks.

Jerusalem, Israel is discouraged during exile. Ezekiel is in this behind the barbed wire of a concentration camp. He sees the exiles by the river Babylon and there is not a very encouraging

situation round about.

So as we look at the passage tonight, I just want to know, is one or two things and again, the key element of it is hope. Remember the genre here is apocalyptic.

It's a picture. We don't go into every single detail, but the big picture is telling us a story. And the big picture, of course, is hopelessness is destroyed and hope emerges.

[5 : 03] So whatever your situation is this evening in your life, your hopeless situation, perhaps there is a degree of inspiration in the passage tonight.

Just a few things. Another one we read here that hope begins with an honest assessment. Look at verse one. 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 that was full of bones.

That expression by the way, the hand of the Lord was upon me. It was last seen in chapter eight, verse one. And every time the hand of the Lord was on Ezekiel, it did not end well for him.

Indeed the last time he saw something gruesome, he was silenced for five years. He saw what was called the abomination in the temple. He saw something so awful that he couldn't speak for five years after that.

But in the language here is very graphic. It's almost a cartoon because he says he brought me out by the spirit and sent me in the middle of a valley and it was full of bones.

[6 : 14] So it's a cartoon because the language here is literally a valley full of bones. If you imagine Glen Coal, which is a really picturesque valley and indeed a valley of death in many ways, you can see it there just the floor of a valley is strewn with bleached bones.

It's a pile of skeletons. This is death on an industrial scale. Now the interesting thing here, and there's lots of interesting things that for Ezekiel you double up because what was he was a priest. And so part of the cultist part of the background there was a dead body was an abomination. And a priest could not go near a dead body.

And here you have this man and he is placed in the middle of the valley. I don't know if you like snakes or spiders. What's your worst nightmare?

Your worst nightmare maybe to be placed in the middle of a tank full of all these things. You know, I'm a celebrity. Get me out of here in the jungle, that sort of thing.

[7 : 28] Well it was more serious of course for a priest. This was defilement, unburied bones is even in our own culture a disgrace and a sign of a curse.

The older haste scandal a few years ago that wasn't awful there that there was these unburied bones strewn about there. And so it was a very embodiment of uncleanness and God wants him to go into the situation and honestly assess it.

Look at verse 2 it says, he led me back and forth among them. And so the picture is the Lord in this vision is taking Ezekiel to the valley.

It's a valley that presumably he knew quite well and he has walked back and forward in the middle of the valley. It's a grisly scene.

There's a really interesting commentary on Ezekiel by a man called Chris Wright. And the heading for this particular passage in Ezekiel 37 is from Rigor Mortis to Resurrection.

[8 : 37] I think we're dealing with a bit more than Rigor Mortis here. This is absolute death.

These are white bleached skeletons. There was not a bit of flesh remaining. The vultures had put everything there was no hair, there was no sinews, there was nothing.

This was just a bleached body. And we read here, what are the bones? Who are? What's it representing? Well verse 11 says, these bones are the people of Israel.

And so there they were cursed. All the other usages of dryness in the Bible speaks of the judgment of God. These were people who were under judgment.

And so we find here that they're asking the hard questions. Hope begins with an honest assessment. You know, have you ever heard of Pollyanna?

[9 : 40] You've Googled it afterwards. If you've never heard the story of Pollyanna, Pollyanna was an incurable optimist. Everything in the garden was really quite rosy and she could see something good emerging in every situation and she was optimistic in a fairly unrealistic way.

We also can be Pollyanna's church I was in very, very recently. It was a scene of spiritual dereliction and decimation.

But the leadership were saying, oh, it's not bad. That's not God's way. Ezekiel, have a look. Check out the valley of dry bones.

So there is hope begins in the context of an honest assessment. Are we going to be honest about our own situation? Are we going to be honest here?

So number two, hope doesn't just begin with an honest assessment. The second thing we notice is that hope begins with a critical question.

[10:50] I don't know if you note humour in the Bible or if you think there is humour in the Bible. I think verse three is quite funny. God says, Son of Man, can these bones live?

It's cannot. You think this is a trick question? I was getting a press conference and the minister asked me what was the name given to the first woman?

And I kind of said tentatively Eve? Oh no, no, no, no. She was called woman, he told me.

A kind of trick question. Look up yourself. Son of Man, can these bones live? Well, it's humorous. There's bones as far as I can see.

And there's a degree of, if it wasn't the Lord asking the question, you would say this is ridiculous. Of course these bones can't live. There's absolute death.

[11:55] Now Ezekiel responds. He says, Lord God, you alone know. Again, there's a kind of background to this. Sovereign Lord, you alone know.

Because in the Eastern culture, there were gods for everything. There was gods of life. There was gods of death.

There was God for every eventuality. So Ezekiel's kind of promoting monotheism here. There is only one God, sovereign God, you alone know.

And He is everything. So what we see here is not a crass triumphalism. There can be that as well. This I alluded to to Pollyanna, a kind of crass triumphalism. That there will be victory in spite of everything. And we can, you know, get a flush of eloquence and we can say these things.

[12:54] But check out the degree of humility here, Lord. You alone know. There's an admission that God alone can do it.

Gospel hope does not emerge from a swagger of self-important positivity. Gospel hope is not Dale Carnegie, how to win friends and influence people.

It's not a Tony Robbins self-help kind of, you can overcome anything if you want to do it. There's an admission that some situations are so dire.

When I was a student, I used to hang out with medical students and in those days, it was a bit kind of in your face. But most medical students in their flat had a skeleton.

I never asked were they real or were they not. But I assume they're plastic skeletons and, you know, the pretentious medical student always had their skeleton there.

[14:00] And often you would say, is he joining us for dinner? And the medical student would say, it's a she actually. Can you not tell the difference? And, you know, they would kind of do things like that.

Well, of course the skeleton's not going to join you in for dinner. That's the idea here. They are wholly dependent on God.

There is spiritual death. You know, that's important because what we're dealing with in the culture, what you're dealing with with your friends and families, are not people who have perhaps just looked up all the options and thought, well, I'll not decide to follow Jesus.

There is a spiritual death out there. You know, the old illustration of the gospel. You're someone who's floundering and drowning and you throw out a life belt and they grab the life belt.

No, that's not the picture. It's a terrible picture. What's happened is someone has fallen into the harbor and they've drowned and their body has been undiscovered for years.

[15:11] And then someone jumps in and takes that dead, almost non-existent skeletal feature and breath life in them and they come alive.

Folks are not just spiritually asleep. The image is deeper than that. There's deadness and actually quite encouraging because the darker we see the situation, the more glorious is the gospel because that's what the gospel does.

He takes death and he brings life. Grace is not quite good. Grace is amazing. The mercy that God shows, the power of God is so incredible that it takes the deadest of the dead and it breathes new life into them and they become alive.

There is spiritual deadness across the cultures, across the classes. Folk in, I don't know, Pilton or is dead in spiritual situation as folk in Barnton.

A millionaire is as spiritually dead as a popper. There's a great equality here. But the great thing is that the gospel, the gospel can bring new life into any and every situation.

[16 : 37] There's an egalitarianism about deathers and egalitarianism as well about the gospel and that God breathes new life.

So hope begins with an honest question and hope begins with a kind of critical, an honest assessment. Hope begins with a kind of critical question. Can these bones live?

Well, that's a great question. Smart folk, really smart folk, don't just have good answers.

The really smart folk have good, great questions. And it's like Jesus said to the man in the pool of Bethesda, do you want to be well to blind Bartimaeus? What do you want from me?

These are really good questions. But the third thing we see here is not just an honest assessment, not just a critical question, but the third thing we see here is that hope is fueled by action.

[17 : 42] If nothing changes, nothing changes. Now that statement is worth the price of your collection tonight. If nothing changes, nothing changes.

Well, you say, why did we get this man great expense to speak to us tonight? Well, what does the passage say? What we find here is that God says to Ezekiel, I want you to do two things.

And God is saying exactly the same thing to us. He's saying exactly the same thing about the church today. And he's saying that we've got to do these two things.

We've got to preach or speak to the bones. I'll unpack that a little bit later. We've got to speak to the bones on behalf of God, prophesy to the bones.

And then he says prophesy to the wind. So we speak to the bones on behalf of God, and then we speak to God on behalf of the bones.

[18 : 48] And so nothing changes, nothing changes. But if we speak the gospel and if we pray, what happens here is that spiritual life comes.

Let me again unpack that a little bit. You've got to really feel sorry for some of the preaching gigs that Ezekiel had.

You know, in chapters two and three, he was to preach to people with what is it? Stiff faces, hard hearts and bronze foreheads.

Now you lot are not like that tonight. You're quite pleasant looking, most of you. We find here, Ezekiel says, stiff faces, hard hearts and bronze foreheads.

Now, I've had some pretty bad preaching gigs in my day. One congregation of three people down in Lanarkshire and Cooter in Lanarkshire, three people, all of whom were asleep for the duration of the sermon.

[19 : 53] I could have gone out, driven to bigger, have a Starbucks and driven back, pronounced the benediction and they would have been none the wiser. It was really pretty tough.

And many of us who are preachers here have preached in very, very bizarre situations. But none of us have been asked to preach to a valley of dry bones.

And yet, preach to the dead the promises of life. We do that every week. You do that in your office. You do that in your coffee times with your friends. You do that in your evangelism. You do that in every single situation.

You see the most unpromising group. And yet we speak to them and amazing things happen. Here is hope.

[20 : 56] Death is no restriction on the power of the gospel. Notice his preaching, it was as God commanded. He did it by the book, prophesied to these bones and say to them, dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

And that's what he did, verse seven. So I prophesied as I was commanded. You think of your friend, okay, your friend who is the most unconvertible human being in the planet.

The member of your family who is just totally in your mind beyond the pale, you speak to the person in your office who is really as hard as nails and yet just speak to them, tell them your story, tell them the gospel and miracles can happen.

But we've got to do it. One commentator says, just the living power of the word of the living God, invading the valley of the shadow of death, just the living power.

You know, they say in our denomination, the free church of Scotland, it's conservative, conservative. There is nothing conservative about a gospel church. There is nothing passive about a gospel church.

[22 : 22] How can it be conservative when heaven visits earth? How can it be conservative when the dead are brought to life? How can it be conservative when it does anything but conserve the status quo?

It smashes the status quo. It brings life where there was death. It brings hope where there was hopelessness. We are not conservative. We are radicals.

Ezekiel was not some kind of chained up, radical conservative face when the great regenerator is in the room.

The sign should be up danger, God is at work. Again, do we have that sense that God is in this place?

That we've not just opened up a museum to a past year, but whenever we come in this place or in our coffee shop, whenever we speak of Jesus, there's power in the room.

[23 : 30] And so we find here he speaks not moralism, but the gospel. He speaks to the bones and behalf of God.

We must use words. So that's the first thing he did. But the second thing he did was he spoke to God on behalf of the bones. Verse 7, then he said to me, prophesy to the breath.

Prophecy, son of man, and say to it, this is what the sovereign Lord says. Now the word breath, as every schoolboy knows, is ruach, a Hebrew word ruach, which is the same word that's used for wind.

It's the same word that's used for life in this passage. It's the same word that's used for spirit. And so what we find here is that Ezekiel is speaking to God, prophesy to the breath, and that's what he does.

This is what the sovereign Lord says, come breath from the four winds and breathe into these slain. And that's the essence of ministry, speaking to folk on behalf of God and speaking to God on behalf of people.

[24 : 40] You know, at preaching 101, they always say, you know, you don't preach a simple sermon and do a little moralistic application at the end, and the moralistic application is usually, pray, read your Bible, and talk to people about Jesus.

Now normally, the advice is, you know, the application is a bit deeper than that. But the clear application of this passage is, speak to people about Jesus.

Speak to Jesus about people. Pray and God will do incredible supernatural works here. And the picture of hope just gets bigger, doesn't it?

Because what happens is that something happens. We're reading verse 7, there was a noise, a rattling sound. The word there actually is big. It's like an earthquake.

Here is a St. Columba's weekend away question in the quiz. How many bones are in the human body? That was the question at last.

[25 : 47] Well, I'm told there are 206 bones in the human body, depending how you define a bone. So imagine here, you get your 206 multiplied by zillions.

What a noise as they all rattle and come together. And so the picture there is an earthquake noise. And verse 7 is really, really big noise.

And then we have, something happens, we have there is a change. I looked verse 8, and the tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

And then we find that he says, prophesy to the breath, and the breath breathed into the bodies and they became alive. What does this remind you of?

Genesis 2, 7, does it? Does this remind you of the creative power of God? This is what God does. A form is created and life is breathed into the form.

[26 : 46] This just as there was a creation of society. So we have here a picture of the recreation of society. John Stott's commentary on Ephesians used to be known as God's new society.

This is a picture of a church coming alive. Ephesians 2 could be the equivalent of this. So what's happening here? Well, the fourth thing we see here is hope fulfilled, verses 11 to verse 14.

Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. And then you get the key to the prophecy. You get the key to the apocalyptic vision, what it actually means.

They said, well Jerusalem is in ruins, but we'll be home by Christmas. They felt like dead men walking. This was a picture of gloom.

And God says there's going to be an even bigger resurrection here. There's going to not just be a national restoration of Israel, there's going to be a restoration even bigger.

[27 : 48] What does all this remind you of? Who is the ultimate Restorer? Who said to the man, the paralytic, rise up and walk?

Take up your bed or your pallet and walk. We see in the New Testament that Jesus is the great Resurrector. In fact, Jesus is mentioned in the passage.

Verse 24, my dear servant David will be king over them and they will all have one shepherd. Verse 26, I will make a covenant peace with them. It will be a everlasting covenant.

I will establish and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. How more New Testament could you get in verse 27? My dwelling place, the incarnation, my dwelling place will be with them and I will be their God and they will be my people.

And the evangelistic and missionless first. Then the nations verse 28 will know that I the Lord make Israel holy when my sanctuary is among them forever.

[28 : 56] His sanctuary is among us forever. Christ in us, the hope of glory.

Think of that most dead church. Think of that most dead situation in your life, that colleague, that friend who really is showing no sign of spiritual life.

There is hope. Think of this congregation of St. Columba's already, being the parent of one, two, three other congregations.

We look at the city of Edinburgh. Son of man, can these bones live? Is God still God?

Folk talk about the ordinary means of grace. If ever there was a ridiculous phrase, it's the ordinary means of grace.

[30 : 02] There's nothing ordinary about it. And so folks, God is God.

The valley of dry bones can come alive. Leave this building, leaping and hopping and praising God. Most of you are Presbyterians so you probably wouldn't do that. God's not dead. He is alive. Let me pray.

Father, thank you for your word, for its clarity, for its power. We pray for our beautiful city and although it is a valley of dry bones, we ask God that you would move amongst it.

Thank you for all that you have given us. Thank you for the Lord's Supper that we are about to have, which speaks there of the creative power of God.

[31 : 03] Bless us now, forgive us all our sins. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.