

Can these bones live?

The prophet Ezekiel's vision of a valley filled with bones is vivid. Ezekiel chapter 37, he finds himself surrounded by the skeletal remains of thousands of his fallen countrymen. It is a graphic picture of hopelessness. That's where the vision begins: For the people of Israel, their hope is gone. They are at this point in their history utterly defeated. Following the heights of prosperity and security and spiritual vitality under the reigns of Kings David and Solomon, things have spiraled ever-downward.

By 597 BC, young Ezekiel is swept off into exile, with many others, forcibly marched from Jerusalem to Babylon, the land which today is Iraq. By the time this vision comes to Ezekiel, his countrymen have been militarily crushed. Jerusalem's Temple has been destroyed, its gold and glory we talked about last week stolen away. For those now ripped from their homeland even as it is being pulled to pieces, the future looks very bleak. Their hope is gone.

Langston Hughes reflects on how devastating it is to lose hope in his poem titled "Dreams," writing:

*Hold fast to dreams,
for if dreams die,
life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.*

*Hold fast to dreams,
for when dreams go,
life is a barren field,
frozen with snow.*

What prompted that poem was the struggles of average, everyday people. Hughes spoke of "workers and singers and job hunters on Lenox Avenue in New York or South State in Chicago—people up today and down tomorrow, working this week and fired the next, beaten and baffled ... hoping to get a new suit for Easter and then pawning that suit before the Fourth of July."

Along with the moments of warmth and laughter, there also come experiences that feel like a broken-winged bird or a barren field, frozen with snow. Hope gets lost along the way. That's where Ezekiel and his peers find themselves.

Maybe this is where you find yourself today. There's some area in which you had hoped, but you're not so sure anymore. If that's where you're at, or someone you know and care about, God has a word for you in this vision.

It is compelling, and it begins with a daring question. This is week 4 of a series titled, "I have a question for you." Rather than dealing with our questions for God, we're tackling several crucial questions God asks of us.

If you're taking notes, here's where to start when you're losing hope:



- 1. Hear God's question when things look hopeless. verses 1-3**

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. 2 He 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. 3 He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

Verses 1-3 describe not just a dead body. Not a few corpses. The scene is a valley, an entire landscape filled with human bones scattered about. They are long dead, sun-baked dry. In that scenario, the Lord asks a daring question: "Son of man, can these bones live?"

The obvious answer according to every law of nature is, "Of course not! No way!" Forget CPR or cryogenics. It's just too late. And that's the point as the scene opens. This is a situation which no human effort or ingenuity can solve. For years, Ezekiel had been prophesying that destruction was coming. More recently he had been listening to some of the newest exiles hauled in from Israel, and he learns that everything he prophesied has taken place: Jerusalem is no more. They have lost their city, their place of worship, and indeed their entire homeland.

This is the time in which God asks the question: "Son of man, can these bones live?"

It's almost a dare, God asking someone who has lost hope:

- Do you believe I can turn things around?
- Can I do the impossible?
- Is it too late...even for me?

Hear the question. Take it in. Wrestle with it. Can these bones live? Sooner or later, you'll find yourself in a "valley of dry bones." What is it for you? Some situation or relationship where your hope is fading fast. Sometimes it's hope in God that fades when tough times don't improve. Could be hope in a person but they disappoint you and you wonder if there's much of a future with them. Dry bones. Losing hope. That's where Ezekiel and his peers found themselves.

I visited a LiveStrong group here this week, a program for cancer patients and survivors that is facilitated here by a cancer survivor. Someone in the group took the risk to vent her anger at losing six siblings and her husband to cancer. Where is hope for someone like that? That's the question God puts to Ezekiel—and to us. Hear his question when things look hopeless. Can these bones live?

What comes next is God's command to...

2. Declare God's Word to people who seem lifeless. 3-8

To God's question, Can these bones live?, Ezekiel replies, "*Sovereign LORD, you alone know.*"

In the natural, of course not. This is beyond hope. But I recognize in whose presence I stand. You alone know, Lord.

We enjoy living in a time when so much can be known. We have at our disposal so much more knowledge than the average person even a hundred years back, no less 6th century BC. Yet what we have in common with every generation is situations that stump us, things that are beyond our control.

If these bones were going to live again—if that situation that seems hopeless to you can possibly be resurrected—God knows. And he includes Ezekiel in the answer—as he does for us today.

He has given us his powerful Word to speak into seemingly impossible situations. Because what God has promised, he will do. The question is, will we believe him, and are we speaking his promises over our hard circumstances?

Verse 4, God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the scattered bones.

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!

Speak the Word of God to that which appears lifeless.

Why declare God's Word over your situation that looks hopeless? Look with me at Isaiah 55. An awesome promise concerning the word of God. The Lord promises...

*"As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." Isaiah 55:10-11*

Just like yesterday's powerful rain isn't wasted as it falls on dry ground and makes things grow, so is God's Word. Through it, God does what he says. By his Word, God fulfills his purpose. What he promises, he accomplishes.

So Ezekiel steps out in faith. He declares God's Word to lifeless countrymen. Verse 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. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Put yourself in the scene—biblical virtual reality. God says declare my word. So you start to speak, embarrassed that this is probably not going to work. But as you speak God's Word, stuff starts happening. The sound of rattling begins behind you, in front, to your left and right. Hope begins to peek over the horizon.

You keep at it, declaring God's Word over this hopeless situation. And parts start moving. Hope begins to rise. A femur flies by and reconnects with a pelvis. A radius shakes into place next to an ulna, as they hear the word of the Lord.

Next come tendons and muscle. It's like the old anatomy books with clear pages for each part of the human body. It starts with the skeleton. Flip the next page on top, and the circulation system is added. Turn the next page, and organs are put in place. Flip the page, muscles and ligaments are added. One final page laid over, and skin covers it all. Ezekiel sees it all play out, but with real bodies! He speaks God's Word, and miracles begin to happen.

What's your hopeless situation? Where are you a step away from walking away? What's your valley of dry bones? Speak God's Word into it. Discover God's promises, and claim them. Verbalize your faith that what God promises, God accomplishes. God's Word has power to do what only he can do.

[A side note to those reading this online: this is not meant to endorse the falsity of "name it & claim it" teachers. Many are led astray by that, and walk away deeply wounded for their supposed lack of faith. This is rather a reminder that "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." (Hebrews 4:12)]

- Hear God's daring question: "Can these bones live?" Nothing is impossible with God.
- Declare God's powerful Word over lifeless situations and people. His Word will not return to him empty. It will achieve the purpose for which he sends it, through you.

And third when hope is slipping...

3. Depend on God's power for answers that leave you breathless. 9-10

Then he said to me, "Prophecy 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.'" ¹So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

The whole vision reaches its stunning peak here. God's Word and God's Spirit make the impossible possible. God's Word and God's Spirit can raise the dead. God's Word and God's Spirit are the source of undying hope, life, and renewal.

The whole passage plays off the Hebrew word *ruach*. *Ruach* can be translated wind, breath, or Spirit. All three come into play in this vision for those who are losing hope.

In the Genesis account of creation, God forms man, then breathes life into him. In Ezekiel's vision, God reforms these men, then breathes and they come back to life. And what God did then, he still does today.

Where is your hope slipping? Everyone needs hope. It's not an optional extra, only part of the deluxe package. It's essential. As Emil Brunner noted long ago, "What oxygen is to the lungs, such is hope to the meaning of life." You can have it all together on the outside, but if you lose hope, you feel like the lifeless bodies surrounding around Ezekiel.

If your hope is slipping, God wants to breathe into you. He wants to renew your hope.

For Ezekiel's peers, symbolized by those dry bones miraculously restored and raised to life, the meaning of the vision was don't abandon hope for all that God has promised:

- To restore them to their land;
- To restore unity among them after tragic divisions;
- To give them spiritual restoration, cleansing them from backsliding;
- And to give them a new shepherd, one King over them all.

Those promises were partially fulfilled in the years ahead:

- They were restored to the land;

- They were empowered to rebuild the Temple;

God's promises come to *complete* fulfillment in Jesus:

- Through Jesus, God has promised a new land, the new earth still to come;
- Through Jesus, God is bringing together people who would otherwise have nothing to do with one another. The church of Jesus comes from many nations and finds fellowship over what matters most, along with appreciation for our differences and learning from one another.
- Through Jesus, all who believe are cleansed from guilt. Temptation still has its pull, but we find ourselves drawn close to our Shepherd and King, rather than hiding like Adam and Eve;
- Through Jesus, God is building a new Temple, each believer its living stones, privileged and thankful to be part of what God is doing;
- And through Jesus, we feel God's *ruach*, his life-giving Spirit, beckoning us to breathe in God's power so that we can stand and serve him.

The whole vision is about hope. Hope—however dead the situation appears—comes from declaring God's Word and depending on God's Spirit. What God has promised, he will perform. Can these bones live? Can God speak life into that situation over which you've been losing hope? Absolutely.

Praise God from Whom all blessings flow
 Praise Him, all creatures here below
 Praise Him above, ye heavenly hosts
 Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost

Let earth and heavenly saints proclaim
 The power and might of His great Name
 Let us exalt on bended knee
 Praise God, the Holy Trinity

Praise God, praise God, praise God, Who saved my soul
 Praise God, praise God, praise God from Whom all blessings flow

Praise to the King, His throne transcends
 His crown and Kingdom never end
 Now and throughout eternity
 I'll praise the One Who died for me