

# The Valley of the Dry Bones

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 07 January 2024

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[ 0 : 0 0 ]      868 of the Church Bibles. Ezekiel 37, beginning at the beginning of the chapter, on page 868.

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. He led me to and fro among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry.

He asked me, Son of man, can these bones live? I said, Sovereign Lord, you alone know. Then he said to me, Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones. I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you, and make flesh come upon you, and cover you with skin.

I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord. 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.

[ 1 : 2 2 ]      I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them, and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, Prophesy 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.

So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them. They came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast army.

Then he said to me, Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, Our bones are dried up, and our hope is gone. We are cut off.

Therefore, prophesy and say to them, This is what the Sovereign Lord says. My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them.

[ 2 : 2 0 ]      I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my spirit in you, and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land.

Then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks, Sam, for reading that.

Good morning, St. Silas. If we've not met before, I'm Martin Ayers. I'm the lead pastor here. It would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bible open. The church Bibles are just in front of you, and it's page 868 that we're looking at, Ezekiel chapter 37, as Sam said.

We're just going to look at that together. If you would find it helpful, you can find an outline inside the notice sheet to follow along as we look at this. Let's pray, and let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word.

Let's pray. Almighty and loving Heavenly Father, we come before you now, and we ask that you will graciously send your life-giving spirit as we hear your voice in the scriptures.

[ 3 : 36 ] That we would uncover from your word truth about you and truth about ourselves. That our hearts would be willing to accept it, and you would enable us to take hold more fully of the life you graciously offer.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I wonder whether there's an area of life, of your life, where you'd be willing to say that you feel so powerless, you could say that your hopes for the future in that area are dead.

It's a very stark picture. A picture of being powerless to change, if we were to use that word, that we're dead. It's a picture of being hopeless that things will get any better.

I think if we're being honest, there are areas of life where we might be willing to admit that about something, about our hopes for achievement. The writer Matthew Syed has written a book, a great book, called Bounce.

And that book, it's all about the power of purposeful practice. So he's one of these guys who buy into the idea that you can do anything at all if you just spend 10,000 hours practicing.

[ 4 : 51 ] You become an expert in anything. So he basically says musicians like Mozart, artists like Rembrandt, sprinters like Usain Bolt, they just got started early.

And if you started when they had, you would be like them. And it's a good kind of corrective of where we overuse the term genius. But I think most of us would recognize there is a level of innate ability required before you can achieve something.

I remember the day I was in an art lesson at school, and we had to draw an animal, a dog or a horse or a goat or something. I can't even remember. I can remember what my picture looked like, but that doesn't help me remember what animal it was meant to be.

And I remember we were all working away at our drawings, and the moment came to sort of compare how we were getting on. And Matthew Routledge next to me looked at mine and he said, Ares, you are really, really bad at drawing.

You're just so bad. And I realized my chances of ever becoming a professional artist were dead. It would need a miracle, a completely new life for me to be an artist.

[ 5 : 58 ] And I guess we realized that in life. There are some things we can do. There are other areas of life where we're powerless. The question we could ask as we come to Ezekiel is, in which category would we put the idea of pleasing God?

The idea of being in a right relationship with him? We've been with Ezekiel in our sermon series, and we've seen that he was a prophet. He was a messenger from God to God's people, first commissioned by God in July 592 BC.

And the extraordinary vision here in chapter 11 is right at the heart of the second season of Ezekiel's life, really, the second half of his book. And I can't think of a better chapter of God's Word to be looking at together this morning.

On Back to Church Sunday, if you're here just looking in as a visitor, or just for our church family at the start of a new year. Because it's a passage of the Bible that reveals to us, God reveals to us, stark truth about us, and wonderful truth about himself.

We're going to look at it in three parts. And our first point this morning is, Ezekiel walks through a lifeless valley. We see that in verse 1. He says, The hand of the Lord was on me.

[ 7 : 18 ] That's his way of describing being overwhelmed, taken up by God to a vision. He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley.

It was full of bones. So picture a battlefield, the scene of a massacre, so brutal, there's nobody left to bury the dead.

They're just left there. In May last year, we went to Sky on holiday. And for any of you who know it, you can go to the fairy pools in Sky. It's kind of where everyone goes. And there are coach loads of Americans there.

And you walk up the street. It's beautiful. And you go and see these fairy pools. But what you can do, if you want to get away from the crowds, is you then turn left at the top and you walk along.

And you can see this place. I'm not going to try and pronounce the Gaelic. I don't have a name for it, but in English, it's the Corrie of the Spoils. So I led the family along this longer walk.

[ 8 : 20 ] Then the rain came in. The weather hit us. Morale was low. And our kids were quite fed up. So I tried to engage them with historical interest. And I explained that the landscape that we were walking through, this kind of vast glen, was the site of the last great battle between the McDonald's and the McLeods.

A fact that left them completely underwhelmed. Because it looks just like any other valley today. Any other wet valley on sky. But how awful to imagine if that landscape stretched out before us still contained the bones, the skeletons of the people who died in that battle.

That's something of what Ezekiel sees here. Horrendous. A valley of dead bones. And the emphasis is on how dead these people are. So not just corpses.

Not even just skeletons. Bones. Bones, he says. Which were very dry. And Ezekiel is 30 years old. Those of us who've been looking at him together in recent weeks.

30 years old. Trained through his life to be a priest. And in the Old Testament, before Jesus came, there was this order of people who were the priesthood. And they knew that to stay religiously clean, you had to stay away from death.

[ 9 : 39 ] He would have felt viscerally that this was a wrong place to be. As he was, I mean, how awful for him to experience verse 2. He led me to and fro among them.

And I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley. Bones that were very dry. And this grim picture is how the people of God see themselves.

That's what we see down in verse 11. If you have a look, just across the page there. Then he said to me, Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, our bones are dried up and our hope is gone.

We are cut off. They feel powerless. Hopeless. They feel cut off from God and his goodness. And they feel like that because of their situation.

By this point in the Old Testament, God had rescued their ancestors. He'd brought them out of slavery in Egypt. He'd led them into the promised land. And he'd given them everything. But they'd rejected God.

[ 10 : 42 ] They'd forgotten him. They'd rejected him. When he graciously withheld blessing to turn them back to him, they turned to pagan gods instead. Made up gods.

And so God moved out earlier in Ezekiel. He withdrew from his people. And by this point in Ezekiel's life, five years into his prophetic ministry, God's judgment has fallen on Israel.

The city of Jerusalem has fallen to the Babylonian Empire. And the people have been led into exile away from the promised land. So they are far from home and they are far from God.

And the key for us is that Israel's exile is actually a picture of another exile that we are all part of. When the Bible tells us the true story of humanity and what's wrong with our world today, it tells us that we're in exile from God.

All of us have turned away from God and we've found ourselves cut off from him. And when the Bible wants to describe our spiritual condition on our own, in Ephesians chapter 2, it says that we're dead.

[ 11 : 50 ] Spiritually dead. Now, of course, I realize that that verdict takes some humility to accept for us this morning. That we are lifeless.

Especially if you think of yourself as a successful person, as an achiever. But the Bible says that whatever good things that we're filling our lives with this morning and however successful we are at filling our lives with those things, true life is about knowing God.

God is explosively full of love and glory and joy and goodness. And he created us to share in that joy through a right relationship with him.

And none of us has built our lives on him and that relationship with him. And given him the thanksgiving and the honor that he is due. So we're left cut off from God.

Powerless to make things right. And on our own, hopeless. And because of that spiritual death, the sentence of physical death hangs over us all through our lives.

[ 12 : 55 ] So as we see Ezekiel on his horrifying tour of the valley of dry bones, we're seeing the heart of the human problem today. And it's the heart of the problem in every generation.

And Ezekiel is asked a question in verse 3 by the Spirit of God. Son of man, can these bones live? And he gives this brilliant answer, doesn't he?

He says, I said, sovereign Lord, you alone know. I think saying that, humanly speaking, of course they can't live. They're beyond hope.

Our only hope is if God is minded to put things right. Is he going to do something about this valley? And that brings us to our second point. So we've heard Ezekiel walks through a lifeless valley.

Secondly, Ezekiel speaks a life-giving word. He's given a command in verse 4. Then he, the Lord, said to me, prophesy to these bones and say to them, dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

[ 14 : 05 ] And the word that he's to shout out across this valley of bones is a promise of life. Look at verse 5.

This is what the sovereign Lord says to these bones. I will make breath enter you and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin.

I will put breath in you and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord. And Ezekiel remarkably obeys God. Remarkable because just imagine how foolish he must have felt.

I can picture him looking around to check no one else is there as he does this ridiculous thing that he's going to look out over this valley of bones and start speaking to them with a promise of life proclaiming the word of God.

But he does it and look at 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.

[ 15 : 17 ] I looked and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them. but there was no breath in them. It's an incredible moment. A moment so incredible we even have a song about it in contemporary folklore.

And any of you who learnt the song at preschool about the knee bones connected to the thigh bone and the thigh bones connected to the hip bone and the hip bones connected to the backbone some of you and some of you are medics and I don't think that's actually right is it but this is the kind of the skeleton song that we learnt at school but the original song is written about this verse of the Bible and it goes Ezekiel cried to them dry bones Ezekiel cried to them dry bones now hear the word of the Lord and then the bones connected to one another before his eyes and so that's what happens it's as he preaches the word of God that the bones rattle and connect and then flesh appears and ligaments and sinews and skin on these bodies and then the second stage is in verse 9 then he said to me prophesy 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 and I think what we miss in our translations is that the word breath here is the same word for spirit so this promise is that the spirit will come into these people and

Ezekiel's been speaking God's word horizontally proclaiming the word to the valley and now he's praying vertically he's asking the spirit to come and give life the miracle of life and so we get the miracle of verse 10 so I prophesied as he commanded me and breath entered them they came to life and stood up on their feet a vast army then he said to me son of man these bones are the people of Israel so there's two stages to this miracle of giving life to these bones and it's an echo of what first happened at the beginning of Genesis when God first created humanity that in the creation account first he forms man and then secondly he breathes life into man he breathes into the nostrils of man the breath of life and the man becomes a living being and so it is here that by the power of the spirit of God at work through the word of God his people are given new life it's summed up in a hymn we sometimes sing at St Silas about Jesus he speaks and listening to his voice new life the dead receive and the message from the Lord through Ezekiel is that we all need this on our own our spiritual condition is that we are lifeless powerless hopeless cut off from God but God stands ready to give us a fresh start just as he gave us physical life he offers to give us miraculous spiritual life if we'll come to him and more than that even the willingness to come to him if we have that desire in our lives if we have that desire this morning it's only because the spirit of God has already breathed that new life into us and so because he has given us that life we are compelled we are we're drawn to God the whole thing is a miracle of God from start to finish and so often today people around us they don't know this about what it means to know God we watched the

Beyond Paradise Christmas special last week if you don't know what Beyond Paradise is it's a follow up to the show Death in Paradise so Death in Paradise there was this detective Humphrey and he's in the Caribbean and people keep getting bumped off and he keeps solving the crimes and then he's decided he's had enough to live in Devon and he's kind of applying his detective skills in this sleepy Devonshire town where remarkably there's a lot of crime and this year for the Christmas special they found the guy the culprit who was actually breaking into homes and putting things in the houses it was Christmas after all and so they find this guy what's the guy doing well they catch up with him and he says well I've found out that I haven't got long to live and I started reading my Bible and remarkably he said I got to reading about a king called Hezekiah and a prophet Isaiah who went to see him and it made me realise that I should if I'm going to die

I need to start putting my house in order I need to start going round and putting right all the things I've done wrong so I've started breaking into homes and giving people gifts gifts that's a very common British view of religion today is it not a great many people around us think there probably is a God and when it comes to the God who is probably there I'm kind of doing okay you know I think my good deeds will probably outweigh my bad deeds and I've got nothing to worry about when it comes to meeting my maker Ezekiel 37 makes sure that none of us here this morning could leave thinking that's the message of God to us in the Bible that we're probably doing okay on our own how am I doing with God on my own not just falling a bit short cut off lifeless powerless hopeless but God moved by love resolute in his purposes to have a people who know him promises to step in here is the life giver the spirit of God so gracious that as his word is proclaimed to us and for any of us who are Christians today this has happened at some point in our lives that as his word is proclaimed to us his spirit breathes new life into us so that we are moved to turn back to him and we have everything from him so in our final point the Lord turns this picture into a promise we've had

[ 21 : 50 ] Ezekiel walks through a lifeless valley then Ezekiel speaks a life-giving word finally Ezekiel receives a life-giving promise notice in verse 11 that God can tell Ezekiel exactly what his people are saying he knows they've lost hope he knows that they're saying that our bones are dried up we're cut off our hope is gone if we're here and we ever find ourselves thinking nobody else knows what I'm going through if we feel a sense of failure or fear or loneliness or grief or shame Israel was experiencing all of those emotions and the Lord makes clear to Ezekiel he hears them he knows what they're saying he knows what they're going through and his response is in verse 12 therefore prophesy and say to them this is what the sovereign Lord says my people I'm going to open your graves and bring you up from them

I will bring you back to the land of Israel God is promising a new rescue and there are three wonderful details to this new life the first is that it's rescued to a good land a safe land in verse 12 I will bring you back to the land of Israel he says and that's a couched in terms they would understand but a promise that points us forward to the new creation or what we sometimes call heaven today but the new earth the glorious new creation which at the end of the Bible it calls the new Jerusalem secondly this new life is a life knowing God verse 13 then you my people will know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and bring you up from them God's people will recognize him they will know him and he will be their God and they will be his people but if God just saves people like us then we will mess it up again that the

Old Testament shows us that generation after generation that whenever God saves people and brings them to himself they blow it they drift from him and so what we need is to be changed on the inside so that we can have security that our relationship with God will last and God promises that in verse 14 I will put my spirit in you and you will live and so with that comes security I will settle you in your own land he says in verse 14 and I think that that's such an important word verse 14 that we'll be settled because we won't fear anymore that we'll blow it and feel that inevitably we're going to mess up this relationship with God God's saying here to Ezekiel that one day his spirit will come so that God will make his home in every believer so that his people really will trust him and love him and be faithful to him and we'll look forward to being settled in the new creation so when was this promise fulfilled well 70 years after

Ezekiel's exile time the people were given permission to go back to the land around Jerusalem and some of them went but it was still a dark time it was a difficult time it was 500 years later that the religious leader Nicodemus went to see Jesus by night in John chapter 3 and Jesus says to him no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they're born again of water and the spirit Jesus is the one John the Baptist has pointed to people and said pointed out to people and said he will baptize by the Holy Spirit and Jesus self-consciously pointed Nicodemus back to this promise through the prophet Ezekiel to say through him God is fulfilling this promise through Jesus rescue mission God can give us this new life that was being promised here so that after Jesus dies he appears to his disciples alive again and he breathes on them in John chapter 20 and says receive the

Holy Spirit it's through all that his death and resurrection have achieved that we can be granted this new life today and this work of grace from God reveals to us what God is really like so we have that refrain it's at the end of verse 14 again then you will know that I the Lord have spoken and I have done it declares the Lord all through Ezekiel we get this recognition promise then they will know that I'm the Lord after God acts and here it's through God's granting of new life to dead bones when we have a deeper sense of how much we blew it with God how we are in exile from him and we grasp that he sees our dead bones in the valley and even then he is merciful and he is powerful and he breathes his spirit into us as we hear his word and he says to our dry bones live then we know God in his mercy his loving grace if we picture Jesus enduring death on the cross so that he could give us spiritual life enduring exile from God on the cross so that he could draw us home then we know God we know what God is like maybe you're here this morning and you are just exploring you're looking into the things of

[ 27 : 43 ] God well Ezekiel's vision shows us that we can't think our way into knowing God we can't kind of philosophize our way into finding God or use science to find God we can't earn our way into knowing God by our good works we're powerless hopeless lifeless on our own but here instead is extraordinary news of invitation to each one of us whatever our past we can be given a fresh start new life by the spirit so let me ask would you be willing today to ask for the spirit to give you that new life could your being here this morning demonstrate that already the spirit is at work in you that he's drawn you here he's giving you that new life and drawing you back to God and what Ezekiel's vision claims is that what you need in your life more than anything is to keep hearing the

Bible keep listening to the word of God just as for those of us who are involved in the life of the church family here Ezekiel's vision calls us to wake up to the life giving power of God's word if we want to experience more of the spirit more of the spirit filled life in this new year it comes through the power of God's word hearing it proclaiming it there are Sundays when I come up here and I think all I've got is some work I've done during the week on what the Bible says and what use is that going to be to anyone when I know what's going on in people's lives do we even have to have a sermon every week what about an interview Sunday now and again or an all singing Sunday or a drama instead but Ezekiel 37 shows us that it's when Ezekiel proclaims the word of God that the spirit gives miraculous life even to a valley of dry bones and we might be able to identify with how he feels speaking to dry bones the promises of

God when we think about the people around us people seem so far from God don't they so far from God's word and in secular Scotland today we might think come on God what's plan B when people won't listen well Ezekiel's vision encourages us keep preaching his word and his spirit takes dry bones and makes them live and let's notice what the bones in the valley become in verse 10 I prophesied as he commanded me and breath entered them they came to life and stood upon their feet a vast army that's his vision of the church we hear the word of the Lord and he gives us life and we don't become a committee or a social group we become an army united with a common mission a purpose ready to engage in spiritual warfare as we pray for the spirit to give life to the dead bones all around us and we proclaim

God's word let's pray together heavenly father we praise you that you are the life giver the sovereign lord who by the power of your spirit as your word is proclaimed gives life breathe on us we pray breath of God that we would be hearers of your word day by day in the coming weeks and that as a church we would be united in mind and purpose to proclaim that powerful life giving word to those around us and we ask that you would bring life to our city for Jesus name sake Amen Amen Amen Amen

Amen Amen