

## All Saints Talk for 11 February 2024

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### God's Questions: Can these dry bones live?

*Ezekiel 37:1-10 The Valley of Dry Bones*

**37** *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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"*

*I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know."*

<sup>4</sup> *Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! <sup>5</sup> This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. <sup>6</sup> 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.'"*

<sup>7</sup> *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. <sup>8</sup> I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.*

<sup>9</sup> *Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, 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.'"* <sup>10</sup> *So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.*

Today is the sixth week of our sermon series *God's questions* looking at how we might respond to these same questions if God put them to us today.

Today's question came to the prophet Ezekiel, who had been taken captive to Babylonia just after 600BC when he was about 25 years old. He had seen the conquest of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar with only the city of Jerusalem holding out. The first few chapters of the book describe an amazing vision Ezekiel had during the fifth year of his captivity with the glory of God enthroned and carried by extraordinary spiritual creatures on wheels. Then after that Ezekiel was appointed by God as a prophet and watchman to warn the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the last remnant of Israel, that if they did not cry out to God and renounce their selfish ways, they too were in danger of defeat and exile and worse, the departure of God's presence.

Sadly, his warnings went unheeded. Seven years later, Jerusalem was destroyed and Ezekiel was heartbroken.

But God did not abandon his people and Ezekiel then switched roles to being a messenger of hope. In due time God promised to raise up a remnant and restore Israel under a new spiritual leader, with soft hearts instead of rebellious hearts of stone.

And that is where today's passage picks up, with Ezekiel's vision of a valley full of dry bones, and God's question to him:

'Son of Man, can these dry bones live?'

This question to Ezekiel came after he had through the trauma of seeing his whole community devastated, despite all his efforts to warn them.

The whole valley full of bones recalled brutal slaughter, lost hopes and dreams, death and decay. We occasionally see CGI imagery of skulls and bones on apocalyptic movies but Ezekiel was placed into this grim virtual reality by the Holy Spirit.

The bones symbolised the people of Israel and the death of their national identity. The Temple, their pride and joy, the spiritual anchor point for both the inhabitants and the exiles, had been destroyed. This was the end of the road, the valley of despair. All that was left were dry relics of lives long forgotten.

And yet this is a key point of inflexion of the whole Bible, because just when you think all is lost and death has the final say, the Lord steps in to intervene. God always preserves a remnant of the faithful.

As I chat to people it seems to be a fairly regular theme in people's faith journey that it is when we reach moments of absolute desperation and cry out to God that we often see his power working. A parched wilderness full of death and bones actually becomes the place that the Lord meets us to bring hope and life. When we reach the end of ourselves, new life can begin.

In the lowest moments, when all seems lost, God asks us the same question:

"Can these bones live?" literally "Child of Adam, can these bones live?"

Humanly speaking our materialist instinct is to simply answer 'No' because clearly bones are bones. Dead. Caput. But God isn't looking for a naturalistic answer, He is looking an answer that springs from a mustard seed of faith.

Ezekiel's reply is wise: "Sovereign LORD, you alone know." Literally Adonai Jehovah, You, you know.

Sometimes faith means throwing ourselves on the sovereign mercy of God. Ezekiel's reply is faithful but weary, not daring to speculate.

Do you find yourself in any situation that makes you feel weary and exhausted?

As I look around at the spiritual health of our nation and the Church in the UK it can be tempting to see only dry bones and decay.

Only 50 years ago churches played a full and a central part of our national life, but increasingly we find ourselves pushed to the margins. Attendance at all the mainline denominations is falling, particularly among younger generations. The Church of England is losing its moorings and finding itself all tangled up over sexuality. The Charismatic renewal movement that has inspired and nurtured me over the last 30 years has been rocked by moral failure and accusations of abuse amongst key leaders.

Can these dry bones live? Well the God we serve is a God of resurrection. As John McGinley points out, the Welsh revival broke out after a period of national decline. He wrote this: 'The following was written by W T Stead, an eyewitness of the 1904 Welsh revival in which 100,000 people were saved within a year:

'It is ever the darkest hour before the dawn. The nation always seems to be given over to the evil one before the coming of the Son of Man. The decay of religious faith, the deadness of the churches, the atheism of the well-to-do, the brutality of the masses, all these, when at their worst, herald the approach of the revival. Things seem to get too bad to last. The reign of evil seems intolerable. Then the soul of the nation awakes.'

On the first Easter Saturday, the disciples must have felt crushed, disillusioned and exhausted. Jesus' death the day before had crushed all their hopes and dreams, their previous 3 years wasted. But it is darkest before the dawn. New life, forgiveness and freedom was coming. They just had to wait for the dawn.

The name Ezekiel means 'God strengthens me' and as His vision played out God showed him that nothing is beyond redemption. We can still dare to hope for revival in our day. Jesus said 'I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it'.

In this passage, revival came to the dry bones by The Word of God and the Spirit of God as Ezekiel spoke out in faith.

Firstly the Lord instructed Ezekiel to invoke the creative power of God's Word, then he told him to invoke the life-giving power of the Spirit. So this is why we make it a priority to not only preach from God's Word, but also to pray 'Come Holy Spirit' whenever we can.

The whole Bible is the story of people's search for God. But in Jesus Christ, God came to reach out to us and save us from separation from him. The gospels tell the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus so that, as John puts it 'by believing, you may have life in his name'. When you say the simple prayer, 'Lord Jesus forgive me and help me' that is enough for you to be rescued from the kingdom of darkness and brought into God's light. But there is more. We need to be filled with the Holy Spirit to get our new life in Christ off the ground.

To me it is a bit like paragliding.

Jesus said that the Spirit is like the wind, you cannot see where it has come from or where it is going, but you can observe its effects. Paragliding is a very real experience of putting your trust in moving air.

I managed to go Paragliding one time at Big Pit in South Wales. I'm not sure it would be allowed these days but when I went we were given a short safety briefing and some instruction about how to set up the paraglider, which strings to pull to launch, steer and brake. Then we were told to get in the harness and run down the mountainside! Wow! Thankfully I survived. The wing inflated and suddenly you are lifted into the air. I absolutely loved it. So extraordinary and beautiful.

You can come to church, hear the Word and follow the instructions, but only the Holy Spirit breathes life into the theory as you take a step of faith and launch.

When you feel like your bones are dried up and your hope is gone, don't despair. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is available for us today. As we cling to the truth of the Gospel and ask the Holy Spirit to breath upon us, the Lord will lift us up.

I'll finish by reading Paul's letter to the Ephesians which tells of the transformation from death to life that Jesus has achieved for us.

*Ephesians 2. As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world...*

*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. <sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.*